

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Saturday, Feb. 7

Varsity girls wrestling at Dell Rapids, 9 a.m.  
Pickleball at Elementary gym, 9:30 a.m.  
Boys Varsity Wrestling at Big Dakota Conference Tournament, 10 a.m., in Pierre  
Dak XII-NEC Clash: Groton Area vs. Canton, 5 p.m., Madison Auxiliary Gym.  
HOSA Middle School dance in the gym.



## Sunday, Feb. 8

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m. (installation of officers); Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.  
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Groton Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.  
Groton Soccer Association Clinics, 11:30 a.m., Arena.  
Soccer Open Gym, 1:30 - 3 p.m. elementary gym.  
4th grade BB Practice, 2 p.m., Gym  
6th grade BB Practice, 6 pm., Arena

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# 1440

**Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.**

## **Measles Resurgence**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention yesterday reported at least 733 confirmed measles cases nationwide so far this year—more than four times the annual average of 180 cases from 2000 to 2024. See dashboard.

The nationwide update, which often lags behind state-level counts, comes as South Carolina reported 920 measles cases yesterday, including 44 new infections since Tuesday. Of those infected with the respiratory virus in South Carolina, 840 are unvaccinated, and 824 are under 18. Overall, roughly 57% of cases confirmed by the CDC are among people aged 5 to 19. Experts attribute the nationwide rise in measles cases to a growing number of parents declining vaccines for their children over concerns about potential side effects.

The US recorded 2,276 measles cases last year—its highest total since the nation declared measles eliminated in 2000 following high vaccination rates. Last year, the share of kindergarteners vaccinated against measles nationwide also fell below 93%. Experts say herd immunity is typically achieved at around 95% coverage.

## **Justice Department arrests and extradites suspect in 2012 Benghazi attack.**

The US has taken into custody an alleged key participant in the 2012 terrorist attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Zubayr al-Bakoush arrived in the US early Friday morning, where he faces charges including murder, terrorism, and arson. He is reportedly a member of an extremist militia. His arrest marks the first in nearly nine years tied to the 13-hour assault that killed four Americans.

## **Trump posts, and then deletes, a video that appears to depict the Obamas as apes.**

The faces of former President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama were superimposed on the heads of apes in a video President Donald Trump shared late Thursday. The clip referenced allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election and has drawn criticism from both sides of the aisle. The White House said the video originated from an online meme inspired by "The Lion King."

## **High-ranking Russian general shot and injured in ambush-style attack.**

Lt. Gen. Vladimir Alexeyev was hospitalized Friday after an unidentified individual fired several shots and fled the scene. The condition of the general, who provided the Kremlin with intelligence for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, was not immediately clear. Russia's foreign minister claimed without evidence that Kyiv may be responsible, after peace talks between the two nations showed little progress Thursday.

## **Uber found liable in sexual assault case, ordered to pay \$8.5M.**

A federal jury ordered Uber to pay the damages to a woman who alleged she was raped by a driver during a 2023 trip. The landmark case sets a precedent for thousands of other sexual assault incidents reported by passengers and drivers. The ride-share company has long maintained that it is not liable for drivers' actions since drivers are categorized as contractors, not employees.

## **Jennifer Garner's organic food company hits NYSE after nearly \$198M IPO raise.**

Once Upon a Farm, a baby and kid food company cofounded by the Golden Globe-winning actress and mother of three, opened Friday at \$21 per share. It targets millennial and Gen Z parents seeking quick meals and snacks without added sugar, preservatives, or artificial ingredients. The brand's success has been linked to heightened scrutiny of food tied to the "Make America Healthy Again" movement.

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## Hall of Fame quarterback Sonny Jurgensen dies at age 91.

Sonny Jurgensen died of natural causes after a brief stay in hospice care, according to a statement from his family posted by the Washington Commanders. Jurgensen spent the majority of his 18-year NFL career with Washington, after joining the team in 1964 from the Philadelphia Eagles. He led the NFL in passing yards five times and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1983.

Separately, Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford won the NFL Most Valuable Player award Thursday, narrowly beating New England Patriots quarterback Drake Maye by one vote.

## Humankind(ness), Love Story Edition

Dear readers— This month, we're pausing our usual act of kindness stories to share a sampling of your love stories. This week's theme is chance encounters.

"My dog Gracie and I were taking our final walk of the evening. As I opened the outside door, Gracie anxiously rushed out, causing a stack of books to go tumbling from the arms of a handsome neighbor. Stepping back inside, I realized this man lived directly above me. In unusual fashion for me (I had been single for 18 years after an 18-year marriage), I invited him to meet for coffee the next morning. This divine door opening led to the sweetest courting and gift of a beautiful 17-year marriage."

— Karen D. in Gardner, Kansas

"In my late 20s, I moved to Portland, Oregon, and was told I had to see a concert at The Gorge Amphitheatre. I bought Jack Johnson tickets online five months in advance. The day of, my friend and I drove 4.5 hours to the concert. I had been dumped a few weeks earlier and had officially given up on meeting someone. On the drive, my car broke down, but we ran water through the engine and decided to keep going. We arrived at the concert, but our tickets wouldn't scan. Apparently, I had bought premier parking passes instead of concert tickets, and the concert was sold out. We drove to the small town where we were staying and went to a little tavern. I met my husband there that night. It was the best mistake I ever made."

— Jessica I. in Port Angeles, Washington

"In the summer of 2020, I had just graduated from college in New York City and decided to go to Tel Aviv for an internship program. A few weeks in, I got COVID and was sent to a COVID hotel with several others from my program. Being locked in the hotel but with no restrictions—because we all had COVID anyway—we all got really close. That's when I met my wife, both struggling with the virus and with nothing to do but hang out, and almost six years later, we're married with a dog. She's from London; I'm from LA. Without getting sent to that hotel, we never would've gotten together, especially during a time when in-person dating was essentially on pause."

— Ilan A. in Tel Aviv, Israel

## Groton Area Boys Sweep Presho Quadrangular; Decker Takes Third at Big Dakota Conference

The Groton Area wrestling program turned in a strong all-around weekend on the mats, as the Tigers' boys team swept all three duals at a quadrangular hosted by Lyman High School in Presho on Saturday, while the girls program added a conference medal at the Big Dakota Conference Tournament. Groton Area posted dominant dual wins over Lyman, Marion/Freeman, and New Underwood to finish the day unbeaten in team competition.

In addition to the team success, several Groton Area wrestlers completed the day undefeated across the three duals. Wyatt Hagen went a perfect 3-0 with a forfeit, a fall, and a major decision, while Kyson Kucker and Noah Scepaniak each also finished 3-0, combining pins and major decisions throughout the day. John Bisbee remained unbeaten with three forfeit victories, Preston Hinkelman went undefeated with two falls and a forfeit, and Gavin Englund closed the day without a loss, earning an injury-default win and two forfeits at heavyweight. Walker Zoellner also finished the day unbeaten, picking up forfeit wins in his matches contested.

Groton opened the day with a commanding 66-16 win over Lyman. Luke Gauer got the Tigers started at 113 pounds with a quick fall over Jaxson Richardson in just 24 seconds. Wyatt Hagen followed with a forfeit win at 120, while Kyson Kucker pinned Lief Henriksen at 126 in 3:43. Noah Scepaniak added a fall over Oakley Schindler at 132 in 2:42, and Aiden Strom needed just 19 seconds to pin Savin Langenbau at 138. At 144, Grayson Flores secured a fall over Carter Coleman in 5:13. Kason Oswald picked up a forfeit at 150, and John Bisbee did the same at 157. Ben Hoeft suffered one of the few setbacks for Groton, dropping a 13-2 major decision to Skyler Langenbau at 165. Isaiah Scepaniak responded with a fall over Tavian Schwartz at 175 in 3:24. Groton gave up points at 190 on a Lyman forfeit win, and at 215 Layne Johnson was pinned by Maverick Johnson in 3:12. The Tigers closed the dual strong as Gavin Englund won by injury default over Desmerius McGhee at heavyweight, and Preston Hinkelman capped the match with a fall over Raiden Rockwood at 106 in 3:57.

Groton then topped Marion/Freeman 60-23 in the second dual of the day. Preston Hinkelman opened with a forfeit win at 106 before Luke Gauer was pinned by Alexis Guzman at 113. Wyatt Hagen earned a fall over Josh Oleson at 120 in 1:36, and Kyson Kucker followed with a pin of Oakley McConniel at 126 in 1:10. Noah Scepaniak continued the momentum by pinning Owen Anderson at 132 in 1:01. Marion/Freeman picked up wins at 138 as Logun Pankratz defeated Aiden Strom by technical fall and at 144 where Elmer Rodolfo pinned Grayson Flores, then added another fall at 150 with Michael Blau over Kason Oswald. John Bisbee answered with a forfeit win at 157, and Ben Hoeft pinned Hunter Spangler at 165 in 1:54. Isaiah Scepaniak claimed a forfeit at 175, Walker Zoellner earned a forfeit at 190, Layne Johnson did the same at 215, and Gavin Englund closed the dual with a forfeit win at 285.

In the final dual, Groton Area secured a 62-18 victory over New Underwood. Wyatt Hagen earned a 19-5 major decision over Tel Elshere at 120, and Kyson Kucker followed with a 16-5 major decision over Trik Elshere at 126. Noah Scepaniak pinned Thomas Rhuby at 132 in 2:47. New Underwood picked up points at 138 as Coy Eddy pinned Aiden Strom in 2:46. Grayson Flores answered with a forfeit win at 144, and Kason Oswald added another forfeit at 150. John Bisbee claimed a forfeit at 157, and Ben Hoeft did the same at 165. Isaiah Scepaniak was pinned by Carl Coats at 175, but Groton rebounded with forfeit wins from Walker Zoellner at 190, Layne Johnson at 215, and Gavin Englund at 285. Preston Hinkelman finished the dual with a fall over James Edoff at 106 in 2:54, while Luke Gauer closed the day with a hard-fought loss to Tommy Studt at 113.

On the girls side, Groton Area was represented at the Big Dakota Conference Girls Wrestling Tournament, where Gracelynn Decker turned in a strong performance at 110 pounds. Decker placed third overall and scored 18.0 team points for the Tigers. She opened the tournament with a quick fall over Tylissa Lunderman of Todd County/White River in 48 seconds in the quarterfinals before dropping her semifinal match to Lakota Tech's Jaynie Perkins by fall. Decker responded with back-to-back pins in the consolation bracket, first defeating Lakota Tech's Solarah Thunder Hawk in 28 seconds in the consolation semifinals, then closing her day with another fall over Lunderman in 2:57 to secure the third-place finish.

## 2026 Dak XII/NEC Conference Clash

Girls Event – February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2026

SCHEDULE (AUXILIARY GYM)			
Time	Dak XII Team		NEC Team
11:00am	Madison Bulldogs	vs.	Bon Homme Cavaliers
12:30pm	Elk Point/Jefferson Huskies	vs.	Redfield Pheasants
2:00pm	Vermillion Tanagers	vs.	Deuel Cardinals
3:30pm	Dakota Valley Panthers	vs.	Sisseton Redmen
5:00pm	Canton C-Hawks	vs.	Groton Area Tigers

SCHEDULE (MAIN GYM)			
Time	Dak XII Team		NEC Team
11:45am	Dell Rapids Quarriers	vs.	Mobridge-Pollock Tigers
1:15pm	Tri-Valley Mustangs	vs.	Milbank Bulldogs
2:45pm	West Central Trojans	vs.	Aberdeen Roncalli Cavaliers
4:15pm	Sioux Falls Christian Chargers	vs.	Clark/Willow Lake Cyclones
5:45pm	Lennox Orioles	vs.	Hamlin Chargers

- All games played at Madison High School and Auxiliary Gymnasiums
- Seed points were calculated for all games played through Saturday, January 31<sup>st</sup>. Then matchups were determined by those seed points.
- Ticket Prices (\$7 adults, \$5 students)
- Games will not start early.

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## SD media landscape shifts as newspapers sold, 2 launch

By Carson Walker, South Dakota News Watch

The ever-changing landscape of South Dakota's traditional and new media industry evolved further in the past few months, with newspapers starting, changing hands and cutting back.

Here are some of the latest developments:

### Forum buys Pierre and Madison newspapers

The Capital Journal in Pierre and Madison Daily Leader were part of Wick Communications' sale of its six Midwest newspapers to Forum Communications Co.

Forum, headquartered in Fargo, North Dakota, is a fifth-generation, family-owned media company with more than 30 newspapers, television stations and digital platforms across the region.

It also operates the Mitchell Republic newspaper and a printing plant in Sioux Falls as well as Sioux Falls Live, an online news and sports site.

And last year it bought what is now Midwest Sports+, which provides shows and live-streamed play-by-play of high school and college games, including University of Sioux Falls football and basketball.

Forum's South Dakota broadcast properties include KNBN-TV, the NBC affiliate in Rapid City, and two Sioux Falls stations, KWSD-TV (now KSFL-TV) and KCWS-TV.

"With the acquisition of these six news titles, Forum Communications will secure its place as the largest news-gathering organization in the Upper Midwest," Bill Marcil Jr., president and CEO of Forum Communications, said in a news release announcing the purchase.

### Brookings adds 2nd newspaper

Months after fears that Brookings was going to lose its only newspaper, the city that's home to South Dakota State University is now a two-paper town.

Josh Linehan, the former editor of The Brookings Register, and his wife, Nichole, have started publishing the Brookings Beacon, which is printed at the Forum plant in Sioux Falls. The Beacon offers digital and weekly print subscriptions.

"The community response has been genuinely overwhelming," Josh Linehan said. "Brookings keeps growing and there's a real hunger for both strong, local journalism and quality advertising space."

The Register was one of four newspapers abruptly shuttered but quickly reopened last year after being purchased by Champion Media, a family-owned community newspaper company based in North Carolina. It also acquired the Huron Plainsman, Redfield Press and Moody County Enterprise at Flandreau.

### Rapid City Post starts weekly print edition

The Rapid City Post, which started posting a digital version online in March, has begun publishing a weekly printed newspaper that's distributed at no cost around the region and by mail for a subscription.

The Post is owned and operated by The HomeSlice Media Group, which runs six Black Hills radio stations and the state's largest podcast network.

"We're taking a lot of our audio content and turning it into print," said Chris Hornick, managing editor. "We've been generating content for decades. We're just new at print."

### Lakota Times ceases print publication

Meanwhile, a newspaper that has served South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation for more than 20 years ended its print publication but plans to continue creating content for its website, Facebook page and app.

The Lakota Times posted on Jan. 14 that it was going to cease publication entirely. But on Feb. 6, owner and publisher Connie Louise Smith said she has decided to try to keep operating by publishing on the paper's digital platforms. An annual subscription for all access is \$65.

"People were calling. It made me feel good," she said. "We're taking a cut in pay until I can find out what type of revenue can come from online."

The Times was the official/legal newspaper of the Oglala and Rosebud Sioux tribes, Oglala Lakota County Schools, Oglala Lakota County, Bennett County and the Lakota Nation Invitational.

*South Dakota News Watch is an independent nonprofit. Read, donate and subscribe for free at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org). Contact CEO Carson Walker: 605-610-9366/[carson.walker@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:carson.walker@sdnewswatch.org).*

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## Gov. Rhoden Signs Six Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – TGovernor Larry Rhoden signed the following six bills into law on Friday. Click on the bill number for more information:

[SB 5](#) requires the disclosure of whether a ballot question was proposed by initiative or by the Legislature;

[SB 56](#) requires that agencies promulgating permanent rules publish the rules and associated rulemaking forms on a state website;

[SB 57](#) clarifies when agency financial resource information must be filed in the permanent administrative rulemaking process;

[SB 64](#) revises and repeals provisions related to the athletic commission;

[SB 84](#) increases thresholds for the value of and eligibility for the partners in education scholarship; and

[HB 1033](#) updates the reference to the Internal Revenue Code to reflect current federal law for the administration of higher education savings plans.

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- 2-Person: \$55.45 per month or \$575.10 per year
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- Family: \$72.43 per month
- Senior/PT: \$20 per month

Call or Text Paul at 605/397-7460  
Call or Text Tina at 605/397-7285

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## South Dakotans' biggest needs, according to 211 calls

By Molly Wetsch, South Dakota News Watch

Some of South Dakotans' greatest needs for resources in 2025 surrounded housing, food and utilities, according to the Helpline Center's 211 data from around the state.

The 211 line connects callers with community services statewide. While it's separate from 988, the state's mental health crisis hotline, the two lines both operate under the umbrella of the nonprofit, which is funded primarily by the state of South Dakota through the Department of Social Services, and also by the United Way and other private and public donations.

Janet Kittams, CEO of the Helpline Center, told News Watch that the lines benefit from working in tandem – especially as needs for mental health services and other community resources often overlap.

"The two teams really do work in partnership with each other because if 211 does get a call that is crisis-related or mental health-related, they can easily transfer that to the 988 team. I think what will happen with our data is we'll continue to see mental health on the 211 continue to go down as far as one of our needs," Kittams said.

The center compiles resources from local organizations that residents can access, such as financial assistance programs and food pantries, both online and when they call, text or email 211.

In more rural areas, it can be a challenge to connect callers with those resources, if they exist at all, said development director Lisa Ottmar. She said 211 will still make efforts to connect with callers even if it cannot offer specific local resource information.

"We can't control what resources are in the communities, but we still want people to reach out. Sometimes it's finding that balance of letting them know that we exist and how we can help. Problem solving, even if there isn't a resource, and just letting them know that there's a connection, a person that they can connect with," Ottmar said.

### Data illustrates unique county-by-county needs

The Helpline Center began making its data on caller needs and geographies available to the public on its data dashboard three years ago, after the line became available to all South Dakotans six years ago.

Kittams said that data and the resource database being publicly available means that local leaders are able to determine what their community needs the most. And while statewide data indicates that housing is the most pressing concern for most South Dakotans, some counties have vastly different needs.

For example, in Perkins County, where the population density is roughly one person per square mile, health care was the most commonly indicated need. In Douglas County, access to information services was the most pressing.

"I think oftentimes those individual counties are surprised by the needs in their county that maybe are different than what we see overall in the state," Kittams said.

### Need 1: Housing

Key takeaway: Housing is the most pressing need in the vast majority of South Dakota's counties, both rural and urban.

Nearly 27% of callers to 211 in 2025 mentioned housing as a need they needed resources for. More than half of those callers needed assistance with rent payments.

"Rent assistance is one of our most common calls. Some of it is immediate, like 'My rent is due and I'm going to get kicked out. Can I get assistance right away?' Some of it is a little bit more in advance like, 'I just got laid off. I'm struggling financially. I know this is gonna come due. Is there a program to help me?'" Kittams said.

Other housing-related needs included assistance in finding shelters, with rent deposits and help with tenants' rights.

### Need 2: Food

Key takeaway: Immediate access to food, via pantries and other community access initiatives, is among the largest concerns for South Dakotans.

The Helpline Center's chief operating officer, Amy Carter, said that temporary cuts to Supplemental Nutri-

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tion Assistance Program benefits during last year's government shutdown meant that 211 saw an increase in calls concerning food access.

Shifts in the resource environment also meant that some callers need assistance in finding new resources – especially related to immediate food access like food pantries, which was the most common food need referenced by callers.

"There's been some changes in the food resources as well, so that, for example, in Sioux Falls, we used to have resources that would do food delivery. That went away a few months ago. So that's changed the types of calls we get in that area a little bit," Carter said.

### Need 3: Utility assistance

Key takeaway: State resources are especially useful for common utility-related needs.

Many callers who need utility assistance will likely be connected to statewide programs, like the Public Utilities Commission's Lifeline program which discounts phone prices for those in need.

"That resource database, we have everything you can possibly think of. Trying to keep that information up to date is our job because people can go online and do random searches, but is it current? Is it valid? Is it actually legit? You'd never know," Ottmar said.

"We have a specific database team, and that's what they do is make sure those resources are current. They're always trying to find the little nuggets that are out there that we don't hear about."

### Personal connection key to 211 success

While the line's primary purpose is to connect callers with resources both statewide and in their communities, Kittams said that having voice-to-voice conversations is often the intervention that makes the difference for those in need.

"Sometimes they just need that emotional support, so sometimes our staff at 211 will take some time and just talk with them. And then if they do need referrals to mental health resources, absolutely, our staff would provide that," Kittams said.

211 Day, the national celebration of 211 and its resources, is on Feb. 11. This year, the Helpline Center will be celebrating more than 50 years of 211 after its establishment in the state in 1974.

"I think that is the difference with 211 – that we have that real live person who's talking to them. Our staff do a great job of showing that they care and they're compassionate," Kittams said. "They can say 'I'm here to help you, I'm here to listen. And I really do want to help you.'"

*South Dakota News Watch is an independent, non-profit organization. Read more statewide stories, donate and subscribe to our free email at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org). Reporter Molly Wetsch is a Report for America corps member covering rural and Indigenous issues. Contact her at [molly.wetsch@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:molly.wetsch@sdnewswatch.org).*

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I'm in Groton but am willing to drive to nearby towns!

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## Tina's Baskets

605-397-7285



Reese's cake with mini Reese's on top  
\$35.00



Mix candy cake with mini mix on top with  
lights on the bottom  
\$20.00



White heart shape with red roses and Fer-  
rero chocolate candy with a bear with it  
\$25.00



Bear sucker cake with life savers and dum  
dum suckers in it  
\$15.00

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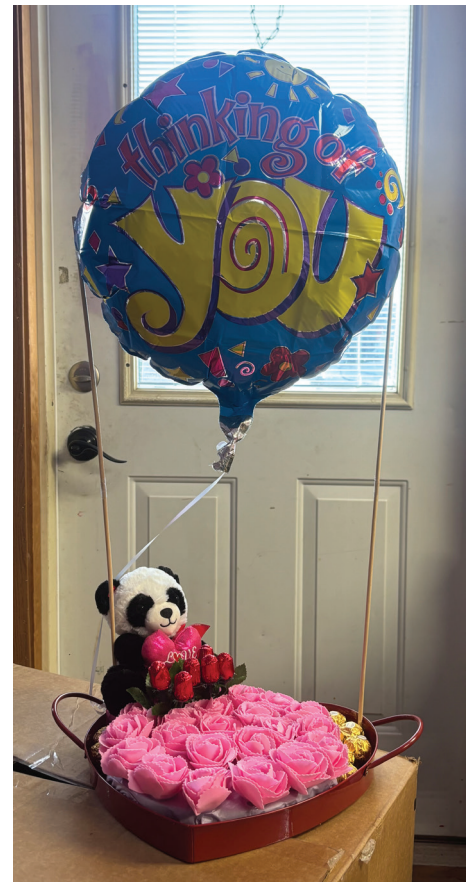
**Hersheys cake with strawberry drops and mini Hersheys on top  
\$40.00**



**Laffy Taffy Octopus cake  
\$ 15.00**



**Relax and Unwind basket with two wine bottles, blanket, adult coloring books and word finds with crayons and pens and some different chocolates as shown here  
\$50.00**



**Thinking of you balloon with bear, red chocolate roses with pink roses and Ferrero Rocher chocolate candy  
\$25.00**

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## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

February 9, 2026 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approve of minutes of January 12, 2026 school board meeting as drafted.
2. Approve of January 2026 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approve of January 2026 District bills for payment.
4. Approve of January 2026 School Lunch Report.
5. Approve of January 2026 School Transportation Report.
6. Authorize the Business Manager to pay district bills up to \$75,000 in advance, using the custodial advance payment account to be approved by the board for reimbursement at the following regular board meeting.

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
  - a. Mathematics... E. Swenson, J. Carson, G. Kjellsen
  - b. Social Sciences... S. Wanner, S. Thorson
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

#### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Adopt supplemental budget #FY26-03.
2. First reading of recommended policy changes: DB Budget [Amendment], DBDA General Fund Balance [Amendment], DBJ Budget Implementation [Delete], DC Taxing and Borrowing Authority/Limitations [Amendment], DD Funding Proposals and Applications [Title Amendment], DFD Gate Receipts and Admissions [New], DH Bonded Employees and Officers [Amendment], DIB Types of Funds [Amendment], DIC Financial Reports and Statements [Amendment], DID Inventories [Amendment], DIE Audits [Amendment], DI Fiscal Accounting and Reporting [Amendment], EBCD Emergency Closings [Amendment], GCPC Retirement of Professional Staff Members
3. First reading of recommended job description for Assistant Business Manager.
4. Approve re-assignment of Kelly Oswald from paraprofessional to Administrative Assistant/Study Hall effective February 9, 2026.
5. Approve hiring Megan Dockter, 5-12 Instrumental Music Teacher, for the 2026-27 school year.
6. Approve retirement of Kami Lipp at the end of the 2025-26 school year.
7. Approve retirement of Diane Kurtz at the end of the 2025-26 school year.
8. Approve resignation of Jodi Schwan at the end of the 2025-26 school year.
9. Executive session pursuant SDCL 1-25-2.1 for personnel issue.

#### ADJOURN



## Fact brief: Does SD have some of the most 'ambulance deserts?'

Michael Klinski  
Freelance Reporter

### Yes

South Dakota is fourth in the nation with the percent of people who live in an ambulance desert, according to a 2023 study.

The state has 15.2% of its county populations in areas underserved by ambulances – behind Montana (27.8%), New Mexico (19.6%) and Utah (19.1%).

The study, completed in May 2023 by the Maine Rural Health Research Center and the Rural Health Research and Policy Centers, defines an ambulance desert as places and people that are more than 25 minutes from an ambulance service.

South Dakota is among eight states that have fewer than three ambulances per 1,000 square miles. While the state is toward the top with ambulance stations per 100,000 people, its geographic size and small population puts it toward the top for rural areas facing a lack of services.

The state Legislature is considering a bill that would create a task force to study classifying emergency medical services as "essential." As it stands the state is not required to provide or fund EMS.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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### **Cattle industry divided over lab-grown and direct-to-consumer meat legislation**

**Both measures await the governor's action after legislative approval**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

A comment this week by a rural Huron farmer who's also a lawmaker told the story of two bills affecting the cattle business.

"If you have two ranchers, you've got four different opinions, and you can't tell any of them what to think," said Republican Sen. Brandon Wipf. "And I respect them for that."

Wipf made the comments as South Dakota state senators who raise cattle were divided over a bill that would effectively bar the sale of lab-grown meat in the state by declaring it an "adulterated" food under state law.

The bill passed the Senate on an 18-16 vote Thursday and awaits a decision by Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden — a rancher — to sign or veto it. Another bill causing a divide in the cattle industry that's also on the governor's desk would make it easier for South Dakotans to buy meat directly from cattle producers, if Congress changes a related federal law. That bill passed the Senate 28-6 on Friday after the House passed it earlier.

#### **Lab-grown meat**

The lab-grown meat bill, which passed the House 45-22, would amend state law to add meat grown in a laboratory to the list of foods deemed adulterated. The bill's supporters said the product should be deemed unsafe and unfit for consumption because its long-term health impacts are unknown, and key parts of the production process are proprietary and lack transparency.

During the Senate floor debate, the bill's supporters alleged that the technology is intended to replace traditional livestock production and could further consolidate control of the meat supply among large corporations, threatening South Dakota ranchers and rural communities. Sen. Mykala Voita, R-Bonesteel, noted that global meatpacking conglomerates are investing in lab-grown meat startups.

"And if you've been reading the writing on the wall that has been coming over the last 20 years, you'll see that they're trying to make the cattle industry go the way of the pigs, of the chickens, of everything else that has become vertically integrated," Voita said.

Vertical integration refers to companies that own the production, processing and retail aspects of their business.

Opponents of the bill said some lab-grown meat products are federally approved for safety and that the state should not label a specific category of food "adulterated" without evidence that it is contaminated or dangerous.

Sen. Sydney Davis, R-Burbank, is a cattle producer. She trusts consumers to choose ranch-raised meat products over lab-grown alternatives, she said. She warned the bill could invite costly litigation over interference in interstate commerce.

"They would make more money on litigation than they ever would selling their product here," she said.

It is unclear whether Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden, a rancher, will sign the bill. Spokesperson Josie Harms told South Dakota Searchlight the governor "will reveal his decision at the appropriate time."

However, during a press conference last week, Rhoden said that while he is not a fan of lab-grown meat, he acknowledged that those are only his personal views.

"We can't just pick and choose when we want to support people's ability to bring a product, no matter

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how much you don't like it," he said. "And then you let the marketplace and people speak with their voice, and they're not buying that product."

Last year, South Dakota legislators and Rhoden adopted a law requiring lab-grown meat to be clearly labeled. They also passed a law prohibiting the use of state money for the research, production, promotion, sale or distribution of lab-grown meat. There's an exception for public universities, which can still do research on lab-grown meat. But the law prevents, for example, the awarding of state economic development grants to companies that sell the product.

## Meat cuts to consumers

Currently, consumers can't buy cuts of meat directly from cattle producers if that meat was not processed at a state or federally inspected facility. A common workaround is buying the animal from the producer and having it processed at a meat locker that has "custom-exempt" status. Those facilities are exempt from the Federal Meat Inspection Act requirements for carcass-by-carcass inspection, but are reviewed periodically for safety.

A bill that passed the Senate 28-6 on Friday afternoon would allow South Dakotans to buy individual cuts of meat from a cattle producer if the meat was processed at a custom-exempt facility — but only if Congress first changes federal law to permit those sales.

The bill had already passed the House by a vote of 48-18. Supporters described the measure as a "trigger bill," meant to take effect only if federal legislation, such as the PRIME Act, is approved.

The South Dakota bill would apply to meat from cattle, sheep, swine or goats raised by the producer for at least 90 days, then slaughtered at a custom-exempt meat locker.

The bill would limit sales to direct, in-person transactions by the producer to a consumer at the producer's primary residence, at a farmers market, or at another temporary sales venue.

Rep. John Shubeck, R-Beresford, farms and raises cattle, and is the bill's main sponsor. He said meat processed at a custom-exempt meat locker is already widely consumed. He said reputational accountability between the producer, butcher and consumer minimizes risk.

"In that case, you're saying, 'Hey, I trust the farmer,'" he said. "In the other case, you're saying, 'I trust the inspector.'"

Proponents, including some cattle producers and the South Dakota Retailers Association, said the bill would expand consumer choice and create more direct-market opportunities, particularly in areas far from federal- or state-inspected slaughter facilities or those facing long processing backlogs.

Opponents included the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association and operators of federal- and state-inspected meat lockers. They said the bill could undercut local processors who have paid for the required inspections, labels and recordkeeping systems that support consumer safety and traceability. Inspected plants follow federal controls, pathogen testing and recall systems that can locate and recall products if contamination is detected. They said custom-exempt processors are not required to provide the same level of documentation.

Troy Hadrick is a Faulkton-area rancher who runs a federally inspected meat processing facility.

"I don't think food safety is red tape," he said. "I think it is a system that is designed to protect us all."

Opponents of the bill, including Sen. Davis, said putting a trigger law on the books "until Congress acts" can create false expectations, confusion that leads to accidental noncompliance, and pre-commit the state to a legal framework before any details of federal law are known.

Republican Sen. Mark Lapka, a farmer and rancher from rural Leola, said passing the bill is a way to pressure Congress to pass legislation.

*Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.*

## High school coaches in sanctioned activities could soon be required to report abuse, neglect

Initial version of bill applied to all coaches at all age levels in any activity

BY: JOHN HULT

A bill to require high school coaches to report abuse and neglect earned the full support of a South Dakota House of Representatives panel on Friday.

House Bill 1187 earned yes votes from every member present on the House Judiciary Committee and was cleared for the House's consent calendar. Consent calendar items are voted on in bulk, without debate, unless a member asks to pull them off for discussion.

The initial version of St. Onge Republican Rep. Mary Fitzgerald's bill would have made anyone serving as a coach in any capacity — paid or volunteer, leading school-sanctioned or non-sanctioned activities for kids at any age — a "mandatory reporter," meaning obligated by law to report suspected abuse or neglect to authorities.

Teachers, health care providers and child care workers are currently deemed mandatory reporters under state law.

Coaches, Fitzgerald said, spend "hours and hours" with children, often developing the kind of rapport and trust relationships that invite disclosure by children of abuse and neglect in or outside the home.

