

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Tuesday, Feb. 10

Senior Menu: Pork loin, roasted potatoes, glazed carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.  
School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, sweet potato fries.  
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Council, potluck meal, 6 p.m.  
4th Grade Girl's Basketball, 4 p.m., elementary gym



Mobridge MS Wrestling Jamboree, 5 p.m.  
Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., elementary gym  
4th Grade BBB, 6 p.m., arena  
Boys basketball vs. Leola/Frederick at Frederick with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

## Wednesday, Feb. 11

Senior Menu: Chicken broccoli bake, mashed potatoes, Mandarin oranges, fruit.  
School Breakfast: Omelets.  
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation.  
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.  
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.  
Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.  
Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., elementary gym  
6th Grade Boys Basketball, 6 p.m., HS Gym  
3rd/4th Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m., Arena  
5th Grade BBB, 6 p.m., HS Gym  
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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.**

## Jimmy Lai Sentenced

A Hong Kong court sentenced 78-year-old media mogul Jimmy Lai yesterday to 20 years in prison. The sentence is the longest to date under Hong Kong's five-year-old national security law that critics say effectively criminalizes political dissent.

Lai founded Apple Daily, a since-shuttered prodemocracy newspaper that reached more than 3.8 million registered web users, about half of Hong Kong's population. At its height, Lai had a reported net worth of \$1.2B. In 2020, however, local authorities arrested him under a then-new national security law following antigovernment protests the year before. Lai was accused of conspiring with foreign governments and printing and distributing seditious articles. He has spent more than five years in jail, including stretches in solitary confinement.

President Donald Trump yesterday said he would speak to Chinese President Xi Jinping to encourage leniency for Lai, who has multiple chronic conditions; Trump is planning to meet with Xi in April, when they will also discuss trade issues, the war in Ukraine, and Taiwan.

## Alphabet's 100-Year Bet

Alphabet is planning to sell a rare 100-year bond as part of a broader push into global debt markets to fund its expanding investments in artificial intelligence, marking the first such offering from a tech firm since Motorola in 1997.

The Google parent raised \$20B in US bonds and, for the first time, will sell debt in the UK and Switzerland, as it is expected to spend up to \$185B this year on data centers and AI infrastructure. Bonds are loans that governments, corporations, or institutions issue to raise money without drawing from their cash reserves. Investors buy bonds in exchange for regular interest payments. Century-long corporate bonds are unusual due to acquisition risk and shifting business models.

Alphabet's sale reflects a broader trend of tech giants, including Oracle, turning to bond markets to fund AI infrastructure. Collectively, Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft forecast roughly \$650B in AI spending in 2026.

## Brain-Boosting Game

Playing a brain-training video game could protect against dementia for up to 20 years, according to a long-term study published yesterday. Researchers say the findings, based on tracking nearly 3,000 individuals ages 65 and older, offer the strongest evidence yet that cognitive training can have lasting benefits on the brain.

Participants who completed up to 23 hours of "speed training" over three years had a 25% lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia over a 20-year follow-up period, compared to a control group. The training required participants to quickly identify and respond to objects on a screen—an activity likened to noticing peripheral objects while driving. By contrast, other subsets of participants who learned memorization strategies or practiced pattern-based problem-solving saw no reduction in dementia risk.

Researchers say the speed-training game's outsized benefits may stem from its reliance on implicit learning and from its gradual increase in difficulty as participants improved.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

US women's ice hockey faces rival Canada at 2:10 pm ET today after beating Switzerland 5-0 yesterday. The US advances to curling mixed doubles final for first time since event was introduced to the Olympics in 2018.

Bad Bunny secures top six spots on Spotify's Top 50 US chart following Super Bowl LX performance. Turning Point USA's alternative halftime show with Kid Rock peaked at 6.1 million concurrent viewers on YouTube; early reports suggest Bad Bunny's show exceeded 135 million viewers.

Ferrari releases images of the interior of its first all-electric sports car; images of exterior expected in May. Cadillac's first F1 race car begins preseason testing in Bahrain tomorrow, following car reveal during Super Bowl.

## Science & Technology

New Mexico trial begins in case accusing Meta of failing to protect kids from sexual exploitation on social media apps; opening arguments begin in Los Angeles trial against Meta and Google for allegedly addicting kids to social media.

Researchers link understudied gut bacteria group to better health, finding it more prevalent in healthy people than in those with conditions like obesity and inflammatory bowel disease.

James Webb telescope data reveals massive gaseous planets form in a similar manner to smaller ones like Jupiter, challenging long-held theories about how big planets can be.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq +1.0%).

Hims & Hers shares fall 16% after Novo Nordisk sues over copycat versions of Wegovy drugs.

American YouTuber MrBeast announces Beast Industries is buying Gen Z-focused fintech app Step, which has raised roughly \$500M in funding and has over 7 million users.

Databricks raises \$5B in funding, valuing data firm at \$134B.

Retail operator of outdoor sportswear brand Eddie Bauer files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, eyes winddown of stores unless a buyer is found.

## Politics & World Affairs

Convicted sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell reportedly invokes Fifth Amendment in closed virtual House Oversight deposition; committee is investigating Maxwell's late co-conspirator Jeffrey Epstein.

Roughly 6,000 public teachers go on strike in San Francisco, the city's first walkout over wages and benefits since 1979.

New York City nurses reach tentative deal to end walkout at two hospitals, negotiations with a third remain ongoing.

The US seizes Panamanian-flagged oil tanker in the Indian Ocean after it departed the Caribbean; vessel is tied to transportation of Russian oil, per US sanctions.

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

The advertisement features a colorful illustration of a teddy bear, a baby bottle, and a stack of colorful blocks on the left, and a yellow bucket with cleaning supplies on the right. At the bottom, there is a small house and a red car on a road.

## Lady Tigers grind past Panthers, pull away for 51-28 win

The Groton Area Lady Tigers worked through another slow start before pulling away in the second half for a 51-28 non-conference victory over Great Plains Lutheran on Monday night.

Great Plains Lutheran jumped out to an early 8-4 lead, and the game was tied twice in the opening quarter before Groton rallied to take a 9-8 lead at the end of the first. The Panthers briefly regained the lead early in the second quarter at 10-9, but the Tigers responded by tying the game at 12 and 15, then closing the half on an 8-0 run to take a 27-18 halftime advantage.

Despite the lead, Groton head coach Matt Locke said the Tigers were still searching for consistency early in the game.

"I don't know what's going on with these starts," Locke said. "I felt like we started slower defensively than we did offensively again tonight. We talk about it, we emphasize it, but we haven't been able to shake it yet."

Groton took full control after halftime, dominating the third quarter 14-3 to push the lead to 41-23 entering the fourth. Locke credited defensive adjustments and improved focus for the second-half separation, including putting Taryn Trap-hagen's length on Katherine Prah.

"We didn't need to get out on her on the perimeter," Locke



**Senior Talli Wright made eight points in the fourth quarter and had five rebounds.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Senior Mia Crank reaches for the loose ball.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

said. "Once she passes it, the first thing she's going to do is basket cut. She's a give-and-go player and a big, strong kid. Putting Taryn on her made a difference in holding her down."

The Tigers finished the night 13-of-34 on two-point attempts (38%), 6-of-24 from three-point range (25%), and 7-of-16 at the free-throw line. Groton controlled the glass with 38 rebounds and added 15 assists, 10 steals, and two blocked shots, while commit-

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## Jaedyn Penning and Taryn Traphagen trap Great Plains Lutheran's Julia Prah. (Photo by

Paul Kosel)

ting just 11 turnovers.

Locke acknowledged fatigue may have played a role as the Tigers navigated a busy stretch of games.

"I thought I saw a little fatigue tonight," he said. "That Thursday, Saturday, Monday stretch can catch up with you. But it's a grind, and you've got to push through that."

Taryn Traphagen led Groton with 15 points, knocking down three three-pointers. She added four rebounds, one steal, and two blocked shots. Jayden Penning scored nine points with seven rebounds and two assists, while Rylee Dunker turned in a strong all-around performance with five points, 10 rebounds, six assists, and two steals.

McKenna Tietz contributed six points, five rebounds, two assists, and one steal, while Jerica Locke added four points, five rebounds, three assists, and two steals. Kella Tracy and Sydney Locke each scored two points, and Mia Crank recorded two assists and two steals.

Great Plains Lutheran was led by Katherine Prah with 12 points, eight of which came in the first half. Julia Prah finished with 10 points, and Emily Moritz added six points on two three-pointers. The Panthers shot 11-of-35 from the field (31%) and 4-of-8 at the free-throw line, committing 15 turnovers.

While pleased with the win, Locke said the Tigers' attention now shifts to improving practice habits ahead of a key matchup later in the week.

"We've got to come to practice with energy and focus," Locke said. "We don't need to go long, but we need productive practices. You can't have four kids doing one thing and one doing another. Whether we're right or wrong, we've got to be on the same page — because if we're not, we're all wrong."

Groton improves to 13-5 on the season and will host Mobridge-Pollock on Saturday in a doubleheader. Great Plains Lutheran falls to 7-10.

## Junior Varsity

Groton also claimed the junior varsity contest, pulling away for a 50-35 victory. The Tigers used an 8-0 run late in the first quarter to take a 12-10 lead, led 26-19 at halftime, and opened the second half with a 13-point run to go up 43-23.

Ashlynn Warrington and Kella Tracy each scored 10 points for Groton. Makenna Krause, Sydney Locke, and Tevan Hanson added six points apiece, while Taylynn Traphagen scored five and Brynlee Dunker finished with four. Evelyn Prah led the Panthers with 14 points.

**The games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy and The MeatHouse in Andover. Shane Clark did the commentary, Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera and Paul Kosel did the stats and technology. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Grandparents.**

## Ace of Hearts

The Ace of Hearts drawing was held Thursday at the Groton American Legion with the jackpot growing to \$23,800. Ticket sales for the week were \$1,305. Kevin Krueger's card was drawn. He picked card number 17 which was the five of clubs. He won \$130. Week number 29 drawing will be held Thursday. You can get your tickets from PaperPaul or at the Groton Legion.



## Assessing gubernatorial property tax proposals

By Alexander Rifaat, South Dakota News Watch

PIERRE, S.D. – Sen. Sue Peterson, chair of the Senate Taxation Committee, summed up what others on the panel seemed to think in rejecting a proposed state sales tax increase in exchange for a reduction in local property taxes.

“I do have concerns that we’re trying to do too much all at once,” said the Sioux Falls Republican.

The failed proposal, Senate Bill 99, tabled by Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, would have increased the sales tax to 6.2% and use the receipts to create a local replacement fund to lower property taxes.

In order to combat the “regressive nature” of the measure, as the Pierre Republican himself put it, groceries would be exempted from the sales tax.

The idea was one of more than two dozen floated as a potential solution to skyrocketing property taxes that has been driven in large part by a 26% increase in the median home price in the state over the past five years.

And while lawmakers seem to agree something needs to be done, there is little agreement on a solution.

### Gubernatorial candidates weigh in amid legislative impasse

Sen. Casey Crabtree, who is running for South Dakota’s at-large seat in Congress, joined other Senate colleagues in commending Mehlhaff for “coming up with a bold plan” to address the property tax issue.

But he cautioned against repeating the gung-ho nature of another property tax bill passed in last year’s legislative session, referring to Senate Bill 216, which capped local municipalities’ ability to use property tax revenues at 3%. That measure has since been blamed for severely limiting the ability of growing cities to pay for essential infrastructure improvements and local services.

“We got plenty of eyes on it (Senate Bill 216), plenty of proponents, and we’re back here in nine months making the adjustment because the legislative body missed something on that and ended up having an unintended consequence,” Crabtree said.

In the same Senate Taxation Committee hearing as Mehlhaff’s proposal, Sen. Randy Deibert, a Spearfish Republican, introduced Senate Bill 97, which increases that cap to 5%. It passed 6-1.

Looming over the property tax reform debate is the hotly contested race to secure the Republican nomination for governor.

With each candidate coming out with their own property tax proposal in an effort to claim the mantle, what lawmakers ultimately decide in the halls of the state Capitol will reverberate across South Dakota as a pivotal primary awaits in June.

News Watch broke down the various proposals and spoke with tax policy watchers to get a sense of the challenges and opportunities of the ideas being floated.

### Rhoden: Let counties decide

Gov. Larry Rhoden, the incumbent, has proposed allowing individual counties the option to decide to replace property taxes with a half-cent sales tax increase.

A county could vote to adopt the measure or hold a referendum. The Union Center rancher has argued his plan is more equitable as it would allow counties that generate more foot traffic, and therefore typically hold higher property values, the opportunity to see a decrease in their property tax bill.

On a philosophical level, Rhoden has sought to portray the proposal, which is set to be introduced in the Legislature, as the one closest to classical Republican small government ideals compared to his GOP challengers.

“It’s government at its best, government close to its people. It’s up to those individual counties and the people in those counties to decide, and we left as much flexibility of that as we could,” Rhoden said at a

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press conference laying out his legislative agenda last month.

## **Johnson: Relief for homeowners**

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, South Dakota's lone representative in Congress, announced a plan that would allow first time homebuyers to be exempt from paying property taxes for two years and provide a \$400 property tax credit to owner-occupied properties using funds from a planned increase in the statewide sales tax, which is set to rise from 4.2% to 4.5% next year.

Johnson argues Rhoden's plan, rather than being equitable, increases inequalities by favoring more prosperous counties instead of providing a uniform statewide solution.

"The governor's proposal is just a huge transfer of wealth from rural South Dakota into our biggest cities. That is not what South Dakota needs right now. My plan helps everyone, brings the American dream closer to reach for new homeowners, and is fully paid for – without any gimmicks," Johnson said in a statement to News Watch.

## **Doeden: Eliminate all property taxes**

Toby Doeden, an Aberdeen businessman, has a more direct plan: eliminate all property taxes in South Dakota.

Doeden has suggested a consumption tax targeting "luxury items" could be used to replace property taxes, although it is unclear if the revenue from such a tax would fill the estimated \$1.8 billion budget hole that would be created if such a move were to materialize.

Similar to the proposal put forth by Mehlhaff, he also said that any consumption tax would exclude grocery items to help relieve lower-income households.

"Larry Rhoden and Dusty Johnson are career politicians in favor of raising sales tax across the board. This only further harms South Dakota families who are already struggling the most," Doeden said.

He also said he'd like to make the 4.2% sales tax, which was originally enacted under former governor and current Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, permanent.

"My plan codifies the Noem tax cuts, eliminates taxes on groceries and baby items, reduces wasteful spending, and most importantly, eliminates property taxes for South Dakota residents," Doeden said.

Noticeable in Doeden's comment was his lack of acknowledgement of the fourth Republican in the gubernatorial race, South Dakota House Speaker Jon Hansen.

Hansen has yet to come out with a formal plan but has accused Johnson of co-opting a proposal on property taxes he put out last year as part of a legislative task force.

## **Sales taxes more volatile than property**

Tax policy observers on both sides of the political aisle cautioned about the history of substituting property taxes for more sales taxes on grounds it would add fiscal uncertainty for municipalities and greater economic inequality statewide.

"The challenge with using a sales tax to replace property taxes is that sales taxes are much more volatile sources of revenue," Rita Jefferson of the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a left-leaning think tank, told News Watch. "Sales taxes go up and down with the economy. If there's a recession, sales tax receipts will decline."

She said Gov. Rhoden's proposal was "less worrisome" since it would give counties the authority to decide whether to replace property taxes but added any initial revenue estimates should be taken with a pinch of salt.

"Even if they could predict how much a half-cent sales tax could bring in, I don't think it would actually cut down the entire cost of running the county," she said.

Rhoden is bullish on the potential revenue generation of his plan. According to data obtained by News Watch, the governor's office estimates his proposal would eliminate, on a statewide average, 90% of the county share of property tax revenue in order to lower owner occupied taxes.

## **Comparison to California's Prop 13**

Jefferson cited the property tax debate in California in the 1970s as an example of the pitfalls of trading lower property taxes for a more robust sales tax regime.

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In 1978, amid a backlash toward surging property taxes brought on by inflation, Californians passed Proposition 13, which capped property taxes at 1% of assessed value and limited annual assessment increases to 2%. The measure also stipulated that a reassessment of the tax for a certain property can only be made if there is a change in ownership or if new construction occurred.

While ostensibly meant to relieve homeowners, the law has been cited as a major factor behind California's housing crisis as it disincentivizes home ownership mobility and encourages maintenance delays on infrastructure projects, given a reduction in local funds. All the while, California today has the highest state sales tax rate in the country, at 7.25%.

Ironically, given Rep. Johnson's claim that Rhoden's plan would unevenly redistribute wealth to richer counties, Jefferson is also skeptical of the congressman's plan, since the beneficiaries of any property tax exemptions and credits would likely be concentrated in areas already experiencing rapid development.

"The places that are going to see this benefit are going to be places that will have faster property growth, higher value homes, higher value commercial properties, and not in places where people are struggling," she said.

## Reduced government accountability with sales taxes

Abir Mandal of the Tax Foundation, a right-leaning research outfit, agrees with Jefferson that sales taxes are less predictable and more unevenly distributed than property taxes, while adding it could leave the door open to a decline in government accountability.

"Replacing property taxes with consumption taxes will hide the true cost of local government from taxpayers because they will no longer be getting the very transparent property tax bill that is sent out each year detailing all levies and the services that they go towards," Mandal told News Watch. "This may actually increase local costs instead of decreasing them."

He pointed out that South Dakota counties are already bound by certain levy restrictions on property taxes and that a possible way to reduce the burden for homeowners could be expanding those restrictions to include school districts, which are currently exempt.

*South Dakota News Watch is an independent nonprofit. Read, donate and subscribe for free at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org). Contact politics and statehouse reporter Alexander Rifaat: 605-736-4396/ [alexander.rifaat@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:alexander.rifaat@sdnewswatch.org).*



## Recycling Trailer returns!

**After a long drought of no recycling trailer, Heartland Sanitation of Mobridge brought over a recycling trailer on Monday. It is located in the same place as the old one, just west of the city shop.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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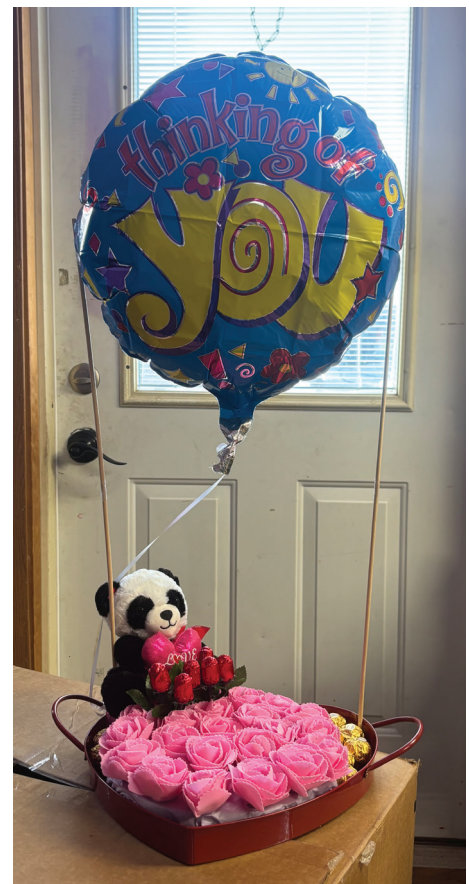
**Hersheys cake with strawberry drops and mini Hersheys on top  
\$40.00**



**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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Tonka truck basket \$50.00



Just because or thinking of you Basket \$40.00

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## Gov. Rhoden Signs Bills to Strengthen EMS

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Larry Rhoden signed two bills to strengthen South Dakota’s emergency medical systems (EMS).

“Keeping South Dakotans safe is my number one priority, and EMS teams are on the front lines those efforts,” said Governor Larry Rhoden. “These bills give EMS professionals the protections and support they need to respond quickly and effectively – and they give South Dakotans peace of mind knowing help is always within reach.”

The following two bills were signed into law. You can click on the bill number to get more information.

[HB 1023](#) establishes requirements and liability protection for registered nurses and licensed practical nurses serving on ambulance crews; and

[HB 1024](#) modifies requirements for ambulance operators.

These bills were signed at a signing ceremony with the prime sponsor, members of the Emergency Medical Services Interim Committee, and other stakeholders.



on

## Boys Varsity

Groton Area

vs Leola/Frederick

at Frederick

Tues, Feb. 10, 2026, 8 p.m.



Groton  
Area  
Tigers  
Groton, SD

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Governor signs two bills that could boost emergency medical staffing

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

A pair of bills aimed at strengthening emergency medical services in South Dakota earned Gov. Larry Rhoden's approval on Monday.

Rhoden said in a statement that "EMS teams are on the front lines" of efforts to keep South Dakotans safe.

"These bills give EMS professionals the protections and support they need to respond quickly and effectively — and they give South Dakotans peace of mind knowing help is always within reach," Rhoden said.

The Legislature passed both bills last month. The first bill protects registered nurses and licensed practical nurses who provide care in the back of an ambulance. It clarifies civil liability protections for nurses in an emergency situation, according to Linda Young, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Nursing.

"Nurses have been providing emergency services throughout many, many, many years, in emergency rooms, on air ambulances," Young said in a January committee hearing. "This bill really does allow them greater flexibility to allow for those nurses to provide care on a ground ambulance."

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Tim Walburg, R-Madison, said it also improves the continuum of care for people in rural areas, where nurses take on a variety of responsibilities.

Walburg also sponsored the second bill, which adds firefighters and law enforcement officers to the statutory definition of "ambulance operator," and gives local officials more deciding power in who can drive an ambulance. Law enforcement officers and firefighters would be able to drive an ambulance as long as they complete training and CPR certification.

In a January committee hearing, Rep. Eric Emery, D-Rosebud, expressed support for the legislation. Emery, a paramedic, said first responders should work in a collaborative environment, especially in rural areas.

"Firefighters and law enforcement officers, we work all together, hand in hand," Emery said. "It'll put a lot of people within the EMS community here in South Dakota at ease and hopefully bring back a lot of those volunteers that had left."

*Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.*



**South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden signs House Bills 1023 and 1024, which are intended to strengthen emergency medical staffing, at a signing ceremony with Rep. Tim Walburg, R-Madison, members of the Emergency Medical Services Interim Committee and others on Feb. 9, 2026, at the Capitol in Pierre.** (Courtesy

of the Governor's Office)

## Leader of South Dakota Democratic Party announces his campaign for governor

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF

Dan Ahlers, the executive director of the South Dakota Democratic Party, said Monday that he plans to run for governor.

Ahlers said in a news release that he'll formally launch his campaign at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Siouxland Downtown Library in Sioux Falls.

"As governor, I'll bring the same determination I've used my entire career looking for common ground, respecting differences and delivering results," Ahlers said in the release. "South Dakota works best when we work together."

Ahlers said he has experience running a small business. He also served six years in the Legislature, 12 years as president and interim administrator of the Dell Rapids Chamber of Commerce, and 11 years as president of the Haven before- and afterschool program. He was South Dakota's Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in 2020, when he lost to incumbent Republican Sen. Mike Rounds.

Other potential Democratic candidates for governor this year are Robert Arnold, a college student from Pierre who announced during the summer that he intends to seek the Democratic nomination, and Anthony Sitter of Aberdeen, who has formed an "Anthony Sitter for Governor" campaign finance committee.

Prospective Democratic candidates have until the end of March to collect the required 1,232 nominating petition signatures from registered South Dakota voters to earn a place on the ballot. If multiple candidates gather enough signatures, they'll face off in the June 2 primary election to determine the party's nominee. The general election is Nov. 3.

Four Republicans have declared their campaigns for that party's nomination for governor: Gov. Larry Rhoden, U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden and state House Speaker Jon Hansen.

Allison Renville, a community activist and member of the Native American tribe known as the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, announced in October that she plans to run as an independent.

Republicans have won every election for governor in South Dakota since 1978.



**Dan Ahlers, the executive directors of the South Dakota Democratic Party, said Monday that he plans to run for governor.** (Courtesy of

South Dakota Democratic Party)

## Trump shuts out Democratic governors from traditional White House gatherings

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump decided to exclude Democratic governors from a traditional annual meeting at the White House and to disinvite several others from a black-tie dinner, according to the White House, the governors and the National Governors Association.

The National Governors Association organizes the bipartisan winter gathering that usually includes a working meeting with the U.S. president and a major dinner at the White House. Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican, serves as current chair of the association, and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat, is vice chair.

The governors' visit to the nation's capital comes amid rising tensions over Trump's deployment of the National Guard and surge of federal immigration border patrol agents into Democratic-led states, including California, Illinois, Minnesota and Oregon.



**President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump arrive for the National Governors Association Evening Dinner and Reception in the East Room of the White House on Feb. 22, 2025 in Washington, D.C. Trump hosted the governors in Washington for the annual National Governors Association meetings.** (Photo by Tierney L. Cross/Getty Images)

### Moore: 'blatant disrespect'

Moore issued a statement Sunday that he was "uninvited" from the dinner, adding that the decision was "especially confounding" given that he was among a bipartisan group of governors at the White House in recent weeks to discuss lower energy costs.

"My peers, both Democrats and Republicans, selected me to serve as the Vice Chair of the NGA, another reason why it's hard not to see this decision as another example of blatant disrespect and a snub to the spirit of bipartisan federal-state partnership," Moore said. "As the nation's only Black governor, I can't ignore that being singled out for exclusion from this bipartisan tradition carries an added weight — whether that was the intent or not."

Moore's exclusion also comes on the heels of Trump's posting of a racist video Friday depicting former President Barack Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama as apes. Trump deleted the post following loud disapproval that included criticism from his own party but has declined to apologize.

The offices of Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz did not immediately respond for comment. Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek decided "some time ago" not to attend the event so that she could be in her state during the legislative session, according to spokesperson Elisabeth Shepard.

Moore added: "As Governor of Maryland and Vice Chair of the NGA, my approach will never change: I'm ready to work with the administration anywhere we can deliver results. Yet, I promised the people of my state I will work with anybody but will bow down to nobody. And I guess the President doesn't like that."

The office of Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, learned Friday about the exclusion of Democratic

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governors and similarly issued a statement of concern.

"Gov. Polis has always been willing to work with anyone across the political spectrum who wants to help work on the hardest problems facing Colorado and America, regardless of party or who occupies the White House. This is a disappointing decision for a traditionally bipartisan event between governors and whom-ever occupies the White House," according to a statement from his office emailed to States Newsroom.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom's office confirmed Monday he had also been uninvited.

## **'Many Democrats' invited, but not all**

A White House official on Monday confirmed Trump's exclusion of some Democratic governors from the annual dinner.

"Many Democrats were invited to dinner at the White House, and others were not. These are White House events and the President reserves the right to invite whomever he wants," the official told States Newsroom in an emailed statement.

Brandon Tatum, the National Governors Association's acting executive director and CEO, said, "The bipartisan White House governors meeting is an important tradition, and we are disappointed in the administration's decision to make it a partisan occasion this year."

"To disinvite individual governors to the White House sessions undermines an important opportunity for federal-state collaboration. At this moment in our nation's history, it is critical that institutions continue to stand for unity, dignity, and constructive engagement. NGA will remain focused on serving all governors as they deliver solutions and model leadership for the American people. Traditionally the White House has played a role in fostering these moments during NGA's annual meeting. This year, they will not," Tatum said in a statement.

This year's meeting follows a tense exchange during the 2025 gathering between Maine Gov. Janet Mills, a Democrat, and Trump, who threatened to withhold all federal funding from the state unless Mills complied with the president's executive order to ban transgender athletes from women's sports.

The association's 2026 meeting is scheduled for Feb. 19-21. The gathering will include "special guests and national experts for solutions-driven conversations on pressing national issues including education, energy, economic growth, artificial intelligence and more," according to the association website.

*Julia Shumway contributed to this report.*

*Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.*

## In the next decade, states will see a surge in obesity

BY: NADA HASSANEIN



**Robert F. Kennedy Jr. promotes “real food” at a rally in Harrisburg, Penn., last month. Over the next decade, obesity rates across the nation could surge to close to half of U.S. adults, a new study says.** (Photo by Whitney Downard/

Pennsylvania Capital-Star)

Over the next decade, obesity rates across the nation could surge to close to half of U.S. adults, a new study published in the medical journal JAMA estimates.

Researchers at the University of Washington conducted the analysis using body mass index data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and self-reported weight data from a national survey of adults ages 20 and older. They examined the 2022 rates and created estimates for 2035 based on current trends. The researchers also looked at race, ethnicity and state-level data, finding wide disparities across states and racial groups.

About a fifth of U.S. adults were living with obesity in 1990. By 2022, the percentage increased to nearly 43%. Obesity was more prevalent in states in the Midwest and South.

If current trends continue, about 47% of U.S. adults will be living with obesity by 2035, according to the researchers. Obesity rates are projected to increase among Americans of all ages and racial groups.

In 2022, non-Hispanic Black women had the highest age-standardized obesity rate, at about 57%, followed by Hispanic women at 49%. Hispanic males, non-Hispanic white males and females, and non-Hispanic Black males had similar rates, ranging from about 40% to nearly 43%.

The study comes amid exploding demand for weight-loss drugs, and as U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. continues to push his Make America Healthy Again campaign.

HHS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture last month made changes to the federal food pyramid, placing a greater emphasis on animal protein, dairy and fats. Like the previous guidelines, the new pyramid discourages the consumption of processed foods, which can cause weight gain.

Despite disparities between men and women and between racial groups, HHS says its nutrition strategy moves away from the “health equity” focus of the Biden administration, in favor of making “the health of all Americans the primary goal.”

For Hispanic people, obesity rates were generally higher in states in the Midwest and the South in 2022, a pattern that is expected to continue through 2035.

In 2022, the obesity rate for Hispanic women was highest in Oklahoma, at about 54%. For Hispanic men, the rate was highest in Indiana, at roughly 47%. In 2035, Indiana is projected to have the highest rate of obesity among Hispanic men at about 54%, while the highest rate for Hispanic women, nearly 60%, is expected to be in South Dakota.

The Midwest and South also had high rates of obesity for non-Hispanic white men and women. In 2022, West Virginia had the highest obesity rates for white men and women — about 47% and 49%, respectively. In 2022, obesity rates for white men and women were lowest in the District of Columbia, at roughly 24% for men and 26% for women.

Among Black women, obesity rates were over 50% for all states, except Hawaii, in 2022. That pattern is expected to continue through 2035. Black men have lower obesity rates than Black women across all states. In 2022, the highest obesity rate for Black men was in Oklahoma, at about 44%. That rate projected to rise to 49% in 2035.

“While no locations were predicted to have decreases in obesity prevalence between 2022 and 2035,

there were many with small increases over this time,” the authors wrote. They pointed to Mississippi, where Black women had the highest obesity rates between 1990 and 2022, but are projected to see one of the smallest changes — an increase of about 1.8% — by 2035.

“Predictions in states with historically high levels of obesity, such as Mississippi, suggest that the prevalence of obesity may be plateauing in some locations,” the researchers wrote.