As such, she argued, coaches ought to have the same reporting expectations as a teacher or caregiver. Leaders with the state's school administrators, large schools, education association, state's attorneys and supporters from nonprofit organizations that work on behalf of children and sexual assault survivors agreed in their testimony.

One opponent, a youth coach from Pennsylvania who testified remotely, expressed concerns about volunteer coaches feeling compelled to issue dubious reports for fear of facing consequences for lack of disclosure. That could overwhelm already overworked social workers, he said, without improving the odds of catching legitimate wrongdoing.

"The question before you is not whether abuse should be reported," said Zac Martin. "We've got to report it. But the question is whether adding coaches to the statutory list of mandatory reporters with criminal penalties attached is an effective and responsible way to advance this goal."

Martin said the bill could also make volunteers think twice about signing on to coach youth sports.

Committee member David Kull, a Brandon Republican, noted that some coaches in youth activities are teenagers. The possibility of penalties for a 15-year-old who fails to report suspected abuse "does raise a little bit of concern," Kull said, asking Fitzgerald to address the issue.

"I can see your point," Fitzgerald said. "But I would think that if that 15- or 16-year-old did see something, that they would go to an adult."

An amendment from Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, aimed to clear up any concerns about volunteers and youth coaches. The change, which Fitzgerald called "friendly," drew a box around the coaches covered by the bill by restricting mandatory reporting requirements to coaches leading activities sanctioned by the South Dakota High School Activities Association.

Mortenson said it's clear that "we should all be reporting," but worried that the bill as written might see resistance without a tighter definition of which coaches are expected to comply.

"I think we are potentially going to be losing a very important step in the right direction by the breadth of the statute as drafted," Mortenson said.

Rep. Peri Pourier, R-Pine Ridge, grew emotional as she spoke in support of her motion to pass the bill and recommend that the full House of Representatives do the same.

"There are areas within our state, remote areas within our state, where secrecy is a culture. Areas where 'don't speak out' is about survival," Pourier said.

It's not "a heavy lift" for coaches to watch the Department of Social Services' 44-minute training video for mandatory reporting, Pourier said.

One committee member spoke up to say that the bill doesn't touch on an issue that's discouraged reporting in her area.

Republican Rep. Jana Hunt of Dupree said some teachers had stopped reporting abuse and neglect because, Hunt said, they felt the state's Child Protection Services failed to act on the reports.

She "talked herself into" supporting the bill over the course of her remarks, but said she would have liked to have seen social services officials in the room to speak to the issue.

"I am severely disappointed in how they are handling the reports that my local school district is sending their way," Hunt said.

*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.*

## **Sales tax, property tax and mobile sports betting: Committees spar over tax relief bills**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER**

State lawmakers on a budget committee endorsed a bill Friday at the Capitol in Pierre that would keep South Dakota's sales tax at its reduced rate.

Shortly after, another committee rejected a rival bill that would have used an increased sales tax rate to lessen property taxes across the state, and advanced a bill that would ask voters to legalize mobile sports betting and capture tax revenue from that to reduce property taxes.

The decisions illustrate competing ideas on how to address property tax relief in South Dakota — there are dozens of bills filed on the topic — and are repeats of conversations from the past several years.

Legislators considered rival tax relief programs in 2023, including a Senate-backed statewide property tax rebate program and a House-backed decrease in the state sales tax rate of 4.5% to 4.2%. Both had a price tag of roughly \$100 million. The Legislature at the time adopted the sales tax rate reduction with a three-year sunset clause that's scheduled to raise the rate back to 4.5% next year.

This is the third year since the tax cut that Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, has tried to repeal the expiration date and make the sales tax reduction permanent, failing in 2024 and 2025. Karr said the permanent sales tax cut is the fairest way to provide relief, since it wouldn't divert sales tax dollars — paid by renters, tourists and others who may not own property — toward property tax credits.

During Friday's Senate Appropriations discussion on the permanent sales tax relief bill, Sen. Ernie Otten, R-Tea, called attempts to use sales taxes for property tax relief "bad tax policy." Karr's bill passed with a 6-3 vote, after facing opposition from the South Dakota Retailers Association, the South Dakota Farm Bureau and the Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce.

During Friday's Senate Taxation Committee meeting, Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, said lawmakers in 2023 "made a poor choice in how they gave tax relief" while discussing a new bill from Madison Republican Sen. Casey Crabtree that would capture revenue from the scheduled sales tax increase to reduce property taxes. Crabtree's bill was rejected with a 4-3 vote, after facing opposition from the state Bureau of Finance and Management and Department of Revenue.

The Senate Taxation Committee advanced two other bills addressing property taxes.

Sen. Randy Deibert, R-Spearfish, introduced Senate Bill 125, which would establish a "homeowner tax reduction fund" at the state level, without specifying a revenue or funding source. That passed out of committee unanimously.

Crabtree's proposal was one option to fill that proposed fund. Deibert said the fund created in SB 125 could be filled in other ways.

The second bill to make it out of the Senate Taxation Committee was Senate Joint Resolution 504, also introduced by Crabtree. The resolution, if passed, would ask South Dakota voters in the November general

election to approve a constitutional amendment legalizing mobile sports betting statewide, with most of the tax revenue used to lower property taxes across the state.

Voters amended the state constitution in 2020 to legalize sports betting only in Deadwood and tribal casinos in South Dakota. It is legal statewide in Wyoming and Iowa, among other states, and sports-betting smartphone apps and websites have proliferated nationwide.

John Pappas, representing fraud prevention and cybersecurity firm GeoComply, shared with lawmakers that the company recorded 1.6 million attempts to place mobile sports bets in South Dakota in 2025, which came from 55,000 sports wagering accounts. Nearly 7,000 South Dakotans physically crossed the Iowa and Wyoming borders since September 2025 to place bets.

"Iowa is benefitting from the current status quo in South Dakota," Pappas said.

The bill advanced 4-3 but faced criticism for funding property tax relief with a potentially addictive enterprise.

Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, shared with lawmakers that her father is "a gambling addict." She saw the constitutional amendment as a way to set up safety measures and guardrails, such as easier access to an addiction hotline and betting caps. Funding property taxes through the new revenue source would be an added benefit, she said.

"Anywhere we can find revenue sources, like a sin tax, essentially, to put toward a growing problem in our state, I'm personally in favor of," Hulse said.

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## Energy secretary calls for more emphasis on fossil fuels to keep power on in winter storms

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

A focus on addressing climate change, including by producing wind and solar energy, has not helped Americans keep their electricity and heat on during winter storms, U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright said Friday.

Ahead of another major cold snap on the East Coast, Wright briefed reporters at the agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., on the importance of maintaining electricity and heat supply during winter storms and advocated for a national energy strategy that focuses more on grid resilience and less on reducing carbon emissions.

His statements continued a Trump administration stress on fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas that contribute to global climate change.

Americans elected President Donald Trump to move away from a focus on climate, Wright said.

"Today, the policies that get in the way of reasonable energy development and mess up the math are things focused around climate change," he said. "We've done almost nothing to change global greenhouse gas emissions — as close to nothing as you can get — from endless regulations on electricity that have just driven up prices and driven down reliability in the name of climate change."

### Electricity grids and peak demand

Electricity grids must be designed for peak demand, such as during winter storms or summer heat waves, Wright said. Efforts to increase generation capacity with renewable sources are misguided, as the United States electricity grid produces hundreds of excess gigawatts of power during normal conditions, he said.

During President Joe Biden's administration, Democrats enacted a law providing massive tax credits for wind and solar production. Without naming that law or specific officials, Wright said those efforts were

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not useful.

"When I hear politicians say, 'We just need more electrons on the grid,' no, we don't," he said. "When the sun shines or the wind blows, (it) doesn't add anything to the capacity of our electricity grid. It just means we send subsidy checks to those generators, and we tell the other generators, turn down."

During the winter storm that gripped much of the country last month, wind energy provided 40% less electricity than it had on the same days in 2025, Wright said. Solar provided only 2% of energy to affected areas, according to a pie chart shown at the briefing.

By contrast, coal provided 25% more power than usual and natural gas produced 47% more, he said. Nuclear energy was about the same.

## Renewables strengthen grid, climate group says

The clean energy group Climate Power said in a Tuesday statement that renewable sources helped fortify energy supply during peak demand times. Solar energy produced 300% more in a 2024 Texas storm than it had in a storm three years earlier. And during last month's cold streak, areas that relied on wind saw lower prices, according to the group.

Climate Power also said natural gas infrastructure was "prone to freezes and mechanical failure."

"As back-to-back winter storms pummeled communities across the country in January, the facts about Donald Trump's reckless energy policies have come into focus: fossil fuels have proved less reliable and more expensive as families struggle to keep the power on," the statement read.

## Wright favors natural gas

But while Democrats and climate activists have said the U.S. should move away from oil, coal and gas because of the climate-warming emissions they release and toward renewables, Wright suggested natural gas should be emphasized instead to substitute for oil, which is more expensive and produces more air pollution.

The proposed Constitution Pipeline, which would carry natural gas from New York state to Pennsylvania, should have been approved years ago, Wright said, but was held up by a "bad political decision."

Planners abandoned the controversial project in 2020 in the face of regulatory difficulties in New York, but revived it last year. Its federal reviews are pending.

Wright said producing more energy would also be needed for another Trump administration priority: leading in artificial intelligence development. The industry needs massive energy sources to run the data centers AI relies on.

*Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.*

## Bill criminalizing fraudulent insemination moves to full South Dakota House of Representatives

**Proposal was inspired by Indiana fertility doctor's secret fathering of more than 90 kids**

**BY: JOHN HULT**

A bill on fertility fraud inspired by a Netflix documentary is on its way to the South Dakota House of Representatives after clearing its first screening committee Friday morning.

House Bill 1164 would make the knowing use by a licensed medical provider of their own reproductive material or the reproductive material of another person to inseminate a patient without their written consent both a crime and a civil cause of action.

A doctor who uses their own sperm to inseminate someone would not be able to use consent for the use of an anonymous donor as a defense against prosecution or a civil lawsuit.

Rep. Terri Jorgenson, R-Piedmont, told the House Judiciary Committee that she first "stumbled upon" a

YouTube video on fertility fraud, then watched a 2022 documentary called "Our Father."

The film tells the story of Dr. Donald Cline, an Indianapolis fertility specialist who secretly used his own sperm to father more than 90 children in the 1970s and 1980s without their mothers' knowledge.

Cline was convicted of obstruction of justice for lying to investigators in 2017. His case prompted Indiana in 2019 to pass a bill similar to Jorgenson's proposal. Other states, including Texas, have already done so, Jorgenson said.

"These states acted because existing laws were inadequate," she said. "General fraud, medical malpractice or assault statutes often fail to capture the unique violation involved, resulting in light consequences or no prosecution at all."

The Jorgenson bill affixes penalties of up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine to fertility fraud. People could sue the wrongdoer for up to five years from the date of a DNA paternity test or other evidentiary record becoming available, from the date the licensed provider admits to their behavior, or from the date that a child born of such a fraudulent scheme turns 18 years old.

One proponent of Jorgenson's bill, Josh Wood, directs the child-focused nonprofit organization Them Before Us. He told lawmakers that at least 50 providers nationwide have been accused of similar fertility fraud, and said the impact on the psychological wellbeing of children who learn of the fraudulent nature of their parentage can be lifelong and devastating.

"They are left to grapple with the aftermath as they realize and process that they were conceived in medical assault," Wood said. "They experience genealogical bewilderment. They discover half siblings living in close proximity. We actually have cases where some have even dated, and they deal with the implications of not knowing their own family medical history."

Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, thanked Jorgenson for identifying what he called a gap in state law. Medical malpractice suits must be commenced in South Dakota within two years of the action that caused a patient's injury, he said, regardless of when a patient learns about the injury.

"We have one of the shortest, most onerous statutes of limitations on medical malpractice in the United States," said Hughes, an attorney who described the two malpractice cases he's tried in his career among the most difficult he'd ever worked on.

In cases like fertility fraud, Hughes said, South Dakota's malpractice laws don't offer enough protection for victims.

The Jorgenson bill passed 11-0, and now moves to the full House of Representatives for a vote.

*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.*

## White House takes down racist meme of Obamas posted on Trump social media

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — The White House on Friday pulled down a social media post depicting former President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama as monkeys after members of Congress from both political parties expressed dismay and called it racist.

A White House spokesperson told States Newsroom around noon that a "staffer erroneously made the post" that was shared on President Donald Trump's social media platform late Thursday night.

But White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt wrote in a statement earlier in the day the video wasn't a real issue.

"This is from an internet meme video depicting President Trump as the King of the Jungle and Democrats as characters from the Lion King," she wrote. "Please stop the fake outrage and report on something today that actually matters to the American public."

The White House press office also shared via email the full video, which was published in October. Trump shared a clip of the video on his social media account on Thursday at 11:44 p.m. Eastern within another

video about allegations of 2020 election fraud in Michigan.

The decision to delete Trump's social media post followed hours of pushback from lawmakers.

"Praying it was fake because it's the most racist thing I've seen out of this White House," wrote South Carolina Republican Sen. Tim Scott. "The President should remove it."

Scott is chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which is tasked with ensuring the GOP maintains its majority in that chamber following November's midterm elections.

Nebraska Republican Sen. Pete Ricketts posted that, "Even if this was a Lion King meme, a reasonable person sees the racist context to this. The White House should do what anyone does when they make a mistake: remove this and apologize."

New York Republican Rep. Mike Lawler wrote the "post is wrong and incredibly offensive — whether intentional or a mistake — and should be deleted immediately with an apology offered."

Mississippi Republican Sen. Roger Wicker called the post "totally unacceptable.

"The president should take it down and apologize."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., described the video as something that "is dangerous and degrades our country" as well as "Racist. Vile. Abhorrent."

"The President must immediately delete the post and apologize to Barack and Michelle Obama, two great Americans who make Donald Trump look like a small, envious man," Schumer wrote.

Michigan Democratic Sen. Elissa Slotkin posted, "This is racist garbage from President Trump. If you're finding yourself defending it, you're on the wrong side of history."

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., wrote that "President Obama and Michelle Obama are brilliant, compassionate and patriotic Americans. They represent the best of this country."

"Donald Trump is a vile, unhinged and malignant bottom feeder," Jeffries added. "Why are GOP leaders like John Thune continuing to stand by this sick individual? Every single Republican must immediately denounce Donald Trump's disgusting bigotry."

New York Democratic Rep. Yvette Clarke, chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, wrote that while some people "still find Donald Trump's behavior shocking. I do not."

"This is the man who built his political fortune by way of a vile campaign of birther lies and harassment against President Obama," Clarke wrote. "Bigotry has been his brand since Day 1, and the wretched 'yes' men who surround him enabling or endorsing this conduct aren't going to change that.

"As his scandals continue to escalate, and as he continues to lose the little lucidity that remains with him, I expect Donald to only retreat deeper into the sewers of racism and ignorance. That's where he's most at home. That's where he's most comfortable."

Virginia Democratic Rep. Don Beyer wrote, "Donald Trump greets the first week of Black History Month with one of the most racist things he's ever posted. This man is unwell."

*Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.*

## 'It is astonishing': Congress rebuffs Trump push to slash \$33B from health, human services

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — Congress has approved the first public health funding bill since President Donald Trump began his second term, with lawmakers largely rejecting his proposed spending cuts and the elimination of dozens of programs.

A bipartisan group of negotiators instead struck a deal to increase funding on several line items within the Department of Health and Human Services' annual appropriations bill, including for major initiatives at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"When you look at the differences between what was proposed and what was agreed to, it is astonishing," House Appropriations Committee ranking member Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., said during a hearing on the bill in late January.

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The Trump administration's budget request, released in May, called on Congress to cut funding for the Department of Health and Human Services by \$33 billion, or 26.2%.

The president asked lawmakers to implement an \$18 billion funding cut to the NIH, which he argued would bring the agency in line with the Make America Healthy Again agenda.

The Trump administration proposed a \$3.6 billion cut for CDC programs, including the elimination of the National Center for Chronic Diseases Prevention and Health Promotion, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, and Public Health Preparedness and Response, all of which it said could "be conducted more effectively by States."

The budget request said more than \$1 billion should be cut from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, though it said the administration was "committed to combatting the scourge of deadly drugs that have ravaged American communities."

Trump also requested lawmakers zero out any funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, which he deemed "unnecessary." The federal program helps millions of low-income households meet their home energy needs, via states and tribes.

The final spending bill Congress approved rejected nearly all of the major cuts.

## Collins, Murray both praise final product

Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Susan Collins, R-Maine, said the bills "reflect months of hard work and deliberation and contributions from members of both parties and on both sides of the Capitol."

"Funding for NIH is not decreased, as was proposed in the administration's budget," she said. "Rather, it is increased by \$415 million, including increases of \$100 million for Alzheimer's research and \$10 million more for diabetes research, with a focus on type 1 diabetes."

Collins also touted an increase in "funding for low-income heating assistance, which is absolutely crucial for states like Maine and is an issue that I have worked for years on with my Democratic colleague Jack Reed of Rhode Island."

Senate Appropriations Committee ranking member Patty Murray, D-Wash., said the difference between Trump's budget request and the final bills was like the difference between "night and day."

"Our bill rejects President Trump's asks to rubber stamp his public health sabotage," she said. "Instead, it doubles down on lifesaving public health investments. It rejects Trump's efforts to slash opioid response funds. It rejects his proposal to chop the CDC in half. It rejects his call to end programs like title X, the teen pregnancy program, essential HIV initiatives, and more."

## Rare bipartisan agreement in Trump's second term

Senators from both political parties indicated last summer they weren't fully on board with Trump's budget proposal and used a hearing with HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in May and a separate hearing with NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya in June to highlight their concerns.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved its HHS spending bill on a broadly bipartisan vote in July, while the House Appropriations Committee approved its funding bill in September without any Democratic support.

Neither of the original bills went to the floor for debate and amendment votes, though negotiations to find compromise on a final bill began late last year after the record-breaking government shutdown ended in November.

Republicans and Democrats brokered a final agreement on the HHS funding bill in late January, the first time bipartisan agreement was reached during Trump's second term.

Congress previously approved a series of stopgap spending bills to keep HHS up and running, mostly on funding levels and policies last set during the Biden administration.

The House originally voted on Jan. 22 to send the package that included funding for HHS to the Senate. But it stalled after federal immigration agents shot and killed a second U.S. citizen in Minnesota and

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Democrats demanded changes to the spending bill for the Department of Homeland Security.

The Senate voted 71-29 on Jan. 30 to send the package back to the House after removing the full-year DHS spending bill and replacing it with a two-week stopgap. The House then voted 217-214 on Tuesday to clear the package for Trump, who signed it later in the day, ending a four-day partial government shutdown.

The package also holds funding for the departments of Defense, Education, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, State, Transportation and Treasury.

## 'Months of hard work turned into results'

House Appropriations Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., said during floor debate last month the process that led to the final bills proved lawmakers "can make tough decisions."

"This is where months of hard work turned into results," Cole said. "You see, we aren't here for just another stopgap temporary fix. We're here to finish the job by providing full-year funding and specifically this package addresses core areas of national consequence — defense; labor, health and education; and transportation and housing development."

Congress is supposed to pass the dozen full-year appropriations bills by the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1, though it hasn't completed all of its work on time in decades.

Last fiscal year, it didn't complete its work at all, making March 2024 the last time Congress approved all of the funding bills.

Cole said during debate the programs funded "aren't abstract concepts on a page, they affect how Americans live, work, learn and travel every day."

DeLauro said the package of bills represents "a strong bipartisan, bicameral agreement that rejects the Trump administration's efforts to eviscerate public services and reasserts Congress' power of the purse."

"It provides funding levels, removing ambiguity that the White House sought to exploit in the past," DeLauro said. "It establishes deadlines for required spending, provides minimum staffing thresholds to prevent agencies from being hollowed out and increases notification requirements to ensure the administration is complying with the laws that Congress makes."

## HHS ends up with \$210 million bump

The bill provides HHS with more than \$116 billion, \$210 million more in discretionary funding than the previous level and a rejection of Trump's request to cut \$33 billion, according to a summary from Murray's office.

NIH will receive \$48.7 billion in funding, \$415 million more than its current spending level, showing that lawmakers were unwilling to slice its budget by \$18 billion as requested.

Congress bolstered funding for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration by \$65 million to a total of \$7.4 billion, according to Murray's summary. Trump asked lawmakers to reduce its allocation by more than \$1 billion.

A \$3.6 billion funding cut for the CDC was also rejected, with appropriators agreeing to provide the Atlanta-based agency with \$9.2 billion.

A summary of the bill from DeLauro's office says negotiators were able to keep funding for domestic and global HIV/AIDS activities, Firearm Injury and Mortality Prevention Research and Tobacco Prevention and Control, among other programs that House Republicans originally proposed to zero out.

The legislation bolstered, instead of eliminated, funding for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, according to a summary from Cole's office.

The bill, it said, "reprioritizes taxpayer dollars where they matter most: into lifesaving biomedical research and resilient medical supply chains, classrooms and technical programs that set Americans up for success, and rural hospitals and primary health care to support strong and healthy families."

## CDC program axed

The legislation does eliminate the CDC's Social Determinants of Health program, which the agency's web-

site states are “nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes.” Those can include whether a person has access to clean air and water, a well-balanced diet, exercise, a good education, career opportunities, economic stability and a safe place to live.

HHS’ Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion writes that “people who don’t have access to grocery stores with healthy foods are less likely to have good nutrition. That raises their risk of health conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity — and even lowers life expectancy relative to people who do have access to healthy foods.”

Cole’s summary of the HHS spending bill says that program “promoted social engineering while distracting grant recipients from combating infectious and chronic diseases.”

The American Public Health Association urged Congress to approve the bill, writing in a statement the compromise “rightly maintains funding for most public health agencies and programs.”

“While the bill is not perfect and we disagree with cuts to several HHS agency programs included, overall, the agreement rejects the devastating cuts and nonsensical agency reorganizations proposed by the Trump administration and is a positive outcome,” APHA wrote. “Importantly, the bill also includes language to ensure that CDC and other health agencies maintain an adequate level of staffing to carry out their statutory responsibilities.

“The bill will also ensure that Congress exercises its oversight over any future proposed agency reorganizations.”

*Jennifer covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.*

## Trump’s calls to ‘nationalize’ elections have state, local election officials bracing for tumult

**Some election leaders are preparing for the possibility of federal pressure**

**BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN**

President Donald Trump’s calls this week to “nationalize” elections capped a year of efforts by his administration to exercise authority over state-run elections. The demands now have some state and local election officials fearing — and preparing for — a tumultuous year ahead.

“I don’t think we can put anything past this administration,” Oregon Democratic Secretary of State Tobias Read told Stateline in an interview. “I think they’re increasingly desperate, increasingly scared about what’s going to happen when they are held accountable by American voters. So we have to be prepared for everything.”

Ever since Trump signed an executive order last March that attempted to impose a requirement that voters prove their citizenship in federal elections, the federal government has engaged in a wide-ranging effort to influence how elections are run. Under the U.S. Constitution, that responsibility belongs to the states.

Then came Trump’s remarks on a podcast Monday that Republicans should nationalize elections and take over voting in at least 15 places, though he didn’t specify where. In the Oval Office the next day, the president reaffirmed his view that states are “agents” of the federal government in elections.

“I don’t know why the federal government doesn’t do them anyway,” Trump told reporters on Tuesday, despite the Constitution’s clear delegation of that job to states.

Across the country, election officials are watching recent developments and, in some instances, grappling with how the Trump administration’s moves could affect their preparations for November’s midterm elections, which will determine control of Congress. Local election officials say they are considering how they would respond to the presence of federal law enforcement near polling places and what steps they need to take to ensure voting proceeds smoothly.

Several Democratic election officials, and some Republicans, have spoken out. Placing voting under control of the federal government would represent a fundamental violation of the Constitution, they note.

The U.S. Constitution authorizes states to set the time, place and manner of elections for Congress but

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also allows Congress to change those regulations. The elections themselves are run by the states.

"Oh, hell no," Maine Democratic Secretary of State Shenna Bellows said in a video statement posted to social media about federalizing elections. Bellows, who is running for governor, said she would mail the White House a pocket Constitution, "because it seems they've lost their copy."

The U.S. Department of Justice already has sued 24 states and the District of Columbia to obtain unredacted voter rolls that include sensitive personal information that it says is needed to search for noncitizen voters. The Department of Homeland Security wants states to run their voter rolls through a powerful citizenship verification tool. Those opposed to the demand say sharing the data risks the privacy of millions of voters. Many fear the administration could use the information to disqualify eligible voters, challenge the legitimacy of a victory in a closely contested midterm election, or use the information to target political enemies.

In recent weeks, U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi linked the presence of federal immigration agents in Minneapolis in part to Minnesota's refusal to turn over its voter rolls. And the FBI seized ballots from an elections warehouse Fulton County, Georgia — a state that was a central focus of Trump's push to overturn his 2020 election loss.

"I think it does affect our planning as far as, what if there is some sort of federal law enforcement presence on Election Day or before or after? So that definitely factors into our planning," said Scott McDonell, the Democratic clerk in Dane County, Wisconsin, which includes Madison.

Ingham County, Michigan, Clerk Barb Byrum, a Democrat running for secretary of state, said she and other election administrators conduct tabletop exercises and keep emergency plans for numerous scenarios. Those used to focus on floods, power outages and cyberattacks.

"Now, unfortunately, it's turning into the president of the United States meddling in elections," Byrum said. "We will be prepared. Voters will hopefully not see anything different at their polling locations. ... But we need to be diligent."

Pamela Smith, president and CEO of the election security nonprofit Verified Voting, said election officials and their lawyers need to study up on laws and regulations, including chain-of-custody requirements for ballots.

David Becker, director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research, which operates the Election Official Legal Defense Network, said more than 10,000 lawyers have been recruited who are ready to provide pro bono legal assistance or advice to election officials.

When Stateline asked Read whether he anticipates Oregon facing federal pressure over its voter rolls, the secretary of state said he was set to meet this week with county clerks in the Portland metro area "to talk about that very question." Read's office later confirmed the meeting took place.

Oregon's largest city, Portland, has been a focus of the Trump administration. Last year, Trump deployed federalized Oregon National Guard members to the city after protests outside an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility. And federal agents last month shot two people in a hospital parking lot. Portland is a self-described sanctuary city that does not aid the federal government in immigration enforcement.

The concern in Oregon comes after Bondi on Jan. 24 sent a letter to Minnesota Democratic Gov. Tim Walz after federal agents killed Renee Good and Alex Pretti in separate shootings in Minneapolis that were captured on video.

Bondi's letter outlined three "common sense solutions" that would help end the "chaos" in Minnesota, she wrote. One of those solutions called for the state to provide the Justice Department with its full, unredacted voter rolls.

Minnesota Democratic Secretary of State Steve Simon has called Bondi's letter an "outrageous attempt to coerce Minnesota" into handing over the data. Simon hasn't provided the voter list, but White House border czar Tom Homan is pulling 700 immigration agents from Minnesota amid outrage over their presence. Roughly 2,300 agents will remain in the state.

In North Carolina, Durham County Director of Elections Derek Bowens called Trump's rhetoric and recent federal actions concerning. Bowens, a nonpartisan official appointed by the Durham County Board

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of Elections, said that as long as the rule of law persists, a "constitutional guard" will protect election administration.

Still, Bowens, who oversees elections in a largely Democratic area in a presidential swing state, said he and other local officials are preparing to prevent potential "intrusion" into the process.

"I'm not at liberty to divulge what that would be in terms of security protocols, but that's definitely in the forefronts of our minds," Bowens said in an interview, adding that he would be working with local emergency services officials "to make sure we're positioned to ensure everyone that is eligible has unfettered access to the ballot box."

## Trump wants federal control

Trump appears to be crossing a line from urging Congress to set additional election requirements into wanting the federal government's hands on states' election administration infrastructure, said Barry Burden, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the director of the Elections Research Center at the university.

"That would be brand new," Burden said.

After Trump called for nationalizing elections during Monday's appearance on the podcast of Dan Bongino, a right-wing media personality who was previously a top FBI official, the White House said Tuesday that the president had been referring to legislation in Congress that would require individuals to show proof of citizenship to register to vote. The bill has passed the House but is stalled in the Senate.

But Trump late Tuesday doubled down on his original comments during an unrelated bill-signing ceremony in the Oval Office. He suggested the federal government should take a role in vote counting.

"The federal government should get involved," Trump said. "These are agents of the federal government to count the votes. If they can't count the votes legally and honestly, then somebody else should take over."

Even before Trump's nationalization comments, Democratic state chief election officials and some Republicans had refused to turn over copies of voter rolls containing driver's license numbers, date of birth and full or partial Social Security numbers after the Justice Department began demanding the data last spring.

Federal judges in California and Oregon have ruled those states don't have to provide the data; numerous other lawsuits against other states are ongoing.

Missouri Secretary of State Denny Hoskins, a Trump-supporting Republican who campaigned for office on calls to hand-count ballots, told a Missouri House committee on Tuesday that he wouldn't provide the state's full voter list without a court order. He said his office had only shared a public version of the voter rolls; Missouri hasn't been sued by the Justice Department.

The Trump administration has previously confirmed it is sharing records with Homeland Security, which operates an online program that it uses to verify citizenship. The Justice Department has also offered some states a confidential agreement to search their voter lists.

"Clean voter rolls and basic election safeguards are requisites for free, fair, and transparent elections," Assistant U.S. Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon wrote in a statement to Stateline.

"The DOJ Civil Rights Division has a statutory mandate to enforce our federal voting rights laws, and ensuring the voting public's confidence in the integrity of our elections is a top priority of this administration."

But U.S. District Court Judge David O. Carter, a Clinton appointee, wrote in a Jan. 15 decision that the voter roll demands risk a chilling effect on Americans who may opt not to register to vote over concerns about how their information could be used. He dismissed the Justice Department's lawsuit seeking California's voter rolls.

"The taking of democracy does not occur in one fell swoop; it is chipped away piece-by-piece until there is nothing left. The case before the Court is one of these cuts that imperils all Americans," Carter wrote in a 33-page decision.

## Some Republicans oppose nationalization

Amid Trump's call for nationalizing elections, some Republican election officials have broken with the

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president even as they have avoided criticizing him directly. State control has long been a central tenant of conservatism, though Trump has challenged elements of Republican orthodoxy over the past decade.

Hoskins, the Missouri secretary of state, told state lawmakers on Tuesday, "I personally don't believe we should nationalize elections."

Georgia Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in a news release on Monday urged lawmakers to focus on strengthening state administration of elections. He said that was better than "moving to federalize a core function of state government."

Raffensperger, who is running for governor this year, was famously targeted by Trump following the 2020 election to overturn his loss in Georgia. In a phone call, Trump told Raffensperger he wanted to "find 11,780 votes" — the size of his loss in the state. Raffensperger refused to aid Trump.

Five years later, Raffensperger now faces pressure from Georgia state lawmakers to provide the state's unredacted voter list to the Justice Department. The Georgia Senate on Monday passed a resolution calling on the secretary of state to fully comply with the department's request.

Georgia Republican state Sen. Randy Robertson, the resolution's lead sponsor, said during a state Senate committee hearing last month that federal law supersedes limits on data sharing in Georgia law. He didn't respond to an interview request.

In a statement to Stateline, Raffensperger said that state law is "very clear" that officials aren't allowed to turn over the information. "I will always follow the law and the Constitution," Raffensperger wrote.

The Georgia Senate vote came less than a week after the FBI searched the Fulton County elections warehouse and seized ballots. Fulton County, which includes much of the Atlanta metro area, was where Trump was indicted on charges of conspiracy and racketeering related to his efforts to overturn the state's 2020 presidential election. The case was dismissed last year.

The Justice Department didn't answer a question from Stateline about whether it plans to seek search warrants for other election offices.

On Wednesday, Fulton County filed a motion in federal court demanding the return of the seized ballots and other materials, Fulton County Board of Commissioners Chair Robb Pitts, a Democrat, said at a news conference. The motion also asks for the unsealing of the affidavit used by the FBI to support its search warrant application.

"We will fight using all resources against those who seek to take over our elections," Pitts said. "Our Constitution itself is at stake in this fight."

*Stateline reporter Jonathan Shorman can be reached at [jshorman@stateline.org](mailto:jshorman@stateline.org).*

*This story was originally produced by Stateline, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.*

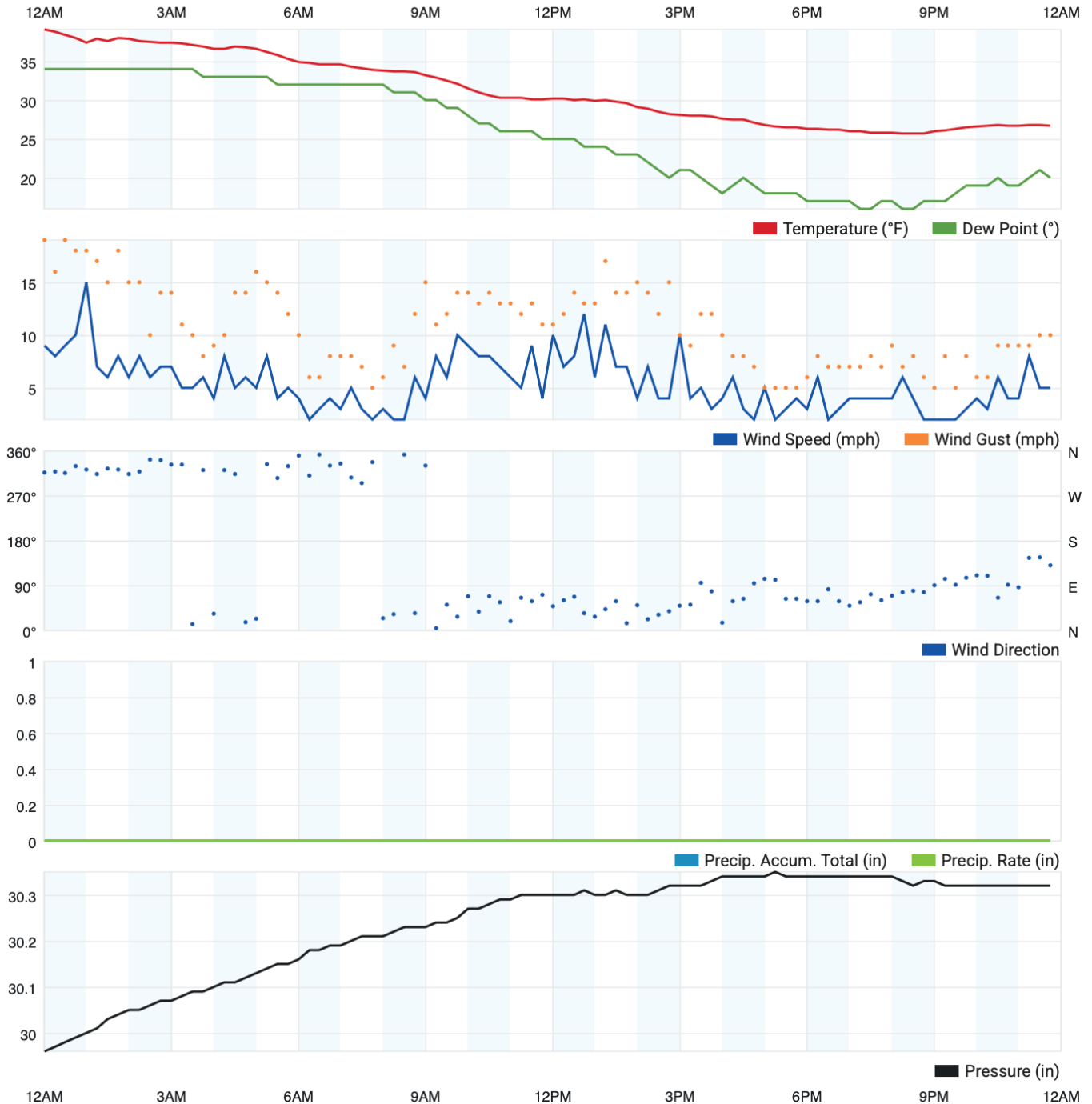
*Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for Stateline, including elections, voting rights, fights over state vs. federal power, civil liberties and more.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 6, 2026



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Today



High: 42 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Tonight



Low: 25 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 48 °F

Partly Sunny

Sunday Night



Low: 30 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Monday



High: 44 °F

Mostly Cloudy



## Weekend Forecast

### Today

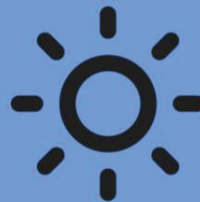


Highs: 30 - 58°F

Lows: 10 - 30°F

Warmest temperatures in south central SD.

### Sunday



Highs: 39 - 65°F

Lows: 21 - 33°F

Warmest temperatures in south central SD.

Partly cloudy skies today will be accompanied by temperatures warming through the weekend. The warmest temperatures will be over south central SD while far northeastern SD will see the coolest temperatures.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 39 °F at 12:02 AM

Low Temp: 26 °F at 8:20 PM

Wind: 19 mph at 12:29 AM

Precip: : 0.00

## Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1987

Record Low: -42 in 1895

Average High: 26

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.14

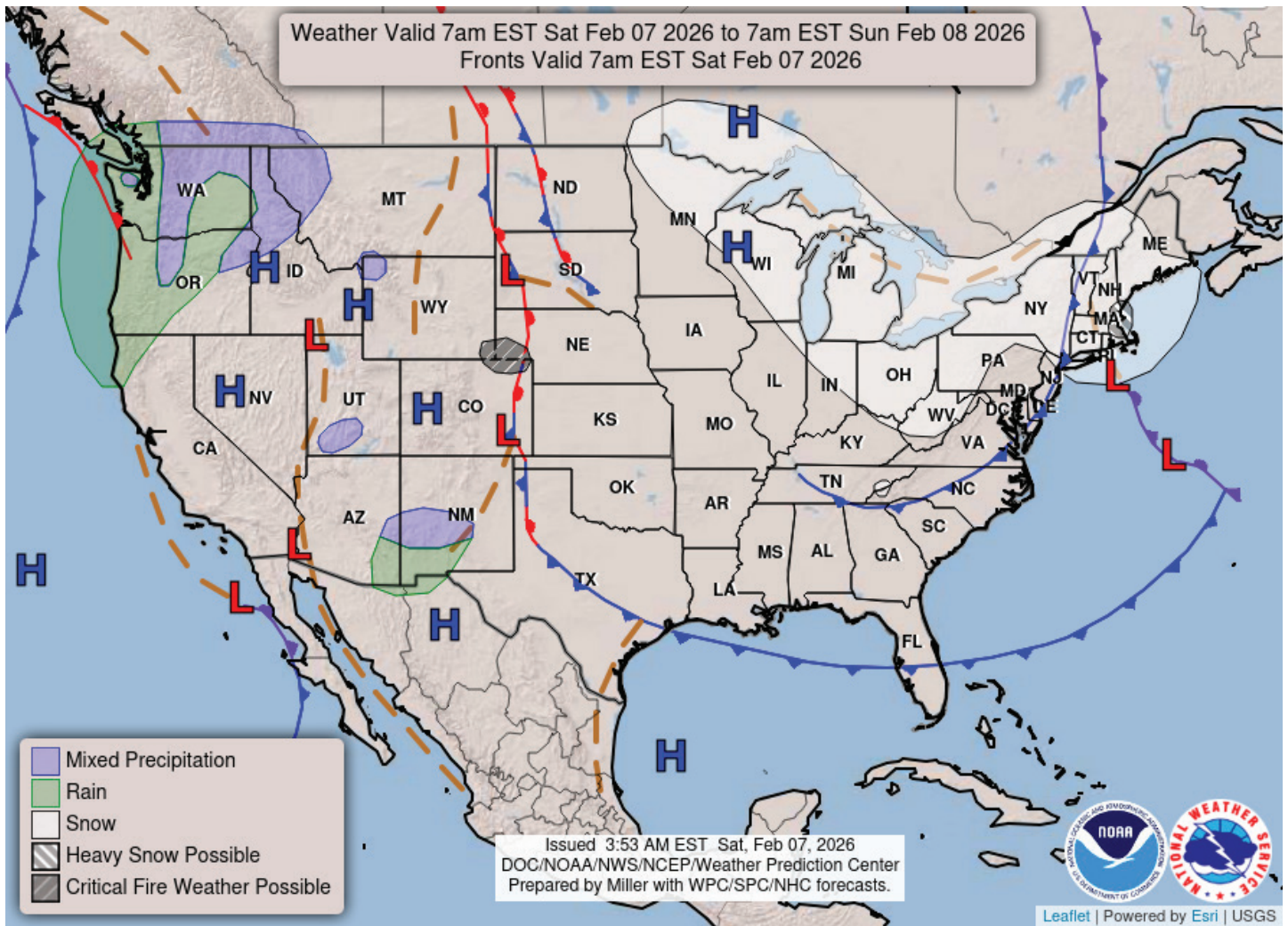
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.69

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:47 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:44 am



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## Today in Weather History

February 7, 1994: Snow falling over the area produced heavy accumulations from central into northeast South Dakota with 11 inches at Kennebec and eight inches at Watertown from the 7th through the 9th. Extreme cold accompanied and followed the snow with low temperatures of 52 below zero at Promise and 45 below zero at Aberdeen on the 9th. Snow accumulation caused a roof to cave in on a drugstore at Bristol. A man died of exposure attempting to walk home near Sioux Falls after his car became stuck in a ditch.

February 7, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 16 inches fell across central and northeast South Dakota, resulting in school and activities cancellations, closing of some businesses, and challenging if not impossible travel. Several people became stranded and had to be rescued. There were also flight cancellations and delays, along with some vehicle accidents resulting in minor injuries. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Mound City, Mobridge, Eureka, 7 inches at Milbank and 6 SE McIntosh, 8 inches at Aberdeen, Ipswich, Selby, Iona, and Britton, 9 inches at Clark, 1 S Columbia, Isabel, Webster, and 10 inches at Roscoe, Watertown, and 1 W of Summit. Locations with snowfall of a foot included Mission Ridge, Murdo, 4 NW Onida, Castlewood, 23 N Highmore, and Timber Lake. Thirteen inches of snow fell at Canning and Fort Pierre, 14 inches fell at Gettysburg, Eagle Butte, and Pierre with 15 inches at Miller and 16 inches of snow at Clear Lake, Mellette, and Faulkton.

February 7, 2010: A compact but strong area of low pressure moved from Canada and across the Northern Plains from the 7th through the 9th. A prolonged period of moderate to heavy snow developed over far northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, bringing 6 to 8 inches of snow to the area. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Milbank, Wheaton, and Ortonville; 7 inches at Clear Lake, Sisseton, and Artichoke Lake; 8 inches at Summit, Victor, Wilmot, and Browns Valley.

1812: The Hard Shock of the New Madrid Earthquake series strikes the area around the small town of New Madrid, Missouri. A three-mile-long island, Island #32, was completely sunk! The Mississippi River once again ran backward. This major shock marked the beginning of the end of New Madrid's extended ordeal, even though aftershocks would continue to be felt for years, and the fault is still active.

1835: A Great Freeze took place from February 2-9 across southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida. During this freeze, the St. Johns River was frozen, "several rods from the shore," and people were able to walk a distance from the shore. Many citruses and other fruit trees were killed to the ground, never to grow again, when temperatures reached as low as 1°F in Charleston and 8°F in Jacksonville. A Florida gentleman told a newspaper that the state "appeared as desolate as if a fire had swept over it" after the severe freeze of that winter season. According to Florida Citrus Mutual, this freeze was so severe that it is considered an impact freeze. This indicates that the freeze annihilates entire groves across the state, killing both mature and young citrus trees while causing a profound economic impact on the citrus industry and prompting growers to replant farther south. This freeze ended attempts to grow citrus in southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida.

1861 — The temperature at Gouverneur, NY, bottomed out at -40 degrees, a drop of 70 degrees in one day. Two days later the mercury hit 55 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1861 — Hanover, NH, plunged from 37 degrees at 1 PM on the 7th to 32 degrees below zero at 7 AM on the 8th, and West Cummington MA plummeted 80 degrees to -32 degrees. Boston MA plunged from 46 degrees to -14 degrees, and on the 11th was back up to 60 degrees. (7th-8th) (The Weather Channel)

1892: The temperature falls to 90 degrees below zero in Verkhoyansk, Russia, on this day. The temperature was considered the coldest temperature ever recorded in the Northern Hemisphere. However, this reading was done by a spirit thermometer, which is less accurate than a mercury thermometer. The accepted record was 90 degrees below zero in Oimaykon on February 6, 1933. However, recently published report by the WMO, the coldest temperature in the Northern Hemisphere is -69.6°C (-93.3°F) on December 22nd, 1991 at Klinck Automatic Weather Station (AWS) Greenland.

1904: A small fire in the business district of Baltimore, Maryland becomes wind-whipped into an uncontrollable conflagration that engulfs a large portion of the city by evening.

1933: The USS Ramapo, a 478 ft. Navy oiler was traveling from Manila to San Diego when it encountered the tallest rogue wave ever recorded. The wave measured 112 feet in height was caused by 70 mph winds over a broad fetch of the ocean.

1934 — A deep freeze made it possible to drive from Bay Shore to Fire Island NY. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

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1978 — The worst winter storm of record struck coastal New England. The storm produced 27.5 inches of snow at Boston, and nearly 50 inches in northeastern Rhode Island. The fourteen foot tide at Portland ME was probably the highest of the century. Winds gusted to 79 mph at Boston, and reached 92 mph at Chatham MA. A hurricane size surf caused 75 deaths and 500 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1987 — Low pressure in Manitoba, Canada, pulled warm air up from the Gulf of Mexico, and more than forty cities in the north central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including North Platte NE and Rapid City SD with readings of 73 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 — Twenty-two cities in the eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Binghamton NY with a reading of 5 degrees below zero. Snow blanketed southern Louisiana, with three inches reported at Cameron. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Twenty-five cities in the western U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Lows of 16 at Las Vegas NV, 26 at Bakersfield CA, -29 degrees at Milford UT, and -16 degrees at Reno NV were February records. The low of 43 degrees below zero at Boca CA was a state record for the month of February. In Utah, lows of -32 degrees at Bryce Canyon, -27 degrees at Delta, -29 degrees at Dugway, and -38 degrees at Vernal were all-time records for those locations. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 — A slow moving cold front spread heavy snow across the state of Utah. Storm totals ranged up to 31 inches at Alta, with 24 inches at reported Brighton and 23 inches at Snowbird. Bitter cold weather prevailed across Alaska for the thirteenth day in a row, with morning lows of -42 degrees at Fairbanks, -48 degrees at Nenana, and -54 degrees at Bettles. Anchorage AK reported a record low of 23 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2017: Six tornadoes traveled across southern Louisiana. The strongest tornado, an EF-3, impacted eastern New Orleans.

## When Our Faith Cools

**If your passion for God fades, spend time in His Word to restore the vibrancy in your relationship with Him.**

2 Timothy 1:1-11: 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus,

2 To Timothy, my beloved son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day,

4 longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy.

5 For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well.

6 For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

7 For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,

9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

11 for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

Scripture assures us that as God's children, we can never lose our salvation (John 10:27-28). However, it's possible for our spiritual passion to wane. Today's passage reveals that even Timothy's excitement for God waned at times. That's why Paul wrote to him, encouraging the young man to fan the flame of his faith.

Spiritual "cooling" can happen to any Christian. For instance, say tragedy or jealousy diverts our attention. Then instead of crying out to the Lord and finding shelter in Him, we may gradually pull away from Bible reading. But God's Word is like wood in a fireplace: The flames can be kept alive only when there are logs to burn. As less time is spent in Scripture, other aspects of our relationship with God can be affected. Perhaps church attendance decreases, giving becomes sporadic, and prayer—which seems stale—is used only for emergencies. That's how joy, contentment, and peace can get replaced by worry, doubt, and fear.

A believer who allows himself to drift will miss out on the comfort and fulfillment of a close, vibrant relationship with the Lord. Think back. Is your excitement about the things of God stronger now? Or has it diminished? If your fire needs help to burn brightly, ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to make that happen (John 16:13).

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.06.26

13 21 25 52 62 19

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$366,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.04.26

2 14 30 43 45 10

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$14,980,000**

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 26 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.06.26

17 21 29 36 39 11

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 41 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.04.26

10 11 16 22 26

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$253,000**

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 41 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.04.26

10 43 49 54 55 10

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 10 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.04.26

27 29 30 37 58 15

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$102,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 10 Mins 29 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Bennett County 75, St. Francis Indian 39  
Bison 57, Oelrichs 26  
Brandon Valley 62, Rapid City Central 39  
Canistota 41, Sioux Falls Lutheran 31  
Colman-Egan 67, Estelline-Hendricks 45  
Corsica/Stickney 61, Viborg-Hurley 25  
Dell Rapids St Mary's 50, Iroquois-Lake Preston 28  
Edgemont 41, Newell 38  
Emery 80, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 35  
Ethan 67, Kimball-White Lake 26  
Faulkton 57, James Valley Christian School 23  
Florence-Henry 61, Tri-State, N.D. 42  
Gettysburg 52, Sully Buttes 33  
Harrisburg 49, Aberdeen Central 45  
Huron 45, Spearfish 34  
Irene-Wakonda 53, Scotland/Menno 24  
Kadoka 41, Todd County 36  
Langford 48, Britton-Hecla 36  
Mitchell 52, Sturgis Brown High School 29  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 50, Chamberlain 34  
Parkston 65, Gregory 31  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 57, Rapid City Stevens 38  
Sioux Valley 50, Flandreau 46  
West Central 63, Madison 33  
Dakota Oyate Challenge=  
Consolation=  
Flandreau Indian 59, Crazy Horse 32  
Tiospaye Topa 55, Wakpala 38  
Semifinal=  
Marty 58, Lower Brule 51, OT  
Omaha Nation, Neb. 67, Tiospa Zina 21

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Roncalli 58, Milbank 48  
Bennett County 75, St. Francis Indian 39  
Bison 51, Oelrichs 29  
Brandon Valley 43, Rapid City Central 36  
Britton-Hecla 52, Langford 23  
Chamberlain 57, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 49  
Clark-Willow Lake 56, Sisseton 29  
Edgemont 53, Newell 31  
Estelline-Hendricks 62, Colman-Egan 31  
Ethan 78, Kimball-White Lake 35

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Faulkton 70, James Valley Christian School 66, OT  
Hamlin 69, Deubrook 39  
Harrisburg 65, Aberdeen Central 48  
Hill City 71, Lead-Deadwood 68  
Huron 46, Spearfish 38  
Irene-Wakonda 50, Scotland/Menno 41  
McCook Central-Montrose 67, Garretson 41  
Mitchell 57, Sturgis Brown High School 45  
New England, N.D. 73, Lemmon High School 48  
Parkston 43, Gregory 35  
Pine Ridge 83, Crow Creek Tribal School 39  
Sioux Falls Jefferson 62, Tea 59  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 68, Brookings 32  
Sioux Falls Lutheran 72, Canistota 32  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66, Rapid City Stevens 55  
Sioux Falls Washington 77, Watertown 68  
St Thomas More 74, Douglas 44  
Sully Buttes 58, Gettysburg 32  
Viborg-Hurley 56, Tri-Valley 48  
Dakota Oyate Challenge=  
Consolation=  
Flandreau Indian 80, Tiospaye Topa 43  
Wakpala 55, Tiospa Zina 38  
Semifinal=  
Marty 49, Crazy Horse 30  
Omaha Nation, Neb. 67, Tiospa Zina 21

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

## Armchair detectives flood social media as search for Savannah Guthrie's missing mom continues

By HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

Moments after the news broke about the apparent abduction of "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's mother, the floodgates opened on social media.

Influencers relayed the timeline from the hours after Nancy Guthrie was last seen and posted photos of the blood found on her front porch that later was a match for the 84-year-old grandmother. Others called out individuals connected to the case as looking "sus" or filmed themselves walking through her neighborhood to help find her.

The desperate search for Guthrie, who authorities believe was taken a week ago against her will from her home just outside Tucson, Arizona, has become the latest investigation to pique the widespread interest of online armchair detectives.

As the search continues with no suspects or persons of interest, posts across Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook and YouTube have put millions of eyeballs on tips and theories surrounding her disappearance. But they've also helped to amplify rumors and forced law enforcement to repeatedly set the record straight on at least one crucial detail.

Michael Alcazar, adjunct professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and retired New York Police Department detective, said overall the positives outweigh the negatives when it comes to the onslaught of social media posts.

"More people are aware; It keeps people alert," he said. "If they know she hasn't been found yet, perhaps

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people will remember that and if they see something, they might say something.”

He compared it to the widespread online response to the disappearance and death of Gabby Petito in 2021 and the impact that may have had on her body being found.

Two YouTubers said at the time that an image they posted showed Petito and her boyfriend’s white van and that it led investigators to the area where her body was found. But the FBI didn’t specify what led to the discovery.

“I think it’s just something that we have to adapt to as far as law enforcement,” Alcazar said. “The true crime community is growing. ... There’s a lot of people out there that want to help.”

But with the widespread posts also comes the proliferation of misinformation.

Ashleigh Banfield, from the cable network NewsNation, announced on her podcast Wednesday that a law enforcement source told her a Guthrie family member is the prime suspect. She seemed to quickly walk-back the statement seconds later, saying the person “may be a prime suspect,” and adding that family members are often looked at first. The information quickly took off across social media, with people posting photos of the person she named.

Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos addressed the rumor early in a news conference Thursday, saying authorities don’t have any suspects or persons of interest. That remained the case Friday.

“I plead with you to be careful of what it is we put out there. ... You could actually be doing some damage to the case, you could do some damage to the individual, too,” he said later in the news conference. “Social media’s kind of an ugly world sometimes.”

Other posts have included a medium expressing her feeling that Guthrie is close by and a woman using astrology to point her viewers in the direction of what may have happened.

Calvin Chrustie, who has more than three decades of experience in negotiations for kidnapping, ransom and extortions, said if the public truly understood the toll those situations can have on family and law enforcement, they might not hastily post unsubstantiated information.

“This stuff on X and other stuff out there that’s pure speculation is actually making it more difficult for the families and making it more difficult to the police to secure the safe, you know, the safe return of the hostage,” he said.

Julie Urquhart, an elementary school teacher in New Brunswick, Canada, has been posting about the case on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. She said she was drawn to the disappearance because she has a mother near Guthrie’s age and was fascinated that someone could have taken her seemingly without a trace.

Urquhart said her information comes from national news sites and law enforcement news conferences. One of her posts on TikTok and Instagram amassed more 4 million views, she said.

“That’s 4 million eyes that now saw that story and now maybe will see something or know something or know someone who does,” she said. “There’s just so many people it hits.”

## What is atrial fibrillation and how is it treated?

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Daniel Moore was about 30 the first time it happened. At the end of a long, hot, stressful day, he chugged an ice-cold glass of milk.

“It felt like a bunny rabbit trying to jump out of my chest,” said Moore, now 60.

Moore, a radiologist, knew what it was: A-fib.

Short for atrial fibrillation, A-fib is a quivering or irregular heartbeat that is a worrisome stage-setter for blood clots, stroke and heart failure. Some researchers believe more than 10 million Americans have it — most of them older. And it’s expected to become even more common in the years ahead.

Yet, University of Utah heart researcher Dr. T. Jared Bunch sees reason for optimism.

“Even though we see more of the disease, we’re better at treating it,” said Bunch, who co-authored a book on A-fib.

Symptoms can include shortness of breath

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A-fib occurs when the heart's upper chambers, called the atria, beat out of sync with the lower chambers, the ventricles. Not everyone is aware something is wrong, but some people suffer alarming symptoms like a pounding heartbeat and shortness of breath.

"I definitely have no exercise tolerance when I'm in it," Moore said. "I can't run. Walking is tiring faster. I get a little light-headed standing up."

The heart can surpass 200 beats per minute for someone with A-fib, more than double the 60 to 100 beats typical for a healthy adult's resting heart rate.

Symptoms can come and go, and it's not usually life-threatening by itself. But the erratic beating can lead to blood pooling in the heart that can become clots in days or even hours. Those clots, in turn, can travel to the brain and cause strokes.

A-fib also can increase the risk of developing ventricular fibrillation — a more serious condition.

Diagnosis is becoming more common

Experts say smartwatches and other devices that can detect erratic heartbeats are one reason A-fib diagnoses are increasing.

Many people who experience symptoms don't understand what is happening.

The American Heart Association found that more than half of people with A-fib didn't know about the condition before they were diagnosed.

Studies have suggested 15% or more of strokes can be tied to A-fib, and that the percentage rises in older people. The condition is one reason that U.S. stroke deaths rose in the last decade, although the stroke death rate has dipped in the last few years.

What causes A-fib?

Researchers attribute A-fib to damage in the heart's upper chambers and its electrical signaling. Genetics can play a role, but other contributors include high blood pressure, diabetes, stress, sleep apnea, smoking and alcohol.

Those harms accumulate over time, which is one reason why the condition tends to hit older adults. About 70% of A-fib cases are people 65 and older, Bunch said.

Viruses can also pose a threat because they can affect the proteins behind the heart's electrical signals or prompt an immune response that damages heart tissue. COVID-19 is among the list of viral culprits, and likely contributed to A-fib in some patients, experts say.

Studies have found no link to COVID-19 shots, said Dr. Jose Joglar, a Dallas-based expert who helped author American Heart Association guidelines on A-fib diagnosis and management.

Doctors have a range of treatment options

There's no cure, but a number of therapies can help manage the problem.

"We're miles beyond where we used to be" in treating A-fib, said Dr. Laurence Epstein, of Hofstra University and Northwell Health. "The technology has really evolved."

One initial treatment is a cardioversion, which involves using a defibrillator to deliver an electric shock to the heart to restore rhythm. It's often successful, but sometimes only temporarily.

For some patients, doctors may recommend implanted devices. Pacemakers can regulate heart rhythm, and a device called a Watchman can close off a clot-prone area of the upper heart.

And then there's ablation. It's a procedure in which a doctor uses heat, cold or electric pulses to zap certain areas of the heart, creating scars that block faulty electric signals. Traditionally, ablation was used when other approaches failed, but in recent years ablation techniques have become more advanced and it has become a first choice for certain patients, including those with heart failure.

Medications to regulate the heart or thin the blood to reduce stroke risk can have problematic side effects.

How to lower your risk

People can lower their risk of developing A-fib by living a healthy lifestyle. That includes exercising, getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, managing high blood pressure, and avoiding tobacco products and alcohol.

Doctors also have long warned about excessive levels of caffeine, although some new evidence suggests

that at least a little may be OK. One small study published recently found that patients who averaged one cup a day saw less recurrence of symptoms than those who abstained entirely.

If symptoms do develop, it's important to take them seriously, said Amy Stahley, who was first diagnosed three years ago.

She went to bed one night and her heart began racing to more than 150 beats per minute. She immediately went to a hospital.

"If you're feeling a little off, get it checked out," said Stahley, who is a nurse and dean of Davenport University's College of Health Professions in Michigan.

Moore, a radiology professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, agreed.

"The longer you stay in A-fib, the more likely you are to stay in it for life," he said.

## **Drone attack by paramilitary group in Sudan kills 24, including 8 children, doctors' group says**

BY SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A drone attack by a notorious paramilitary group hit a vehicle carrying displaced families in central Sudan Saturday, killing at least 24 people, including eight children, a doctors' group said, a day after a World Food Program aid convoy was targeted.

Saturday's attack by the Rapid Support Forces occurred close to the city of Rahad in North Kordofan province, said the Sudan Doctors Network, which tracks the country's ongoing war. The vehicle was transporting displaced people who fled fighting in the Dubeiker area, the group said in a statement. Among the dead children were two infants.

Several others were wounded and taken for treatment in Rahad, which suffers severe medical supplies shortages, like many areas in the Kordofan region, the statement said.

The doctors' group urged the international community and rights organizations to "take immediate action to protect civilians and hold the RSF leadership directly accountable for these violations."

There was no immediate comment from the RSF, which has been at war against the Sudanese military for control of the country for about three years.

Sudan plunged into chaos in April 2023 when a power struggle between the military and the RSF exploded into open fighting in the capital, Khartoum, and elsewhere in the country, leaving tens of thousands dead and millions displaced.

WFP aid convoy attacked

An attack on Friday on WFP aid convoy in North Kordofan province, which killed one and wounded several others, said Denise Brown, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator in Sudan.

Brown said the convoy was heading to deliver "life-saving food assistance" to displaced people in the city of Obeid in North Kordofan when it was struck. The attack burned the trucks and destroyed the aid, she said.

"Attacks on aid operations undermine efforts to reach people facing hunger and displacement," he said in a statement.

Last week, a drone strike hit close to a WFP facility in the Blue Nile province, wounding a WFP worker, Brown also said.

Emergency Lawyers, an independent group documenting atrocities in Sudan, blamed the RSF for the attack, while the Sudan Doctors Network called it a "flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and amounts to a full-fledged war crime."

Massad Boulos, a U.S. adviser for African and Arab affairs, condemned the attack on X and called for holding those responsible accountable.

"Destroying food intended for people in need and killing humanitarian workers is sickening," he said. "The Trump Administration has zero tolerance for this destruction of life and of U.S.-funded assistance; we demand accountability."

The British minister for international development and Africa, Jenny Chapman, called the attack on the WFP convoy "disgraceful."

"Civilians are starving," she wrote Saturday on X. "Aid workers and humanitarian operations bringing vital food should never be targeted."

Famine report portrays a grim picture

In recent months, Kordofan has become a flashpoint in the war and the army managed to break the RSF siege of two major cities in the region earlier this year.

The devastating war has so far killed more than 40,000 people, according to U.N. figures, but aid groups say that is an undercount and the true number could be many times higher.

It created the world's largest humanitarian crisis with over 14 million people forced to flee their homes. It has fueled disease outbreaks and pushed parts of the country into famine that still spreads as the war shows no sign of abating.

In a report released Thursday, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, said famine was found in two more areas in the western region of Darfur where famine was confirmed for the first time in a displacement camp in August 2024.

The report warned that acute malnutrition is expected to worsen in 2026, with a 13.5% increase in cases of acute malnutrition in children under five and pregnant and breastfeeding women — from 3.7 million children and women in 2025 to nearly 4.2 million in 2026.

Severe acute malnutrition, the most dangerous and deadly form of malnutrition, is expected to increase to 800,000 cases, up 4% from 2025, it said.

Mohamad Abdiladif, country director for Save the Children in Sudan, said children were already dying from hunger-related causes in many part of Sudan.

"Every day we hear devastating stories of parents selling the last of what they own simply to keep their children alive from one day to the next," he said.

## **Immigrant whose skull was broken in eight places during ICE arrest says beating was unprovoked**

By JACK BROOK, MICHAEL BIESECKER, JIM MUSTIAN and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Alberto Castañeda Mondragón says his memory was so jumbled after a beating by immigration officers that he initially could not remember he had a daughter and still struggles to recall treasured moments like the night he taught her to dance.

But the violence he endured last month in Minnesota while being detained is seared into his battered brain.

He remembers Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents pulling him from a friend's car on Jan. 8 outside a St. Paul shopping center and throwing him to the ground, handcuffing him, then punching him and striking his head with a steel baton. He remembers being dragged into an SUV and taken to a detention facility, where he said he was beaten again.

He also remembers the emergency room and the intense pain from eight skull fractures and five life-threatening brain hemorrhages.

"They started beating me right away when they arrested me," the Mexican immigrant recounted this week to The Associated Press, which recently reported on how his case contributed to mounting friction between federal immigration agents and a Minneapolis hospital.

Castañeda Mondragón, 31, is one of an unknown number of immigration detainees who, despite avoiding deportation during the Trump administration's enforcement crackdown, have been left with lasting injuries following violent encounters with ICE officers. His case is one of the excessive-force claims the federal government has thus far declined to investigate.

He was hurt so badly he was disoriented for days at Hennepin County Medical Center, where ICE officers constantly watched over him.

Officers claimed he ran headfirst into a wall

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The officers told nurses Castañeda Mondragón “purposefully ran headfirst into a brick wall,” an account his caregivers immediately doubted. A CT scan showed fractures to the front, back and both sides of his skull — injuries a doctor told AP were inconsistent with a fall.