*Stateline reporter Nada Hassanein can be reached at [nhassanein@stateline.org](mailto:nhassanein@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.*

*Nada Hassanein is a health care reporter for Stateline with a focus on inequities.*

## Breast cancer survival rates higher in Medicaid expansion states, study finds

Hispanic women saw the biggest benefits of coverage

BY: NADA HASSANEIN

Women with breast cancer living in states that expanded Medicaid eligibility were less likely to die from the disease — but not everyone benefited equally, according to a recent study published in the medical journal JAMA Network Open.

Researchers from Howard University, the University of Alabama, Henry Ford Hospital in Michigan, and others looked at data from about 1.6 million women ages 40 to 64 who were diagnosed with breast cancer between 2006 and 2021.

They compared survival rates among women living in states that expanded Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare, with the rates in states that did not expand. About 58% of the women lived in expansion states, and roughly 42% lived in nonexpansion states. States began expanding Medicaid in 2014.

The researchers found that Medicaid expansion was associated with lower overall mortality — no matter the disease stage, race or ethnicity, or neighborhood income of the women. Women in expansion states whose cancer had spread to other organs — the most advanced stage of disease — saw the most significant decline in deaths.

Among racial and ethnic groups, the largest relative gains were among Hispanic women — they were 19% less likely to die if they lived in an expansion state. There were smaller gains among non-Hispanic Black women and residents of low-income areas. The smallest difference was among white women.

Hispanic women’s large gains could be due to many previously lacking insurance, said Dr. Oluwasegun Akinyemi, senior research fellow at the Howard University College of Medicine’s Clive O. Callender Outcomes Research Center and a coauthor of the study.



**Roger Williams Medical Center in Providence, R.I. A new study shows that women with breast cancer living in Rhode Island and other states that expanded Medicaid eligibility were less likely to die from the disease.** (Photo by

Michael Salerno/Rhode Island Current)

Black women have higher breast cancer death rates compared to white women, even though there are fewer cases among them, partly because they are often diagnosed with the disease at a later stage.

Overall, Black women with breast cancer benefitted less from Medicaid expansion than other groups because they are disproportionately located in the South, where most states have not expanded, Akinyemi noted. The expansion holdout states include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

The remaining three nonexpansion states are Kansas, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

The researchers also compared mortality rates in low- and high-income neighborhoods. Women living in the highest-income neighborhoods, as well as those who received immunotherapy treatment, had lower mortality rates. Akinyemi said that result suggests that coverage leads to greater access to treatment.

In July, President Donald Trump signed a broad tax and spending bill that will cut federal Medicaid funding by more than \$900 billion over the next decade. As a result, about 15 million people may lose Medicaid coverage, according to estimates by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

*Editor's Note: Because of inaccurate information provided to Stateline, an earlier version of this story misstated the position of Dr. Oluwasegun Akinyemi. Stateline reporter Nada Hassanein can be reached at nhassanein@stateline.org.*

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*Nada Hassanein is a health care reporter for Stateline with a focus on inequities.*

## Governor vetoes bill that would ban lab-grown meat, but says he'd support a moratorium

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN



**South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden speaks to the media on Feb. 5, 2026, at the state Capitol in Pierre.** (Photo by Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

Searchlight)

PIERRE — Gov. Larry Rhoden vetoed a bill Monday that would effectively ban lab-grown meat in South Dakota, but also suggested a moratorium on the products as a compromise approach.

The vetoed bill is sponsored by Lesterville Republican Rep. Julie Auch, who proposed the legislation with concern for what she called “the takeover of the livestock industry here in South Dakota.” The bill would add lab-grown meat to a list of adulterated foods in state law.

The bill was supported 45-22 in the state House and 18-16 in the state Senate. It’s Rhoden’s first veto of the current legislative session, and overriding it would require a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

Opponents of the bill raised concern about opening the state up to lawsuits, similar to ones filed against state bans in Florida and Texas. Others, like Rhoden, worry about disrupting the free market.

“While you won’t catch me eating these products, it is against our values to ban products just because we don’t like them,” Rhoden said in a statement Monday. “Government is best when it is limited. We should respect the freedoms of our people, and we should not set precedent that violates our own values.”

In place of Auch’s bill, Rhoden suggested amendments to a state Senate bill, which is sponsored by Bonesteel Republican Mykala Voita and has not yet had a hearing. In its current form, the bill would place a 10-year ban on the manufacture, sale and distribution of lab-grown meat in the state.

Rhoden said he would support amending the bill to a five-year moratorium, “to permit further study

within the existing regulatory framework and allow the pending litigation in other states to further unfold.”

Voita is open to working with the governor.

“I don’t agree with the decision that the governor made, but we’re appreciative that he was willing to work with us to at least get something across the finish line,” said Voita, who voted in favor of Auch’s bill.

Auch said she’s disappointed in the veto but is hopeful the compromise bill will pass.

“A compromise is better than nothing,” she said.

The South Dakota Cattlemen’s Association, South Dakota Retailers Association and South Dakota Farm Bureau all support the veto, according to letters Rhoden released Monday.

Rhoden and legislators adopted a law last year 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.

*Meghan O’Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She’s previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.*

## State House panel endorses bill to bar jail time for inability to pay sobriety program fees

**Settlement in class action lawsuit causes some lawmakers to switch positions on issue**

BY: JOHN HULT

A bill that would bar the practice of jailing people who can’t afford to pay sobriety program fees sailed through a South Dakota House of Representatives panel Monday morning at the Capitol in Pierre.

All 12 members of the House Judiciary Committee present for the meeting — including some lawmakers who’d opposed an earlier effort to ban the practice — endorsed House Bill 1176.

The 24-7 sobriety program lets people charged for alcohol- or drug-related offenses, often repeat drunken driving, leave jail as they await trial on the condition they submit to and pay for frequent testing to prove their sobriety.

Those who fail a test can be immediately jailed, after which they can see a judge to request another chance on the program.

It’s unconstitutional to jail people for debt in the U.S. The former state attorney general who pioneered the 24-7 program told South Dakota Searchlight in December that he always instructed the sheriffs who operate it not to incarcerate participants for failure to pay, based on those constitutional concerns.

But some participants have been jailed for nonpayment alone.

Last year, a group of them signed a settlement with Pennington County to settle a lawsuit over the practice. The county agreed to pay the primary defendant, Ricky Lee Lookingback, \$10,000 in damages, and to pay \$1,000 apiece to another 37 people who’d been jailed for their inability to pay.



**Rep. Peri Pourier, R-Rapid City, speaks on the South Dakota House floor during the 2025 legislative session at the Capitol in Pierre.** (Photo

by John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

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The settlement dictates that no one can be jailed or threatened with jail time for an inability to pay. A federal judge has yet to approve the final settlement, but Lookingback, the lawyer for the class, and the county have all signed the agreement.

A South Dakota Searchlight story on the settlement inspired Rep. Peri Pourier to file the bill. The Rapid City Republican said reading the story reminded her that the issue isn't new to the Legislature.

In 2022, a bill to bar detention for an inability to pay cleared the House of Representatives and the Senate Judiciary Committee, but failed by one vote in the Senate.

"I took the bill that went through in 2022 and introduced it" with some final revisions from the state's Legislative Research Council, she said.

This year's bill aligns state law "with clear U.S. Supreme Court precedent that prohibits jailing people solely because they are poor," Pourier said.

Her bill specifies that "no defendant may be jailed, nor a defendant's bond or pre-trial release revoked, for failure to pay the costs and expenses of the program, unless the court finds the defendant has the present and continued ability to pay the costs and expenses of the program."

In practice, a judge would need to hold a hearing to determine if a participant has the means to pay program fees and willfully refused to do so before jailing a person who shows up sober for testing and does not pay. The unpaid fees could be logged for payment at a later date.

Representatives for South Dakota defense attorneys and trial lawyers, as well as a lobbyist for the South Dakota Network Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault, testified in support of the bill.

In 2022, several opponents from law enforcement, including representatives from the Attorney General's Office, testified against the change. Pourier's bill received no opposition testimony Monday.

"I think these court cases have significantly changed the way that the 24-7 program operates in the state of South Dakota," said Rep. Mary Fitzgerald, R-Saint Onge, who voted against the 2022 version of the bill. "I guess this will just put into statute what the state is already doing now, after these court decisions."

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, also voted against the 2022 bill. On Monday, he said he'd reviewed Supreme Court cases on the issue of jailing the indigent and took note of who wasn't present for Monday's hearing.

"I didn't hear the attorney general in here saying, 'No, no, you're reading it wrong, this is going to let people walk easier.' I didn't hear the state's attorneys in here saying, 'don't do this,' and I didn't hear the sheriffs in here saying, 'don't do this,'" Mortenson said.

After the committee vote, Chairman Mike Stevens, a Yankton Republican, certified the legislation for inclusion on the House of Representatives consent calendar. The House votes on such bills in bulk and only debates them if a member requests a discussion.

*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.*

## Excess school taxes and minimum state funding: Lawmakers move education funding bills forward

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER



**Sen. Sue Peterson, R-Sioux Falls, speaks to the Senate State Affairs Committee on Feb. 9, 2026, at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.** (Photo by Makenzie Huber/

South Dakota Searchlight)

at least 5% of registered voters in the district.

That is “unattainable” for some school districts, Peterson said.

The new bill would lower the signature threshold to 5% of the last school district election’s voter turnout or 50 signatures, whichever is greater, and extend the circulation period to 40 days. That would align with referral requirements for statewide issues.

“The referral process is meant to ensure that citizens are part of the process, not excluded from it,” Peterson said.

An attempt last year to refer the Sioux Falls School Board’s \$2.1 million opt-out decision required 5,490 signatures. Petitioners collected 2,302 signatures.

Peterson’s bill could drop the number of required signatures to refer an opt-out in Sioux Falls down to 148, given the 2.33% voter turnout in the 2025 school board election. The district’s future elections will have to be held during the June primary or November general elections, due to a law the Legislature passed last year mandating local election dates, which could result in higher turnout than past elections held on standalone dates.

Opponents of the bill included education lobbyists and members of the Sioux Falls and Rapid City school boards, saying that the change would erode the purpose of electing school board members to make decisions for district residents.

The bill now heads to the Senate floor.

### **Mandatory funding increase bill advances**

Another education funding discussion will continue after the House Education Committee on Monday advanced without recommendation a bill that would require state education funding increases to match or outpace inflation, with a floor of 3%. The committee voted 8-6 to move the bill to the House Appropriations Committee, which is one of the Legislature’s budget panels.

PIERRE — An attempt to make it easier to refer excess school property taxes to voters passed the South Dakota Senate State Affairs Committee with a 6-3 vote on Monday at the Capitol.

Senate Bill 223, introduced by Sen. Sue Peterson, R-Sioux Falls, targets decisions by school districts to “opt out” of property tax limitations imposed by the state, in order to raise more revenue.

Peterson originally introduced a bill to require elections for schools to exceed property tax limits. That bill failed in the House on a 29-39 vote last week.

Peterson’s second attempt targets the number of petition signatures needed to refer an opt-out to a vote and the length of time petitioners can gather signatures.

Local residents can already petition a board’s opt-out decision to a public vote. They have 20 days to collect signatures from

South Dakota's current law requires an annual increase of 3% or inflation, whichever is less — an amount described as the "index factor." Public education in South Dakota is funded not only by the state but also by local property taxes.

Rep. Nicole Uhre-Balk, D-Rapid City, introduced the bill to set 3% "as the floor, rather than the ceiling" by changing the language to "whatever is greater." The change would help school districts keep pace with inflation and would prevent cost shifts onto local taxpayers from higher property taxes, she told lawmakers.

"Keeping the law the way it is now will guarantee cuts to education that will never keep up with inflation and will always underfund our ability to keep up with target teacher pay," Uhre-Balk said.

Gov. Larry Rhoden recommended flat state funding for school districts in the next state budget, despite the law. Lawmakers regularly adjust the law each year to increase funding above or below the index factor.

Grant Judson, with the state Bureau of Finance and Management, told lawmakers the change would "create an expectation we can't guarantee" because funding changes each year based on revenues.

*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.*

## Lawmakers endorse 'principles' on tribal consultation but punt on required meetings, documentation

BY: JOHN HULT

South Dakota officials should talk to tribal leaders more often, but lawmakers aren't prepared to make them.

That was the message from two bills — one that passed, one that didn't — considered Monday morning in Pierre by the House of Representatives' State Affairs Committee.

The winning proposal, House Bill 1232, is a policy statement that says South Dakota "recognizes" the importance of accountability, cooperation, collaboration, and early and regular communication with tribes when its state agencies develop or administer programs "that have the potential of affecting tribal members." The agencies should also understand and respect tribal sovereignty, the legislation says, and "the government-to-government relationship between the state and each tribe."

The bill came from Rapid City Republican Rep. Peri Pourier, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

Some of her bill's language, such as its requirement that state agencies document their consideration of its principles, was removed before its passage on a 12-0 vote.

Initially, the bill said agencies "shall recognize" the principles.

"We wanted these to be guiding principles and not necessarily be construed as some sort of mandate that could potentially spin up litigation," said Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids.

The committee first heard the bill earlier, but held back its vote until Monday. Pourier thanked Hansen



**Rep. Peri Pourier of Rapid City speaks on the House floor on March 3, 2025, at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre.** (Photo by Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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for “helping me find the language that we would hope that the state would agree to.”

## A ‘no’ to mandated meetings

Shortly after passing the Pourier bill, the committee took up House Bill 1190.

Its sponsor, Rosebud tribal member and Democratic Rep. Eric Emery, wanted committee members to endorse the creation of a South Dakota tribal consultation commission that would meet four times each year.

The Legislature has a State-Tribal Relations Committee, Emery said, but its scope and membership are limited. Under his proposal, the new commission would include the governor or a representative of the governor, the secretary of the Department of Tribal Relations or a designee, a representative from each of the nine tribes in South Dakota and members of the state House of Representatives and Senate.

Regular meetings, Emery said, would benefit citizens on and off tribal land in South Dakota.

“When the tribes succeed, the state succeeds as well,” Emery said. “And that’s the whole intention of this piece of legislation.”

Emery’s bill had support, through testimony, from the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Rosebud Sioux Tribe and Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

Kevin Killer, a former lawmaker and member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, said similar conversations about ways to improve relations between the state and tribes through regular meetings were taking place when he was first elected as a state lawmaker in 2008.

“It’s almost 20 years where we’ve been asking for a place to have this kind of conversation,” Killer said.

Algin Young, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and current secretary for the state Department of Tribal Relations, testified against the bill. Gov. Larry Rhoden “has said publicly” that he’s willing to meet with any tribal leaders on any issue as needed, and Young said that fluid, open lines of communication are the best way to address tribal issues.

“The truth is you can’t legislate relationships,” Young said.

Emery, in his initial remarks and rebuttal, said he’s been pleased with Rhoden’s efforts to improve relations with tribes since his ascent to governor last year when former Gov. Kristi Noem left to lead the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Even so, he said, the lack of a formal structure for consultation leaves relations open to change with each gubernatorial administration.

Rep. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, wanted to know why the bill would mandate four meetings a year.

“That sounds very extensive, and a lot of meetings,” he said.

Emery replied that the idea was to ensure one meeting per quarter.

Rep. Leslie Heinemann, R-Flandreau, said he’s been impressed with the policies proposed this year by the State-Tribal Relations Committee and that “we should let that have a chance to work.”

The bill failed on an 8-4 vote. One of its supporters was Spearfish Rep. Scott Odenbach who, like Emery, serves on the State-Tribal Relations Committee. Odenbach referenced one of that group’s meetings last year, where members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe pointed out that North Dakota has a formal, quarterly meeting structure similar to what Emery’s bill proposes. Tribal members said South Dakota could learn something from North Dakota’s approach.

Regular meetings seemed to improve relations for that state, said Odenbach, who said he’s seen little improvement here.

“My whole political career, the conversations just end with people throwing up our hands,” Odenbach said.

## Information sharing approved

A third bill dealing with collaboration between state and tribal agencies, House Bill 1175, cleared the House Judiciary Committee later in the morning.

That bill also came from Pourier, who called it a “cleanup” bill. It amends current statute, which directs the state Division of Criminal Investigation to furnish national criminal background check information to the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate upon request for a person applying to work for the tribe or hold positions

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on tribal committees or commissions.

"What I am proposing is that instead of just one tribe, we open it up to any tribe," Pourier said.

Rep. Matt Roby, R-Watertown, wanted to know why current law only mentions one tribe.

Pourier said she's not certain, but that new federal background check requirements came into effect in the 1990s, and that the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate have "always had a mutual benefit and great relationship with the state." She assumed the law was meant to help the tribe with "compliance issues."

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said his research into the current law suggested that the tribe was engaged in setting up a commercial enterprise at the time of its passage, in 1998.

"I don't know what sort of commerce they were trying to do, but the DCI had the ability to get background checks done for those that maybe they needed that," Mortenson said.

Every member of the committee present on Monday morning voted to support the bill.

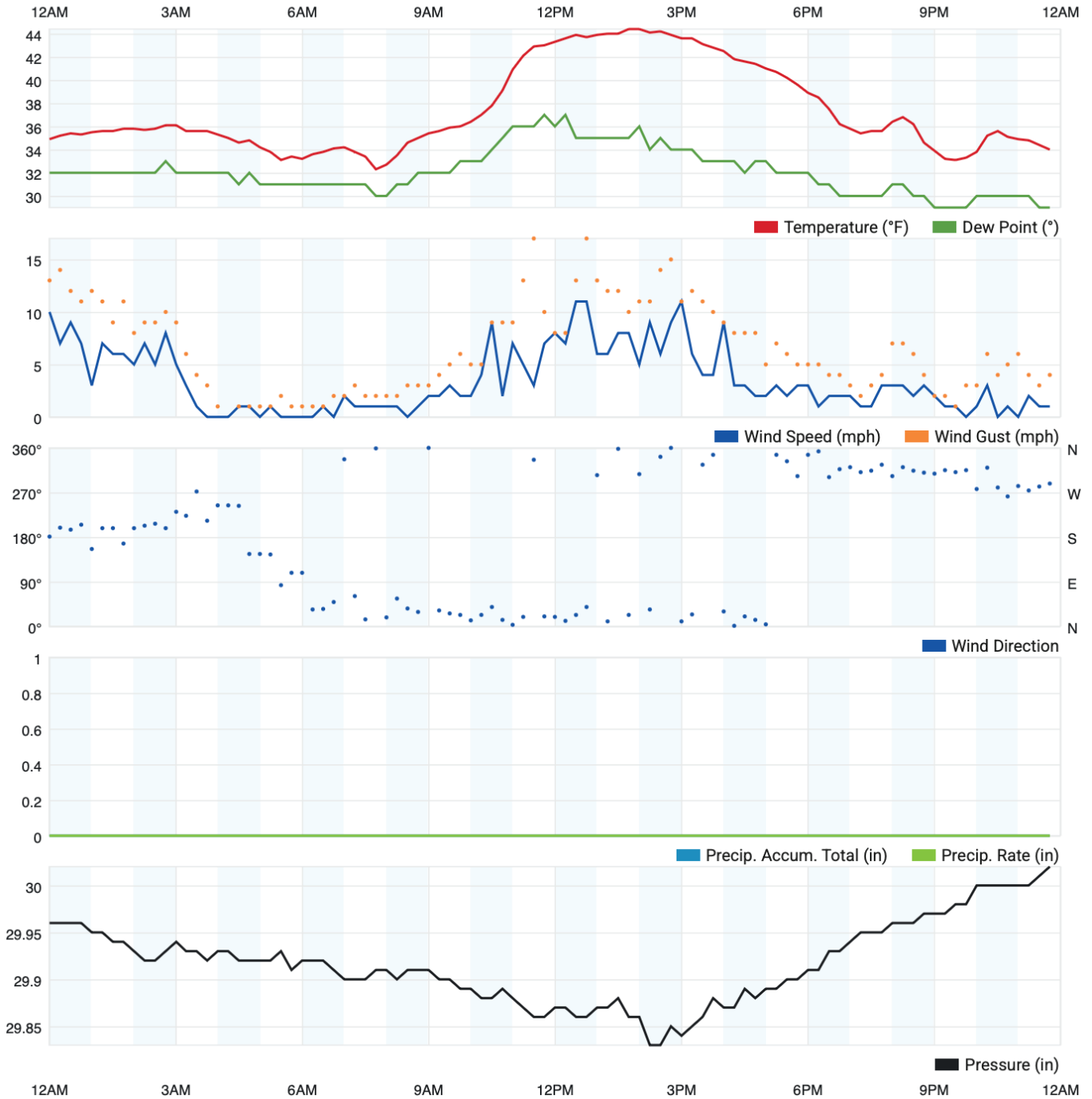
*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

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Today



High: 43 °F

Gradual  
Clearing

Tonight



Low: 25 °F

Mostly Clear

Wednesday



High: 47 °F

Increasing  
Clouds

Wednesday  
Night



Low: 29 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Thursday



High: 47 °F

Sunny



## Mild Temperatures Continue

### Today



Highs: 35 - 45°F

Wind: NW 10-25 mph

Warmest temperatures over central SD.

### Wednesday



Highs: 40 - 50°F

Wind: S 10-20 mph

Warmest temperatures over central SD.

We'll remain under a mild air mass with above normal temperatures in the 30s and 40s today. Mostly cloudy skies this morning over northern and eastern South Dakota are forecast to eventually break up later today. Surface high pressure over the area will keep conditions dry with northwest breezes generally 10-25 mph, becoming light late in the day.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 1:54 PM

Low Temp: 32 °F at 7:43 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 11:23 AM

Precip: : 0.00

## Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1977

Record Low: -27 in 1988

Average High: 27

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.20

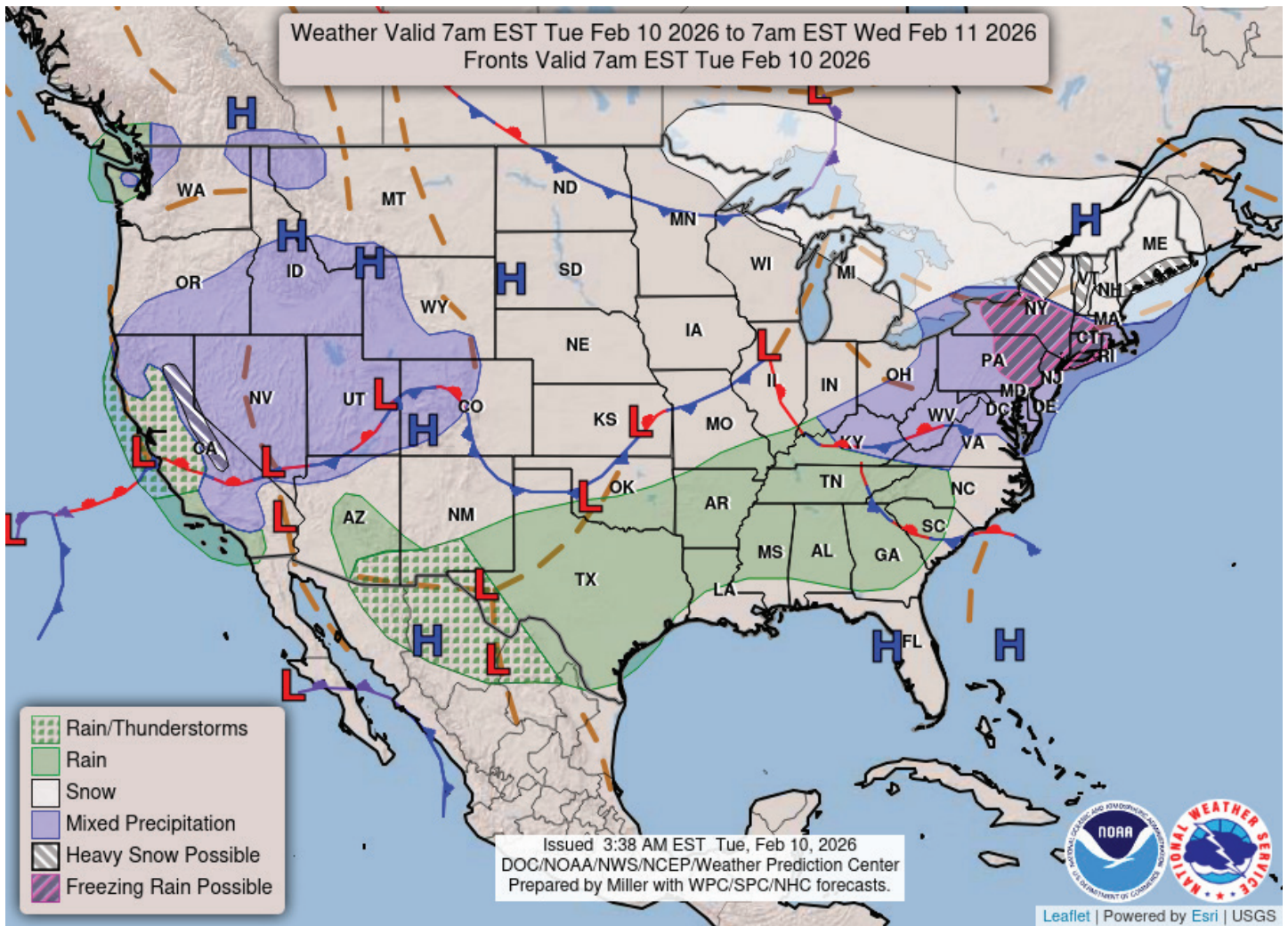
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.75

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:51 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40 am



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## Today in Weather History

February 10, 1993: Snow fell across South Dakota from the 10th to the 12th, with over 8 inches in south-central, west-central, and southwest. Some reports included 13 inches at Harrington, 12 inches at Midland, 10.5 inches at Winner, 10 inches near Stephan, Ardmore, and Wagner, 8.5 inches near Lead and Milesville, and 8 inches at Mitchell and Usta.

February 10, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, an intense area of low pressure and an Arctic high-pressure area created strong winds from 35 to 50 mph with gusts to around 65 mph through the afternoon and into the late evening. These high winds combined with the falling snow and the snow on the ground create blizzard conditions and slick roads across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Highway 12 from Webster to Summit was closed the evening of the 10th and Interstate-29 from Summit to Sisseton. Hundreds of travelers were stranded at Summit for several hours until conditions improved. Some wind gusts included 61 mph at Mobridge and 66 mph at Pierre and Aberdeen.

February 10, 2013: A powerful area of low pressure brought widespread heavy snow of 6 to as much as 19 inches across South Dakota and into Minnesota. The combination of heavy snow and powerful winds of 30 to 50 mph caused extensive blowing and drifting snow. Roads, highways, and Interstates 29 and 90 were closed for a time, and schools started late or closed on Monday the 11th.

1870 — President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law "to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations in the interior of the continent." A petition submitted by Increase A Lapham to Congressman Halbert E Paine in December 1869 began this process.

1921: Gardner, Georgia, was devastated by a massive, estimated F4 tornado that caused an entire small town section to disappear. The tornado killed an estimated 31 people and injured 100.

1933 — The temperature at Moran, WY, located next to Teton National Park, plunged to 63 degrees below zero to establish a state record. The temperature at the Riverside Ranger Station in Montana dipped to 66 below zero to establish a record for the state, and a record for the nation which stood until 1954. (David Ludlum)

1934 — The mercury dipped to 51 degrees below zero at Vanderbilt to establish a record for the state of Michigan. The temperature at Stillwater plunged to 52 degrees below zero to establish a record for the state of New York. (David Ludlum)

1959: St. Louis, Missouri, was hit by a massive F4 tornado that killed 21 and injured 345. Over 2000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, including the St. Louis Arena.

1981: A morning tornado at Bay Minette, AL, struck the local middle school severely damaging the gymnasium. The tornado hurt 62 people were injured, 44 of whom were students.

1990 — Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front erupted over eastern Texas late in the morning, and produced severe weather as they swept across the southeastern states. Early evening thunderstorms spawned a tornado which injured one person at Nat TX, and produced tennis balls size hail which caused more than half a million dollars damage around Shreveport LA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994 — A devastating ice storm struck Mississippi, Louisiana, and extreme northwest Alabama. Freezing rain began falling over northern Mississippi during the early morning hours and continued until midday on the 10th. Ice accumulated 3 to 6 inches thick on exposed objects in the affected area. Due to the weight of the ice, power lines, trees, and tree limbs were down. Nearly one million people were without power after the storm, some for a month.

2010: Cyclone Pat slams The Cook Islands with 125 mph winds, which destroyed about 80 percent of the island of Aitutaki.

2017: An atmospheric phenomena know as "moonbow" was seen in the Seattle area.

2017: Denver saw their all-time warmest temperature in February with a reading of 79 degrees.



Daily Devotion

## The Cost of Running From God

**Even when God's will seems unclear to us,  
we can choose to trust in His goodness and respond with faith.**

Jonah 4:9-11: 9 Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

10 Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight."

11 "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

You would think a life-threatening storm and a few days in a fish's belly would shake some sense into a person. Yet that wasn't the case with Jonah. The final paragraphs of his story reveal a prophet who technically obeyed God but allowed his heart to remain on the run.

Jonah paid a high price for running from the Lord—he endured many physical, social, and emotional consequences for trying to ignore God's instructions. But when those events were long past, Jonah still grappled with the spiritual cost of his flight. He lived with anger and a bitterness so strong that he begged God for the relief that death would bring.

As believers, we cannot disobey the Lord without paying a price. Perhaps you have a habit, a desire, or a current course of action that you know is against God's will. Have you considered the cost? The Lord is holy and righteous, and tolerating sin is incompatible with who He is. What's more, the price for following our own will is high, but if we obey the Lord, He will bless us (Deuteronomy 5:33). We can trust in His love for His children, even if we don't understand exactly what He's calling us to do—or why.

*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: 17 Hrs 34 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.09.26

2 7 26 28 34 1

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$15,180,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 49 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.09.26

11 14 23 25 42 3

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 4 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.26

9 12 18 20 24

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$263,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 4 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.09.26

2 33 49 51 64 26

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 33 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.09.26

6 19 22 28 48 24

Power Play: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$126,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 33 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Chester 68, Centerville 63  
Dell Rapids St Mary's 78, Arlington 34  
Dupree 75, Lemmon High School 22  
Hankinson, N.D. 78, Wilmot 64  
Jones County 40, Miller 37  
Mitchell Christian 61, Sunshine Bible Academy 49  
Sioux Falls Lutheran 61, Great Plains Lutheran 54  
Webster 59, Sisseton 48

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

### GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 54, Sunshine Bible Academy 27  
Arlington 57, Dell Rapids St Mary's 51  
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 65, Timber Lake 50  
Emery 67, Flandreau Indian 21  
Gregory 58, Winner 41  
Groton 51, Great Plains Lutheran 28  
Lyman 71, Chamberlain 30  
Mobridge-Pollock 59, Herried-Selby 32  
Sioux Falls Christian 52, Madison 26  
Sisseton 45, Webster 32  
St. Francis Indian 77, Oelrichs 36

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

## Top Iran security official to travel to Oman, site of talks with US, likely with nuclear message

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A top Iranian security official traveled Tuesday to Oman, the Mideast sultanate now mediating talks between Tehran and the United States over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program aimed at halting a possible American strike.