“There was never a wall,” Castañeda Mondragón said in Spanish, recalling ICE officers striking him with the same metal rod used to break the windows of the vehicle he was in. He later identified it as an ASP, a telescoping baton routinely carried by law enforcement.

Training materials and police use-of-force policies across the U.S. say such a baton can be used to hit the arms, legs and body. But striking the head, neck or spine is considered potentially deadly force.

“The only time a person can be struck in the head with any baton is when the person presents the same threat that would permit the use of a firearm — a lethal threat to the officer or others,” said Joe Key, a former Baltimore police lieutenant and use-of-force expert who testifies in defense of police.

Once he was taken to an ICE holding facility at Ft. Snelling in suburban Minneapolis, Castañeda Mondragón said officers resumed beating him. Recognizing that he was seriously hurt, he said, he pleaded with them to stop but they just “laughed at me and hit me again.”

“They were very racist people,” he said. “No one insulted them, neither me nor the other person they detained me with. It was their character, their racism toward us, for being immigrants.”

The Department of Homeland Security, which includes ICE, did not respond to repeated requests for comment over the last two weeks on Castañeda Mondragón’s injuries.

It is unclear whether his arrest was captured on body-camera footage or if there might be additional recordings from security cameras at the detention center.

In a recent bid to boost transparency, DHS announced a broad rollout of body cameras for immigration officers in Minneapolis as the government also draws down ICE’s presence there.

ICE deportation officer William J. Robinson did not say how Castañeda Mondragón’s skull was smashed in a Jan. 20 declaration filed in federal court. During the intake process, it was determined he “had a head injury that required emergency medical treatment,” he wrote in the filing.

The declaration also stated that Castañeda Mondragón entered the U.S. legally in March 2022, and that the agency determined only after his arrest that he had overstayed his visa. A federal judge later ruled his arrest had been unlawful and ordered him released from ICE custody.

Video shows him stumbling during arrest

A video posted to social media captured the moments immediately after Castañeda Mondragón’s arrest as four masked men walk him handcuffed through a parking lot. The video shows him unsteady and stumbling, held up by ICE officers.

“Don’t resist,” shouts the woman who is recording. “Cause they ain’t gonna do nothing but bang you up some more.”

“Hope they don’t kill you,” she adds.

“And y’all gave the man a concussion,” a male bystander shouts.

The witness who posted the video declined to speak with AP or provide consent for the video’s publication, but Castañeda Mondragón confirmed he is the handcuffed man seen in the recording.

At least one ICE officer later told staff at the medical center that Castañeda Mondragón “got his (expletive) rocked,” according to court documents filed by a lawyer seeking his release and nurses who spoke with AP.

AP interviewed a doctor and five nurses about Castañeda Mondragón’s treatment at HCMC and the presence of ICE officers inside the hospital. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss patient care and feared retaliation. AP also consulted an outside physician, who affirmed the injuries were inconsistent with an accidental fall or running into a wall.

Minnesota state law requires health professionals to report to law enforcement any wounds that could have been perpetrated as part of a crime.

An HCMC spokeswoman declined to say this week whether anyone at the facility had done so. However, following the Jan. 31 publication of AP’s initial story about Castañeda Mondragón’s arrest, hospital administrators opened an internal inquiry seeking to determine which staff members have spoken to the media,

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according to internal communications viewed by AP.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz posted a link to AP's prior story about Castañeda Mondragón, but his office has not said whether state authorities would pursue answers.

"Law enforcement cannot be lawless," Walz wrote in the post on X. "Thousands of aggressive, untrained agents of the federal government continue to injure and terrorize Minnesotans. This must end."

Castañeda Mondragón's arrest came a day after the first of two fatal shootings of U.S. citizens in Minneapolis by immigration officers, triggering widespread public protests.

Elected officials call for accountability

Minnesota congressional leaders and other elected officials, including St. Paul Mayor Kaohly Her, called this week for an investigation of Castañeda Mondragón's injuries.

The Ramsey County Attorney's Office, which oversees St. Paul, urged Castañeda Mondragón to file a police report to prompt an investigation. He said he plans to file a complaint. A St. Paul police spokesperson said the department would investigate "all alleged crimes that are reported to us."

While the Trump administration insists ICE limits its operations to immigrants with violent rap sheets, Castañeda Mondragón has no criminal record.

"We are seeing a repeated pattern of Trump Administration officials attempting to lie and gaslight the American people when it comes to the cruelty of this ICE operation in Minnesota," Sen. Tina Smith, a Minnesota Democrat, said in a statement.

Rep. Kelly Morrison, another Democrat and a doctor, recently toured the Whipple Building, the ICE facility at Ft. Snelling. She said she saw severe overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and an almost complete lack of medical care.

"If any one of our police officers did this, you know what just happened in Minnesota with George Floyd, we hold them accountable," said Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum, whose district includes St. Paul.

A native of Veracruz, Mexico, Castañeda Mondragón came to Minnesota nearly four years ago on a temporary work visa and found jobs as a driver and roofer. He uses his earnings to support his elderly father, who is disabled and diabetic, and his 10-year-old daughter.

On the day of his arrest, he was running errands with a friend when they suddenly found themselves surrounded by ICE agents. They began breaking the windows and opening the doors of the vehicle. He said the first person who hit him "got ugly with me for being Mexican" and not having documents showing his immigration status.

About four hours after his arrest, court records show, Castañeda Mondragón was taken to an emergency room in the suburb of Edina with swelling and bruising around his right eye and bleeding. He was then transferred to the Minneapolis medical center, where he told staff he had been "dragged and mistreated by federal agents," before his condition deteriorated, court records show.

A week into his hospitalization, caregivers described him as minimally responsive. As his condition slowly improved, hospital staff handed him his cellphone, and he spoke with his child in Mexico, whom he could not remember.

"I am your daughter," she told him. "You left when I was 6 years old."

His head injuries erased past experiences that for his daughter are unforgettable, including birthday parties and the day he left for the U.S. She's been trying to revive his memory in daily calls.

"When I turned 5, you taught me how to dance for the first time," she reminded him recently.

"All these moments, really, for me, have been forgotten," he said.

He showed gradual improvement and, to the surprise of some who treated him, was released from the hospital on Jan. 27.

Long recovery lies ahead

He faces a long recovery and an uncertain future. Questions loom about whether he will be able to continue to support his family back in Mexico. "My family depends on me," he said.

Though his bruises have faded, the effects of his traumatic brain injuries linger. In addition to the problems with his memory, he also has issues with balance and coordination that could prove debilitating for a man whose work requires going up and down ladders. He said he is unable to bathe himself without help.

"I can't get on a roof now," he said.

Castañeda Mondragón, who does not have health insurance, said doctors have told him he needs ongoing care. Unable to earn a living, he is relying on support from co-workers and members of the Minneapolis-St. Paul community who are raising money to help provide food, housing and medical care. He has launched a GoFundMe.

Still, he hopes to stay in the U.S. and to provide again someday for his loved ones. He differentiates between people in Minnesota, where he said he has felt welcome, and the federal officers who beat him.

"It's immense luck to have survived, to be able to be in this country again, to be able to heal, and to try to move forward," he said. "For me, it's the best luck in the world."

But when he closes his eyes at night, the fear that ICE officers will come for him dominates his dreams. He is now terrified to leave his apartment, he said.

"You're left with the nightmare of going to work and being stopped," Castañeda Mondragón said, "or that you're buying your food somewhere, your lunch, and they show up and stop you again. They hit you."

## Epstein revelations have toppled top figures in Europe while US fallout is more muted

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A prince, an ambassador, senior diplomats, top politicians. All brought down by the Jeffrey Epstein files. And all in Europe, rather than the United States.

The huge trove of Epstein documents released by the U.S. Department of Justice has sent shock waves through Europe's political, economic and social elites — dominating headlines, ending careers and spurring political and criminal investigations.

Former U.K. Ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson was fired and could go to prison. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer faces a leadership crisis over the Mandelson appointment. Senior figures have fallen in Norway, Sweden and Slovakia. And, even before the latest batch of files, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, brother of King Charles III, lost his honors, princely title and taxpayer-funded mansion.

Apart from the former Prince Andrew, none of them faces claims of sexual wrongdoing. They have been toppled for maintaining friendly relationships with Epstein after he became a convicted sex offender.

"Epstein collected powerful people the way others collect frequent flyer points," said Mark Stephens, a specialist in international and human rights law at Howard Kennedy in London. "But the receipts are now in public, and some might wish they'd traveled less."

The documents were published after a public frenzy over Epstein became a crisis for President Donald Trump's administration and led to a rare bipartisan effort to force the government to open its investigative files. But in the U.S., the long-sought publication has not brought the same public reckoning with Epstein's associates — at least so far.

Rob Ford, a professor of political science at the University of Manchester, said that in Britain, "if you're in those files, it's immediately a big story."

"It suggests to me we have a more functional media, we have a more functional accountability structure, that there is still a degree of shame in politics, in terms of people will say: 'This is just not acceptable, this is just not done,'" he said.

British repercussions

U.K. figures felled by their ties to Epstein include the former Prince Andrew — who paid millions to settle a lawsuit with one of Epstein's victims and is facing pressure to testify in the U.S. — and his ex-wife Sarah Ferguson, whose charity shut down this week.

Like others now ensnared, veteran politician Mandelson long downplayed his relationship with Epstein, despite calling him "my best pal" in 2003. The new files reveal contact continued for years after the financier's 2008 prison term for sexual offenses involving a minor. In a July 2009 message, Mandelson appeared to refer to Epstein's release from prison as "liberation day."

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Starmer fired Mandelson in September over earlier revelations about his Epstein ties. Now British police are investigating whether Mandelson committed misconduct in public office by passing on sensitive government information to Epstein.

Starmer has apologized to Epstein's victims and pledged to release public documents that will show Mandelson lied when he was being vetted for the ambassador's job. That may not be enough to stop furious lawmakers trying to eject the prime minister from office over his failure of judgment.

## American associates

Experts caution that Britain shouldn't be too quick to pat itself on the back over its rapid reckoning with Mandelson. The U.S. has a better record than the U.K. when it comes to declassifying and publishing information.

But Alex Thomas, executive director of the Institute for Government think tank, said "there is something about parliamentary democracy," with its need for a prime minister to retain the confidence of Parliament to stay in office, "that I think does help drive accountability."

A few high-profile Americans have faced repercussions over their friendly ties with Epstein. Most prominent is former U.S. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, who went on leave from academic positions at Harvard University late last year.

Brad Karp quit last week as chair of top U.S. law firm Paul Weiss after revelations in the latest batch of documents, and the National Football League said it would investigate Epstein's relationship with New York Giants co-owner Steve Tisch, who exchanged sometimes crude emails with Epstein about potential dates with adult women.

Other U.S. Epstein associates have not yet faced severe sanction, including former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, who exchanged hundreds of texts with Epstein, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, who accepted an invitation to visit Epstein's private island, and tech billionaire Elon Musk, who discussed visiting the island in emails, but says he never made the trip.

Former President Bill Clinton has been compelled by Republicans to testify before Congress about his friendship with Epstein. Trump, too, has repeatedly faced questions about his ties to Epstein. Neither he nor Clinton has ever been accused of wrongdoing by Epstein's victims.

## European investigations

The Epstein files reveal the global network of royals, political leaders, billionaires, bankers and academics that the wealthy financier built around him.

Across Europe, officials have had or resign or face censure after the Epstein files revealed relationships that were more extensive than previously disclosed.

Joanna Rubinstein, a Swedish U.N. official, quit after the revelation of a 2012 visit to Epstein's Caribbean island. Miroslav Lajcak, national security adviser to Slovakia's prime minister, quit over his communications with Epstein, which included the pair discussing "gorgeous" girls.

Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have set up wide-ranging official investigations into the documents. Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk said a team would scour the files for potential Polish victims, and any links between Epstein and Russian secret services.

Epstein took an interest in European politics, in one email exchange with billionaire Peter Thiel calling Britain's 2016 vote to leave the European Union "just the beginning" and part of a return to "tribalism."

Grégoire Roos, director of the Europe program at the think tank Chatham House, said the files uncover Epstein's "far-reaching" network of contacts in Europe, "and the level of access among not just those who were already in power, but those who were getting there.

"It will be interesting to see whether in the correspondence he had an influence in policymaking," Roos said.

## Norwegian revelations

Few countries have been as roiled by the Epstein revelations as Norway, a Scandinavian nation with a population of less than 6 million.

The country's economic crimes unit has opened a corruption investigation into former Prime Minister Thorbjørn Jagland — who also once headed the committee that hands out the Nobel Peace Prize — over

his ties with Epstein. His lawyer said Jagland would cooperate with the probe.

Also ensnared are high-profile Norwegian diplomat couple Terje Rød-Larsen and Mona Juul, key players in the 1990s Israel-Palestinian peace efforts. Juul has been suspended as Norway's ambassador to Jordan after revelations including the fact that Epstein left the couple's children \$10 million in a will drawn up shortly before his death by suicide in a New York prison in 2019.

Norwegians' respect for their royal family has been dented by new details about Epstein's friendship with Crown Princess Mette-Marit, who is married to the heir to the throne, Prince Haakon. The files include jokey exchanges and emails planning visits to Epstein properties, teeth-whitening appointments and shopping trips.

The princess apologized Friday "to all of you whom I have disappointed."

The disclosures came as her son from a previous relationship, Marius Borg Høiby, stands trial in Oslo on rape charges, which he denies.

## **Franjo von Allmen of Switzerland wins men's downhill, first gold medal of Milan Cortina Games**

By PAT GRAHAM AP Sports Writer

BORMIO, Italy (AP) — Swiss racer Franjo von Allmen captured the Olympic downhill Saturday to win the first gold medal at the Milan Cortina Games.

On a picture-perfect day in Bormio, von Allmen powered through the challenging Stelvio course in 1 minute, 51.61 seconds. His time was good enough to withstand the charge of Italy's Giovanni Franzoni, who finished with the silver medal. Franzoni's teammate, the 36-year-old Dominik Paris, had a fast run to take bronze and knock Marco Odermatt of Switzerland off the podium.

Von Allmen keeps the Olympic downhill title in the Swiss family. Beat Feuz won the event at 2022 Beijing Games before retiring.

The 24-year-old von Allmen sometimes flies under the radar of Odermatt, who's won four straight overall World Cup titles. They're fast friends and friendly rivals. They share course information but hold a little back, too. Turns out, von Allmen had the better inside track on the demanding hill.

It's been quite a run for von Allmen, who won the downhill at the world championships in Austria last winter.

The stands were packed with flag-waving fans. Some of the biggest cheers were reserved for Franzoni and then, the next racer to go, Paris.

This is a breakout season for the 24-year-old Franzoni, who's from Manerba del Garda, located about 200 kilometers south of Bormio. More specifically, it's been a breakout 22 or so days. He won a World Cup super-G in Wengen, Switzerland, on Jan. 16 and followed that up with a downhill victory in Kitzbühel, Austria, the following week.

Paris knows this course well, having won seven World Cup races at the venue. He hails from Val d'Ultimo, which is about three hours away — or a 15-minute helicopter ride.

It was Paris' first Olympic medal in his fifth Winter Games. He now becomes a bronze medalist in addition to being the vocalist of a heavy metal band called "Rise of Voltage."

The 27th racer to take the course, Kyle Negomir found a fast line and vaulted into 10th place for the top American finish.

## **Health costs are fueling voter stress and powering Democratic campaigns**

By ALI SWENSON and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Donald Trump's second term has presented an array of opportunities for political opponents, from immigration crackdowns and lingering inflation to attacks on independent institu-

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tions and friction with overseas allies.

Many Democrats, however, are staying focused on health care, an issue that was once a political liability but has become foundational for the party in recent elections. They insist their strategy will help the party regain control of Congress in the November elections and fare better than chasing headlines about the latest outrages out of the White House.

Republicans last year cut about \$1 trillion over a decade from Medicaid and declined to extend COVID-era subsidies that had lowered the cost of health plans under the Affordable Care Act.

Democrats are filming campaign spots outside struggling hospitals, spotlighting Americans facing spiking insurance premiums and sharing their own personal health care stories.

U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia, one of the party's most endangered incumbents this year, is expected to highlight health care challenges at a rally Saturday in suburban Atlanta.

"It's a banger of an issue for Democrats," said Brad Woodhouse, a longtime Democratic strategist and executive director of the advocacy group Protect Our Care. "I think it will be part of every single campaign, up and down the ballot."

Republicans defend their votes as reining in ballooning health spending and cracking down on what they call waste, fraud and abuse. Trump recently launched a website to help patients buy discounted prescription drugs.

"They are working every single day to make sure that we bring affordability to the people," said Joe Gruters, chairman of the Republican National Committee.

But the party, despite controlling both chambers of Congress, has been unable so far to pass comprehensive legislation to offset Americans' health costs.

Ron Bonjean, a Republican strategist, said the issue would remain his party's "Achilles' heel" until its leaders draft realistic proposals that can be turned into law.

Public opinion on health care wasn't always in Democrats' favor

Health care was once seen as a political liability for the left.

In 2010, Democrats lost their U.S. House majority after President Barack Obama's signature health policy, the ACA, passed without a single Republican vote. In 2014, they gave up the U.S. Senate a year after his administration fumbled the rollout of Healthcare.gov.

Those tides turned when Trump "touched the stove" during his first term, Woodhouse said, by supporting unsuccessful efforts to repeal and replace the health overhaul, known as "Obamacare," potentially leaving millions of people uninsured and making it harder for those with preexisting medical conditions to get coverage.

Last year Republicans passed legislation to reduce spending on federal health programs and food assistance, largely by imposing work requirements on people receiving aid and by shifting certain costs onto the states.

Republicans said that would stave off abuse of the Medicaid program, and they added a \$50 billion investment in rural health to offset losses. Unrig Our Economy, a left-wing group, said it has funneled more than \$12 million into ads criticizing Republicans on health care since the beginning of 2025.

Democrats saw another opportunity to win voters' support last year when enhanced ACA tax credits were headed toward expiration and they forced a government shutdown over the issue. The funding was not restored but the party believes they gained political leverage going into this year's campaigns.

"Republicans own it now," said Eric Stern, a Democratic media strategist. "You better believe Democrats are going to be talking about that."

Candidates meet with hospital leaders and showcase emotional stories

Stef Feldman, a Democratic consultant who was an aide to former President Joe Biden, said she is hearing from candidates that voters care about health affordability "more than just about anything else."

A recent poll from the health care research nonprofit KFF backs that observation. It found that about one-third of U.S. adults are "very worried" about the cost of health care, compared with about one-quarter who feel the same way about the cost of groceries, housing or utilities.

For Iowa state Sen. Zach Wahls, who is running for the U.S. Senate this year, tapping into those con-

cerns has meant visits to vulnerable hospitals and tours of pharmacies. For Rebecca Cooke, a U.S. House candidate in Wisconsin, it has meant meetings with hospital leaders and telling personal stories, including about her dad's expensive prostate cancer drugs and the \$200 jump in her own ACA premiums.

In a recent campaign video, Ossoff said health care was "a life-or-death question." He is the only Democratic senator seeking reelection this year in a state that Trump won in 2024.

At his rally Saturday, one expected speaker is Teresa Acosta, who frequently campaigns for Democratic candidates. She said her ACA policy, which covers herself and two teenagers, including a son with Type 1 diabetes, now costs \$520 a month, seven times more than before expanded subsidies went away.

"I think most people would agree that health care is a human right," Acosta said. "And the Republicans seem hellbent on weakening access to it."

ACA plans are heavily relied upon in Georgia, one of the 10 states that did not expand Medicaid. As a result, advocates have warned that the expiration of the expanded subsidies could leave Georgia residents uninsured. Recent federal data shows about 14% fewer Georgians have signed up for plans in 2026 compared with last year, although those numbers are not yet final.

Republicans say they don't want to throw money at a 'broken system'

U.S. Reps. Mike Collins and Buddy Carter, two of Ossoff's top Republican opponents, voted in January against a temporary ACA tax-credit extension that passed the House but languished in the Senate. Both deride the ACA as the "Unaffordable Care Act," a phrase used by Trump, and favor a narrower Republican alternative.

Carter, who worked as a pharmacist, said an extension amounted to "throwing more money at a broken system, riddled with waste, fraud and abuse, without addressing the root cause of skyrocketing costs."

U.S. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, the Wisconsin Republican fending off a challenge from Cooke, was one of 17 Republicans who voted for the temporary extension. He said he did not support the subsidies but had to vote that way to protect his constituents. He noted that Democrats set the expiration date in the first place.

But Van Orden was also critical of his own party for allowing the tax credits to expire without another solution in place.

"For the last 15 years, when you said health care, they'd dive out the window and barrel roll into a bush and hide," Van Orden said. "We're the party of good policy, and so we should be writing policy, and we need to embrace this."

## **Takeaways from AP report on immigrant who says ICE officers beat him during Minnesota arrest**

By JACK BROOK, MICHAEL BIESECKER, JIM MUSTIAN and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Alberto Castañeda Mondragón's memory was jumbled after he says he was badly beaten last month while being taken into custody by immigration officers. He did not remember much of his past, but the violence of the Jan. 8 arrest in Minnesota was seared into his battered brain.

The Mexican immigrant told The Associated Press this week that he remembers Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents pulling him from a friend's car outside a St. Paul shopping center and throwing him to the ground, handcuffing him, and then punching him and striking his head with a steel baton.

He remembers being taken to a detention facility, where he said he was beaten again. Then came the emergency room and the intense pain from eight skull fractures and five life-threatening brain hemorrhages.

Castañeda Mondragón, 31, is one of an unknown number of immigration detainees who, despite avoiding deportation, have been left with lasting injuries following violent encounters with ICE. While the Trump administration insists ICE limits its enforcement operations to immigrants with violent rap sheets, he has no criminal record.

Here's what to know about the case, one of the excessive-force claims the federal government has thus

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far declined to investigate.

Immigrant says attack was unprovoked

ICE officers who arrested Castañeda Mondragón on Jan. 8 told nurses the man “purposefully ran headfirst into a brick wall,” an account Hennepin County Medical Center staff immediately doubted. A CT scan showed fractures to the front, back and both sides of his skull — injuries a doctor told AP were inconsistent with a fall.

ICE’s account evolved as Castañeda Mondragón lay stricken in the hospital. At least one officer told staff the man “got his (expletive) rocked,” according to court documents filed by a lawyer seeking his release and nurses who treated him.

“There was never a wall,” Castañeda Mondragón told AP, recalling ICE officers striking him with the same metal rod used to break the windows of the vehicle he was in. He later identified it as a telescoping baton routinely carried by law enforcement.

Training materials and police use-of-force policies across the U.S. say such a baton can be used to hit the arms, legs and body. But striking the head, neck or spine is considered potentially deadly force.

Once he was taken to an ICE holding facility in suburban Minneapolis, Castañeda Mondragón said, officers resumed beating him. He said he pleaded with them to get a doctor, but they just “laughed at me and hit me again.”

DHS will not discuss the case

The Trump administration this week announced a broad rollout of body cameras for immigration officers in Minneapolis even as the government draws down ICE’s presence there. But it’s not clear whether Castañeda Mondragón’s arrest was captured on body-camera footage or if there might be additional recordings from security cameras at the detention center.

The Department of Homeland Security, which includes ICE, has not responded to repeated requests for comment on the case.

The government’s only acknowledgment of the injuries came in a Jan. 20 court filing that said it was learned during his arrest that “had a head injury that required emergency medical treatment.”

The same filing said Castañeda Mondragón entered the U.S. legally in March 2022 and that the agency determined only after his arrest that he had overstayed his visa. A federal judge ruled his arrest had been unlawful and ordered him released from ICE custody.

Elected officials call for accountability

The case has drawn the attention of several officeholders in Minnesota, including Gov. Tim Walz, who this week posted an AP story about the case on X. But it’s not clear whether any state authorities are investigating how Castañeda Mondragón was injured.

The Ramsey County Attorney’s Office, which oversees St. Paul, urged Castañeda Mondragón to file a police report to prompt an investigation. He said he plans to file a complaint. A St. Paul police spokesperson said the department would investigate “all alleged crimes that are reported to us.”

“We are seeing a repeated pattern of Trump Administration officials attempting to lie and gaslight the American people when it comes to the cruelty of this ICE operation in Minnesota,” Sen. Tina Smith, a Minnesota Democrat, said in a statement.

Rep. Kelly Morrison, another Democrat and a doctor, recently toured the Whipple Building, the ICE facility at Ft. Snelling. She said she saw severe overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and an almost complete lack of medical care. She and other Minnesota Democrats say injuries that occur in ICE custody should be investigated.

“If any one of our police officers did this, you know what just happened in Minnesota with George Floyd, we hold them accountable,” said Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum, whose district includes St. Paul. “There’s no reason why federal agents should not be held to the same high standard.”

## Spiritual ties of ousted Venezuelan President Maduro and successor include guru Sathya Sai Baba

By DEEPA BHARATH and MARÍA TERESA HERNANDEZ Associated Press

Venezuela's former President Nicolás Maduro and current acting President Delcy Rodríguez — both raised Catholic in an overwhelmingly Christian country — have a deep reverence for an Indian spiritual leader who died in 2011.

Religious identity is complex in Venezuela, where it is common for people to blend multiple religious and spiritual practices. For Maduro and Rodríguez, that blend includes the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba, who has had a strong global following for over 50 years for his message of unity, love and spiritual oneness that transcends religious, social and cultural barriers.

Maduro frequently invoked Christ, the Holy Spirit and God in his speeches as president, framing his government's struggles as a spiritual battle for Venezuela's soul and sovereignty. Just weeks before his Jan. 3 capture by U.S. forces, he celebrated the centenary of Sai Baba in a social media post, expressing his hope that "the wisdom of this great teacher will continue to illuminate us in the mission of building a homeland of love, peace and high spirituality."

Rodríguez visited Sai Baba's ashram in southern India as recently as 2024. She said during her first presidential media briefing last month that the Venezuelan people faced "a new moment where coexistence, mutual respect, and recognition of others allow for the construction and building of a new spirituality."

Rodríguez also said in an interview with the organization's official channel during a 2023 visit that she still feels the guru's presence in trying times.

"Many times, when I was in danger, I felt Baba with me, my family and also with my country," she said. "He is always with us, teaching us ... and showing a path for peace and love."

Top leaders' fondness for Sathya Sai Baba

The U.S. military seized Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, from their Caracas home Jan. 3 in a stunning operation that landed them in New York to face federal drug trafficking charges. Maduro called himself "a man of God" while pleading not guilty.

After Maduro's capture, several news outlets in India published a 2005 photo that shows him and his wife seated at the feet of the Sai Baba, who had distinctive black, curly locks and wore a long saffron robe. It has been widely reported that Maduro displayed a large, framed photograph of Sai Baba in his office at Miraflores Palace in Caracas, alongside portraits of Latin America's liberator Simón Bolívar and former Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez.

Maduro, who declared a national day of mourning upon Sai Baba's death in 2011, marked the 2025 centenary by hailing the spiritual leader as "a being of light" and a "beacon of unconditional love, selfless service and truth."

Videos posted by Sai Baba's organization, which is still active and ubiquitous in India, have shown Rodríguez visiting its ashram and headquarters in Puttaparthi, a town in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. During visits in 2023 and 2024, she can be seen praying at the sanctum, the guru's final resting place, which devotees believe radiates spiritual energy. She can also be seen interacting with R.J. Rathnakar, Sai Baba's nephew who currently heads the organization.

The Associated Press' efforts to reach the Sai Baba organization in India and Venezuela for comment went unanswered.

The Sai Baba's organization's presence in Venezuela

Sai Baba's organization came to Venezuela long before Maduro and other politicians sought out the guru. The organization opened its first center in Caracas on Aug. 22, 1974, started by Arlette Meyer, a devotee who wrote books in Spanish about the guru. In her apartment, she and a few other members sang devotional hymns and studied Sai Baba's teachings — the organization's first such center in Latin America.

The organization in Venezuela now appears to be centered in Abejales, a town in the state of Táchira, about 465 miles (750 kilometers) west of Caracas, where it runs a "Human Values School." The town is the birthplace of former lawmaker Walter Márquez, who has maintained close ties with Sai Baba before

and after serving as Venezuela's ambassador to India. Márquez was honored by the Sai Baba organization in Venezuela late last year. Some estimates put the number of Sai Baba followers in Venezuela at about 200,000 and millions globally.

The role of religion in Venezuelan politics

Faith in Venezuela is not monolithic, said Andrew Chesnut, professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. He said while Catholicism is still dominant, it coexists comfortably with evangelical Protestantism, Afro-Indigenous traditions and transnational religious figures, without requiring formal conversion or exclusive allegiance.

"This syncretic religious ecology helps explain how Nicolás Maduro can describe himself as a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba while simultaneously cultivating close relationships with evangelical leaders who operate within a very different theological universe," he said.

Religion is invoked rhetorically by Venezuelan politicians, rather than to dictate policy or shape laws, Chesnut said. Encounters with figures like Sai Baba "carry symbolic and performative weight rather than serving as drivers of political ideology or decision-making," he said.

An influential and controversial figure

Sathya Sai Baba, who was born Ratnakaram Sathyanarayana Raju, claimed to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, a guru revered by Hindus and Muslims, who died in 1918. Sathya Sai Baba became popular in India and worldwide in the 1970s and 1980s as word spread of his miraculous abilities to materialize objects such as rings, necklaces and sacred ash. He is believed to have performed spontaneous healings and resurrections.

Sai Baba encouraged his followers to practice their own religions, often saying that God is one and that all paths led to the same truth. He was known for sayings that reflected his message of unity and service: "Love All, Serve All" and "Help Ever, Hurt Never."

The guru was known for interacting with devotees, meeting them individually or in groups. Though he traveled just once outside India — in the 1960s to East Africa — the movement became global, establishing nearly 2,000 nondenominational centers in 120 countries, including 200 in the U.S, according to the organization's website.

Among his followers are Bollywood actors, cricketers, prominent business leaders and millions of average Indians who flock to Sai Baba centers for worship, prayer and singing bhajans or devotional songs, many in praise of the guru.

Sai Baba faced intense criticism from some corners, particularly rationalists and scientists, who accused him of faking his miraculous materializations. He also faced criminal allegations including accusations of fraud, sexual abuse and murder, but was never charged with any of those crimes. His followers dismissed those allegations as slander and propaganda.

Sai Baba still has ardent devotees like Dr. Samuel Sandweiss, a retired psychiatrist based in Southern California, who visited the guru nearly 80 times since 1972. He said he has seen the guru materialize everything from sacred ash called vibhuti to several golden rings.

Sandweiss is not surprised that Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders followed Sai Baba.

"I've seen him with all kinds of people from all walks of life — from the lowest to the highest," he said. "His main message was that love transcends all religion and unites us all."

## Reporting on itself: 'Today' keeps it low-key in covering search for Savannah Guthrie's mother

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

Savannah Guthrie gets top billing every weekday morning when the "Today" show introduces its cast. In an anguishing twist, the disappearance of her 84-year-old mother has made Guthrie herself the top story, too.

NBC's morning show is reporting news that it is part of, a journalistic challenge made more acute by the conceit that this television format has long been built upon: The on-air team is a family, one that viewers

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are part of each day. Guthrie has been co-host of "Today" since 2012.

The probable abduction of Nancy Guthrie from her Arizona home last weekend was the lead story on "Today" every morning this past week, as it often was on other newscasts.

"Our thoughts and our prayers remain firmly focused on our friend," said Craig Melvin, Guthrie's co-host. His partner has been replaced this week by Sheinelle Jones, who typically anchors the show's fourth hour.

The "Today" show coverage stood in marked contrast to another journalism institution in the news this past week: The Washington Post did not assign any of its reporters to cover the announcement that the newspaper was laying off one-third of its staff.

Viewers 'knew' Guthrie's mom, too

For the most part, "Today" was relatively straightforward in its coverage, while mindful of the fact that it affected a person that its viewers "knew." Dedicated fans are also familiar with Guthrie's mother, who has made a handful of appearances on the show with her daughter over the years — clips that were replayed this past week.

Melvin and Jones updated the story with each day's developments, with the help of reporter Liz Kreutz in Arizona and Tom Winter, a law enforcement correspondent. At times, the details came at a frustratingly slow pace. "We're getting new information," Winter said at one point. "Unfortunately, it's not really new information than can help advance the case."