Ali Larijani, a former Iranian parliament speaker who now serves as the secretary to the country's Supreme National Security Council, likely will carry Iran's response to the initial round of indirect talks held last week in Muscat with the Americans.

Larijani is due to meet with Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, the chief intermediary in the talks, and Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the state-run IRNA news agency reported. IRNA described the talks as "important," without elaborating on what message Larijani will carry. It said he flew out of Tehran for Muscat on Tuesday morning.

Iran and the U.S. held new nuclear talks last week in Oman. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking Sunday to diplomats at a summit in Tehran, signaled that Iran would stick to its position that it must be able to enrich uranium — a major point of contention with U.S. President Donald Trump, who bombed Iranian atomic sites in June during the 12-day Iran-Israel war. That war disrupted earlier rounds of nuclear talks between Washington and Tehran.

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is to travel to Washington this week, with Iran expected to be the major subject of discussion, his office said.

The U.S. has moved the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, ships and warplanes to the Middle East to pressure Iran into an agreement and have the firepower necessary to strike the Islamic Republic should Trump choose to do so. Already, U.S. forces shot down a drone they said got too close to the Lincoln and came to the aid of a U.S.-flagged ship that Iranian forces tried to stop in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf.

The U.S. Transportation Department's Maritime Administration issued a new warning Monday to American vessels in the strait to "remain as far as possible from Iran's territorial sea without compromising navigational safety." The strait, through which a fifth of all oil traded passes, is in Iranian and Omani territorial waters. Those traveling into the Persian Gulf must pass through Iranian waters.

## Global shares mostly rise, led by a post-election rally in Japan

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Global shares were mostly higher Tuesday as Japan's benchmark set another record after a historic election win for the nation's first female prime minister.

France's CAC 40 edged up 0.2% in early trading to 8,342.16, while Germany's DAX lost nearly 0.2% to 24,977.44. Britain's FTSE 100 slipped 0.5% to 10,339.55. The futures for the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average were up less than 0.1%.

In Asian trading, Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 jumped 2.3% to finish at 57,650.54, a record close. It jumped 3.9% to a record Monday after the landslide victory for Sanae Takaichi's political party in Sunday's parliamentary election. Takaichi is expected to push through reforms intended to boost the economy and stock market.

"Japan's fiscal stance could loosen further because the LDP's supermajority will enable the new government to implement policies with few obstacles," Fitch Ratings said in a report following the election, referring to Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party.

"Policy choices under the new government are likely to focus on tax relief and growth-oriented investment spending, reflecting voter concerns over higher inflation and low income growth," it said.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng surged 0.6% to 27,183.15, while the Shanghai Composite added 0.1% to 4,128.37. Australia's S&P/ASX 200 declined less than 0.1% to 8,867.40. South Korea's Kospi gained less than 0.1% to 5,301.69.

On Monday, the S&P 500 gained 0.5% and the Dow edged up less than 0.1%. The Nasdaq gained 0.9%.

The U.S. government will offer the latest monthly update on the health of the job market on Wednesday. Friday will bring the latest monthly reading of inflation at the consumer level.

Either report could sway expectations for what the Federal Reserve will do with interest rates. The Fed has put its cuts to interest rates on hold, but a weakening of the job market could push it to resume more quickly.

Too-hot inflation could keep it on hold for longer. One of the reasons the U.S. stock market remains close to records is the expectation that the Fed will continue cutting interest rates.

In other dealings early Tuesday, benchmark U.S. crude added 5 cents to \$64.41 a barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, advanced 22 cents to \$69.26 a barrel.

The U.S. dollar edged down to 155.55 Japanese yen from 155.88 yen. The euro cost \$1.1902, down from \$1.1918.

## Hong Kong fire victims long for home as Lunar New Year stirs painful memories

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — When Hong Kong was hit by its deadliest fire in decades last November, it left thousands of residents without some of their friends, family or the place they called home.

Months later, the former occupants of the Wang Fuk Court — now a largely burnt-out apartment complex in the suburban district of Tai Po — are waiting not just for answers about what happened, but also a new place to live.

They are in temporary housing and authorities have yet to unveil plans for long-term resettlement after carrying out a survey of their preferences. Also, the government has offered rental grants to help homeowners pay for the short-term homes.

The upcoming Lunar New Year on Feb. 17, is stirring memories of celebrating the festival in happier times.

The massive blaze engulfed seven apartment buildings and killed 168 people on Nov. 26, 2025, shattering a close-knit community. Authorities blamed substandard scaffold netting and foam boards used in a maintenance project for rapidly spreading the fire. Although some arrests were made, an independent committee is still investigating the cause.

The Associated Press talked to four families who lived in the complex or lost loved ones there. Here's what they said:

**No place to call home**

When flames devoured the towers of the Wang Fuk Court complex, Pearl Chow, 87, fled her apartment with essential documents like her title deed. Her grandson, Dorz Cheung, 33, rushed from his office to find her safe nearby while the fire was still raging.

That night, Chow went to a friend's home and didn't sleep, while Cheung watched the flames for hours, crying while clutching a friend. They both miss old photos lost in the fire.

Now they are separated into two temporary housing units on separate floors, each around 100 square feet (9.2 square meters). Chow says she's satisfied, but Cheung says it's not a home.

"Only a permanent residence can be a home," he said.

Chow still regularly returns to Tai Po for church and grocery shopping, despite the hourlong journey. They want to be resettled in Tai Po, where they lived for decades, in a unit about the same size as their old apartment.

"I am an elderly person. When they finish building, I may have gone to my heavenly home," she said with a laugh.

Data from the 2021 population census showed over one-third of the complex's approximately 4,600 residents were aged 65 or above.

Cheung said he lost his sense of security with the authorities after the blaze. The government proposed measures to combat bid-rigging in building maintenance and enhance fire safety in January, but Cheung says it still hasn't addressed resettlement.

"We can only wait, being tossed around like a ball," he said.

**A temporary refuge**

Kit Chan, 74, lived with her husband in a 460-square-foot (43-square-meter) apartment for over 40 years, raising their family in a community where neighbors helped look after each other's children.

Chan planned to spend the rest of her life there, but the blaze forced the couple into a studio unit at a youth hostel half the size of their apartment. Weeks ago, they heard that other fire victims were being asked to move out of the hostel.

She hasn't been asked to leave, but is worried about what comes next. "It's like being unable to get by in my final years," she said.

Chan initially wanted to be resettled in a new home built on the fire site, but the government estimates that rebuilding will take about a decade. Now she says she could accept a similar-sized apartment in another district with good transport.

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Her husband, Keung Mak, 78, hopes they can return to their old home just to have a look.

"Many people hope they can at least see how badly it was burned," he said.

Weighing time against place

During past Lunar New Year celebrations, Isaac Tam's family used to visit neighbors on their floor with gifts. Now, the familiar faces he has known for years are scattered across the city.

The loss of their two apartments in the fire was heartbreaking. His parents cried, and his 92-year-old grandfather grew thinner. But Tam, 23, said at least all his family members were alive.

Last weekend, they were preparing to move into temporary homes, smaller than their old apartments and farther from the city center. They shelled out money to renovate them.

While he says the government's handling is not as bad as some say, he worries about how his grandfather will adjust to temporary housing in a new district. Back in Tai Po, the grandfather used to have a morning dim sum routine with his friends.

While awaiting the government's resettlement plans, they are mulling apartments in another district that could be ready sooner than units in Tai Po, which he prefers because he grew up there.

Time is their priority, given his grandfather's age, Tam said.

"I fear he can't wait until we secure an apartment of about 400 square feet (about 37 square meters)," he said, regardless of the district.

Grieving for a mother, hanging on to memories

Phyllis Lo's mother called her after seeing thick smoke outside her door when the blaze started. On the call, knowing she might not survive, her 74-year-old mother asked Lo, 48, and her brother to live well.

Lo immediately rushed to her childhood home and called again minutes later. No one answered. The next morning, police told her they had found her mother's body.

After learning that a mix of issues including substandard materials were used in the building maintenance project and failed fire alarms, Lo wondered if the tragedy could have been avoided if government departments had done a better job. While she doesn't know who should bear responsibility, she blames herself for not looking into the building maintenance for her mother more closely.

What bothers her most is the lack of transparency — when will she be allowed to go see her burnt apartment, how will authorities use the \$589 million relief fund. She hopes the nine-month investigation will release what was found.

She wants her childhood home rebuilt at the fire site, but considers the proposed timeline — about a decade — unreasonably long.

As the Lunar New Year nears, Lo made turnip cakes, a tradition she inherited from her mother. "Maybe she is still everywhere and still seeing us now. I really want to be with her," she said in tears.

Rebuilding a community isn't easy

Hong Kong leader John Lee said the city is working hard on a resettlement plan, but it's a complicated matter. He added that a significant proportion of homeowners have indicated that they'd be willing to consider selling their ownership rights to the government.

"This is no easy time for families of Wang Fuk Court. The government will work tirelessly to finalize the plan as soon as possible," he said at Tuesday's news conference.

Jack Rozdilsky, professor of disaster and emergency management at York University in Canada, said that concrete plans for continuous mental health and trauma coping assistance will be key to a successful resettlement plan.

Rozdilsky saw the community survey on resettlement as a good sign because a one-size-fits-all proposal will not satisfy every household.

While rebuilding living spaces is complicated, he said, reconstructing a community is much harder. He said understanding what promoted a sense of community at the housing complex before the fire and incorporating those features — be it a bus stop or a gathering point in a park — would help.

"Very small things matter," he said.

## Misery deepens in the West Bank as Israel provides few Palestinian work permits

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

TULKAREM, West Bank (AP) — Hanadi Abu Zant hasn't been able to pay rent on her apartment in the occupied West Bank for nearly a year after losing her permit to work inside Israel. When her landlord calls the police on her, she hides in a mosque.

"My biggest fear is being kicked out of my home. Where will we sleep, on the street?" she said, wiping tears from her cheeks.

She is among some 100,000 Palestinians whose work permits were revoked after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack ignited the war in the Gaza Strip. Confined to the occupied territory, where jobs are scarce and wages far lower, they face dwindling and dangerous options as the economic crisis deepens.

Some have sold their belongings or gone into debt as they try to pay for food, electricity and school expenses for their children. Others have paid steep fees for black-market permits or tried to sneak into Israel, risking arrest or worse if they are mistaken for militants.

Israel, which has controlled the West Bank for nearly six decades, says it is under no obligation to allow Palestinians to enter for work and makes such decisions based on security considerations. Thousands of Palestinians are still allowed to work in scores of Jewish settlements across the West Bank, built on land they want for a future state.

Risk of collapse

The World Bank has warned that the West Bank economy is at risk of collapse because of Israel's restrictions. By the end of last year, unemployment had surged to nearly 30% compared with around 12% before the war, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Before the war, tens of thousands of Palestinians worked inside Israel, mainly in construction and service jobs. Wages can be more than double those in the landlocked West Bank, where decades of Israeli checkpoints, land seizures and other restrictions have weighed heavily on the economy. Palestinians also blame the Palestinian Authority, which exercises limited self-rule in parts of the territory, for not doing enough to create jobs.

About 100,000 Palestinians had work permits that were revoked after the outbreak of the war. Israel has since reinstated fewer than 10,000, according to Gisha, an Israeli group advocating for Palestinian freedom of movement.

Wages earned in Israel injected some \$4 billion into the Palestinian economy in 2022, according to the Institute for National Security Studies, an Israeli think tank. That's equivalent to about two-thirds of the Palestinian Authority's budget that year.

An Israeli official said Palestinians do not have an inherent right to enter Israel, and that permits are subject to security considerations. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Israel seized the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war, territories the Palestinians want for a future state. Some 3 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, along with over 500,000 Israeli settlers who can come and go freely.

The war in Gaza has brought a spike in Palestinian attacks on Israelis as well as settler violence. Military operations that Israel says are aimed at dismantling militant groups have caused heavy damage in the West Bank and displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians.

'My refrigerator, it's empty'

After her husband left her five years ago, Abu Zant secured a job at a food-packing plant in Israel that paid around \$1,400 a month, enough to support her four children. When the war erupted, she thought the ban would only last a few months. She baked pastries for friends to scrape by.

Hasan Joma, who ran a business in Tulkarem before the war helping people find work in Israel, said Palestinian brokers are charging more than triple the price for a permit.

While there are no definite figures, tens of thousands of Palestinians are believed to be working illegally in Israel, according to Esteban Klor, professor of economics at Israel's Hebrew University and a senior

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researcher at the INSS. Some risk their lives trying to cross Israel's separation barrier, which consists of 9-meter high (30-foot) concrete walls, fences and closed military roads.

Shuhrat Barghouthi's husband has spent five months in prison for trying to climb the barrier to enter Israel for work, she said. Before the war, the couple worked in Israel earning a combined \$5,700 a month. Now they are both unemployed and around \$14,000 in debt.

"Come and see my refrigerator, it's empty, there's nothing to feed my children," she said. She can't afford to heat her apartment, where she hasn't paid rent in two years. She says her children are often sick and frequently go to bed hungry.

Sometimes she returns home to see her belongings strewn in the street by the landlord, who has been trying to evict them.

## Forced to work in settlements

Of the roughly 48,000 Palestinians who worked in Israeli settlements before the war, more than 65% have kept their permits, according to Gisha. The Palestinians and most of the international community view the settlements, which have rapidly expanded in recent years, as illegal.

Israeli officials did not respond to questions about why more Palestinians are permitted to work in the settlements.

Palestinians employed in the settlements, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, say their employers have beefed up security since the start of the war and are far more willing to fire anyone stepping out of line, knowing there are plenty more desperate for work.

Two Palestinians working in the Mishor Adumim settlement said security guards look through workers' phones and revoke their permits arbitrarily.

Israelis have turned to foreign workers to fill jobs held by Palestinians, but some say it's a poor substitute because they cost more and do not know the language. Palestinians speak Arabic, but those who work in Israel are often fluent in Hebrew.

Raphael Dadush, an Israeli developer, said the permit crackdown has resulted in costly delays.

Before the war, Palestinians made up more than half his workforce. He's tried to replace them with Chinese workers but says it's not exactly the same. He understands the government's decision, but says it's time to find a way for Palestinians to return that ensures Israel's security.

Assaf Adiv, the executive director of an Israeli group advocating for Palestinian labor rights, says there has to be some economic integration or there will be "chaos."

"The alternative to work in Israel is starvation and desperation," he said.

## Israeli strikes kill 3 people in Gaza, hospital says

By WAFSA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and SAM METZ Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli military strikes on Monday killed three people west of Gaza City, according to the hospital where the casualties arrived.

Shifa Hospital reported the deaths amid the months-old ceasefire that has seen continued fighting. The Israeli army said Monday it is striking targets in response to Israeli troops coming under fire in the southern city of Rafah, which it says was a violation of the ceasefire. The army said it is striking targets "in a precise manner."

The four-month-old U.S.-backed ceasefire followed stalled negotiations and included Israel and Hamas accepting a 20-point plan proposed by U.S. President Donald Trump aimed at ending the war unleashed by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack into Israel. At the time, Trump said it would lead to a "Strong, Durable, and Everlasting Peace."

Hamas freed all the living hostages it still held at the outset of the deal in exchange for thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and the remains of others.

But the larger issues the agreement sought to address, including the future governance of the strip, were met with reservations, and the U.S. offered no firm timeline.