Rather than overdoing it, the show seems to have covered the developments as they would if another well-known person — and not the mother of "Today's co-host — was involved, said Shelley Ross, a longtime "Today" competitor as former top producer at ABC's "Good Morning America" and, later, CBS' morning show.

"They're reporting it as stoically as possible without medicating themselves," Ross said. "They were very professional in their coverage. I think it was pitch-perfect and helpful."

When Guthrie recorded a video message with her brother and sister, addressed to their mother and potential kidnappers, "Today" aired it in full. That was one indication of the personal involvement — other networks generally aired bits and pieces of the video — but Ross argued that it made for effective television. "Today" seems to have sought — and was taking the advice — of experts in hostage situations, she said.

Another family member returns in time of crisis

The need to cover the story when the show was part of the news isn't foreign to "Today" — or Guthrie. NBC left it to her and Hoda Kotb to tell viewers in 2017 when Matt Lauer was fired for "inappropriate sexual behavior" with a colleague.

Beyond this week's headlines, "Today" colleague Jenna Bush Hager reported on Guthrie's religious faith, saying they were neighbors in New York City who often attended church together. Kotb, Guthrie's co-anchor after Lauer's firing until she left the show last year, returned Friday for a story about how others in news and entertainment, along with "Today" viewers, had shown their support.

"There's this helpless feeling," she said.

Viewing Kotb's return as a "family member" returning home at a time of crisis may seem schmaltzy, but it's an apt metaphor in this case, said Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture.

Network morning shows are the ultimate fluid format: a "Today" host could report on a complex breaking news story one morning, and dress up in a Halloween costume the next, Thompson said. The show's sets are often designed to make it appear like a viewer is looking into a living room.

"This is really the 'Today' show doing exactly what the 'Today' show was designed to do three-quarters of a century ago," Thompson said.

Guthrie's absence was also noted Friday at the beginning of NBC's coverage of the 2026 Winter Olympics opening ceremony. She was supposed to have co-hosted the event with Terry Gannon, but stayed in Arizona to be with her family and was replaced by Mary Carillo. "She is dearly missed by everybody," said Terry Gannon, the co-host.

NBC's Guthrie coverage made The Washington Post's own decision more noticeable. With the troubled news outlet facing headwinds over the past few years, its management decreed that its own media re-

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porters who cover the news industry not write about their own. They stuck with that decision even as the deep layoffs, which included eliminating the newspaper's sports section, were widely covered elsewhere.

The Post's website instead ran a story about its own announcement that was written by The Associated Press.

## India and the US move closer to reducing Trump tariffs

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India and the United States released a framework for an interim trade agreement to lower tariffs on Indian goods, which Indian opposition accused of favoring Washington.

The joint statement, released Friday, came after U.S. President Donald Trump announced his plan last week to reduce import tariffs on the South Asian country, six months after imposing steep taxes to press New Delhi to cut its reliance on cheap Russian crude.

Under the deal, tariffs on goods from India would be lowered to 18%, from 25%, after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed to stop buying Russian oil, Trump had said.

The two countries called the agreement "reciprocal and mutually beneficial" and expressed commitment to work toward a broader trade deal that "will include additional market access commitments and support more resilient supply chains." The framework said that more negotiations will be needed to formalize the agreement.

India would also "eliminate or reduce tariffs" on all U.S. industrial goods and a wide range of food and agricultural products, Friday's statement said.

The U.S. president had said that India would start to reduce its import taxes on U.S. goods to zero and buy \$500 billion worth of American products over five years, part of the Trump administration's bid to seek greater market access and zero tariffs on almost all American exports.

Trump also signed an executive order on Friday to revoke a separate 25% tariff on Indian goods he imposed last year.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi thanked Trump "for his personal commitment to robust ties."

"This framework reflects the growing depth, trust and dynamism of our partnership," Modi said on social media, adding it will "further deepen investment and technology partnerships between us."

India's opposition political parties have largely criticized the deal, saying it heavily favors the U.S. and negatively impacts sensitive sectors such as agriculture. In the past, New Delhi had opposed tariffs on sectors such as agriculture and dairy, which employ the bulk of the country's population.

Meanwhile, Piyush Goyal, Indian Trade Minister, said the deal protects "sensitive agricultural and dairy products" including maize, wheat, rice, ethanol, tobacco, and some vegetables.

"This (agreement) will open a \$30 trillion market for Indian exporters," Goyal said in a social media post, referring to the U.S. annual GDP. He said the increase in exports was likely to create hundreds of thousands of new job opportunities.

Goyal also said tariffs will go down to zero on a wide range of Indian goods exported to the U.S., including generic pharmaceuticals, gems and diamonds, and aircraft parts, further enhancing the country's export competitiveness.

India and the European Union recently reached a free trade agreement that could affect as many as 2 billion people after nearly two decades of negotiations. That deal would enable free trade on almost all goods between the EU's 27 members and India, covering everything from textiles to medicines, and bringing down high import taxes for European wine and cars.

India also signed a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with Oman in December and concluded talks for a free trade deal with New Zealand.

## US gave Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach agreement to end war, Zelenskyy says

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The U.S. has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a deal to end the nearly four-year war, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told reporters, as Russian strikes on energy infrastructure forced nuclear power plants to cut output on Saturday.

If the June deadline is not met, the Trump administration will likely put pressure on both sides to meet it, he added.

"The Americans are proposing the parties end the war by the beginning of this summer and will probably put pressure on the parties precisely according to this schedule," Zelenskyy said, speaking to reporters on Friday. Zelenskyy's comments were embargoed until Saturday morning.

"And they say that they want to do everything by June. And they will do everything to end the war. And they want a clear schedule of all events," he said.

He said the U.S. proposed holding the next round of trilateral talks next week in their country for the first time, likely in Miami, Zelenskyy said. "We confirmed our participation," he added.

Zelenskyy said Russia presented the U.S. with a \$12 trillion economic proposal — which he dubbed the "Dmitriev package" after Russian envoy Kirill Dmitriev. Bilateral economic deals with the U.S. form part of the broader negotiating process.

Russian strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure continued with over 400 drones and about 40 missiles launched overnight Saturday, Zelenskyy said in a post on X. Targets included the energy grid, generation facilities and distribution networks.

Ukrenergo, the state energy transmission operator, said the attack was the second mass strike on energy infrastructure since the start of the year, forcing nuclear power plants to reduce output. Eight facilities in eight regions came under attack, it said in a statement.

"As a result of missile strikes on key high-voltage substations that ensured the output of nuclear power units, all nuclear power plants in the territories under control were forced to reduce their load," the statement said.

It said the power deficit in the country has increased "significantly" as a result of the attacks forcing an extension of hourly power outages in all regions of Ukraine.

The latest deadline follows U.S.-brokered trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi that produced no breakthrough as the warring parties cling to mutually exclusive demands. Russia is pressing Ukraine to withdraw from the Donbas, where fighting remains intense — a condition Kyiv says it will never accept.

"Difficult issues remained difficult. Ukraine once again confirmed its positions on the Donbas issue. 'We stand where we stand' is the fairest and most reliable model for a ceasefire today, in our opinion," Zelenskyy said. He reiterated that the most challenging topics would be reserved for a trilateral meeting between leaders.

Zelenskyy said no common ground was reached on managing the Russian-held Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant and expressed skepticism about a U.S. proposal to turn the Donbas region, coveted by Russia, into a free economic zone as a compromise.

"I do not know whether this can be implemented, because when we talked about a free economic zone, we had different views on it," he said.

He said in the last round of talks the negotiators discussed how a ceasefire would be technically monitored. He added that the U.S. has reaffirmed it would play a role in that process.

Repeated Russian aerial assaults have in recent months focused on Ukraine's power grid, causing blackouts and disrupting the heating and water supply for families during a bitterly cold winter, putting more pressure on Kyiv.

Zelenskyy said the U.S. again proposed a ceasefire banning strikes on energy infrastructure. Ukraine is ready to observe such a pause if Russia commits; but he added that when Moscow previously agreed to a one-week pause suggested by the U.S., it was violated after just four days.

## Islamic State affiliate claims suicide bombing that killed 31 at Shiite mosque in Pakistani capital

By MUNIR AHMED and MUHAMMAD YOUSAF Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — An affiliate of the Islamic State group claimed responsibility overnight for a deadly suicide bombing inside a Shiite mosque on the outskirts of Pakistan's capital that killed 31 people and wounded 169 others, as mourners gathered Saturday under tight security at the same mosque for funerals for the victims.

Authorities said officers identified the bomber, his facilitators and arrested the mastermind of the attack.

The regional Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State in Pakistan, claimed responsibility in a statement posted on its Amaq News Agency. It said the attacker opened fire on security guards who tried to stop him at the main gate and detonated his explosive vest after reaching the mosque's inner gate.

The Islamic State group suggested it viewed the Pakistani Shiites as legitimate targets, calling them a "human reservoir" that provided recruits to Shiite militias fighting the Islamic State in Syria.

Friday's mosque bombing was the deadliest in Islamabad since a 2008 suicide bombing at the Marriott Hotel that killed 63 people and wounded more than 250. In November, a suicide bomber struck outside a court in the capital, killing 12 people.

The latest attack comes as Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government grapples with a surge in militant attacks across Pakistan. According to Pakistani authorities, the attacker was a Pakistani national who had recently traveled to Afghanistan.

### Pakistan arrests suspects linked to attack

Authorities said several suspects, including the brother, mother and other relatives of the bomber, were arrested during overnight raids in Islamabad and in northwestern Pakistan, and that a police officer was killed in the operation.

State-run Pakistan TV reported on Saturday a breakthrough in the investigation, with the arrest of an alleged Afghan with IS accused of masterminding the attack. It reported that the bombing was planned by IS in Afghanistan, which poses a threat to both regional and global security. There was no immediate comment from Kabul about the latest claims.

### Funerals for the victims

More than 2,000 grief-stricken mourners gathered as coffins of those killed were brought to the mosque for funerals for about a dozen victims, joined by Shiite community leaders and senior government officials. Funerals of other victims were to be held in their home towns.

IS is a Sunni group that has targeted Pakistan's Shiite minority in the past, apparently seeking to stoke sectarian divisions in the majority Sunni country. In 2022 it claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that struck a Shiite Muslim mosque in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar, killing at least 56 and wounding 194.

Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif told reporters Friday that the attack signaled that Pakistan-based militants operating from Afghanistan could strike even in the capital.

His remarks drew a sharp response from Afghanistan's Taliban government.

In a statement, Afghanistan's Defense Ministry condemned the mosque attack in Islamabad but said the Pakistani defense minister had "irresponsibly" linked it to Afghanistan. Pakistan has frequently accused Afghanistan, where the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, of harboring militants, including members of the Pakistani Taliban. Kabul denies the accusations.

### Attack draws international condemnation

The attack drew condemnation from the wider international community, including the United States, Russia and the European Union.

Prime Minister Sharif said he was grateful for the messages of sympathy and support received "from across the globe" following what he called the "heart-wrenching suicide attack in Islamabad." He said international support remained critical to Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts and vowed the perpetrators would be brought to justice.

Although Pakistan's capital has seen relatively few attacks compared with other regions, the country has experienced a recent rise in militant violence. Much of it has been blamed on Balochseparatists and the Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, which is a separate group but allied with Afghanistan's Taliban.

## **Yemen's ruling council names new cabinet after deadly clashes in the south**

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The head of Yemen's ruling leadership council has named a new cabinet, weeks after deadly clashes in the country's south and the dissolution of a separatist group.

The escalation has exposed cracks in a Saudi-led coalition fighting Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

Rashad al-Alimi, head of the Presidential Leadership Council, announced the cabinet in a presidential decree published by the country's state-run SABA news agency late Friday.

The 35-member cabinet is chaired by Prime Minister Shae'a al-Zandani, who also serves as foreign minister. It included only two women: Afrah al-Zouba, minister of planning and international cooperation, and Ahd Jaasous, state minister for women's affairs.

Maj. Gen. Taher al-Aqili was appointed defense minister and Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Haidan will lead the Interior Ministry. Both will oversee Saudi-backed efforts to dismantle militias of the separatist Southern Presidential Council, which is supported by the United Arab Emirates.

Yemen has been mired for more than a decade in a civil war that involves a complex interplay of sectarian and tribal grievances and the involvement of regional powers.

The Iran-aligned Houthis control the most populous regions in the north, including the capital Sanaa. Meanwhile, a loose regional coalition of powers — including Saudi Arabia and the UAE — has backed the internationally recognized government in the south.

The Southern Transitional Council is part of the anti-Houthi camp, but it seeks an independent state in southern Yemen.

In December, STC forces advanced into the provinces of Hadramout and Mahra, where they seized oil-rich areas and facilities and the presidential palace in the main southern city of Aden. They pushed out forces affiliated with the Saudi-supported National Shield Forces, another group aligned with the anti-Houthi coalition.

The Saudi-backed forces have since regained control of Hadramout, the presidential palace in Aden and camps in al-Mahra. The STC then announced its dissolution.

The escalation in southern Yemen in the past two months has rattled the Saudi-led coalition and brought long-muted tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE into the open. Saudi Arabia accused the UAE of supporting the separatists, and smuggling the STC leader, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who is wanted for treason, out of Yemen and flying him to Abu Dhabi.

The Saudi-led coalition, which until recently had included the UAE, has fought to restore Yemen's government. The war has remained at a stalemate, and the rebels reached a deal with Saudi Arabia that stopped their attacks on the kingdom in return for an end to Saudi-led strikes on their territories.

## **She filmed Iran's violent crackdown on protesters. Now she is afraid to go outside**

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — As tear gas canisters landed among protesters filling the wide boulevard, the 37-year-old beautician and her friends ran for cover. They sheltered among trees, concealed in darkness pierced only by the glow of streetlights and small fires behind them in the western Iranian city of Karaj.

Then gunfire rang out, audible in the video she was taking on her phone.

"Don't be afraid," she screamed repeatedly, her voice breaking. The crowd joined at the top of their

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lungs: "Don't be afraid. We are all together."

"Are they using live bullets?" she cried out. "Shameless! Shameless!" Others joined in the chant, along with cries of "Death to the dictator!"

It was a moment of collective boldness on Jan. 8, the night hundreds of thousands of Iranians across the country took to the streets against the cleric-led theocracy that has ruled for nearly 50 years. But after the bloodshed of that night, the beautician, like countless others, has retreated into terrified isolation. She moved in with her mother, afraid to be alone, and has huddled there, anxious and unable to sleep.

A blanket of fear has settled over Iran, she said, and a sense of grief and quiet rage has taken over.

"When you look at people in the street, it feels like you are seeing walking corpses, people with no hope left to continue living," she said in a text message in late January.

Her videos and messages provide a raw account of the exuberance that protesters felt taking to the streets last month — and the shock that has paralyzed many after the bloodiest crackdown ever inflicted by the Islamic Republic. The beautician expressed despair that change can happen and a sense of abandonment by the world.

She saw little hope in Iran-U.S. nuclear talks that were held Friday even as they trade warnings of war. She feared Iran's leaders will outlast Trump's pressure and "become entrenched and all those people who died will have died in vain," she wrote.

Monitoring groups say at least 6,854 were killed, most on Jan. 8 and 9, but they say the full number could be triple that. The clampdown since has also been unprecedented. A monthlong internet blackout has hidden the full extent of what happened, even as more than 50,000 people have been reported detained.

The Associated Press received more than a dozen videos as well as text messages the beautician sent to a relative of hers in Los Angeles during sporadic openings in the internet shutdown. The beautician gave permission for the material to be shared.

The AP is withholding the names of the beautician and her relative for their security. The AP verified the location and authenticity of her videos, which corresponded with known features of the area around Samandehi Park in Karaj. The AP could not verify all details in her account, but it broadly conforms with accounts from other protesters documented by the AP and rights groups.

### Taking to the streets

The beautician struggled in Iran's economy, crippled by decades of corruption and mismanagement and international sanctions. With jobs hard to find, she chose to work for herself as a nail technician, believing she could make a better living, said the relative, who has long been close to her and was in frequent contact even before the protests.

She gave up on having a family or children, the relative said. Everything was too expensive, and it was too repressive in Iran to bring up kids.

She had little faith in Iranian politicians claiming to be moderates and reformers, the relative said. But she joined protests. The power of a popular movement fueled her sense that change in Iran was possible.

She participated in the 2022 protests ignited by the death of Mahsa Amini, who died after being arrested for not wearing her headscarf to the liking of authorities. But she was disillusioned by the violence that followed. Over 500 were believed killed and over 22,000 detained.

Her desire changed "from saving her country to saving herself," the relative said. Her family looked for opportunities for her to leave Iran, but they never materialized.

When protests triggered by the plunging value of Iran's currency began in late December, she didn't take part at first.

But when she found she could hardly even afford cooking oil, it was the last straw. She told her relative that she made the equivalent of only \$40 in December, down from an already paltry \$300-\$400 average for the past year.

On Jan. 8, she made plans with her friends to join the protests.

Iranians poured into the streets on Jan. 8

That night, Iranians poured into the streets of at least 192 cities across Iran's 31 provinces, according to

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the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency. These were quite possibly the biggest anti-government rallies since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The diversity of the crowds across social and economic classes was greater than past marches.

The beautician's videos show protesters filling a main boulevard in Karaj. Their confidence bolstered by their numbers, they walk unhurriedly among the trees. Women, men and children chant, "Death to Khamenei," referring to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Some chanted in support of the exiled crown prince Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last shah, who had called for the public to turn out. Some set up bonfires and formed protest circles around them.

It is not clear from her videos how the violence began.

One video shows protesters lined up outside a police station, cheering, while a fire burned inside.

From inside the station, police fired tear gas and shotgun pellets, the beautician said in a message. Live ammunition quickly followed.

The beautician wrote to her relative that she saw nearly 20 people shot in her immediate circle. The parents of a family friend were shot and killed as they tried to help a wounded person. Another friend's father was killed, and authorities later made his daughter pay the equivalent of \$4,500 to release his body.

In one video, a group huddled over a wounded protester, her leg covered in blood. They frantically looked for a way to stop the bleeding.

"Do you have a scarf? A headscarf, anything?" one person shouted. Another said: "We can't go to the hospital," apparently out of fear of being detained. Another interjected, in a panic: "Tie it tight and fasten it."

The government has put the death toll from the wave of nationwide protests at more than 3,000, and Khamenei has denounced them as "a coup."

'We are all in mourning'

The next night, rights groups say shooting continued in Karaj, with snipers on rooftops and more dead. The beautician stepped out of the house but quickly returned, filming nothing, her relative said.

She has hardly left since.

"We have seen so many horrific scenes of people being killed before our eyes that we are now afraid to leave our homes," she wrote in a message.

She fears security agents will come to her building, she wrote. She and her neighbors agreed not to let in anyone who rings the bells.

She takes tranquilizers "but I don't truly sleep," she wrote. "Everyone I talk to says they cannot sleep at night, stressed that at any moment they might come and attack our homes."

One night in late January, she went out briefly to withdraw money from the bank sent by her relative. But the bank had no cash.

Over all the years of repression, "we always kept going, strong," she wrote.

Not this time.

"We are all in mourning, filled with anger that we no longer even dare to shout out, for fear of our lives. Because they have no mercy."

## What to know about Nancy Guthrie's kidnapping and the race to find her

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — It's been a week since "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's mother disappeared from her home in Arizona in what authorities say was a kidnapping.

Investigators have been examining ransom notes and looking for evidence but have not named a suspect. On Friday, officers returned to 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie's home near Tucson and to the surrounding neighborhood to continue their search.

Here's what to know about the case:

The disappearance

Family members told officials they last saw Guthrie at 9:48 p.m. on Jan. 31 when they dropped her off at home after they ate dinner and played games together. The next day, family learned she didn't attend

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church. They reported her missing after they went to check on her.

Guthrie has a pacemaker and needs daily medication. Her family and authorities are worried her health could be deteriorating by the day.

## Collecting evidence

Authorities think Guthrie was taken against her will from her home in an upscale neighborhood that sits on hilly, desert terrain. DNA tests showed blood on Guthrie's front porch matched hers, the county sheriff has said.

Investigators found her doorbell camera was disconnected early Sunday and that software data recorded movement at the home minutes later. But investigators haven't been able to recover the footage because Guthrie didn't have an active subscription to the service.

Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos told The Associated Press in an interview that investigators have not given up on trying to access those images.

"I wish technology was as easy as we believe it is, that here's a picture, here's your bad guy. But it's not," Nanos told the AP on Friday. "There are pieces of information that come to us from these tech groups that say 'This is what we have and we can't get anymore.'"

The president of the Catalina Foothills Association, a neighborhood group, thanked residents in a letter for being willing to speak with law enforcement, share camera images and allow their properties to be searched.

## Ransom notes

At least three media organizations reported receiving purported ransom notes, which they handed over to investigators. Authorities made an arrest after one ransom note turned out to be fake, the sheriff said.

It's unclear if all of the notes were identical. Heith Janke, the FBI chief in Phoenix, said details included a demand for money with a Thursday evening deadline and a second deadline for Monday if the first one wasn't met. At least one note mentioned a floodlight at Guthrie's home and an Apple watch, Janke said.

Investigators said they are taking the notes seriously.

On Friday, KOLD-TV in Tucson said it received a new message, via email, tied to the Guthrie case. The station said it couldn't disclose its contents. The FBI said it was aware of a new message and was reviewing its authenticity.

## Family appeals

Concern about Guthrie's condition is growing because authorities say she needs daily medicine that's vital to her health. She has a pacemaker, high blood pressure and heart issues, according to sheriff's dispatcher audio on broadcastify.com.

Guthrie's children recorded two separate video messages to their mother's abductor and posted them publicly on social media.

Savannah Guthrie filmed a sometimes emotional message on Wednesday asking the kidnapper for proof their mother was alive. She noted that technology today allows for the easy manipulation of voices and images and the family needed to know "without a doubt" that she is alive and in the abductor's hands.

Police have not said that they have received any deepfake images of Nancy Guthrie.

Savannah Guthrie described her mother as a "kind, faithful, loyal, fiercely loving woman of goodness and light" and said she was funny, spunky and clever.

"Talk to her and you'll see," she said.

She spoke some words directly to her mom, saying she and her siblings wouldn't rest until they're all together again.

## Trump's involvement

The FBI has offered a \$50,000 reward for information about Guthrie's whereabouts.

The White House said President Donald Trump called and spoke with Savannah Guthrie on Wednesday. He posted on social media that he was directing federal authorities to help where they can.

On Friday night, he told reporters flying with him to his Florida estate on Air Force One that the investigation was going "very well" and investigators had some strong clues.

Famous kidnappings

The kidnapping is the latest abduction to attract the American public's attention.

Other notorious kidnappings in U.S. history have included the son of singer Frank Sinatra, the granddaughter of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst and the 9-year-old girl for whom the AMBER Alert was named.

## **Savannah Guthrie's mother may have been kidnapped. How does law enforcement handle negotiations?**

By SAFIYAH RIDDLE Associated Press

Experts say abductions for ransom are rare, despite the prevalence of dramatic hostage crises on television. But the apparent kidnapping of "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's mother has raised questions about how law enforcement handles hostage negotiations in real life, and the risks of media attention for victims.

In the days since Nancy Guthrie, 84, was taken from her home outside Tucson, Arizona, a local television station received two messages that appear to be in connection with the case. One demanded money in exchange for Guthrie's return and contained information about her Apple watch and floodlights on her property.

While law enforcement hasn't named a suspect — or even confirmed definitively that the ransom note is authentic — Guthrie's children have released two videos appealing to her apparent kidnappers, begging for proof that their mother is still alive.

Professional hostage negotiators from around the world say that kidnappings depicted on television — where police shout through a bullhorn at heavily armed hostage-takers inside a bank — often misrepresent the delicate touch required for real-world negotiations.

Abductions for money are uncommon

There are three types of hostage situations, according to Scott Tillema, a retired SWAT hostage negotiator in Illinois. The least common kind in the U.S., he said, are ones that involve kidnapping for ransom.

For this category, the abduction is intentionally used as leverage to achieve an outcome, like financial compensation, publicity or political changes, said Tillema, who declined to speak about the apparent Guthrie kidnapping specifically.

Scott Walker, author of "Order Out of Chaos: A Kidnap Negotiator's Guide to Influence and Persuasion," has dealt with hundreds of abduction cases in his decades-long career. Most of them involved international actors, but he said that regardless of location, most scenarios follow a similar sequence of events.

Typically the kidnappers will plan well ahead of the abduction — sourcing a clandestine location to hold the hostage and designating a specific person to communicate with authorities and the victim's relatives.

The first step for law enforcement is confirming proof of life, Walker said. From there, authorities and the victim's family will try to establish trust with the abductors to facilitate an exchange.

Walker didn't speculate on Guthrie's specific case. Broadly speaking, he said the victims of abductions that come with demands are not chosen at random.

"It's very, very rare that someone is kidnapped for being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Walker said.

One of the most notable historical examples that falls into this category is the 1963 kidnapping of Frank Sinatra Jr., where the FBI helped Sinatra's parents pay his kidnappers \$240,000 for the 19-year-old's freedom. All three kidnappers were eventually convicted.

Arizona law enforcement has said it's not clear that Guthrie was targeted, and if she was, investigators don't know why.

Involvement of the family

Movies that depict hostage crises often gloss over how much time is involved, Walker said. Communication is often interrupted by long stretches of silence.

"There's a lot more waiting going on in real life: Waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for the kidnappers

to get in touch," Walker said.

The Guthrie family appealed to potential kidnappers in two videos after the Tucson-based KOLD-TV says it received an email Monday night that appears to be a ransom note. The note included a demand for money by 5 p.m. Thursday and a second deadline for next Monday, investigators said.

The station received a second email Friday afternoon, but said, "We cannot share contents of the new message right now," in a statement online.

Often silence is a strategy to put pressure on the family, Walker said. As a result, one of the most important assets for professional negotiators and family members alike is patience.

"We're likely to make better decisions when we're in a more positive, balanced, regulated frame of mind," he said.

That's easier said than done, according to Calvin Chrustie, a senior partner at the private security firm Critical Risk Team, which primarily handles kidnappings, blackmail and extortions in the U.S.

"I just think the public underestimates the huge psychological stressors on both the family and the police in these particular situations," Chrustie said. He added that the national media's insatiable demand for more information throughout an investigation only gives kidnappers more leverage and interferes with law enforcement operations — further endangering the victim.

Chrustie said in general he would suspect ransom notes sent to the press were possibly an attempt "to increase leverage" for kidnappers or "to mislead" law enforcement.

Other types of negotiations

There are two other types of hostage situations that are far more common in the U.S., according to Tillema.

The first is called "expressive hostage taking" and describes a situation when an individual takes a hostage in a moment of acute, intense emotional distress, Tillema said. Typically, these crises happen at home among family members when someone in a psychological crisis wants to compel law enforcement to leave.

The vast majority of mediations he brokered in his roughly two decades as a negotiator fell into that category, he said.

The second-most common is called "incidental hostage taking," which is defined as a situation when a hostage is taken during another crime, like a bank robbery. In these cases, frequently sensationalized in movies like Spike Lee's "Inside Man," a person is usually confronted by law enforcement and then uses a hostage as leverage to negotiate freedom. Tillema said those situations are typically disorganized because the abduction is not premeditated.

## **Trump's racist post about Obamas is deleted after backlash despite White House earlier defending it**

By BILL BARROW and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's racist social media post featuring former President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, as primates in a jungle was deleted Friday after a backlash from both Republicans and Democrats who criticized the video as offensive.

Trump said later Friday that he won't apologize for the post: "I didn't make a mistake," he said.

The Republican president's Thursday night post was blamed on a staffer after widespread backlash, from civil rights leaders to veteran Republican senators, for its treatment of the nation's first Black president and first lady. A rare admission of a misstep by the White House, the deletion came hours after press secretary Karoline Leavitt dismissed "fake outrage" over the post. After calls for its removal — including by Republicans — the White House said a staffer had posted the video erroneously.

The post was part of a flurry of overnight activity on Trump's Truth Social account that amplified his false claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him, despite courts around the country and Trump's first-term attorney general finding no evidence of systemic fraud.

Trump has a record of intensely personal criticism of the Obamas and of using incendiary, sometimes racist, rhetoric — from feeding the lie that Obama was not a native-born U.S. citizen to crude generaliza-

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tions about majority-Black countries.

The post came in the first week of Black History Month and days after a Trump proclamation cited “the contributions of black Americans to our national greatness” and “the American principles of liberty, justice, and equality.”

An Obama spokeswoman said the former president, a Democrat, had no response.

‘An internet meme’

Nearly all of the 62-second clip appears to be from a conservative video alleging deliberate tampering with voting machines in battleground states as 2020 votes were tallied. At the 60-second mark is a quick scene of two jungle primates, with the Obamas’ smiling faces imposed on them.

Those frames originated from a separate video, previously circulated by an influential conservative meme maker. It shows Trump as “King of the Jungle” and depicts Democratic leaders as animals, including Joe Biden, who is white, as a jungle primate eating a banana.

“This is from an internet meme video depicting President Trump as the King of the Jungle and Democrats as characters from the Lion King,” Leavitt said by text.

Disney’s 1994 feature film that Leavitt referenced is set on the savannah, not in the jungle, and it does not include great apes.

“Please stop the fake outrage and report on something today that actually matters to the American public,” Leavitt added.

By noon, the post had been taken down, with responsibility placed on a Trump subordinate.

Trump, answering questions from reporters accompanying him Friday night aboard Air Force One, said the video was about fraudulent elections and that he liked what he saw.

“I liked the beginning. I saw it and just passed it on, and I guess probably nobody reviewed the end of it,” he said.

Asked if he condemned the video’s racism, Trump said, “Of course I do.”

The White House explanation raises questions about control of Trump’s social media account, which he’s used to levy import taxes, threaten military action, make other announcements and intimidate political rivals. The president often signs his name or initials after policy posts.

The White House did not immediately respond to an inquiry about how posts are vetted and when the public can know when Trump himself is posting.

Mark Burns, a pastor and a prominent Trump supporter who is Black, said Friday on X that he’d spoken “directly” with Trump and that he recommended to the president that he fire the staffer who posted the video and publicly condemn what happened.

“He knows this is wrong, offensive, and unacceptable,” Burns posted.

Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman Yvette Clarke, D-N.Y., told The Associated Press she does “not buy the White House’s commentary.”

“If there wasn’t a climate, a toxic and racist climate within the White House, we wouldn’t see this type of behavior regardless of who it’s coming from,” Clarke said, adding that Trump “is a racist, he’s a bigot, and he will continue to do things in his presidency to make that known.”

Condemnation across the political spectrum

Trump and White House social media accounts frequently repost memes and artificial intelligence-generated videos. As Leavitt did Friday, Trump allies typically cast them as humorous.

This time, condemnations flowed from across the spectrum — along with demands for an apology that doesn’t appear to be coming.

At a Black History Month market in Harlem, the historically Black neighborhood in New York City, vendor Jacklyn Monk said Trump’s post was embarrassing even if it was eventually deleted. “The guy needs help. I’m sorry he’s representing our country. ... It’s horrible that it was this month, but it would be horrible if it was in March also.”

In Atlanta, Rev. Bernice King, daughter of the assassinated civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr., resurfaced her father’s words: “Yes. I’m Black. I’m proud of it. I’m Black and beautiful.” Black Americans, she

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said, "are beloved of God as postal workers and professors, as a former first lady and president. We are not apes."

The U.S. Senate's lone Black Republican, Tim Scott of South Carolina, called on Trump to take down the post. "Praying it was fake because it's the most racist thing I've seen out of this White House," said Scott, who chairs Senate Republicans' midterm campaign arm.

Another Republican, Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, is white but represents the state with the largest percentage of Black residents. Wicker called the post "totally unacceptable" and said the president should apologize.

Some Republicans who face tough reelections this November voiced concerns, as well. The result was an unusual cascade of intraparty criticism for a president who has enjoyed a stranglehold over fellow Republicans who stayed silent during previous Trump controversies for fear of a public spat with the president or losing his endorsement in a future campaign.

NAACP President Derrick Johnson called the video "utterly despicable" and pointed to Trump's wider political concerns that could help explain Republicans' willingness to speak out. Johnson asserted that Trump is trying anything to distract from economic conditions and attention on the Jeffrey Epstein case files.

"You know who isn't in the Epstein files? Barack Obama," he said. "You know who actually improved the economy as president? Barack Obama."

A long history of racism

There is a long history in the U.S. of powerful white figures associating Black people with animals, including apes, in demonstrably false, racist ways. The practice dates to 18th century cultural racism and pseudo-scientific theories used to justify the enslavement of Black people, and later to dehumanize freed Black people as uncivilized threats to white people.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote in his famous text "Notes on the State of Virginia" that Black women were the preferred sexual partners of orangutans. President Dwight Eisenhower, discussing school desegregation in the 1950s, suggested white parents were rightfully concerned about their daughters being in classrooms with "big Black bucks." Obama, as a candidate and president, was featured as a monkey or other primates on T-shirts and other merchandise.

In his 2024 campaign, Trump said immigrants were "poisoning the blood of our country," language similar to what Adolf Hitler used to dehumanize Jews in Nazi Germany.

During his first White House term, Trump called a swath of majority-Black, developing nations "shithole countries." He initially denied saying it but admitted in December 2025 that he did.

When Obama was in the White House, Trump pushed false claims that the 44th president, who was born in Hawaii, was born in Kenya and constitutionally ineligible to serve. Trump, in interviews that helped endear him to conservatives, demanded that Obama prove he was a "natural-born citizen" as required to become president.

Obama eventually released birth records, and Trump finally acknowledged during his 2016 campaign, after having won the Republican nomination, that Obama was born in Hawaii. But immediately after, he said, falsely, that his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton started the birtherism attacks.

## Judge orders return of 3 deported families protected by family separation settlement

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A judge says the federal government must return three families hurt by the first Trump administration's policy of separating parents from the children at the border, saying their deportations in recent months relied on "lies, deception and coercion."

The order, issued Thursday, found the deported families should have been allowed to remain in the United States under terms of a legal settlement over the Trump administration's separation of about 6,000 children from their parents at the border in 2018. Each mother had permission to remain in the U.S. until 2027 under humanitarian parole.

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U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw in San Diego said the administration also had to pay for their return travel costs.

One woman and her three children, including a 6-year-old U.S. citizen, were deported to Honduras in July after being ordered to check in with ICE at least 11 times over two months, which, she said, caused her to lose her job.

Sabraw rejected the government's argument that the family left the U.S. voluntarily. The woman said ICE officers visited her home and asked her sign a document agreeing to leave but she refused.

"This did not make any difference to these officers. They took me and my children to a motel and removed my ankle monitor. They detained us for three days and then removed us to Honduras," the woman said in court documents.

The other two families, identified only by their initials, bore similarities.

"Each of the removals was unlawful, and absent the removals, these families would still be in the United States and have access to the benefits and resources they are entitled to," wrote Sabraw, who was appointed by President George W. Bush.

Lee Gelernt, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union who represents the families, welcomed the decision.

"The Trump administration has never acknowledged the illegality or gratuitous cruelty of the initial family separation policy and now has started re-deporting and re-separating these same families. The Court put its foot down and not only ordered the families return but did so at government expense," he said.

The Homeland Security and Justice departments did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment Friday.

Under a "zero-tolerance" policy, parents were separated from their children to be criminally prosecuted when crossing the border illegally. Sabraw ordered an end to the separations in June 2018, days after Trump halted them on his own amid intense international backlash. The settlement prohibits such a policy until 2031.

## **Iran and US hold indirect talks in Oman. America's military leader in the Mideast joins the talks**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

MUSCAT, Oman (AP) — Iran and the United States held indirect talks in Oman on Friday, negotiations that appeared to return to the starting point on how to approach discussions over Tehran's nuclear program. But for the first time, America brought its top military commander in the Middle East to the table.

The presence of U.S. Navy Adm. Brad Cooper, head of the military's Central Command, in his dress uniform at the talks in Muscat, the Omani capital, served as a reminder that the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other warships were now off the coast of Iran in the Arabian Sea.

President Donald Trump said the United States had "very good" talks on Iran and said more were planned for early next week. But he kept up the pressure, warning that if the country didn't make a deal over its nuclear program, "the consequences are very steep."

"Iran looks like they want to make a deal very badly — as they should," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One as he headed to his Florida golf club late Friday. He suggested Iran was willing to "do more" than in previous talks but did not give details.

Asked how long he was willing to wait for a deal, Trump said: "We have plenty of time. If you remember Venezuela, we waited around for a while. We're in no rush." The Trump administration built up a huge military presence in the Caribbean Sea in the months before a U.S. raid captured then-Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January.

Trump has issued threats against Iran

Trump has repeatedly threatened to use force to compel Iran to reach a deal on the program after earlier sending the carrier to the region amid Tehran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands of others detained in the Islamic Republic.

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Gulf Arab nations fear an attack could spark a regional war that would drag them in as well.

That threat is real — U.S. forces shot down an Iranian drone near the Lincoln and Iran attempted to stop a U.S.-flagged ship in the Strait of Hormuz just days before Friday's talks in this sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula.

"We did note that nuclear talks and the resolution of the main issues must take place in a calm atmosphere, without tension and without threats," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi later told journalists.

"The prerequisite for any dialogue is refraining from threats and pressure," he added.

Araghchi said diplomats would return to their capitals, signaling this round of negotiations was over. The U.S. was represented by Mideast special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law.

In a display of force, the U.S. military published photos on X of the Lincoln carrier group sailing in the Arabian Sea with aircraft flying overhead, with the message "Peace through Strength!"

Iran's top diplomat offers a positive note

Araghchi offered cautious optimism as he spoke in a live interview from Muscat on Iranian state television. He said Friday's talks were focused primarily on finding a framework for further negotiations.

"We will hold consultations with our capitals regarding the next steps, and the results will be conveyed to Oman's foreign minister," Araghchi said.

"The mistrust that has developed is a serious challenge facing the negotiations," Araghchi said. "We must first address this issue, and then enter into the next level of negotiations."

Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, who oversaw multiple rounds of negotiations before Israel launched its 12-day war on Iran in June, called the talks "useful to clarify both the Iranian and American thinking and identify areas for possible progress."

The talks had initially been expected to take place in Turkey in a format that would have included regional countries as well, and would have included topics like Tehran's ballistic missile program — something Iran apparently rejected in favor of focusing only on its nuclear program.

Before the June war, Iran had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels. The U.N. nuclear watchdog — the International Atomic Energy Agency — had said Iran was the only country in the world to enrich to that level that wasn't armed with the bomb.

Iran has been refusing requests by the IAEA to inspect the sites bombed in the June war, raising the concerns of nonproliferation experts. Even before that, Iran has restricted IAEA inspections since Trump's decision in 2018 to unilaterally withdraw America from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Omani palace hosts talks

Friday's talks saw in-person meetings at a palace near Muscat's international airport, used by Oman in earlier talks Iran-U.S. talks in 2025. Associated Press journalists saw Iranian officials first at the palace and later returning to their hotel before the Americans came separately.

It remains unclear just what terms Iran is willing to negotiate at the talks. Tehran has maintained that these talks will only be on its nuclear program. However, the Al Jazeera satellite news network reported that diplomats from Egypt, Turkey and Qatar offered Iran a proposal in which Tehran would halt enrichment for three years, send its highly enriched uranium out of the country and pledge "not initiate the use of ballistic missiles."

Russia had signaled it would take the uranium, but Iran has said ending the program or shipping out the uranium were nonstarters.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Wednesday that the talks needed to include all those issues.

The US slaps new sanctions on Iran's energy sector

Shortly after Friday's talks, the U.S. Treasury and the U.S. State Department announced a new round of sanctions on Iran targeting its energy sector, imposing penalties, including freezes on assets in U.S. jurisdictions, on 14 oil tankers in a so-called "shadow fleet" that the U.S. says are used to try to evade sanctions, as well as on 15 trading firms and two business executives.

Trump also signed an executive order that says an import tax of potentially 25% "may" be imposed on goods from countries that buy oil from Iran. The order does not specifically impose tariffs so much as give the president the legal basis for levying them starting Saturday.

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It says the potential tariffs can be removed if Iran or the foreign buyers of its oil align themselves with U.S. interests on national security, foreign policy and economic issues.

In the past month, the U.S. also has sanctioned Iran's interior minister, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, and several other leaders involved in Iran's deadly crackdown against last month's protests.

Colorado funeral home owner who abused nearly 200 corpses gets 40 years, decried as a 'monster'

By JESSE BEDAYN and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — A Colorado funeral home owner who stashed 189 decomposing bodies in a building over four years and gave grieving families fake ashes was sentenced to 40 years in state prison Friday.

During the sentencing hearing, family members told Judge Eric Bentley they have had recurring nightmares about decomposing flesh and maggots since learning what happened to their loved ones.

They called defendant Jon Hallford a "monster" and urged the judge to give him the maximum sentence of 50 years.

Bentley told Hallford he caused "unspeakable and incomprehensible" harm.

"It is my personal belief that every one of us, every human being, is basically good at the core, but we live in a world that tests that belief every day, and Mr. Hallford your crimes are testing that belief," Bentley said.

Hallford apologized before his sentencing and said he would regret his actions for the rest of his life.

"I had so many chances to put a stop to everything and walk away, but I did not," he said. "My mistakes will echo for a generation. Everything I did was wrong."

'Motivated by greed'

Hallford's attorney unsuccessfully sought a 30 year sentence, arguing that it was not a crime of violence and he had no prior criminal record.

His former wife, Carie Hallford, who co-owned the Return to Nature Funeral Home, is due to be sentenced April 24. She faces 25 to 35 years in prison.

Both pleaded guilty in December to nearly 200 counts of corpse abuse under an agreement with prosecutors.

During the years they were stashing bodies, the Hallfords spent lavishly, according to court documents. That included purchasing a GMC Yukon and an Infiniti worth over \$120,000 combined, along with \$31,000 in cryptocurrency, pricey goods from stores like Gucci and Tiffany & Co. and laser body sculpting.

"Clearly this is a crime motivated by greed," prosecutor Shelby Crow said. The Hallfords charged more than \$1,200 per customer, and the money the couple spent on luxury items would have covered the cost to cremate all of the bodies many times over, Crow said.

The Hallfords also pleaded guilty to federal fraud charges after prosecutors said they cheated the government out of nearly \$900,000 in pandemic-era small business aid. Jon Hallford was sentenced to 20 years in prison in that case, and Carie Hallford's sentencing is pending.

A plea agreement in the corpse abuse case calls for the state prison sentence to be served concurrently with the federal sentence.

Heartbroken families

One of the family members who spoke at the hearing was Kelly Mackeen, whose mother's remains were handled by Return to Nature.

"I'm a daughter whose mother was treated like yesterday's trash and dumped in a site left to rot with hundreds of others," Mackeen said. "I'm heartbroken, and I ask God every day for grace."

As she and others spoke of their grief, Jon Hallford sat at a table to their right, wearing orange jail attire and looking directly ahead. The courtroom's wooden benches were full of relatives of the deceased and also journalists.

The Hallfords stored the bodies in a building in the small town of Penrose, south of Colorado Springs, from 2019 until 2023, when investigators responded to reports of a stench from the building.

Bodies were found throughout the building, some stacked on top of each other, with swarms of bugs

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and decomposition fluid covering the floors, investigators said. The remains — including adults, infants and fetuses — were stored at room temperature.

The bodies were identified over months with fingerprints, DNA and other methods.

Investigators believe the Hallfords gave families dry concrete that resembled ashes.

After families learned that what they received and then spread or kept at home were not actually their loved ones' remains, many said it undid their grieving process, while others had nightmares and struggled with guilt.

Lax regulations

One of the recovered bodies was that of a former Army sergeant first class who was thought to have been buried at a veterans' cemetery, FBI agent Andrew Cohen said.

When investigators exhumed the wooden casket at the cemetery, they found the remains of a person of a different gender inside, he said. The veteran, who was not identified in court, was later given a funeral with full military honors at Pikes Peak National Cemetery.

The corpse abuse revelations spurred changes to Colorado's lax funeral home regulations.

The AP previously reported that the Hallfords missed tax payments, were evicted from one of their properties and were sued for unpaid bills, according to public records and interviews with people who worked with them.

In a rare decision last year, Judge Bentley rejected previous plea agreements between the Hallfords and prosecutors that called for up to 20 years in prison. Family members of the deceased said the agreements were too lenient.

## A man whose mother was found among 189 decaying bodies tells the story

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — Derrick Johnson buried his mother's ashes beneath a golden dewdrop tree with purple blossoms at his home on Maui's Haleakalā Volcano, fulfilling her wish of a final resting place looking over her grandchildren.

Then the FBI called.

It was Feb. 4, 2024, and Johnson was teaching an eighth-grade gym class.

"Are you the son of Ellen Lopes?" a woman asked, Johnson recalled in an interview with The Associated Press.

There had been an incident, and an FBI agent would fly out to explain, the caller said. Then she asked: "Did you use Return to Nature for a funeral home?"

"You should probably google them," she added.

In the clatter of the weight room, Johnson typed "Return to Nature" into his cellphone. Dozens of news reports appeared, popping out in a blur.

Hundreds of bodies stacked on top of each other. Inches of body decomposition fluid. Swarms of bugs. Investigators traumatized. Governor declares state of emergency.

Johnson felt nauseated and his chest constricted, forcing the breath from his lungs. He pushed himself out of the building as another teacher heard his cries and came running.

Two FBI agents visited Johnson the following week, confirming his mother's body was among 189 that Return to Nature's owners, Jon and Carie Hallford, had stashed in a Colorado building between 2019 and Oct. 4, 2023, when the bodies were found.

It was one of the largest discoveries of decaying bodies at a funeral home in the U.S. Lawmakers overhauled the state's lax funeral home regulations. Besides handing over fake ashes to grieving families, the Hallfords also admitted to defrauding the federal government out of nearly \$900,000 in pandemic-era aid for small businesses.

Even as the Hallfords' bills went unpaid, authorities said they spent lavishly on Tiffany jewelry, luxury

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cars and laser-body sculpting, pocketing about \$130,000 clients paid for cremations.

They were arrested in Oklahoma in November 2023 and charged with abusing nearly 200 corpses.

Hundreds of families learned from officials that the ashes they ceremonially spread or kept close weren't actually their loved ones' remains. The bodies of their mothers, fathers, grandparents, children and babies had moldered in a room-temperature building in Colorado.

Jon Hallford was sentenced Friday to 40 years in prison. Carie Hallford, was to be sentenced in April. Attorneys for Jon and Carie Hallford did not respond to an AP request for comment.

Johnson, 45, who's suffered panic attacks since the FBI called, promised himself that he would speak at Hallford's sentencing.

"When the judge passes out how long you're going to jail, and you walk away in cuffs," he said, "you're gonna hear me."

'She lied'

Jon and Carie Hallford were a husband-and-wife team who advertised "green burials" without embalming as well as cremation at their Return to Nature funeral home in Colorado Springs.

She would greet grieving families, guiding them through their loved ones' final journey. He was less seen.

Johnson called the funeral home in early February 2023, the week his mother died. Carie Hallford assured him she would take good care of his mother, Johnson said.

Days later, she handed Johnson a blue box containing a zip-tied plastic bag with gray powder, saying those were his mother's ashes.

"She lied to me over the phone. She lied to me through email. She lied to me in person," Johnson told the AP.

The following day, the box lay surrounded by flowers and photos of Ellen Marie Shriver-Lopes at a memorial service at a Holiday Inn in Colorado Springs.

Johnson sprinkled rose petals over it as a preacher said: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Caught on video

On Sept. 9, 2023, surveillance footage showed a man appearing to be Jon Hallford walk inside a building owned by Return to Nature in the town of Penrose, outside Colorado Springs, according to an arrest affidavit.

Camera footage inside showed a body lying on a gurney wearing a diaper and hospital socks. The man flipped it onto the floor.

Then he "appeared to wipe the remaining decomposition from the gurney onto other bodies in the room," before wheeling what appeared to be two more bodies into the building, the affidavit said.

In a text to his wife, Hallford said, "while I was making the transfer, I got people juice on me," according to court testimony.

The neighborhood mom

Johnson grew up with his mother in an affordable-housing complex in Colorado Springs, where she knew everyone.

Johnson's father wasn't around much; at 5 years old, Johnson remembers seeing him punch his mom, sending her careening into a table, then onto a guitar, breaking it.

It was Lopes who taught Johnson to shave and hollered from the bleachers at his football games.

Neighborhood kids called her "mom," some sleeping on the couch when they needed a place to stay and a warm meal. She would chat with Jehovah's Witnesses because she didn't want to be rude. With a life spent in social work, Lopes would say: "If you have the ability and you have the voice to help: Help."

On Thursday, Johnson held a pink Mother's Day card he had written in high school and discovered among her things. "I think I wrote 'I love you' in there 20 times," he said, "because how many times did I miss saying it?"

"It makes me feel so good that she kept this."

Johnson said he spoke with his mom nearly everyday. After diabetes left her bedridden and blind at age 65, she'd ask Johnson to describe what her grandchildren looked like over the phone.

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It was Super Bowl Sunday in 2023 when her heart stopped. Johnson, who had flown in from Hawaii to be at her bedside, clutched her warm hand and held it until it was cold.

A gruesome discovery

Detective Sgt. Michael Jolliffe and Laura Allen, the county's deputy coroner, stood outside the Penrose building on Oct. 3, 2023, according to the 50-page arrest affidavit.

A sign on the door read "Return to Nature Funeral Home" and listed a phone number. When Jolliffe called it, it was disconnected. Cracked concrete and yellow stalks of grass encircled the building. At back was a shabby hearse with expired registration. A window air conditioner hummed.

Someone had told Jolliffe of a rank smell coming from the building the day before, the affidavit said.

One neighbor told an AP reporter they thought it came from a septic tank; another said her daughter's dog always headed to the building whenever it got off-leash.

Reminiscent of rancid manure or rotting fish, it struck anyone downwind of the building.

Jolliffe and Allen spotted a dark stain under the door and on the building's stucco exterior. They thought it looked like fluids they had seen during investigations with decaying bodies, the affidavit said.

But the building's windows were covered and they couldn't see inside.

Allen contacted the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies that oversees funeral homes, which got in touch with Jon Hallford. Hallford agreed to show an inspector inside the next afternoon.

Inspector Joseph Berry arrived, but Hallford didn't show.

Berry found a small opening in one of the window coverings, the affidavit said. Peering through, he saw white plastic bags that looked like body bags on the floor.

A judge issued a search warrant.

Bodies stacked high

Donning protective suits, gloves, boots and respirators, investigators entered the 2,500-square-foot (232-square-meter) building on Oct. 5, 2023, according to the affidavit.

Inside, they found a large bone grinder and next to it a bag of Quikrete that investigators suspected was used to mimic ashes. Bodies were stacked in nearly a dozen rooms, including the bathroom, sometimes so high they blocked doorways, the affidavit said.

There were 189.

Some had decayed for years, others several months, according to the affidavit. Many were in body bags, some wrapped in sheets and duct tape. Others were half-exposed, on gurneys or in plastic totes, or lay with no covering, it said.

Investigators believed the Hallfords were experimenting with water cremation, which can dissolve a body in several hours, the document said. There were swarms of bugs and maggots.

Body bags were filled with fluid, according to the affidavit. Some had ripped. Five-gallon buckets had been placed to catch the leaks. Removal teams "trudged through layers of human decomposition on the floor," it said.

Investigators identified bodies using fingerprints, hospital bracelets and medical implants, the affidavit said. It said one body was supposed to be buried in Pikes Peak National Cemetery.

Investigators exhumed the wooden casket at the burial site of the U.S. Army veteran, who served in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. Inside was a woman's deteriorated body, wrapped in duct tape and plastic sheets.

The veteran's body was discovered in the Penrose building, covered in maggots.

'Ashes to ashes'

Following the call from the FBI, Johnson promised himself he would speak at the Hallfords' sentencing. But he struggled to talk about what had happened even with close friends, let alone in front of a judge and the Hallfords.

For months, Johnson obsessed over the case, reading dozens of news reports, often glued to his phone until one of his children would interrupt him to play.

When he shut his eyes, he said he imagined trudging through the building with "maggots, flies, centipedes.

There's rats, they're feasting." He asked a preacher if his mother's soul had been trapped there. She reassured him it hadn't. When an episode of the zombie show "The Walking Dead" came on, he broke down.

Johnson started seeing a therapist and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He joined Zoom meetings with other victims' relatives as the number grew from dozens to hundreds.

After Lopes' body was identified, Johnson flew in March 2024 to Colorado, where his mother's remains lay in a box in a crematorium.

"I don't think you blame me, but I still want to tell you I'm sorry," he recalled saying, placing his hand on the box.

Then Lopes' body was loaded into the cremator and Johnson pushed the button.

Justice

Johnson has slowly improved with therapy, engaging more with his students and children. He practiced speaking at the Hallfords' sentencings in therapy. Closing his eyes, he envisioned standing in front of the judge — and the Hallfords.

"Justice is, it's the part that is missing from this whole equation," he said. "Maybe somehow this justice frees me. And then there's part of me that's scared it won't, because it probably won't."

On Friday, Johnson spoke about his mother at Hallford's sentencing.

"My mother earned the right to be known for her presence and not her death," he said. "Jon Hallford stole that."

## Luigi Mangione speaks out in protest as judge sets state murder trial for June 8

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Luigi Mangione spoke out in court Friday against the prospect of back-to-back trials over the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, telling a judge: "It's the same trial twice. One plus one is two. Double jeopardy by any commonsense definition."

Mangione, 27, made the remarks as court officers escorted him out of the courtroom after a judge scheduled his state murder trial to begin June 8, three months before jury selection in his federal case.

Judge Gregory Carro, matter-of-fact in his decision after a lengthy discussion with prosecutors and defense lawyers at the bench, said the state trial could be delayed until Sept 8 if an appeal delays the federal trial.

Mangione's lawyers objected to the June trial date, telling Carro that at that time, they'll be consumed with preparing for the federal trial, which involves allegations that Mangione stalked Thompson before killing him.

"Mr. Mangione is being put in an untenable situation," defense lawyer Karen Friedman Agnifilo said. "This is a tug-of-war between two different prosecution offices."

"The defense will not be ready on June 8," she added.

"Be ready," Carro replied.

Mangione has pleaded not guilty to state and federal charges, both of which carry the possibility of life in prison. Last week, the judge in the federal case ruled that prosecutors can't seek the death penalty.

Jury selection in the federal case is set for Sept. 8, followed by opening statements and testimony on Oct. 13.

Wearing a tan jail suit, Mangione sat quietly at the defense table until his outburst at the end of the hearing.

As the trial calendar began to take shape, Assistant District Attorney Joel Seidemann sent a letter to Carro asking him to begin the New York trial on July 1.

The prosecutor argued that the state's interests "would be unfairly prejudiced by an unnecessary delay" until after the federal trial. Under the law, he said, the state has "priority of jurisdiction for purposes of trial, sentencing and incarceration" because Mangione was arrested by New York City police, not federal authorities.

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When Mangione was arrested, federal prosecutors said they anticipated that the state trial would go first. Seidemann told Carro on Friday that Thompson's family has also expressed a desire to see the state trial happen first.

"It appears the federal government has reneged on its agreement to let the state, which has done most of the work in this case, go first," Carro said Friday.

Scheduling the state trial first could help Manhattan prosecutors avoid double jeopardy issues. Under New York law, the district attorney's office could be barred from trying Mangione if his federal trial happens first.

The state's double jeopardy protections kick in if a jury has been sworn in a prior prosecution, such as a federal case, or if that prosecution ends in a guilty plea. The cases involve different charges but the same alleged course of conduct.

Mangione isn't due in court again in the state case until May, when Carro is expected to rule on a defense request to exclude certain evidence that prosecutors say connects Mangione to the killing.

Those items include a 9 mm handgun that prosecutors say matches the one used to kill Thompson and a notebook in which they say he described his intent to "wack" a health insurance executive.

Last week, Garnett ruled that prosecutors can use those items at that trial.

In September, Carro threw out state terrorism charges but kept the rest of the case, including an intentional murder charge.

Thompson, 50, was killed on Dec. 4, 2024, as he walked to a midtown Manhattan hotel for UnitedHealth Group's annual investor conference.

Surveillance video showed a masked gunman shooting him from behind. Police say "delay," "deny" and "depose" were written on the ammunition, mimicking a phrase used to describe how insurers avoid paying claims.

Mangione, a University of Pennsylvania graduate from a wealthy Maryland family, was arrested five days later at a McDonald's in Altoona, Pennsylvania, about 230 miles (about 370 kilometers) west of Manhattan.

## Feds can't withhold social service funds from 5 Democratic states amid fraud claims, judge rules

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A federal judge ruled Friday that President Donald Trump's administration must keep funds flowing to child care subsidies and other social service programs in five Democratic-controlled states — at least for now.

U.S. District Judge Vernon Broderick in New York, who was nominated by former President Barack Obama, granted the states' request for a preliminary injunction and a stay against the administration to bar it from withholding the money while a lawsuit works its way through the courts.

The states affected include California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York. The five states said they receive a total of more than \$10 billion a year from the programs.

Attorneys representing the federal government in the case did not immediately return emails seeking comment Friday night. A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of New York declined to comment.

Two temporary rulings had been issued in January, when the states sued, that blocked the federal government from holding back the funding, with the latest set to expire on Friday.

The programs in question are the Child Care and Development Fund, which subsidizes child care for 1.3 million children from low-income families nationally; the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which provides cash assistance and job training; and the Social Services Block Grant, a smaller fund that provides money for a variety of programs.

"Every day, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers rely on these funds to pay for necessities and provide their children a safe place to learn," New York Attorney General Letitia James said in a statement. "This illegal funding freeze would have caused severe chaos in the lives of some of the most vulnerable families in our state. I am proud to have secured another victory in this case to put a stop to it."

California Attorney General Rob Bonta added in a statement, "The Trump Administration's actions are

not only unlawful — they are cruel, targeting the most vulnerable among us.”

The government’s explanation of its actions has shifted.

When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced it was withholding the money, it said there was “reason to believe” the states were granting benefits to people in the country illegally. It did not initially explain where the information came from. But in a court hearing, a federal government lawyer said it was largely in reaction to news reports about possible fraud.

HHS did not immediately return an email request for comment.

And while the government’s initial news release said it “froze” access to money, federal lawyers told the judge that wasn’t what was happening. Rather, they said, the Trump administration was requiring more information from those states.

The government says it wants more records from the group of states, including names and Social Security numbers for beneficiaries of some of the programs.

Advocates warn that cutting off the child care subsidies could have deep impacts. Day cares that accept the subsidies could face the risk of layoffs or closures. And that would affect both the lower-income families who receive the subsidies and families who don’t. And for many families, losing child care can make it hard or impossible to work.

The Trump administration has targeted multiple programs in Minnesota due to previous fraud cases and new allegations, mostly involving members of the state’s Somali community.

Besides the heightened requirements for the four other Democratic-led states, the administration also has required all states to submit more information about how they’re using money in the child care program before they can draw down the funds.

## **4 people have died from eating death cap mushrooms as they spread in California after rains**

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Four people have died and three others have required liver transplants after eating the aptly named death cap mushroom that is proliferating in California following a rainy winter.

The California Department of Public Health is urging people to avoid mushroom foraging altogether this year because death cap mushrooms are easily confused with safe, edible varieties.

Since Nov. 18 there have been more than three dozen cases of death cap poisonings reported, including the four deaths and three liver transplants, according to the health department. Many who sought medical attention suffered from rapidly evolving acute liver injury and liver failure. Several patients required admission to an intensive care unit. They have ranged in age from 19 months to 67 years old.

The death cap is one of the most poisonous mushrooms in the world and is part of a small group of mushrooms containing amatoxins, which are highly potent compounds causing 90% of fatal mushroom poisonings globally. They are in city parks and in forests, often under oak trees.

In a typical year there are between two and five death cap poisonings, said Dr. Craig Smollin, medical director for the San Francisco Division of the California Poison Control System.

“The main thing this year is just the magnitude, the number of people ingesting this mushroom,” Smollin said. “Having almost 40 is very unusual.”

Warm, fall temperatures coupled with early rains are leading to a kind of “super bloom” of death caps in California this year, experts say.

Eating even a small amount can be fatal, and experts warn that a mushroom’s color is not a reliable way of detecting its toxicity, and whether the death cap variety is raw, dried or cooked does not make a difference.

Laura Marcelino told the San Francisco Chronicle that her family in the Northern California town of Salinas gathered mushrooms that looked like the ones she and her husband used to forage in their native Oaxaca, a state in Southern Mexico.

“We thought it was safe,” Marcelino, 36, said in Spanish.

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Her husband was dizzy and tired the next day, but Marcelino felt fine, and they ate the mushrooms again, heating them up in a soup with tortillas. Their kids don't like mushrooms and so didn't have any. The next day, both adults, seasonal farmworkers, became ill with vomiting and stayed home from work.

Marcelino spent five days in the hospital, while her husband had to undergo a liver transplant.

People can have stomach cramping, nausea, diarrhea or vomiting within 24 hours after ingesting a toxic mushroom and the situation can quickly deteriorate after that, experts say. Early symptoms may also go away within a day, but serious to fatal liver damage can still develop within 2 to 3 days.

Death cap mushrooms have been collected in local and national parks across Northern California and the Central Coast. Clusters have been identified in the Monterey and San Francisco Bay areas as well.

The public health department said those poisoned have included many Spanish, Mixteco, and Mandarin Chinese speakers and the state in response has expanded their warnings in different languages.

Spanish was the primary language for more than 60% of people poisoned, according to the health department.

The death cap resembles many fungi varieties from around the world that are safe to eat, and it changes in appearance in different stages, Smollin said, going from a brownish-white cap to a greenish cap.

"Unless you're an expert who studies mushrooms it can be very difficult to know," Smollin said.

Children have been among those poisoned this year. Officials advise keeping an eye on children and pets outside where mushrooms grow, and buying mushrooms from trusted grocery stores and sellers.

Treatment is more difficult once symptoms start so doctors advise people to seek medical care once someone becomes aware that they have eaten a poisonous mushroom or suspect they have.

U.S. Poison Centers said in an email to The Associated Press it has seen an increase in exposures of all varieties of mushrooms — not just the death cap — from September through January by 40% from the same period the previous year. Exposures do not always result in illness or poisoning.

U.S. Poison Control Centers can be reached in case of an emergency poisoning or for questions about mushrooms at 1-800-222-1222 or PoisonHelp.org.

## Zelenskyy says Ukrainian air force needs to improve as Russian drone barrages take a toll

By KAMILA HRABCHUK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday described the performance of the air force in parts of the country as "unsatisfactory," and said that steps are being taken to improve the response to large-scale Russian drone barrages of civilian areas.

The repeated Russian aerial assaults have in recent months focused on Ukraine's power grid, causing blackouts and disrupting the heating and water supply for families during a bitterly cold winter.

With the war about to enter its fifth year later this month following Russia's all-out invasion of its neighbor, there is no sign of a breakthrough in U.S.-led peace efforts following the latest talks this week. Further U.S.-brokered meetings between Russian and Ukrainian delegations are planned "in the near future, likely in the United States," Zelenskyy said.

Zelenskyy said Friday he had discussed with his defense minister and the air force commander what new air defense measures Ukraine needs to counter the Russian barrages. He didn't elaborate on what would be done.

Russia fired 328 drones and seven missiles at Ukraine overnight and in the early morning, the air force said, claiming that air defenses shot down 297 drones.

One person was killed and two others were injured in an overnight Russian attack using drones and powerful glide bombs on the central Dnipropetrovsk region, according to the head of the regional military administration, Oleksandr Hanzha.

A Russian aerial attack on the southern Zaporizhzhia region during early daylight hours injured eight people and damaged 18 apartment blocks, according to regional military administration head Ivan Fedorov.

A dog shelter in the regional capital was also struck, killing 13 dogs, Zaporizhzhia City Council Secretary

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Rehina Kharchenko said.

Some dogs were rushed to a veterinary clinic, but they could not be saved, she said. Seven other animals were injured and are receiving treatment.

Amid icy conditions in Kyiv, more than 1,200 residential buildings in multiple districts of the capital have had no heating for days due to the Russian bombardment of the power grid, according to Zelenskyy.