Top UN official concerned over Israel's West Bank decision

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The United Nations top official on Monday expressed concern about the Israeli security cabinet's decision to deepen the country's control over the occupied West Bank.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is "gravely concerned" and warned that the Israeli decision could erode the prospect of a two-state solution, spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric said in a statement.

"Such actions, including Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are not only destabilizing but – as recalled by the International Court of Justice – unlawful," he said.

Israel's security cabinet on Sunday approved measures that aim to deepen Israeli control over the occupied West Bank and weaken the already limited powers of the Palestinian Authority.

Israel's far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said the measures would make it easier for Jewish settlers to force Palestinians to give up land, adding that "we will continue to bury the idea of a Palestinian state."

Israel captured the West Bank, as well as Gaza and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for a future state.

Rafah crossing improving, official says

The Palestinian official set to oversee day-to-day affairs in Gaza said on Monday that passage through the Rafah crossing with Egypt is starting to improve after a chaotic first week of reopening marked by confusion, delays and a limited number of crossings.

Ali Shaath, head of the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza, told Egypt's Al-Qahera News that operations at the crossing were improving on Sunday. He said 88 Palestinians were scheduled to travel through Rafah on Monday, more than have crossed in the initial days since reopening. Israel did not immediately confirm the figures.

The European Union border mission at the crossing said in a statement Sunday that 284 Palestinians had crossed since reopening. Travelers included people returning after having fled the war and medical evacuees and their escorts. In total, 53 medical evacuees departed during the first five days of operations.

That remains well below the agreed target of 50 medical evacuees exiting and 50 returnees entering daily, negotiated by Israeli, Egyptian, Palestinian and international officials.

Shaath and other members of the committee remain in Egypt, without Israeli authorization to enter the war-battered enclave.

The Rafah crossing opened last week for the first time since mid-2024, one of the main requirements for the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. It was closed Friday and Saturday because of confusion around operations.

Palestinian officials say nearly 20,000 people are seeking to leave Gaza for medical care unavailable in its largely destroyed health system.

Palestinians who returned to Gaza in the first days after the crossing reopened described hourslong delays and invasive searches by Israeli authorities and an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu Shabab. Israel denied mistreatment.

Gaza's Health Ministry said on Monday that five people were killed over the previous 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 581 since the October ceasefire. The truce led to the return of the remaining hostages — both living captives and bodies — from the 251 abducted during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war.

Hamas-led militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in the attack. Israel's military offensive has since killed over 72,000 Palestinians, according to the ministry, which operates under the Hamas-run government and is staffed by medical professionals. The U.N. and independent experts consider it the most reliable source on war casualties.

## Social media 'addicting the brains of children,' plaintiff's lawyer argues in landmark trial

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Comparing social media platforms to casinos and addictive drugs, lawyer Mark Lanier delivered opening statements Monday in a landmark trial in Los Angeles that seeks to hold Instagram owner Meta and Google's YouTube responsible for harms to children who use their products.

Instagram's parent company Meta and Google's YouTube face claims that their platforms addict children through deliberate design choices that keep kids glued to their screens. TikTok and Snap, which were originally named in the lawsuit, settled for undisclosed sums.

Jurors got their first glimpse into what will be a lengthy trial characterized by dueling narratives from the plaintiffs and the two remaining defendants.

Meta lawyer Paul Schmidt spoke of the disagreement within the scientific community over social media addiction, with some researchers believing it doesn't exist, or that addiction is not the most appropriate way to describe heavy social media use.

Lawyers representing YouTube will begin their opening statement on Tuesday.

'Addicting the brains of children'

Lanier, the plaintiff's lawyer, delivered lively first remarks where he said the case will be as "easy as ABC" — which stands for "addicting the brains of children." He said Meta and Google, "two of the richest corporations in history," have "engineered addiction in children's brains."

He presented jurors with a slew of internal emails, documents and studies conducted by Meta and YouTube, as well as YouTube's parent company, Google. He emphasized the findings of a study Meta conducted called "Project Myst" in which they surveyed 1,000 teens and their parents about their social media use. The two major findings, Lanier said, were that Meta knew children who experienced "adverse events" like trauma and stress were particularly vulnerable for addiction; and that parental supervision and controls made little impact.

He also highlighted internal Google documents that likened some company products to a casino, and internal communication between Meta employees in which one person said Instagram is "like a drug" and they are "basically pushers."

At the core of the Los Angeles case is a 20-year-old identified only by the initials "KGM," whose case could determine how thousands of other, similar lawsuits against social media companies will play out. She and two other plaintiffs have been selected for bellwether trials — essentially test cases for both sides to see how their arguments play out before a jury.

Plaintiff grew up using YouTube, Instagram

KGM made a brief appearance after a break during Lanier's statement and she will return to testify later in the trial. Lanier spent time describing KGM's childhood, focusing particularly on what her personality was like before she began using social media. She started using YouTube at age 6 and Instagram at age 9, Lanier said. Before she graduated elementary school, she had posted 284 videos on YouTube.

The outcome of the trial could have profound effects on the companies' businesses and how they will handle children using their platforms.

Lanier said the companies' lawyers will "try to blame the little girl and her parents for the trap they built," referencing the plaintiff. She was a minor when she said she became addicted to social media, which she claims had a detrimental impact on her mental health.

Lanier said that despite the public position of Meta and YouTube being that they work to protect children, their internal documents show an entirely different position, with explicit references to young children being listed as their target audiences.

The attorney also drew comparisons between the social media companies and tobacco firms, citing internal communication between Meta employees who were concerned about the company's lack of proactive action about the potential harm their platforms can have on children and teens.

"For a teenager, social validation is survival," Lanier said. The defendants "engineered a feature that caters

to a minor's craving for social validation," he added, speaking about "like" buttons and similar features.

Meta pushes back

In his opening statement representing Meta, Schmidt said the core question in the case is whether the platforms were a substantial factor in KGM's mental health struggles. He spent much of his time going through the plaintiff's health records, emphasizing that she had experienced many difficult circumstances in her childhood, including emotional abuse, body image issues and bullying.

Schmidt presented a clip from a video deposition from one of KGM's mental health providers, Dr. Thomas Suberman, who said social media was "not the through-line of what I recall being her main issues," adding that her struggles seemed to largely stem from interpersonal conflicts and relationships. He painted a picture — with KGM's own text messages and testimony pointing to a volatile home life — of a particularly troubled relationship with her mother.

Schmidt acknowledged that many mental health professionals do believe social media addiction can exist, but said three of KGM's providers — all of whom believe in the form of addiction — have never diagnosed her with it, or treated her for it.

Schmidt emphasized to the jurors that the case is not about whether social media is a good thing or whether teens spend too much time on their phones or whether the jurors like or dislike Meta, but whether social media was a substantial factor in KGM's mental health struggles.

A reckoning for social media and youth harms

A slew of trials beginning this year seek to hold social media companies responsible for harming children's mental well-being. Executives, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, are expected to testify at the Los Angeles trial, which will last six to eight weeks. Experts have drawn similarities to the Big Tobacco trials that led to a 1998 settlement requiring cigarette companies to pay billions in health care costs and restrict marketing targeting minors.

A separate trial in New Mexico, meanwhile, also kicked off with opening statements on Monday. In that trial, Meta is accused of failing to protect young users from sexual exploitation, following an undercover online investigation. Attorney General Raúl Torrez in late 2023 sued Meta and Zuckerberg, who was later dropped from the suit.

A federal bellwether trial beginning in June in Oakland, California, will be the first to represent school districts that have sued social media platforms over harms to children.

In addition, more than 40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits against Meta, claiming it is harming young people and contributing to the youth mental health crisis by deliberately designing features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms. The majority of cases filed their lawsuits in federal court, but some sued in their respective states.

TikTok also faces similar lawsuits in more than a dozen states.

## Democrats say White House offer on ICE is 'insufficient' as Homeland Security funding set to expire

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic leaders say a proposal from the White House is "incomplete and insufficient" as they are demanding new restrictions on President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown and threatening a shutdown of the Homeland Security Department.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer and House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement late Monday that a White House counterproposal to the list of demands they transmitted over the weekend "included neither details nor legislative text" and does not address "the concerns Americans have about ICE's lawless conduct." The White House proposal was not released publicly.

The Democrats' statement comes as time is running short, with another partial government shutdown threatening to begin Saturday. Among the Democrats' demands are a requirement for judicial warrants, better identification of DHS officers, new use-of-force standards and a stop to racial profiling. They say such

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changes are necessary after two protesters were fatally shot by federal agents in Minneapolis last month.

Earlier Monday, Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., had expressed optimism about the rare negotiations between Democrats and the White House, saying there was "forward progress."

Thune said it was a good sign that the two sides were trading papers, and "hopefully they can find some common ground here."

But coming to an agreement on the charged issue of immigration enforcement will be difficult, especially as rank-and-file lawmakers in both parties were skeptical about finding common ground.

Republicans have balked at the Democrats' requests and some have demands of their own, including the addition of legislation that would require proof of citizenship before Americans register to vote and restrictions on cities that they say do not do enough to crack down on illegal immigration.

And many Democrats who are furious about Immigration and Customs Enforcement's aggressive crack-down have said they won't vote for another penny of Homeland Security funding until enforcement is radically scaled back.

"Dramatic changes are needed at the Department of Homeland Security before a DHS funding bill moves forward," Jeffries said earlier Monday. "Period. Full stop."

#### Trump deals with Democrats

Congress is trying to renegotiate the DHS spending bill after Trump agreed to a Democratic request that it be separated out from a larger spending measure that became law last week. That package extended Homeland Security funding at current levels only through Feb. 13, creating a brief window for action as the two parties discuss new restrictions on ICE and other federal officers.

Democrats made the demands for new restrictions on ICE and other federal law enforcement after ICU nurse Alex Pretti was shot and killed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 24, and some Republicans suggested that new restrictions were necessary. Renee Good was shot by ICE agents on Jan. 7.

While he agreed to separate the funding, Trump has not publicly responded to the Democrats' specific demands.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said late last week that the Trump administration is willing to discuss some items on the Democrats' list, but "others don't seem like they are grounded in any common sense, and they are nonstarters for this administration."

#### Democratic demands

Schumer and Jeffries have said they want immigration officers to remove their masks, to show identification and to better coordinate with local authorities. They have also demanded a stricter use-of-force policy for the federal officers, legal safeguards at detention centers and a prohibition on tracking protesters with body-worn cameras.

Among other demands, Democrats say Congress should end indiscriminate arrests, "improve warrant procedures and standards," ensure the law is clear that officers cannot enter private property without a judicial warrant and require that before a person can be detained, it's verified that the person is not a U.S. citizen.

Republicans have said they support the requirement for DHS officers to have body-worn cameras — language that was in the original DHS bill — but have balked at many of the other Democratic asks.

"Taking the masks off ICE officers and agents, the reason we can't do that is that it would subject them to great harm, their families at great risk because people are doxing them and targeting them," said House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., on Monday. "We've got to talk about things that are reasonable and achievable."

Tennessee Sen. Bill Hagerty said on "Fox News Sunday" that Democrats are "trying to motivate a radical left base."

"The left has gone completely overboard, and they're threatening the safety and security of our agents so they cannot do their job," Hagerty said.

#### Consequences of a shutdown

In addition to ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the homeland security bill includes funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Transportation Security Administration. If DHS

shuts down, Thune said last week, "there's a very good chance we could see more travel problems" similar to the 43-day government closure last year.

Lawmakers in both parties have suggested they could separate out funding for ICE and Border Patrol and pass the rest of it by Friday. But Thune has been cool to that idea, saying instead that Congress should pass another short-term extension for all of DHS while they negotiate the possible new restrictions.

"If there's additional time that's needed, then hopefully Democrats would be amenable to another extension," Thune said.

Many Democrats are unlikely to vote for another extension. But Republicans could potentially win enough votes in both chambers from Democrats if they feel hopeful about negotiations.

"The ball is in the Republicans' court," Jeffries said Monday.

## **New Zealand mosque shooter always planned to admit his crimes, his former lawyers tell appeals court**

By CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-McLAY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The self-professed white supremacist who murdered 51 Muslims in New Zealand's deadliest mass shooting was pleased to be charged with terrorism and wanted to be described as a terrorist, his former lawyer told a court deciding if the man was in a fit state to admit to his crimes.

Brenton Tarrant, 35, was sentenced to life in prison without a chance of parole after pleading guilty to terrorism, murder and attempted murder for his hate-fueled massacre of worshippers including children at two Christchurch mosques during Friday prayers in 2019. The Australian man is now seeking to recant the admissions he made in 2020, saying solitary confinement and other prison conditions made him irrational and mentally unwell.

New Zealand's Court of Appeal in Wellington is considering Tarrant's bid in a five-day hearing. If the three-judge panel discards his guilty pleas, the case would return to court for trial.

Shooter's change of mind is examined

Tarrant first pleaded not guilty to the charges he faced, then reversed his position before his trial was due to begin. He told the appeals court Monday that he felt forced into his admissions by "nervous exhaustion" brought on by constant solitary confinement, surveillance by prison staff, lack of access to reading materials and almost no contact with the outside world.

Lawyers who represented him during the period when he entered both sets of pleas told the court Tuesday that they had laid a complaint about his prison conditions early in his confinement. Prison officials were dismissive of his grievances, the lawyers said.

They said, however, that restrictions on Tarrant eased later and they didn't think his environment had harmed his ability to make decisions. Tarrant said Monday that he had masked symptoms of serious mental illness in an effort not to appear weak or to reflect poorly on others who held his racist views.

Crown lawyers suggested to Tarrant on Monday that he had many opportunities to raise concerns about his mental health and or request a postponement of his trial. No witness has so far agreed with Tarrant that his conditions were so onerous and his mental state so poor that he wasn't fit to plead guilty.

Shooter was told a political trial wasn't possible

One issue at the heart of the case is whether Tarrant always intended to admit the charges or planned to contest them. Tarrant said Monday that he had meant to defend himself at a trial, while his lawyers said Tuesday that they were sure he intended to plead guilty due to the overwhelming evidence against him, which included his Facebook livestream of the massacre and a racist manifesto he posted online before the attack.

Shane Tait, who previously acted for Tarrant, said his client had wanted to argue during a trial that he had been defending New Zealand — a country he migrated to with a view to committing the attack — from immigrants. Tait assured Tarrant that such a defense wasn't available under New Zealand law, he

told the court.

"Brenton, what am I going to tell the jury if we go to trial?" Tait said he had asked Tarrant. His client had responded, "Don't worry, it won't get that far," Tait said.

Both Tait and Tarrant's other then-lawyer Jonathan Hudson said it was important to their client that he be convicted on the terrorism charge and he refused to allow his lawyers to attempt to negotiate it away in exchange for guilty pleas to the murder and attempted murder charges.

"He wanted to be described as a terrorist," Hudson said.

The appeal outcome is due later

Bids to appeal convictions or sentences in New Zealand must be made within 20 working days. Tarrant was two years late in seeking an appeal, filing documents in 2022.

He told the court Monday that his bid had been late because he hadn't had access to the information required to make it.

The judges are expected to release their decision at a later date. If they reject Tarrant's attempt to have his guilty pleas discarded, a later hearing will focus on his bid to appeal his sentence.

The hearing was the first time that Tarrant, who appeared by video conference from prison, had been seen or heard from in court for years. He appeared pale and thin, with a shaved head and black-framed glasses.

Some of those bereaved or injured by his violence watched a live feed of proceedings from a courtroom in Christchurch, telling reporters afterward of their exasperation and anger that he was allowed to keep revisiting his case in court.