The U.K. defense ministry said Friday that Ukraine's electricity network "is experiencing its most acute crisis of the winter."

Mykola Tromza, an 81-year-old pensioner in Kyiv, said he has had his power restored, but recently went without heating and water at home for a week.

"I touched my nose and by God, it was like an icicle," Tromza said. He said he ran up and down to keep warm.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that air defenses downed 38 Ukrainian drones overnight, including 26 over the Bryansk region.

Bryansk Gov. Alexander Bogomaz said the attack briefly cut power to several villages in the region.

Another Ukrainian nighttime strike damaged power facilities in the Russian city of Belgorod, disrupting electricity distribution, Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

Local reports said that Ukrainian missiles hit a power plant and an electrical substation, cutting power to parts of the city.

Fierce fighting has also continued on the front line despite the frigid temperatures.

Ukraine's Commander in Chief, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyy, said the front line now measures about 1,200 kilometers (750 miles) in length along eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

The increasing technological improvements to drones on both sides mean that the so-called "kill zone" where troops are in greatest danger is now up to 20 kilometers (12 miles) deep, he told reporters on Thursday in comments embargoed until Friday.

## **Government must reach agreement on right to counsel for people at Minnesota ICE facility, judge says**

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Attorneys for the federal government have until next Thursday to reach an agreement with human rights lawyers who are seeking to ensure the right to counsel for people detained at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Minnesota, a judge said Friday.

Advocates said people held at the facility on the edge of Minneapolis who face possible deportation are denied adequate access to lawyers, including in-person meetings. Attorney Jeffrey Dubner said detainees are allowed to make phone calls, but ICE personnel are typically nearby.

U.S. District Judge Nancy Brasel told Justice Department attorney Christina Parascandola that there seemed to be a "very wide factual disconnect" between what the human rights lawyers allege and the government's claims of adequate access at what ICE depicts as only a temporary holding facility.

Parascandola said people detained at the facility have access to counsel and unmonitored phone calls at any time and for as long as they need. She conceded she had never been there.

Brasel called her argument "a tough sell," noting there was far more evidence in the case record to back up the plaintiffs' claims than the government's assurances.

"The gap here is so enormous I don't know how you're going to close it," the judge said.

Rather than ruling on the spot, Brasel told both sides to keep meeting with a retired judge who's mediating and who has helped narrow some of the gaps already. She noted at the start of the hearing that both sides agreed that "some degree of reasonable access" to legal counsel is constitutionally necessary but that they differed on the details of what that should look like.

If the sides don't reach at least a partial agreement by 5 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 12, the judge said she'll issue her order then. She didn't specify which way she'd rule.

A member of Congress decries conditions at detention center

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The facility is part of the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, which is a center of ICE operations and has been the scene of frequent protests.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Kelly Morrison, of Minnesota, said in a statement Friday that conditions at the detention center continue to be poor. The physician said she learned in her visit Thursday night that the facility has no protocols in place to prevent the spread of measles to Minnesota from Texas. At least two cases were reported at a major ICE detention center in Texas this week.

Some Minnesota detainees including families with children have been sent to the Texas facility, and some have returned to Minnesota after courts intervened, including 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos and his father.

"It's abundantly clear that Whipple is not at all equipped to handle what the Trump Administration is doing with their cruel and chaotic 'Operation Metro Surge,'" Morrison said in a statement. "I am stunned by the inability or unwillingness of the federal agents to answer some of the most basic questions about their operations and protocols."

Even though a federal judge ruled Monday that members of Congress have the right to make unannounced visits to ICE facilities, Morrison said in a statement that agents attempted to deny her entry for nearly a half-hour and demanded that she leave before eventually letting her in.

On her first attempt last month, Morrison and fellow Minnesota Democratic Reps. Ilhan Omar and Angie Craig were turned away.

After she was able to enter the facility last weekend, Morrison said no real medical care was being offered to people held there.

Craig and Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum said they were turned away despite the court order when they tried to visit the facility overnight.

"We have heard countless reports that detainees are being held in unlivable conditions at Whipple," the two representatives said in a statement. "We have every reason to believe that this administration is once again lying through their teeth and trying to hide what we all know to be true -- that they are ignoring due process and treating immigrants as political pawns, not people."

Man charged with felony for wrecking anti-ICE sculpture

A supporter of the immigration crackdown who posted a video on social media of himself kicking down an anti-ICE sculpture outside the Minnesota state Capitol in St. Paul was released from jail Friday after being charged with a felony count of damage to property.

Lt. Mike Lee, a spokesperson for the Minnesota State Patrol, said Capitol Security observed Jake Lang, 30, of Lake Worth, Florida, damaging the display Thursday afternoon. He was arrested a short distance away. The ice sculpture spelled out "Prosecute ICE."

At his first court appearance, Lang was released pending trial but ordered to stay at least three blocks away from the Capitol. Court records don't list an attorney who could comment on his behalf.

Lang was drowned out by a large crowd last month when he attempted to hold a small rally in Minneapolis in support of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown. Lang was previously charged with assaulting an officer and other crimes before receiving clemency as part of President Donald Trump's sweeping intervention on behalf of Jan. 6 defendants last year.

## Justice Department will allow lawmakers to see unredacted versions of released Epstein files

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Department of Justice will allow members of Congress to review unredacted files on the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein starting on Monday, according to a letter that was sent to lawmakers.

The letter obtained by The Associated Press says that lawmakers will be able to review unredacted versions of the more than 3 million files that the Justice Department has released to comply with a law passed by Congress last year.

To access the files, lawmakers will need to give the Justice Department 24 hours' notice. They will be

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able to review the files on computers at the Department of Justice. Only lawmakers, not their staff, will have access to the files, and they will be permitted to take notes, but not make electronic copies.

The arrangement, first reported by NBC News, showed the continued demand for information on Epstein and his crimes by lawmakers, even after the Justice Department devoted large numbers of its staff to comply with the law passed by Congress last year. The Justice Department has come under criticism for delays in the release of information, failing to redact the personal information and photos of victims and not releasing the entire 6 million documents collected in relation to Epstein.

Still, lawmakers central to the push for transparency, described the concession by the Justice Department as a victory.

"When Congress pushes back, Congress can prevail," Rep. Ro Khanna, who sponsored what's known as the Epstein Files Transparency Act, posted on social media.

Khanna has pointed to several emails between Epstein and individuals whose information was redacted that appeared to refer to the sexual abuse of underage girls. The release of the case files has prompted inquiries around the world about men who cavorted with the well-connected financier. Still, lawmakers are pressing for a further reckoning over anyone who may have had knowledge of Epstein's abuse or could have helped facilitate it.

Epstein killed himself in a New York jail cell in 2019 while he faced charges that he sexually abused and trafficked dozens of underage girls. The case was brought more than a decade after he secretly cut a deal with federal prosecutors in Florida to dispose of nearly identical allegations. Epstein was accused of paying underage girls hundreds of dollars in cash for massages and then molesting them.

## Mississippians near two weeks without power after winter storm

By SOPHIE BATES and JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

OXFORD, Miss. (AP) — Nearly two weeks after an ice storm knocked out power to her home, Barbara Bishop still finds herself trying to flip the lights on and looking in her fridge for food that has since spoiled.

Bishop, 79, and her 85-year-old husband, George Bishop, live in a rural area near Oxford, Mississippi, where ice-coated trees snapped in half, bringing down power lines and making roads nearly impassable.

After the storm hit, the Bishops took in their son, granddaughter and two children, whose homes lost both power and water.

The family endured days of bitter cold with nothing but a gas heater to keep them warm. For a few days, they lost water.

"It's just been one of those times you just have to grit, grit your teeth and bare it," Bishop said.

Nearly 20,000 customers remained without power in northern Mississippi on Friday, according to PowerOutage.us, which tracks outages nationwide. That is down from about 180,000 homes and businesses without power in Mississippi shortly after the storm struck late last month.

Lafayette County, where Oxford is located, had the most remaining outages of any county on Friday, with about 4,200 customers without power, followed by Tippah County with about 3,500. Panola, Yalobusha and Tishomingo counties all had more than 2,000 customers without power.

After days of bitter cold, temperatures in Oxford reached 70 degrees on Friday, but the chunks of ice still littered the ground in shaded areas.

Downed trees had been gathered into large piles on the sides of roads, some burned and still smoldering. While much of the worst damage had been cleared, in some places, power lines still hung low over roads and laid strewn about in parking lots. Everywhere, tree limbs dangled precariously.

Across the street from the Bishops, Russ Jones and his wife have no electricity or water. For days, they used five-gallon buckets filled with water to flush toilets, cooked on their gas stove and stayed warm by their fireplace.

"It's been a shock to the system," Jones said, adding that he and his wife began staying with friends who have power a few days ago.

On Friday, Jones' yard was teaming with volunteers from Eight Days of Hope, a nonprofit that responds to natural disasters. The volunteers cleared snapped tree limbs and hauled away a large tree that had

fallen in Jones' backyard.

The organization arrived days after the storm and has helped dozens of homeowners clean up their yards and patch damaged roofs. It has also served more than 16,000 free meals.

Jones said it was a relief to know he had one less thing on his plate. When a volunteer handed him a free T-shirt and a blanket for his wife, he held back tears.

"It's just beyond anything I could ever imagine," he said.

## The Milan Cortina Olympics officially open with a multi-site ceremony for a spread-out Winter Games

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

MILAN (AP) — Featuring tributes to da Vinci and Dante, Puccini and Pausini, Armani and Fellini, pasta and vino, and other iconic tastes of Italian culture — plus Mariah Carey hitting all the high notes in "Nel Blu Dipinto Di Blu" aka "Volare" — an unprecedented four-site, dual-cauldron opening ceremony got the Milan Cortina Olympics officially started Friday.

Allowing athletes to participate in the Parade of Nations at the mountain locales for the most spread-out Winter Games in history created what perhaps was an unintended consequence: Zero competitors from any of the first five countries announced actually showed up at the main hub, Milan's San Siro soccer stadium.

While signs bearing the names of Greece — which always leads the procession as the birthplace of the Olympics — Albania, Andorra, Saudi Arabia and Argentina were carried into the home of Serie A soccer titans AC Milan and Inter Milan, there were no athletes from those places around. Instead, they were participating at simultaneous festivities held at Cortina d'Ampezzo in the heart of the Dolomites, Livigno in the Alps, and Predazzo in the autonomous province of Trento.

The first country with athletes at San Siro was Armenia — and their entrance drew raucous cheers from a crowd filled with 61,000 ticket-holders plus others.

Later, a smattering of boos met Israel's four representatives at the Milan ceremony. There have been some calls for Israel to be banned from the Olympics over the war in Gaza, which began with Hamas' deadly attack in October 2023.

And while athletes from the U.S. were cheered when they appeared, Vice President JD Vance was jeered when he was shown briefly on the arena's video boards from his spot in the tribune. Support for the United States among its allies has been eroding as the Trump administration has taken an aggressive posture on foreign policy, including punishing tariffs, military action in Venezuela and threats to invade Greenland.

The contingent from Venezuela got a big backing when entering. So did that from Ukraine, where a war continues four years after Russia invaded.

The ceremony's organizers have said they sought to convey themes of harmony and peace, seeking to represent the city-mountain dichotomy of the particularly unusual setup for these Olympics while also trying to appeal to a sense of unity at a time of global tensions. South African actor Charlize Theron and Italian rapper Ghali delivered messages of peace toward the end of the night.

"I hope the opening ceremony is seen by everyone as an opportunity to be respectful," new International Olympic Committee President Kirsty Coventry said when asked this week about possible crowd reactions.

The loudest greeting was reserved, naturally, for host Italy, which walked in last, to an electronic version of "The Barber of Seville."

The ceremony was already nearly three hours old — and not yet done — by the time Italian President Sergio Mattarella officially declared the Milan Cortina Games open following a speech by Coventry, the first woman to lead the IOC.

"Thank you for believing in the magic of the Olympic Games," she said, then several minutes later made sure to make mention of the "media rights holders" who pay to broadcast the event.

Soon, tenor Andrea Bocelli's voice was belting out Puccini's "Nessun Dorma" and its closing refrain of "Vincerò," Italian for "I will win!" As he concluded, torch bearers headed out of the arena toward a cauldron at the Arch of Peace, 2½ miles (4 kilometers) from San Siro.

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One symbol of how far-flung things are at these Olympics: Instead of the usual one cauldron that is lit and burns throughout the Games, there were two, both intended as an homage to Leonardo da Vinci's geometric studies. The other is 250 miles (400 kilometers) away in Cortina.

All three flame-lighters — Alberto Tomba and Deborah Compagnoni in Milan, and Sofia Goggia in Cortina -- are Olympic champion Alpine ski racers from Italy. Tomba and Compagnoni are retired; Goggia is entered in the 2026 Games.

The full collection of competition venues for the next two-plus weeks dot an area of about 8,500 square miles (more than 22,000 square kilometers), roughly the size of the entire state of New Jersey. The multi-city ceremony format Friday allowed up-in-the-mountains sports such as Alpine skiing, bobsled, curling and snowboarding to be represented without requiring folks to make the several-hours-long trek to Milan.

It didn't exactly feel like a Winter Games in the country's financial capital, where the temperature was a tad below 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 degrees Celsius), and the sky was a crisp, clear azure all afternoon Friday. Not a trace of clouds, let alone snow.

As Italy welcomed the world by displaying symbols of its heritage, the show produced by Olympic ceremony veteran Marco Balich began with dancers from the academy of the famed Milan opera house Teatro alla Scala reimagining 18th-century sculptor Antonio Canova's marble works.

People wearing oversized, mascot-style heads representing opera composers Giacomo Puccini, Gioachino Rossini and Giuseppe Verdi appeared on the central stage, before giant paint tubes floated above and dropped silk of red, blue and yellow — the primary colors — before an early parade of various-color-wearing characters arrived in the stadium. They represented music and art, literature and architecture, appreciations for beauty and history and, above all, "La Dolce Vita" (loosely, Italian for "The Good Life" and the name of a 1960 film by Federico Fellini).

There were references to ancient Rome, the Renaissance, the Venice Carnival and the country's noted traditions in various areas such as cuisine and literature, such as "Pinocchio" and Dante's "Inferno."

A runway walk showcased outfits — created by the late fashion designer Giorgio Armani, who died last year at 91 — in the colors of Italy's flag: red, green and white. And balladeer Laura Pausini sang Italy's national anthem.

Carey got loud cheers in Milan as she sang in Italian. In Cortina, hundreds of fans sang along with her, and a roar emerged when they realized she was performing the song with the "Volare" refrain.

Another local touch: Italian actress Sabrina Impacciatore, of "White Lotus" fame, led a segment that took viewers through a century of past Olympics, with examples of evolving equipment, sportswear and music. And actress and comedian Brenda Lodigiani demonstrated the popular Italian hand gestures often used to communicate in place of words.

## US stocks soar to their best day since May as the Dow tops 50,000 and bitcoin stops plunging

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market roared back on Friday, as technology stocks recovered much of their losses from earlier in the week and bitcoin halted its plunge, at least for now.

The S&P 500 rallied 2% for its best day since May. The Dow Jones Industrial Average soared 1,206 points, or 2.5%, and topped the 50,000 level for the first time, while the Nasdaq composite leaped 2.2%.

Chip companies helped drive the widespread rally, and Nvidia jumped 7.8% to trim its loss for the week, which came into the day at just over 10%. Broadcom climbed 7.1% and erased its drop for the week.

They were the two strongest forces lifting the S&P 500, and they benefited from hopes for continued spending by customers diving into artificial-intelligence technology. Amazon CEO Andy Jassy, for example, said late Thursday it expects to spend about \$200 billion on investments this year to take advantage of "seminal opportunities like AI, chips, robotics, and low earth orbit satellites."

Such immense spending, similar to what Alphabet announced a day earlier, is creating concerns of its own, though. The question is whether all those dollars will create big enough profits to make the invest-

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ments worth it. With doubt remaining about that, Amazon's stock dropped 5.6%.

Even with Friday's surge, the S&P 500 still fell to its third losing week in the last four. Besides worries about spending by Big Tech companies, which are Wall Street's most influential stocks, concerns about AI potentially stealing customers from software companies also hurt the market. Software stocks got hit particularly hard after AI firm Anthropic released free tools to automate things like legal services.

Bitcoin, meanwhile, steadied following a weeklong plunge that had sent it more than halfway below its record price set in October. It climbed back above \$70,000 after briefly dropping close to \$60,000 late Thursday.

Prices in the metals market also calmed a bit following their own wild swings. Gold rose 1.8% to settle at \$4,979.80 per ounce, while silver added 0.2%.

Their prices suddenly ran out of momentum last week following jaw-dropping rallies, which were driven by investors clamoring for something safe to own amid worries about political turmoil, a U.S. stock market that critics called expensive and huge debt loads for governments worldwide. By January, prices for gold and silver were surging so quickly that critics called it unsustainable.

On Wall Street, the recovery for bitcoin helped stocks of companies enmeshed in the crypto economy. Robinhood Markets jumped 14% for the biggest gain in the S&P 500. Crypto trading platform Coinbase Global rose 13%. Strategy, the company that's made a business of buying and holding bitcoin, soared 26.1%.

Stocks of smaller U.S. companies also helped lead the market, along with companies whose profits depend on U.S. households spending more money. They benefited from potentially encouraging data on how U.S. consumers are feeling.

A preliminary report from the University of Michigan suggested sentiment among U.S. consumers is improving slightly, when economists were expecting to see a drop. The improvement was strongest among households that own stocks, which are benefiting from the S&P 500 setting a record late last month.

To be sure, sentiment "remained at dismal levels for consumers without stock holdings," according to Surveys of Consumers Director Joanne Hsu.

Airline stocks strengthened with hopes that more confidence among U.S. households will translate into more spending on trips. That included gains of 9.3% for United Airlines, 8% for Delta Air Lines and 7.6% for American Airlines.

The smaller stocks in the Russell 2000 index jumped 3.6%, well above the S&P 500's gain. Smaller companies' profits can be more dependent on the strength of the U.S. economy than those for big, multinational rivals.

All told, the S&P 500 jumped 133.90 points to 6,932.30. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rallied 1,206.95 to 50,115.67, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 490.63 to 23,031.21.

In stock markets abroad, indexes rose across much of Europe.

That was even though Stellantis, the auto giant whose stock trades in Italy, lost a quarter of its value after saying it would take a charge of 22 billion euros, or \$26 billion, as it dials back its electric vehicle production. The automaker acknowledged "over-estimating the pace of the energy transition" and said it was resetting its business "to align the company with the real-world preferences of its customers."

Stocks fell across much of Asia, but Japan's Nikkei 225 rose 0.8%. It benefited from a 2% climb for Toyota Motor, which said CEO Koji Sato will step down in April and will be replaced by Chief Financial Officer Kenta Kon.

In the bond market, Treasury yields held relatively steady. The yield on the 10-year Treasury edged down to 4.20% from 4.21% late Thursday.

## Photos show an Israeli strike blowing up a Gaza building in split-second detail

By ADAM GELLER. Photos by JEHAD ALSHRAFI Associated Press  
GAZA CITY (AP) — On a rare day off from covering the war in Gaza, Associated Press photographer Jihad Alshrafi made sure to take his camera before heading out.

So when the Israeli military ordered the evacuation of people living near a Gaza City intersection Friday afternoon and warned of an impending airstrike, Alshrafi was ready.

His photos capture the staggering impact of an Israeli bomb in split-second detail.

In a post on social media, an Israeli military spokesman identified the target as a building used by Hamas militants. Warned to keep back at least 300 meters (about 980 feet), Alshrafi headed for a cemetery with a view of the site.

"I saw the evacuation order on the internet and went directly to the place," Alshrafi said.

It's common for people in Gaza to visit cemeteries on Friday to pay respect to lost family members. With space between the headstones busy with mourners, Alshrafi set up at the far end of the cemetery, "because I know that sometimes the explosions are very strong, so we need to always stay vigilant."

His images reinforce that very real danger. In the first, an Israeli bomb is frozen in midair, just a few feet from striking its target, as cemetery visitors turn to flee.

In the frames that follow, an immense plume of flames and smoke erupts from the structure. Debris sprays skyward. The building staggers before collapsing on itself.

The experience of bearing witness and the images it produced are searing. "The explosion was loud and strong beyond imagination," Alshrafi said. "It was incredibly violent."

This is a photo gallery curated by AP photo editors.

## **Actor Timothy Busfield indicted in New Mexico on 4 counts of sexual contact with a child**

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — "West Wing" and "Field of Dreams" actor Timothy Busfield has been indicted by a grand jury on four counts of criminal sexual contact with a child under age 13, a New Mexico prosecutor announced Friday.

The allegations are tied to Busfield's work as a director on the set of the TV series "The Cleaning Lady" from 2022 to 2024.

Busfield has denied the allegations, initially filed in court by police, and a defense attorney on Friday said he would "fight these charges at every stage."

Bernalillo County District Attorney Sam Bregman announced the indictment in a social media post.

Busfield had turned himself in to authorities in January on related charges by police and was released from jail by a judge who found no pattern of criminal conduct or similar allegations involving children in Busfield's past. The grand jury indictment allows the case against Busfield to proceed toward possible trial without a preliminary courtroom hearing on evidence.

Larry Stein, an attorney for Busfield, did not comment directly on the sexual contact charge in the indictment but said the grand jury declined to endorse grooming charges sought by prosecutors. Prosecutors declined to comment on what accusations it brought before the grand jury.

Stein said in a statement that a detention hearing already "exposed fatal weaknesses in the state's evidence — gaps that no amount of charging decisions can cure."

"Mr. Busfield will fight these charges at every stage and looks forward to testing the State's case in open court," the statement said.

An investigator with the Albuquerque Police Department said a boy reported that Busfield touched his private areas over his clothing when he was 7 years old and again when he was 8, according to the initial criminal complaint from police. The boy's twin told authorities he was also touched by Busfield, but he didn't say anything right away because he didn't want to get in trouble, the complaint said.

The indictment — filed Friday in state District Court — reiterates allegations that Busfield "touched or applied force to the intimate parts" of one of the boys on several occasions.

At a detention hearing last month, Busfield's attorneys pointed out that the children initially said during interviews with police that Busfield didn't touch them inappropriately. Busfield's attorneys then accused

the boys' parents of coaching their children toward incriminating statements after the boys lost lucrative roles on the show.

But Assistant District Attorney Savannah Brandenburg-Koch has called evidence of abuse against Busfield strong and specific, with support from medical findings and the boys' therapist. She also said witnesses expressed fear about potential retaliation and professional harm.

Prosecutors have outlined what they said was grooming behavior and abuse of power by Busfield over three decades.

Each count in the indictment against Busfield carries a possible penalty of six years in prison that can be enhanced if it involves a sexual offense, according to prosecutors.

In freeing Busfield on Jan. 20, state District Court Judge David Murphy said that while the crimes Busfield is accused of inherently are dangerous and involve children, prosecutors didn't prove the public wouldn't be safe if he's released.

Busfield is best known for appearances on "The West Wing," "Field of Dreams" and "Thirtysomething."

## **Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show: Here's some things to expect and what they mean**

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — There are stages, and then there is the Super Bowl halftime show.

On Sunday, fresh off his historic win at the Grammys for his love letter to Puerto Rico, "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," Bad Bunny will once again surprise audiences with a performance that is gearing up to be a landmark moment for Latino culture.

But what can you expect from his set?

What we know

Apple Music's Zane Lowe mentioned that Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime performance is 13 minutes long during an interview with the superstar on Thursday. Historically, they run 12 to 15 minutes.

In the same conversation, Bad Bunny offered few specifics about what viewers will see Sunday.

"It's going to be a huge party," he said, playfully dodging questions about surprise guests and other details. "What people can expect from me ... I want to bring to the stage, of course, a lot of my culture. But I really don't, I don't want to give any spoilers. It's going to be fun."

Beyond that: A minute-and-a-half long trailer for the halftime show posted last month set a jovial tone for his performance. In it, Bad Bunny approaches a Flamboyán tree — more on that below — and presses play on his single "Baile Inolvidable" ("Unforgettable Dance").

The song is modern salsa, performed with students from the Escuela Libre de Música San Juan. It is a featured single from "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," an album that marries folkloric tradition in local Borinquen genres like bomba, plena, salsa and música jíbara with contemporary styles like reggaeton, trap and pop.

In the clip, Bad Bunny sways as he's joined by different dancers across genders, races and ages: Those include a traditional salsa dancer in a red dress, a firefighter, a cowboy and a viejito wearing a pava ("viejito" is an affectionate term for an older man and a "pava" is a kind of straw hat). It's representative of the superstar's international appeal; he is currently the most-streamed artist globally on Spotify.

Will Bad Bunny perform entirely in Spanish?

All of Bad Bunny's music is recorded in Spanish, so it seems like a safe bet. Were he to include English into his set, it would likely appear in a spoken interjection — or it would be featured in text.

In October, Bad Bunny hosted "Saturday Night Live" and said a few sentences in Spanish during his opening monologue. When he concluded, he joked in English, "If you didn't understand what I just said, you have four months to learn," a reference to the Super Bowl and his critics.

On Thursday, he joked that fans didn't actually need to learn Spanish to enjoy his set — but they should be prepared to dance.

What symbols can we expect?

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There's no way to know for sure, but here are a few educated guesses.

**Puerto Rican flags:** In his song "La Mudanza," Bad Bunny sings, "Aquí mataron gente por sacar la bandera / Por eso es que ahora yo la llevo donde quiera." In English: "Here they killed people for showing the flag / That's why I bring it everywhere I want now." It appears to be a reference to Law 53 of 1948, better known as the Gag Law, a ruling by the Puerto Rican Legislative Assembly which attempted to suppress the independence movement on the island and criminalized displaying the Puerto Rican flag. It was repealed in 1952. It is also one of many reasons Puerto Ricans are known for waving their flag with pride for their island.

It is almost certain the flag of Puerto Rico will appear in some form on the Super Bowl stage. But its colors are worth noting. If it is shown in red, white and blue, that is the current flag of Puerto Rico and has been since 1952. If there are flags that feature light blue, that is reflective of the Puerto Rican independence movement. A black and white version of the flag has become synonymous with Puerto Rican struggle and resiliency. And if there is a flag that more closely resembles the Dominican Republic's flag, that is the flag of the Puerto Rican mountain town Lares. It was used in the Grito de Lares, the first short revolt against Spanish rule in Puerto Rico in the 19th century.

**Puerto Rican expressions:** There may be a few Puerto Rican expressions uttered on stage, beyond just those found in Bad Bunny's music. That could be anything from "Wepa!" which is used in moments of excitement, not unlike exclaiming "Wow!" It grew in popularity after the release of Alfonso Véllez's 1974 salsa song "El Jolgorio (Wepa Wepa Wepa)." Or "Acho, PR es otra cosa," a phrase that became a fan chant during Bad Bunny's performance of "Voy a llevarte pa' PR" during his residency. It translates to "Damn, PR is something else."

**Casita:** At Bad Bunny's residency in Puerto Rico last summer, he performed across two stages. One was built to resemble a casita ("little house"), for the *pari de marquesina*, a house party. These structures are synonymous with Puerto Rico and the Caribbean at large.

**Pavas:** A symbol that is likely familiar to Bad Bunny fans everywhere, a pava is a straw hat traditionally worn by jíbaros, or Puerto Rican rural farmers. It has become a symbol of pride for the island. The singer even wore a leather version of the hat on the red carpet at the 2025 Met Gala.

**Flamboyant tree:** The second of the two stages at Bad Bunny's residency focused on showcasing the island's natural beauty with its flamboyant and plantain trees. The former are a common feature in Puerto Rican art for its flowers, most commonly seen in brilliant red, orange and yellow hues. The image of the tree evokes Puerto Rico almost as immediately as the sound of its national nocturnal residents, *el coquí* (a frog with a distinctive sing-song-y call heard only at night.)

**El Sapo Concho:** Not to be mistaken with *el coquí*, *el sapo concho* is the endangered Puerto Rican crested toad that Bad Bunny has used an animated version of in his visuals for "Debí Tirar Más Fotos."

**Traditional Puerto Rican instruments:** Because much of Bad Bunny's music pulls from *bomba* and *plena*, it is likely that a few of those traditional instruments will be on stage. Look out for a *cuatro* (a small, four-stringed guitar), *güiro/güira* (a percussive instrument made of a hollow gourd), *palitos* (also a percussive instrument resembling two long, wood sticks), *cencerro* (cow bell) and *maracas*. For the *bomba* songs, specifically, there may be a *barriel* (a barrel) and for *plena*, a *pandereta* (tambourine.)

Will there be special guests during the halftime show?

It is impossible to predict, but it would be surprising if Bad Bunny wasn't joined by other performers — particularly other giants of Latin music, and probably, other Puerto Rican performers. The band *Chuwi* joined Benito for every night of his San Juan residency; it wouldn't be out of the question to see them on stage for their collaboration, "Weltita."

Other potential guests, if the residency is a framework to follow, could include Marc Anthony, Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, Young Miko, Wisin y Yandel, Gilberto Santa Rosa and Alfonso Véllez. But the list goes on and on.

Will it be a political performance?

That is in the eye of the beholder. But there is historical precedent for it at the Super Bowl. In 2020, the

NFL asked Jennifer Lopez to cut a segment featuring children in cages during her halftime performance, a critique of U.S. immigration policies. She refused. (Bad Bunny was actually a guest performer during that halftime show, which was headlined by Lopez and Shakira.)

Last year, Kendrick Lamar's set was an artful confrontation of American history and racial dynamics through metaphor, as the actor Samuel L. Jackson, dressed as Uncle Sam, complained of a performance that was "too loud, too reckless, too ghetto" and reminded Lamar to "play the game."

Bad Bunny has never steered clear of political messaging. He has criticized President Donald Trump on everything from his hurricane response in his native Puerto Rico to his treatment of immigrants. At the Grammys Sunday, he said "ICE out" while accepting his first televised award of the night. His latest tour skipped the continental U.S.; in an interview he said it was at least partially inspired by concerns that his fans could be targeted by immigration agents.

Trump, a Republican, has said he doesn't plan to attend this year's game, unlike last year, and he has derided Bad Bunny as a "terrible choice."

## **In unusual move, Republican chairman scrutinizes companies tied to husband of Rep. Ilhan Omar**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chairman of the House Oversight Committee on Friday requested records related to firms partially owned by the husband of Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar, taking the extraordinary step of scrutinizing the spouse of a sitting House member.

Rep. James Comer, a Kentucky Republican, released a letter to Timothy Mynett, a former Democratic political consultant who is married to Omar, requesting records related to a pair of companies that had a substantial jump in value between 2023 and 2024, according to financial disclosures filed by the congresswoman.

Comer's request marked a highly unusual move by the chair of a committee with a history of taking on politically-charged investigations, but almost always focused on government officials outside of Congress. The House Ethics Committee, which is comprised of an equal number of Democrats and Republicans and tries to stay away from political fights, typically handles allegations involving lawmakers and their family members.

Yet since her 2018 election as one of the first Muslim women in the House, Omar has received nearly-constant attacks from the right. She has dismissed allegations around her finances as "misleading" and based on conspiracy theories.

A spokesperson for Omar, Jackie Rogers, said in a statement that Comer's letter was "a political stunt" and part of a campaign "meant to fundraise, not real oversight."

"This is an attempt to orchestrate a smear campaign against the congresswoman, and it is disgusting that our tax dollars are being used to malign her," Rogers added.

Comer has also displayed a willingness to push the traditional parameters of the Oversight panel. In a separate investigation into Jeffrey Epstein, he is enforcing subpoenas for depositions from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton, marking the first time a former president will be forced to appear before Congress.

In the letter to Mynett on Friday, Comer said, "There are serious public concerns about how your businesses increased so dramatically in value only a year after reporting very limited assets."

There is no evidence of wrongdoing by Omar, but President Donald Trump also said last month that the Department of Justice is looking into her finances.

In response to the president, Omar said on social media that "your support is collapsing and you're panicking," adding that "Years of 'investigations' have found nothing."

The scrutiny of Omar's finances comes from a required financial disclosure statement she filed in May last year. She reported then that two firms tied to her husband, a winery called eStCru and an investment

firm called Rose Lake Capital, had risen in value by at least \$5.9 million dollars. Lawmakers report assets within ranges of dollar figures, so it was not clear exactly how much the firms had risen in value or what ownership stake Mynett had in them.

Omar has also pointed out that her husband's reported income from the winery was between \$5,000 and \$15,000 and none from Rose Lake Capital.

## US births dropped last year, suggesting the 2024 uptick was short-lived

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. births fell a little in 2025, according to newly posted provisional data.

Slightly over 3.6 million births have been reported through birth certificates, or about 24,000 fewer than in 2024. The decline seems to confirm predictions by some experts, who doubted a slight increase in births in 2024 marked the start of an upward trend.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated its provisional birth data late last week, filling in two months of missing data and offering the first good look at last year's tally.

The posted numbers account for nearly all of the babies born in 2025, according to the CDC. Data is still being compiled and analyzed, but the final tally might only add "a few thousand additional births," said Robert Anderson, who oversees birth and death tracking at the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

Experts say people are marrying later and also worry about their ability to have the money, health insurance and other resources needed to raise children in a stable environment.

Last year, the Trump administration took steps to encourage more births, like issuing an executive order meant to expand access to and reduce costs of in vitro fertilization and backing the idea of "baby bonuses" that might encourage more couples to have kids.

So far, only the number of births are available — and not birth rates and other information that can give insights into who is having babies.

For example, although births increased in 2024 over the year before, the fertility rate actually fell, noted Karen Guzzo, a family demographer at the University of North Carolina.

The fertility rate is a statistic describing whether each generation has enough children to replace itself — about 2.1 kids per woman. It has been sliding in America for close to two decades as more women wait longer to have children or don't have kids at all.

For 2025, "I wouldn't expect birth or fertility rates to have risen; I would expect them to fall because childbearing is highly related to economic conditions and uncertainty," Guzzo said in an email.

Also, most of the births in 2025 would have been children conceived in 2024, when people were worried about affordability and political polarization, she added.

As a general trend, U.S. births and birth rates have been falling for years. They dropped in 2020, then rose for two straight years after that, an increase experts partly attributed to pregnancies put off amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

A 2% drop in 2023 put U.S. births at fewer than 3.6 million, the lowest one-year tally since 1979.

## Suicide bombing at a Shiite mosque on Islamabad's outskirts kills at least 31 and wounds scores

By MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — A suicide bomber targeted a Shiite mosque on the outskirts of Islamabad during Friday prayers, killing 31 people and wounding at least 169 others, officials said, a rare bombing in Pakistan's capital as its Western-allied government struggles to rein in a surge in militant attacks across the country.

Television footage and social media images showed police and residents transporting the wounded to nearby hospitals. Some of the wounded in the attack on the sprawling mosque of Khadija Al-Kubra were reported to be in critical condition.

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Rescuers and witnesses described a harrowing scene, with bodies and wounded lying on the mosque's carpeted floor. Hussain Shah said he was praying in the mosque courtyard when he heard a sudden, loud explosion.

"I immediately thought that some big attack had happened," he said. He then went into the mosque to utter chaos — many of the wounded were screaming and crying out for help. Shah said he counted around 30 bodies inside the mosque, while the number of the wounded appeared to be significantly higher.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the explosion, but suspicion is likely to fall on militants such as the Pakistani Taliban or the Islamic State group, which has been blamed for previous attacks on Shiite worshippers, a minority in the country. Militant groups across Pakistan often target security forces and civilians.

## A surge in militant attacks

Though attacks are not so frequent in Islamabad, Pakistan has seen a surge in militant violence in recent months, largely blamed on Baloch separatist groups and the Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, which is a separate group, but allied with Afghanistan's Taliban. A regional affiliate of the Islamic State group has also been active in the country.

In the initial aftermath of the explosion, a lower number of casualties was released, but Islamabad Deputy Commissioner Irfan Memon gave the latest tolls.

Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif wrote on X that preliminary findings suggest the suicide bomber had been on the move to and from Afghanistan. Asif said the mosque's security guards tried to intercept the suspect, who opened fire at them and then detonated his explosives among the worshippers.

The condition of the guards was not immediately known.

The Afghan Defense Ministry said Afghanistan condemned the mosque attack in Islamabad and said the Pakistani defense minister had "irresponsibly" linked the attack to Afghanistan.

Pakistan often accuses Afghanistan, where the Taliban seized power again in August 2021 as American and NATO troops were withdrawing after a 20-year war, of harboring militants and members of the Pakistani Taliban. Kabul denies the accusation.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement Friday saying that the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan condemns such attacks that violate the sanctity of sacred rituals and mosques and target worshippers and innocent people."

The attack also drew condemnation from the international community, including the United States and European Union. Condolences and condemnation also poured in from various embassies in Islamabad.

## Political and religious leaders condemn the attack

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif extended condolences to the families of the victims in separate statements and asked that all possible medical assistance be provided for those wounded.

"Targeting innocent civilians is a crime against humanity," Zardari said. "The nation stands with the affected families in this difficult time."

"Those who are responsible must be identified and punished," Sharif said. Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also condemned the attack.

Friday's attack occurred as Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who is on an official two-day visit, was attending an event with Sharif. The event in Islamabad was several miles away from the site of the explosion.

A top Shiite leader, Raja Nasir, expressed deep sorrow over the attack at Khadija Al-Kubra.

"Such a terrorist act in the federal capital is not only a serious failure in protecting human lives but also raises significant questions about the performance of the authorities and law enforcement agencies," he said and asked for people to give blood as the hospitals in Islamabad were in urgent need for blood supplies for the wounded.

It was the deadliest attack in Islamabad since 2008 when a suicide bombing targeted the Marriott Hotel in the capital, killing 63 people and wounding over 250 others. In November, a suicide bomber had struck

outside a court in Islamabad, killing 12 people.

The latest attack came nearly a week after the outlawed Baloch Liberation Army carried out multiple attacks in insurgency-hit southwestern Balochistan province, killing about 50 people.

Security forces responding to those attacks also killed more than 200 "terrorists," according to the military.

Hours after the Islamabad bombing, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif said on X that she had canceled her events at the music and kite-flying festival in the city of Lahore for Saturday. The festival, which got underway on Friday, was still expected to continue.

## **Savannah Guthrie's family renews plea to mother's kidnapper, while sheriff says they have no suspect**

By SEJAL GOVINDARAO, JACQUES BILLEAUD and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's brother on Thursday renewed the family's plea for their mother's kidnapper to contact them, hours after an Arizona sheriff said investigators don't have proof Nancy Guthrie is alive but believe "she's still out there."

"Whoever is out there holding our mother, we want to hear from you. We haven't heard anything directly," Camron Guthrie said in a video posted on social media.

"We need you to reach out and we need a way to communicate with you so we can move forward," but first the family needs to know the kidnapper has their mother, he said, echoing a statement his famous sister read the day before.

Five days into the desperate search for 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie, authorities have not identified any suspects or persons of interest, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos said.

Authorities think she was taken against her will from her home in Tucson over the weekend. DNA tests showed blood found on Guthrie's front porch was a match to her, the sheriff said.

"Right now, we believe Nancy is still out there. We want her home," Nanos said at a news conference earlier Thursday. He acknowledged, however, that authorities have no evidence she's OK.

### Demands for ransom

Investigators said they are taking seriously notes seeking ransom that were sent to some media outlets.

It's unclear if all of the notes were identical. Heith Janke, the FBI chief in Phoenix, said details included a demand for money with a Thursday evening deadline and a second deadline for Monday if the first one wasn't met. At least one note mentioned a floodlight at Guthrie's home and an Apple watch, Janke said.

"To anyone who may be involved, do the right thing. This is an 84-year-old grandma," Janke said.

At least three media organizations reported receiving purported ransom notes, which they handed over to investigators. Authorities made an arrest after one ransom note turned out to be fake, the sheriff said.

A note e-mailed Monday to the KOLD-TV newsroom in Tucson included information that only the abductor would know, anchor Mary Coleman told CNN.

"When we saw some of those details, it was clear after a couple of sentences that this might not be a hoax," she said.

The sheriff said it's possible Nancy Guthrie was targeted, but if she was, investigators don't know if that's because her daughter is one of television's most visible anchors.

Authorities say any decision on whether to fulfill ransom demands ultimately is up to the family.

A day earlier, Savannah Guthrie and her siblings released a message to her mother's kidnapper, saying they are ready to talk but want proof their mom is still alive. There's been no response to their pleas so far.

### New timeline of Guthrie's disappearance

Investigators gave a more detailed timeline from the hours after Nancy Guthrie was last seen Saturday night. She was eating dinner and playing games with family members before one of them dropped her off at her home in a upscale neighborhood that sits on hilly, desert terrain, the sheriff said.

About four hours later, just before 2 a.m. Sunday, the home's doorbell camera was disconnected, Nanos said. But Guthrie did not have an active subscription, so the doorbell company was unable to recover any

footage.

Software data recorded movement at the home minutes later, the sheriff said, acknowledging that the motion could have come from an animal.

Then at 2:28 a.m. the app on Guthrie's pacemaker was disconnected from her phone.

Search enters a fifth day

Guthrie was reported missing shortly before noon Sunday after she didn't show up at a church.

While she is able to drive and her mind is sharp, the sheriff said she has difficulty walking even short distances. She also requires daily medicine that's vital to her health, he has said.

A sheriff's dispatcher said during the search Sunday that Guthrie has high blood pressure, a pacemaker and heart issues, according to audio from broadcastify.com.

Investigators searched in and around Guthrie's home again for several hours Wednesday.

Authorities are bringing more resources and people into the investigation, and the FBI announced Thursday it was offering up to \$50,000 for information. A day earlier, President Donald Trump posted on social media that he was directing federal authorities to help where they can.

The kidnapping has attracted the attention of the American public, much like other famous abductions in U.S. history.

Savannah Guthrie's emotional plea

Savannah Guthrie has hosted "Today" — NBC's flagship morning show — for more than a decade and had been set to co-anchor the network's coverage of Friday's opening ceremony for the Winter Olympics. For now, she's staying close to her mother's home.

She joined her two siblings in an emotional plea on social media Wednesday to say they're ready to talk to whoever sent the ransom notes.

"We need to know without a doubt that she is alive and that you have her. We want to hear from you and we are ready to listen. Please reach out to us," she said while fighting off tears.

With her voice cracking, she addressed her mother directly, saying the family was praying for her and that people were looking for her. She was flanked by Camron and their sister, Annie.

"Mamma, If you're listening, we need you to come home. We miss you," Annie Guthrie said.

## In Minnesota, sending a child to school is an act of faith for immigrant families

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — In some ways, 10-year-old Giancarlo is one of the lucky ones. He still goes to school.

Each morning, he and his family bundle up and leave their Minneapolis apartment to wait for his bus. His little brother hefts on his backpack, even though he stopped going to day care weeks ago because his mom is too afraid to take him.

As they wait behind a wrought-iron fence, Giancarlo's mother pulls the boys into the shadow of a tree to pray. It's the only time she stops scanning the street for immigration agents.

"God, please protect my son when he's not at home," she says in Spanish. She spoke with The Associated Press on condition of partial anonymity for the family, because she fears being targeted by immigration authorities.

For many immigrant families in Minnesota, sending a child to school requires faith that federal immigration officers deployed around the state won't detain them. Thousands of children are staying home, often for lack of door-to-door transportation — or simply trust.

The fear has turned into reality. Many parents and some children have been detained, including 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos, who with his father, originally from Ecuador, was taken into custody in the Minneapolis suburb of Columbia Heights as he was arriving home from school. They were sent to a detention facility in Texas but returned after a judge ordered their release.

Schools, parents and community groups have mobilized to help students get to class so they can learn, socialize and have steady access to meals. And for those who are still sending their children, the trip to

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and from school is one of the only risks they are willing to take.

"I don't feel safe with him going to school," Giancarlo's mother said, shaking her head. "But every day he wakes up and wants to go. He wants to be with his friends."

School remains a haven in a time of tumult

Giancarlo's Minneapolis elementary school is the best thing going for him these days. There's soccer to play at recess. The recorder to learn. Giancarlo has set his eyes on learning the flute next year when fifth graders choose an instrument. He has "demasiado" — "too many" — best friends to name.

But his mother and brother's home confinement weighs on him. He saves half the food he gets at school breakfast and lunch to share with them, and he's lost four pounds this year. He takes extra care to bring pizza or hamburgers, treats the family used to eat in restaurants when his mom, an asylum-seeker from Latin America, was still working and they felt safe leaving the house. Giancarlo has also applied for asylum and his brother, Yair, has U.S. citizenship.

Sometimes only seven of Giancarlo's classmates show up when there should be close to 30. "The teachers cry," he said. "It's sad."

With as many as 3,000 federal officers roaming the state this year, some immigrant parents have made a bet that their children are safer riding or walking with white Minnesotans who were strangers just weeks ago — rather than in their own cars or while holding their hands.

One mother, an immigrant from Mexico, has given up her housecleaning job, and her husband stopped going to his construction job to minimize their chances of being detained. Her 10-year-old, U.S.-born daughter is the only one leaving the house, getting a ride with another student's parents to her private Christian school in Minneapolis.

"It raises my blood pressure," the mother said. She spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of being targeted by immigration authorities.

Absenteeism has soared across schools in the Twin Cities area

Under longstanding guidance that was thrown out by the Trump administration, schools and other "sensitive places" such as hospitals and churches previously were considered off-limits for Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and other immigration officials. Children, no matter their immigration status, have a constitutional right to attend public school.

This winter, school absenteeism and the demand for online learning have surged as immigration officers showed up in school parking lots.

In St. Paul, over 9,000 students were absent on Jan. 14, more than a quarter of the 33,000-student district, according to data obtained by the AP. In Fridley, a Minneapolis suburb, school attendance has dropped by nearly a third, according to a lawsuit the district filed this week trying to block immigration enforcement operations near schools.

Kids sent letters to St. Paul Superintendent Stacie Stanley begging her to offer online learning. During an interview, her voice shook as she read a letter from an elementary school student: "I don't feel safe coming to school because of ICE."

When the district introduced a temporary virtual learning option, over 3,500 students enrolled in the first 90 minutes. That number has since risen to more than 7,500 students.

An escort from school — and assurance for a small girl

After school on Wednesday, around 20 teachers and a retired principal packed into the front office at Valley View Elementary School — where Liam Conejo Ramos attends prekindergarten — for a briefing before walking home children who live nearby. School officials say several other students and over two dozen parents have been detained.

"We live in a place where ICE is everywhere," said Rene Argueta, the school's family liaison. Argueta, himself an immigrant from El Salvador, organized the teachers walking and driving students to and from their homes.

The day before, the group had run into federal officers in the neighborhood at dismissal time. Argueta felt it necessary to calm some of the teachers upset by the encounter.

"Your only goal is to bring the students home, no matter what you see," he told the group. "We don't

approach ICE. We don't take out our phones."

After distributing walkie-talkies, Argueta and two other teachers met a group of 12 kids waiting for them in the hallway. Argueta took the hand of the youngest child, a boy in prekindergarten, and led the group outside.

Toward the back of the line, second grade teacher Jenna Scott chatted with a former student, now a third grader. She tried to keep the conversation light.

"I'm so excited to see your house," Scott told her.

"Have you signed up for parent-teacher conference?"

"No, miss. ICE," the girl said.

"I know. Tell your parents you can do it online this time."

The third grader then ran to her home. Afterward, Scott said the 10-minute walk is a delicate dance. "You don't want to scare the kids, but you also want them to walk quickly."

The day before, Argueta said, they were walking the students home when they heard cars honking to warn that immigration agents were nearby. One little girl who was walking ahead started to panic and ran back toward Argueta.

"ICE viene," or "ICE is coming," she yelled.

He took her hand and kept walking. She asked if he was afraid.

No, he said.

She asked if he had papers, if he was in the country legally. Argueta has a green card and permission to work, but he lied. He told her he didn't, so she wouldn't feel alone.

Her hand relaxed in his. She smiled again.

He held her hand until they got to her doorstep and she went inside with her mother.

## Matthew Stafford edges Drake Maye for the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award

By ROB MAADDI Pro Football Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Matthew Stafford walked away with the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award and a declaration that he's returning to the Los Angeles Rams for another season.

Stafford edged Drake Maye for the MVP award on Thursday night in the closest race since Peyton Manning and Steve McNair were co-winners in 2003.

Stafford received 24 of 50 first-place votes while Maye got 23. But Maye has a chance to go home this week with a Vince Lombardi Trophy. He leads the New England Patriots against the Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl on Sunday.

Stafford, who turns 38 on Saturday, wants another opportunity to try to win his second Super Bowl ring with the Rams.

"Oh yeah, I'll be back. It was such an amazing season and I play with such a great group of guys and great group of coaches that I was lucky enough to finish this season healthy, and I wanna make sure that I go out there and see what happens next year," Stafford told the AP.

Stafford brought his four daughters — all dressed in identical black-and-white dresses — to the stage to accept the award.

He thanked his team and saved his wife and daughters for last: "You're unbelievable cheerleaders for me. I appreciate it. I am so happy to have you at the games on the sideline with me, and I can't wait for you to cheer me on next year when we're out there kicking (butt)."

It was Stafford's way of announcing he will be back next season after contemplating retirement.

Myles Garrett was a unanimous choice for the AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year award after setting a season record for sacks with 23.

All-Pro wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba beat out Christian McCaffrey for the AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year award.

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New England's Mike Vrabel beat out Jacksonville's Liam Coen for the AP NFL Coach of the Year award, becoming the seventh coach to win it with two different teams.

McCaffrey became the first running back to win the AP NFL Comeback Player of the Year award in 24 years.

Browns linebacker Carson Schwegler was a runaway winner for the AP NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year award.

Panthers wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan ran away with the AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year award.

Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels won the AP NFL Assistant Coach of the Year award in the first season of his third stint with the team.

A nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league completed voting before the playoffs began. Votes were tabulated by the accounting firm Lutz and Carr.

Voters selected a top 5 for the eight AP NFL awards. First-place votes were worth 10 points. Second-through fifth-place votes were worth 5, 3, 2 and 1 points.

Josh Allen, the 2024 NFL MVP, received two first-place MVP votes, and Justin Herbert got the other one.

Stafford, who earned first-team All-Pro honors for the first time in his 17-year career, finished with 366 points to Maye's 361. Allen placed third with 91 points, Christian McCaffrey (71) was fourth and Trevor Lawrence (49) came in fifth.

It's McCaffrey's second top-five finish in three years, more than any other non-quarterback since the weighted point system was implemented in 2022.

Stafford led the NFL with 4,707 yards passing and 46 TDs. He threw eight picks and finished second to Maye with a 109.2 passer rating. Stafford and the Los Angeles Rams lost to Seattle in the NFC championship game.

Maye had 4,394 yards passing, 31 TDs and eight picks. The second-year pro led the league in passer rating (113.5) and completion percentage (72).

Coach of the Year

Vrabel can get his first Super Bowl title as a head coach Sunday if the Patriots beat the Seahawks. He received 19 first-place votes to Coen's 16 and finished with 302 points.

Vrabel, the 2021 Coach of the Year winner with the Titans, led the Patriots from worst to first in the AFC East, a 10-win turnaround in his first season in New England.

Coen had 239 points after leading the Jacksonville Jaguars to 13 wins and an AFC South title in his first season.

Seattle's Mike Macdonald got eight first-place votes and finished third (191). Chicago's Ben Johnson received one first-place vote and came in fourth (145). San Francisco's Kyle Shanahan had six first-place votes to place fifth (140).

Defensive Player of the Year

Garrett received all 50 first-place votes to become the ninth player to win DPOY multiple times and second unanimous choice following J.J. Watt, who did it in 2014. Cleveland's edge rusher also was a unanimous All-Pro selection. Garrett previously won the award in 2023.

"It doesn't just start with me," he said. "It starts with great teammates, a great organization, great coaches being able to put us in position. I'm thankful for every single one of teammates to help get me up here. It's not possible without them."

Texans edge rusher Will Anderson Jr. finished second with 77 points, Packers edge rusher Micah Parsons came in third (63) followed by Broncos edge rusher Nik Bonitto (52) and Lions edge rusher Aidan Hutchinson (42).

Garrett surpassed both Michael Strahan (22.5) and T.J. Watt (22.5) when he sacked Joe Burrow in the final game of the regular season.

Offensive Player of the Year

Smith-Njigba got 14 first-place votes to McCaffrey's 12 and finished with 272 points. McCaffrey, who won the AP NFL Comeback Player of the Year award, had 223 points.

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Smith-Njigba caught 119 passes and led the league with 1,793 yards receiving. He had 10 TDs.

Rams wide receiver Puka Nacua, a unanimous All-Pro like Smith-Njigba, finished third with eight first-place votes and 170 points. Falcons All-Pro running back Bijan Robinson was right behind him with six first-place votes and 168 points.

**Comeback Player of the Year**

McCaffrey, San Francisco's All-Pro do-it-all back, received 31 first-place votes and 395 points, outgaining Aidan Hutchinson. Garrison Hearst was the last running back to win it in 2001.

Hutchinson got nine first-place votes and 221 points. Dak Prescott came in third with six first-place votes and 167 points. Lawrence got two first-place votes and finished fourth (130). Stefon Diggs came in fifth (40).

Philip Rivers and Chris Olave each received one first-place vote.

McCaffrey played in just four games in 2024 due to bilateral Achilles tendinitis followed by a season-ending PCL knee injury. He returned to play every game for the 49ers and had 2,126 yards from scrimmage and 17 TDs.

**Defensive Rookie of the Year**

Schwesinger received 40 first-place votes and had 441 points to become the sixth player in the last 45 seasons to win the award after not being picked in the first round. Shaq Leonard (2018) and DeMeco Ryans (2006) were the only others in the last 20 seasons. Cleveland selected Schwesinger in the second round at No. 33 overall.

Versatile Seahawks defensive back Nick Emmanwori got seven first-place votes and finished second (199).

**Offensive Rookie of the Year**

McMillan earned 41 first-place votes after catching 70 passes for 1,014 yards and seven TDs.

Saints quarterback Tyler Shough got five first-place votes and finished second with 168 points, way behind McMillan's 445.

**Assistant Coach of the Year**

McDaniels received 17 of 50 first-place votes and finished with 249 points. Broncos defensive coordinator Vance Joseph placed second with 10 first-place votes and 176 points.

## Norwegian crown princess apologizes to royals and all 'disappointed' by her Epstein contacts

OSLO, Norway (AP) — Norway's crown princess apologized on Friday for the situation she has put the royal family in as she faces scrutiny over her contacts with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, part of a broader apology for all those she has "disappointed."

Crown Princess Mette-Marit's communications and contacts with Epstein have put her in the spotlight over the past week, adding to the embarrassment to the royals just as her son went on trial in Oslo for multiple offenses, including charges of rape.

The Epstein files contained several hundred mentions of the crown princess, who said in 2019 that she regretted having had contact with Epstein, Norwegian media reported.

The documents, which include email exchanges, showed that Mette-Marit borrowed an Epstein-owned property in Palm Beach, Florida, for several days in 2013. Broadcaster NRK reported that the stay was arranged through a mutual friend, which was later confirmed by the royal household.

The royal palace said Friday that Mette-Marit wants to talk about what happened and explain herself in more detail, but is unable to at present. It added that she is in a very difficult situation and "hopes for understanding that she needs time to gather her thoughts."

It also issued a statement from the crown princess — her second in a week — in which she reiterated her deep regret for her past friendship with Epstein.

"It is important for me to apologize to all of you whom I have disappointed," she said. "Some of the content of the messages between Epstein and me does not represent the person I want to be. I also apologize for the situation I have put the Royal Family in, especially the King and Queen."

King Harald, 88, and the royals are generally popular in Norway, but the case against Mette-Marit's son, Marius Borg Høyby, has been a problem for the family's image since 2024 and the latest Epstein files have compounded that. Mette-Marit is married to Crown Prince Haakon, the heir to the throne.

The release of documents included an email from Mette-Marit to Epstein in November 2012 asking: "Is it inappropriate for a mother to suggest two naked women carrying a surfboard for my 15-year-old son's wallpaper?"

He replied, "Let them decide," and advised that the mother should, "Stay out of it."

Mette-Marit, 52, said in a statement issued shortly after the files were released that she "must take responsibility for not having investigated Epstein's background more thoroughly, and for not realizing sooner what kind of person he was." She added: "I showed poor judgment and regret having had any contact with Epstein at all. It is simply embarrassing."

The crown princess isn't the only high-profile Norwegian who faces unflattering attention stemming from the documents on millionaire financier and sex offender Epstein released by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Norwegian Economic Crime Investigation Service, a mixed unit of police and prosecutors, said Thursday that it would look into whether gifts, travel or loans were received by former Prime Minister Thorbjørn Jagland in connection with his positions.

Jagland was Norway's prime minister between 1996 and 1997. He also has chaired the Norwegian Nobel Committee and was secretary general of the Council of Europe.

The files revealed years of contact between the politician and Epstein. Emails indicate that he made plans to visit Epstein's island with his family in 2014, when he was chairman of the Nobel committee, with an Epstein assistant organizing the flights.

Norwegian authorities are also looking to lift Jagland's immunity, which he enjoys because of his past as a diplomat. His legal representative told Norwegian broadcaster NRK that Jagland is cooperating with the investigation.

The World Economic Forum also announced on Thursday that it was opening an internal review into its CEO Børge Brende to determine his relationship with Epstein, after the files indicated the two had dined together several times and exchanged messages. Brende was Norway's foreign minister from 2013-2017.

He told NRK that he is cooperating with the investigation, that he only met Epstein in business settings and that he had been unaware of Epstein's criminal background.

Epstein killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on charges that he sexually abused underage girls at his homes in the U.S.

## **UK police search two properties linked to Peter Mandelson as part of Epstein probe**

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British police on Friday searched two properties linked to ex-ambassador Peter Mandelson as part of a probe into potential misconduct stemming from his ties to the late Jeffrey Epstein.

Metropolitan Police Deputy Assistant Commissioner Hayley Sewart said that "officers from the Met's Central Specialist Crime team are in the process of carrying out search warrants at two addresses, one in the Wiltshire area, and another in the Camden area.

"The searches are related to an ongoing investigation into misconduct in public office offenses, involving a 72-year-old man."

Mandelson, 72, has homes in Wiltshire in Western England and the Camden area of London.

Two people believed to be police officers were seen entering Mandelson's London home near Regents Park on Friday afternoon.

The former Cabinet minister, ambassador and elder statesman of the governing Labour Party is being investigated for potential misconduct in public office over documents, part of a trove of Epstein files released in the United States, suggesting he passed sensitive government information to Epstein a decade

and a half ago.

In 2009, Mandelson, then the U.K. government's business secretary, sent Epstein an internal government report discussing ways the U.K. could raise money after the 2008 global financial crisis, including by selling off government assets. The following year he appeared to tip Epstein off about an imminent 500 billion euro deal to prop up the European single currency.

Mandelson has not been arrested or charged.

Misconduct in public office carries a maximum sentence of life in prison.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who fired Mandelson from his ambassadorial job over earlier revelations about his Epstein ties, is facing a political storm over his decision in 2024 to appoint him to Britain's most important diplomatic post.

Starmer's government has promised to release emails and other documentation related to Mandelson's appointment, which it says will show that Mandelson misled officials.

Starmer apologized Thursday to Epstein's victims.

"I am sorry, sorry for what was done to you, sorry that so many people with power failed you," Starmer said. "Sorry for having believed Mandelson's lies and appointed him."

## **Savannah Guthrie's demand for mom's 'proof of life' is complicated in this era of AI and deepfakes**

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and ED WHITE Associated Press

When Savannah Guthrie made a heart-wrenching plea to the kidnapper of her 84-year-old mother to send "proof of life," she addressed the possibility of people creating deepfakes.

"We live in a world where voices and images are easily manipulated," she said.

Before artificial intelligence tools proliferated — making it possible to realistically impersonate someone, in photos, sound and video — "proof of life" could simply mean sending a grainy image of a person who's been abducted.

That's no longer true.

"With AI these days you can make videos that appear to be very real. So we can't just take a video and trust that that's proof of life because of advancements in AI," Heith Janke, the FBI chief in Phoenix, said at a news conference Thursday.

Hoaxes — whether high or low-tech — have long challenged law enforcement, especially when it comes to high-profile cases such as Nancy Guthrie's disappearance last weekend from her home in the Tucson area.

As technology has advanced, criminals have grown savvy and used it to their benefit, confusing police and the public and masking their identities. The FBI in December warned that people posing as kidnapers can provide what appears to be a real photo or video of a loved one, along with demands for money.

Police have not said that they have received any deepfake images of Guthrie. At least three news organizations have reported receiving purported ransom notes that they have given to investigators, who said they are taking them seriously.

Investigators said they believe she's "still out there," but they have not identified any suspects.

Separately, a California man was charged Thursday with sending text messages to the Guthrie family seeking bitcoin after following the case on television. There's no indication that he's suspected of having a role in the disappearance, according to a court filing.

Savannah Guthrie appeared in an emotional video on Instagram, sitting between her sister and brother. Her voice cracked as she spoke directly to the kidnapper, saying the family is "ready to talk" and "ready to listen" but that they also want to know that their mother is alive. The brother, Camron Guthrie, posted a similar video on social media Thursday.

Images of Nancy Guthrie, publicly shared by family, could be used to create deepfakes, said former FBI agent Katherine Schweit.

She said ransom demands over history have evolved from phone calls and handwritten notes to email, texts and other digital tools. A century ago, ransom notes were analog. For example, when the toddler

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son of famous aviator Charles Lindbergh was kidnapped, a piece of paper demanding \$50,000 was found on a windowsill.

"Investigative techniques accumulate over time," Schweit said. "There's never less to do as years go by; there's more to do. Digital and forensic work is a perfect example. It just adds to the other shoe-leather work we would have done in years past. ... Nothing can be dismissed. Everything has to be run to ground."

Schweit said directly addressing a kidnapper, like Savannah Guthrie did in her video, is a tactical move.

"The goal is to have the family or law enforcement speak directly to the victim and the perpetrator, and ask the perpetrator: What do you need? How can we solve this? Let's move this forward," she said.

Janke suggested to reporters that the FBI may have had some influence on Guthrie's decision to release a video message.

"We have an expertise when it comes to kidnappings, and when families want advice, consultation, expertise, we will provide that," he said. "But the ultimate decisions — on what they say and how they put that out — rests with the family itself."

## Today in History: February 7

### The Beatles arrive for their first US tour

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Feb. 7, the 38th day of 2026. There are 327 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 7, 1964, the Beatles were met by thousands of screaming fans at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport as they arrived to begin their first American tour.

Also on this date:

In 1904, the Great Baltimore Fire began; one of the worst city fires in American history, it destroyed over 1,500 buildings in central Baltimore.

In 1943, the U.S. government announced that wartime rationing of shoes made of leather would soon take effect, limiting the number of pairs a person could buy each year. (Rationing was lifted in 1945 after World War II ended.)

In 1971, women in Switzerland gained the right to vote through a national referendum, 12 years after a previous attempt failed.

In 1984, space shuttle Challenger astronauts Bruce McCandless II and Robert L. Stewart went on the first untethered spacewalk.

In 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of Haiti. (He was overthrown by the military the following September.)

In 1999, Jordan's King Hussein died of cancer at age 63; he was succeeded by his eldest son, Abdullah.

In 2013, Mississippi certified its ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, making it the last state to officially abolish slavery.

In 2021, after moving south to a new team and conference, Tom Brady led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to a 31-9 Super Bowl victory over the Kansas City Chiefs on the Buccaneers' home field.

In 2023, LeBron James passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to become the NBA's all-time career scoring leader.

Today's birthdays: Author Gay Talese is 94. Sen. John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., is 74. Actor James Spader is 66. Country singer Garth Brooks is 64. Actor-comedian Eddie Izzard is 64. Actor-comedian Chris Rock is 61. Actor Essence Atkins is 54. Basketball Hall of Famer Steve Nash is 52. Actor Ashton Kutcher is 48. Actor Deborah Ann Woll is 41. NFL quarterback Matthew Stafford is 38. NHL forward Steven Stamkos is 36. Race car driver Pierre Gasly is 30. Singer Bea Miller is 27.