"There's definitely no remorse at all," said Rashid Omar, whose son Tariq Omar was murdered, adding that the proceedings appeared to be a game to Tarrant.

"We are very, very strong," Omar said. "We're not going to be bullied by him."

## Four players ejected after Pistons and Hornets tussle in physical game won by Detroit

By STEVE REED AP Sports Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — A fight between the Detroit Pistons and Charlotte Hornets in the third quarter of Monday night's game, resulted in four player ejections.

Charlotte's Moussa Diabate and Miles Bridges were tossed, along with Detroit's Jalen Duren and Isaiah Stewart. Hornets coach Charles Lee was ejected in the fourth quarter after he had to be restrained from going after an official while arguing a call.

The Pistons won the game 110-104. The loss ended the Hornets' bid to match a franchise record with 10 straight wins.

Duren had the ball and was driving toward the basket with just over seven minutes left in the third period when he was fouled by Diabate. Duren turned around to get face-to-face with Diabate and the two appeared to butt heads. Duren then hit Diabate in the face with his open right hand, starting a confrontation that lasted more than 30 seconds and ultimately ended with a brief police presence on the floor.

While Pistons forward Tobias Harris was holding Diabate back, Diabate threw a punch at Duren. Duren walked away and Bridges charged at him, throwing a left-handed punch. Duren retaliated with a punch. Diabate attempted to charge again at Duren and had to be held back.

Stewart left the bench to confront Bridges, who responded with a punch, and the players tussled. At one point, Stewart got Bridges in a headlock and delivered multiple left-handed blows to his head.

Duren called it an "overly competitive game."

"Emotions were flaring," Duren said. "At the end of the day, we would love to keep it basketball, but things happen. Everybody was just playing hard."

Duren said that opposing NBA teams have been trying to "get in our head" all season.

"This isn't the first time that people have tried to be like extra aggressive with us and talk to us, whatever the case may be," Duren said. "But as a group we have done an OK job of handling that energy and

intensity. At the end of the day, emotions got high with everybody being competitive. Things happen.”

Duren did not say how the fight started, referring reporters instead to the video replays.

The Hornets did not make Bridges and Diabate available for interviews after the game.

However, Bridges took to Instagram late Monday night to say: “Sorry Hornets nation! Sorry Hornets Organization.! Always gonna protect my teammates forever.”

“It looked like two guys got into a heated conversation and it just kind of spiraled from there,” Lee said.

Crew chief John Goble said in a pool report after the game that the players were ejected because they “engaged in fighting activity during the dead ball. After review, we assessed fighting fouls and by rule they were ejected from the game.”

Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff defended his players after the game.

“Our guys deal with a lot, but they’re not the ones that initiated, they’re not the ones who crossed the line tonight,” Bickerstaff said. “It was clear, through frustration, because of what J.D. (Duren) was doing, that they crossed the line. I hate that it got as ugly as it got.

“That’s not something that you ever want to see,” Bickerstaff added, “but if a guy throws a punch at you, you have a responsibility to protect yourself. That’s what happened tonight. If you go back and watch the film, they’re the ones who initiated crossing the line and our guy had to defend himself.”

Tensions continued to mount at the Spectrum Center after the fight.

Midway through the fourth quarter, Lee was ejected and had to be restrained by Hornets guard Brandon Miller while yelling at officials for a no-call after Charlotte’s Grant Williams collided with Detroit’s Paul Reed.

“Grant was walking down the paint and barely touched somebody and the guy fell over and that is what we are going to call a foul,” Lee said. “They have a hard job to make these calls, but I don’t think that was the consistency with which that had been called the rest of the game.”

As for being ejected, Lee said he has to have more control of emotions moving forward.

## Democrats and White House trade offers as shutdown of Homeland Security looms

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic leaders said late Monday that a proposal from the White House is “incomplete and insufficient” as they are demanding new restrictions on President Donald Trump’s immigration crackdown just days before funding for the Department of Homeland Security is set to expire.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer and House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement that a White House counterproposal to the list of demands they transmitted over the weekend “included neither details nor legislative text” and does not address “the concerns Americans have about ICE’s lawless conduct.” The White House proposal was not released publicly.

The Democrats’ statement comes as time is running short, with another partial government shutdown threatening to begin Saturday. Among the Democrats’ demands are a requirement for judicial warrants, better identification of DHS officers, new use-of-force standards and a stop to racial profiling. They say such changes are necessary after two protesters were fatally shot by federal agents in Minneapolis last month.

Earlier Monday, Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., expressed optimism about the rare negotiations between Democrats and the White House, saying there was “forward progress.”

Thune said it was a good sign that the two sides were trading papers, and “hopefully they can find some common ground here.”

But coming to an agreement on the the charged issue of immigration enforcement will be difficult, especially as rank-and-file lawmakers in both parties were skeptical about finding common ground.

Republicans have balked at the Democrats’ requests and some have demands of their own, including the addition of legislation that would require proof of citizenship before Americans register to vote and restrictions on cities that they say do not do enough to crack down on illegal immigration.

And many Democrats who are furious about Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s aggressive crack-

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down have said they won't vote for another penny of Homeland Security funding until enforcement is radically scaled back.

"Dramatic changes are needed at the Department of Homeland Security before a DHS funding bill moves forward," Jeffries said earlier Monday. "Period. Full stop."

### Trump deals with Democrats

Congress is trying to renegotiate the DHS spending bill after Trump agreed to a Democratic request that it be separated out from a larger spending measure that became law last week. That package extended Homeland Security funding at current levels only through Feb. 13, creating a brief window for action as the two parties discuss new restrictions on ICE and other federal officers.

The funding issue came to a head after ICU nurse Alex Pretti was shot and killed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 24, and some Republicans suggested that new restrictions were necessary. Renee Good was shot by ICE agents on Jan. 7.

While he agreed to separate the funding, Trump has not publicly responded to the Democrats' specific demands.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said late last week that the Trump administration is willing to discuss some items on the Democrats' list, but "others don't seem like they are grounded in any common sense, and they are nonstarters for this administration."

### Democratic demands

Schumer and Jeffries have said they want immigration officers to remove their masks, to show identification and to better coordinate with local authorities. They have also demanded a stricter use-of-force policy for the federal officers, legal safeguards at detention centers and a prohibition on tracking protesters with body-worn cameras.

Among other demands, Democrats say Congress should end indiscriminate arrests, "improve warrant procedures and standards," ensure the law is clear that officers cannot enter private property without a judicial warrant and require that before a person can be detained, it's verified that the person is not a U.S. citizen.

Republicans have said they support the requirement for DHS officers to have body-worn cameras — language that was in the original DHS bill — but have balked at many of the other Democratic asks.

"Taking the masks off ICE officers and agents, the reason we can't do that is that it would subject them to great harm, their families at great risk because people are doxing them and targeting them," said House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., on Monday. "We've got to talk about things that are reasonable and achievable."

Tennessee Sen. Bill Hagerty said on "Fox News Sunday" that Democrats are "trying to motivate a radical left base."

"The left has gone completely overboard, and they're threatening the safety and security of our agents so they cannot do their job," Hagerty said.

### Consequences of a shutdown

In addition to ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the homeland security bill includes funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Transportation Security Administration. If DHS shuts down, Thune said last week, "there's a very good chance we could see more travel problems" similar to the 43-day government closure last year.

Lawmakers in both parties have suggested they could separate out funding for ICE and Border Patrol and pass the rest of it by Friday. But Thune has been cool to that idea, saying instead that Congress should pass another short-term extension for all of DHS while they negotiate the possible new restrictions.

"If there's additional time that's needed, then hopefully Democrats would be amenable to another extension," Thune said.

Many Democrats are unlikely to vote for another extension. But Republicans could potentially win enough votes in both chambers from Democrats if they feel hopeful about negotiations.

"The ball is in the Republicans' court," Jeffries said Monday.

## Landmark trial accusing social media companies of addicting children to their platforms begins

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The world's biggest social media companies face several landmark trials this year that seek to hold them responsible for harms to children who use their platforms. Opening statements in one such trial in Los Angeles County Superior Court began on Monday.

Instagram's parent company Meta and Google's YouTube face claims that their platforms deliberately addict and harm children. TikTok and Snap, which were originally named in the lawsuit, settled for undisclosed sums.

Jurors got their first glimpse into what will be a lengthy trial characterized by dueling narratives from the plaintiffs and the two remaining social media companies named as defendants.

Meta lawyer Paul Schmidt spoke of the disagreement within the scientific community over social media addiction, with some believing it doesn't exist or that addiction is not the most appropriate way to describe heavy social media use.

'Addicting the brains of children'

Mark Lanier delivered the opening statement for the plaintiffs first, in a lively display where he said the case is as "easy as ABC," which he said stands for "addicting the brains of children." He called Meta and Google "two of the richest corporations in history" that have "engineered addiction in children's brains."

He presented jurors with a slew of internal emails, documents and studies conducted by Meta and YouTube, as well as YouTube's parent company, Google. He emphasized the findings of a study Meta conducted called "Project Myst" in which they surveyed 1,000 teens and their parents about their social media use. The two major findings, Lanier said, were that the company knew children who experienced "adverse events" like trauma and stress were particularly vulnerable for addiction; and that parental supervision and controls made little impact.

He also showed internal Google documents that likened some company products to a casino, and internal communication between Meta employees in which one person said Instagram is "like a drug" and that employees are "basically pushers."

At the core of the Los Angeles case is a 20-year-old identified only by the initials "KGM," whose case could determine how thousands of other, similar lawsuits against social media companies will play out. She and two other plaintiffs have been selected for bellwether trials — essentially test cases for both sides to see how their arguments play out before a jury.

Plaintiff grew up on YouTube, Instagram

KGM made a brief appearance after a break during Lanier's statement and she will return to testify later in the trial. Lanier spent time speaking about her childhood, and particularly focused on what her personality was like before she began using social media, saying her mother called her a "creative spark" as a child. She started using YouTube at age 6 and Instagram at age 9, Lanier said. Before she graduated elementary school, she had posted 284 videos on YouTube.

The outcome of the trial could have profound effects on the companies' businesses and how they will handle children using their platforms.

Lanier said the companies' lawyers will "try to blame the little girl and her parents for the trap they built," referencing the plaintiff. She was a minor when she said she became addicted to social media platforms, which she claims had a detrimental impact on her mental health.

Lanier said that despite the public position of Meta and YouTube being that they work to protect children and implement safeguards for their use of the platforms, their internal documents show an entirely different position, with explicit references to young children being listed as their target audiences.

Lanier also drew comparisons between the social media companies and tobacco firms, citing internal communication between Meta employees who were concerned about the company's lack of proactive action about the potential harm their platforms can have on children and teens.

"For a teenager, social validation is survival," Lanier said. The defendants "engineered a feature that caters

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to a minor's craving for social validation," he added, speaking about "like" buttons and similar features.

Meta pushes back

In his opening statement representing Meta, Schmidt said the core question in the case is whether the platforms were a substantial factor in KGM's mental health struggles. He spent much of his time going through the plaintiff's health records, emphasizing that she had experienced many difficult circumstances in her childhood, including emotional abuse, body image issues and bullying.

Schmidt presented a clip from a video deposition from one of KGM's mental health providers, Dr. Thomas Suberman, who said social media was "not the throughline of what I recall being her main issues," adding that her struggles seemed to largely stem from interpersonal conflicts and relationships. He painted a picture of a particularly troubled relationship with her mother, with KGM's own words in text messages and testimony pointing to a volatile home life.

Schmidt acknowledged that many mental health professionals do believe social media addiction can exist, but said three of KGM's providers — all of whom believe in the form of addiction — have never diagnosed her with it or treated her for it.

Schmidt emphasized to the jurors that the case is not about whether social media is a good thing, the content seen on social media, whether teens spend too much time on their phones or whether the jurors like or dislike Meta, but whether social media was a substantial factor in KGM's mental health struggles.

One case of thousands

"This was only the first case — there are hundreds of parents and school districts in the social media addiction trials that start today, and sadly, new families every day who are speaking out and bringing Big Tech to court for its deliberately harmful products," said Sacha Haworth, executive director of the non-profit Tech Oversight Project.

Jurors are not being asked to stop using Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or any other forms of social media throughout the course of the trial — which is expected to last about eight weeks — but Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl emphasized that they should not make any changes to the way they interact with the platforms, including changing their settings or creating new accounts.

Kuhl said that jurors should decide the liability of Meta and YouTube independently when they deliberate.

A separate trial in New Mexico, meanwhile, also kicked off with opening statements on Monday.

KGM claims that her use of social media from an early age addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. Importantly, the lawsuit claims that this was done through deliberate design choices made by companies that sought to make their platforms more addictive to children to boost profits. This argument, if successful, could sidestep the companies' First Amendment shield and Section 230, which protects tech companies from liability for material posted on their platforms.

Executives, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, are expected to testify at the trial, which will last six to eight weeks. Experts have drawn similarities to the Big Tobacco trials that led to a 1998 settlement requiring cigarette companies to pay billions in health care costs and restrict marketing targeting minors.

The tech companies dispute the claims that their products deliberately harm children, citing a bevy of safeguards they have added over the years and arguing that they are not liable for content posted on their sites by third parties.

A reckoning for social media and youth harms

A slew of trials beginning this year seek to hold social media companies responsible for harming children's mental well-being.

In New Mexico, opening statements began Monday for trial on allegations that Meta and its social media platforms have failed to protect young users from sexual exploitation, following an undercover online investigation. Attorney General Raúl Torrez in late 2023 sued Meta and Zuckerberg, who was later dropped from the suit.

A federal bellwether trial beginning in June in Oakland, California, will be the first to represent school districts that have sued social media platforms over harms to children.

In addition, more than 40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits against Meta, claiming it is harming young people and contributing to the youth mental health crisis by deliberately designing features on

Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms. The majority of cases filed their lawsuits in federal court, but some sued in their respective states.

TikTok also faces similar lawsuits in more than a dozen states.

Other countries, meanwhile, are enacting new laws to limit social media for children. In January, French lawmakers approved a bill banning social media for children under 15, paving the way for the measure to enter into force at the start of the next school year in September, as the idea of setting a minimum age for use of the platforms gains momentum across Europe. Australia has banned use of the platforms by kids under 16.

## **When conflict meets competition: Trump's immigration agenda roils opening days of Winter Olympics**

By STEVEN SLOAN and EDDIE PELLIS Associated Press

LIVIGNO, Italy (AP) — As the Winter Olympics opened in Milan, Vice President JD Vance hailed the competition as “one of the few things that unites the entire country.”

That unity didn't last long.

The early days of the Milan Cortina Games have been roiled by the tumultuous political debate in the U.S. American athletes have faced persistent questions about President Donald Trump's aggressive immigration enforcement agenda and their comfort in representing a country whose policies are increasingly controversial on the world stage.

“There's obviously a lot going on that I'm not the biggest fan of and I think a lot of people aren't,” American freestyle skier Hunter Hess said as he spoke of the “mixed emotions” of representing the U.S. “If it aligns with my moral values, I feel like I'm representing it. Just because I'm wearing the flag doesn't mean I represent everything that's going on in the U.S.”

That prompted a fast response from Trump, who said on social media that Hess was a “real loser” who “shouldn't have tried out for the team.”

“Very hard to root for someone like this,” the president added.

The criticism of an American athlete from a U.S. president was a sharp departure from the unifying, apolitical tones the White House typically strikes during the Olympics, highlighting how the tension over the enforcement of Trump's immigration policies has now bled into athletic competition. Other leading conservative voices, ranging from podcaster Megyn Kelly to a Republican candidate for governor in Florida, added to the critique of Hess, with some calling for him to be taken off the U.S. team.

By Monday, other top athletes who have previously found themselves in political controversy were rallying to Hess' defense.

“In moments like these, it is really important for us to unite and kind of stand up for one another for all that's going on,” said Chloe Kim, the two-time Olympic gold medalist whose parents are South Korean immigrants and who has faced racism throughout her career for her Asian heritage.

After her silver-medal win in slopestyle, Eileen Gu, who was born in San Francisco and competes for China, said she had been in touch with Hess, who told her she was one of the few people who could relate to what he's going through.

“As someone who's been caught in the crossfire before, I feel sorry for the athletes,” said Gu, whose decision to compete for China drew sharp critiques.

The Olympics are never walled off from politics

The Olympics are never walled off from political and cultural debates. The raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the 1968 Olympics remain one of the most powerful and enduring images of protest and resistance to racial injustice in the U.S. Since then, political commentary from athletes has become more commonplace, aided by social media platforms that allow competitors to share their real-time thoughts on everything from food and nutrition to news of the day.

The comments from athletes in Italy are notable, however, because they're coming at the biggest global sporting event to occur since federal agents killed two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis last month, reigniting

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a debate in the U.S. and abroad over Trump's hard-line immigration measures.

Chris Lillis, another American freestyle skier, said he felt "heartbroken about what's happening in the United States."

"As a country, we need to focus on respecting everybody's rights and making sure that we're treating our citizens as well as anybody with love and respect," he said. "I hope that when people look at athletes competing in the Olympics, they realize that that's the America that we're trying to represent."

Skiing star Mikaela Shiffrin quoted Nelson Mandela as she acknowledged "a lot of hardship in the world globally, and there's a lot of heartbreak, there's a lot of violence."

"It can be tough to reconcile that when you're also competing for medals in an Olympic event," she said. "I'm really hoping to show up and represent my own values, values of inclusivity, values of diversity and kindness and sharing, tenacity, work ethic, showing up with my team every single day."

For the most part, athletes are largely engaging in political conversation during news conferences when they're specifically asked to respond to news events. At one such press event, American figure skater Amber Glenn, an outspoken LGBTQ+ rights activist, noted that the queer community is going through a "hard time" under Trump. She later said she would step back from social media after receiving threats on the platform.

Political controversy can put athletes at an uneasy intersection as they weigh whether to use their platforms to take a stance or avoid anything that might upset their fans or sponsors. During last month's Australian Open tennis tournament, American Amanda Anisimova said questions about U.S. politics were not "relevant." Another American player, Taylor Fritz, said he felt that "whatever I say here is going to get put in a headline and it's going to get taken out of context."

"So I'd really rather not do something that's going to cause a big distraction for me in the middle of the tournament," he said.

Back at the Olympics, U.S. speedskater Casey Dawson, said "we definitely know the whole situation going on in the USA" while noting that "politics don't apply to us" at the Games.

"We're here to skate," said Dawson, who finished eighth in the men's 5,000 meters on Sunday with Vance and his family in the stands. "We're here to skate. We're here to perform."

The spotlight on the U.S. that comes with global sports will only intensify in the coming years. The U.S., along with Canada and Mexico, will host this year's World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympics will be held in Los Angeles. While there's little chance that political tensions in the U.S. will ease in that time, some hope that sports will serve as a way for people to process their disagreements and ultimately come together.

"There's this really magical thing that sport can do," said Ashleigh Huffman, who was the chief of sports diplomacy at the State Department during the Biden and first Trump administrations. "It can lower the temperature of the room."

## Navy leader wants to move faster and leaner instead of turning to aircraft carriers in crisis

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Navy's top uniformed officer wants to convince commanders to use smaller, newer ships and other assets for missions instead of consistently turning to huge aircraft carriers — as seen now in the American military buildups off Venezuela and Iran.

Adm. Daryl Caudle's vision — what he calls his "Fighting Instructions" — calls for the Navy to deploy more tailored groups of ships and equipment that would offer the sea service more flexibility to respond to crises as they develop.

Caudle spoke to The Associated Press before the rollout of the new strategy, which comes as the Trump administration has moved aircraft carriers and other ships to regions around the world to address emerging concerns. This has disrupted standing deployment plans, scrambled ships to sail thousands of miles and put increasing strain on vessels and equipment that are already facing mounting maintenance issues.

The world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, was redirected late last year from the Mediter-

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anean Sea to the Caribbean Sea, where the crew ultimately supported last month's operation to capture then-Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. And two weeks ago, the USS Abraham Lincoln arrived in the Middle East as tensions with Iran rise, having been pulled from the South China Sea.

In an interview, Caudle said his strategy would make the Navy's presence in regions like the Caribbean much leaner and better tailored to meet actual threats.

He said he's already spoken with the commander of U.S. Southern Command, which encompasses the Caribbean and Venezuela, "and we're in negotiation on what his problem set is — I want to be able to convey that I can meet that with a tailored package there."

Admiral sees a smaller contingent in the Caribbean in the future

Speaking broadly, Caudle said he envisions the mission in the Caribbean focusing more on interdictions and keeping an eye on merchant shipping.

The U.S. military has already seized multiple suspicious and falsely flagged tankers connected with Venezuela that were part of a global shadow fleet of merchant vessels that help governments evade sanctions.

"That doesn't really require a carrier strike group to do that," Caudle said, adding that he believes the mission could be done with some smaller littoral combat ships, Navy helicopters and close coordination with the Coast Guard.

The Navy has had 11 ships, including the Ford and several amphibious assault ships with thousands of Marines, in South American waters for months. It is a major shift for a region that has historically seen deployments of one or two smaller Navy ships.

"I don't want a lot of destroyers there driving around just to actually operate the radar to get awareness on motor vessels and other tankers coming out of port," Caudle said. "It's really not a well-suited match for that mission."

Turning to drones or robotic systems

To compensate, Caudle envisions leaning more heavily on drones or other robotic systems to offer military commanders the same capabilities but with less investment from Navy ships. He acknowledges this will not be an easy sell.

Caudle said even if a commander knows about a new capability, the staff "may not know how to ask for that, integrate it, and know how to employ it in an effective way to bring this new niche capability to bear."

"That requires a bit of an education campaign here," he later added.

President Donald Trump has favored large and bold responses from the Navy and has leaned heavily toward displays of firepower.

Trump has referred to aircraft carriers and their accompanying destroyers as armadas and flotillas. He also revived the historic battleship title for a planned type of ship that would sport hypersonic missiles, nuclear cruise missiles, rail guns and high-powered lasers.

If built, the proposed "Trump-class battleship" would be longer and larger than the World War II-era Iowa-class battleships, though the Navy has not only struggled to field some of the technologies that Trump says will be aboard but it has had challenges building even smaller, less sophisticated ships on time and on budget.

Given this trend, Caudle said if the Lincoln's recent redeployment to the Middle East were to happen under his new plan, he would talk with the Indo-Pacific commander about how to compensate for the loss.

"So, as Abraham Lincoln comes out, I've got a three ship (group) that's going to compensate for that," Caudle suggested as an example.

Caudle argues that his vision already is in place and working in Europe and North America "for the last four or five years."

He said this could apply soon in the Bering Strait, which separates Russia and Alaska, noting that "the importance of the Arctic continues to get more and more prevalent" as China, Russia and the U.S. prioritize the region.

Trump has cited the threat from China and Russia in his demands to take over Greenland, the Arctic island overseen by NATO ally Denmark.

Caudle said he knows he needs to offer the commanders in that region "more solutions" and his "tailored force packages would be a way to get after that."

## New Mexico lawsuit accuses Meta of failing to protect children from sexual exploitation online

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Meta has failed to disclose what it knows about the harmful effect of its platforms on children in violation of New Mexico's consumer protection laws, a state prosecutor said Monday as a trial began over the dangers of child sexual exploitation on social media.

It's the first stand-alone trial from state prosecutors in a stream of lawsuits against major social media companies, including Meta, over harm to children, and one that is likely to highlight explicit online content and its effects.

In his opening statement, prosecution attorney Donald Migliori said Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, has misrepresented the safety of its platforms, engineering its algorithms to keep young people online while knowing that children are at risk of sexual exploitation on social media.

Migliori said state prosecutors will present evidence that Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, have emphasized profits over safety.

"Meta clearly knew that youth safety was not its corporate priority ... that youth safety was less important than growth and engagement," Migliori told the jury.

Meta attorney Kevin Huff pushed back on those assertions in his opening statement, highlighting an array of efforts by the company to weed out harmful content from its platforms while warning users that some dangerous content still gets past its safety net. He repeated the refrain that "Meta disclosed, it didn't deceive."

"The state cannot win this case by showing there is bad content on Facebook and Instagram," he told the jury. You must "instead focus on whether Meta disclosed risks to user. ... And the evidence will show that Meta did disclose that."

More than 40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits against Meta, claiming it is deliberately designing features that addict children to its platforms and failed to protect children and their mental health. Most filed their lawsuits in federal court.

Also Monday, trial began in a separate case in California accusing Meta and Google of deliberately making their social media platforms addictive.

State says Zuckerberg and others understood the risks

It's unclear whether Zuckerberg will testify. New Mexico limits the ability to compel out-of-state witnesses to testify in person. Prosecutors on Monday did preview a video deposition of Zuckerberg that might figure prominently in the trial.

Other current and former Meta employees are expected to testify that the company has misrepresented what it knows about the effects its platforms have on teenagers and preteens. The state's witness list includes Arturo Béjar, an engineering director at Facebook from 2009 to 2015, who testified to Congress about his daughter confronting harassment on Instagram.

Prosecutors say they'll present evidence that Meta knew that some 500,000 inappropriate interactions with children take place daily on its platforms, and that the company doesn't adequately track those interactions.

Lawsuits across the country

In California, opening statements began Monday in a separate case against Meta and Google's YouTube alleging their platforms are deliberately addictive and harm children.

The outcome there and in New Mexico could challenge the companies' First Amendment shield and Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which protects tech companies from liability for material posted on their platforms.

A team led by New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez, who sued Meta in 2023, built their case by posing as children on social media, then documenting sexual solicitations as well as Meta's response.

Torrez — a Democrat seeking reelection this year to a second term — wants Meta to implement more effective age verification and do more to remove bad actors from its platform.

He also is seeking changes to algorithms that can serve up harmful material, and has criticized end-to-end privacy encryption that can prevent the monitoring of communications with children for safety. Meta has noted that encrypted messaging is encouraged in general as a privacy and security measure by some state and federal authorities.

Meta says investigation is 'ethically compromised'

Meta says prosecutors are cherry-picking evidence to make sensationalist arguments. Meta spokesperson Andy Stone posted online Sunday that the state's investigation is "ethically compromised" by its use of child photos on proxy accounts, delays by prosecutors in reporting child sexual abuse material and the disposal of data from devices used in the investigation.

"The evidence will show that the state rigged this investigation to get a fake result," Huff told the jury Monday. "We think you will reject the reliability and fairness of the state's fake-account investigation."

## **FBI says it's unaware of Savannah Guthrie talking with her mom's suspected kidnappers**

By TY O'NEIL Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — The FBI is not aware of ongoing communication between Savannah Guthrie's family and any suspected kidnappers more than a week after the "Today" show host's mom went missing, the agency said Monday.

The FBI has also not identified any suspects or persons of interest in the disappearance of 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie, Connor Hagan, a spokesperson for the FBI, said in a statement. The agency is operating a 24-hour command post equipped with investigative teams and crisis management experts while asking for help from the public.

"Someone has that one piece of information that can help us bring Nancy home," he said.

In a video released Monday, Savannah Guthrie said the family was "at an hour of desperation" but that they continue to believe her mother is out there and hearing everyone's prayers.

"She was taken and we don't know where, and we need your help," Guthrie said in the video posted on Instagram, urging people nationwide to be on the lookout "no matter where you are, even if you're far from Tucson, if you see anything, if you hear anything."

By Monday evening, a purported ransom deadline apparently set by her mom's abductors appeared to have passed.

The mysterious disappearance and search has riveted the country — from President Donald Trump, who spoke with Savannah Guthrie last week, to the online sleuths who've flooded social media with tips, theories and rumors.

The FBI is asking for the public's help on digital billboards up in several major cities in Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico. The FBI has offered a \$50,000 reward for information.

Multiple news outlets received alleged ransom letters during the past week. At least one letter made monetary demands and set deadlines for receiving the money. The first deadline passed last Thursday and a second one was set for Monday evening.

Law enforcement officials declined to affirm that the letters were credible but said all tips were being investigated seriously. The Pima County Sheriff's Department said Monday that law enforcement tip lines have received thousands of calls.

Authorities say they have growing concerns about Nancy Guthrie's health because she needs daily medication. She is said to have a pacemaker and has dealt with high blood pressure and heart issues, according to sheriff's dispatcher audio on broadcastify.com.

In a video Saturday, Savannah Guthrie said the family was prepared to pay for her mother's return. "This is the only way we will have peace. This is very valuable to us, and we will pay."

Authorities believe Nancy Guthrie was taken against her will from her home just outside Tucson. She was last seen there Jan. 31 and reported missing the next day after not attending church. DNA tests showed blood on Guthrie's front porch was a match to her, and her doorbell camera was disconnected in the early

hours of Sunday morning, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos has said.

Outside the home on Monday, neighbors strolled by on their morning jogs and walks, while a county sheriff's deputy remained stationed out front.

Law enforcement's work at Guthrie residences will continue Tuesday "as part of the ongoing investigative process, including the expansion of the search and follow-up on new leads," the Pima County Sheriff's Department said in a statement Monday.

Detectives and agents carried out follow-up work in the neighborhood and other locations over the weekend as part of the investigation, the Pima County Sheriff's Department said Sunday.

Investigators on Saturday were inside daughter Annie Guthrie's home, about 4 miles (6 kilometers) from Nancy Guthrie's house. On Sunday, an investigator was seen using a pole to search an underground tank behind Nancy Guthrie's home.

## **NYC nurses reach a deal to end a strike at 2 major hospitals while walkout continues at another**

By PHILIP MARCELO and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nurses and two major hospital systems in New York City have reached a deal to end a nearly monthlong strike over staffing levels, workplace safety, health insurance and other issues.

The tentative agreement announced Monday by the nurses' union involves the Montefiore and Mount Sinai hospital systems. Nurses remain on strike at NewYork-Presbyterian.

The walkout began Jan. 12, prompting the hospitals to scramble to hire legions of temporary nurses to fill in during a demanding flu season.

The three-year proposal affects roughly 10,500 of the some 15,000 nurses on strike at some of the city's biggest private, nonprofit hospitals.

The union said nurses at Montefiore and Mount Sinai hospitals will vote to ratify their contracts starting Monday. If the tentative deals are ratified, nurses will return to work Saturday.

"For four weeks, nearly 15,000 NYSNA members held the line in the cold and in the snow for safe patient care," Nancy Hagans, president of the New York State Nurses Association, said in a statement. "Now, nurses at Montefiore and Mount Sinai systems are heading back to the bedside with our heads held high."

The nurses union said the tentative agreements call for a 12% pay raise over three years, as well as maintain nurses' health benefits with no additional out-of-pocket costs.

In addition, the proposed pacts include new protections against workplace violence, including specific protections for transgender and immigrant nurses and patients, as well as provisions addressing artificial intelligence in hospitals, the union said.

A Montefiore spokesperson declined to comment other than to confirm its nurses would be voting through Wednesday.

Brendan Carr, Mount Sinai's CEO, said in a note to hospital staff that it would take time for the system to "rebuild the momentum" after a "long and difficult" negotiation.

"I commit to you that we will heal the organization together in the service of continuing to help people to live longer and better lives," he wrote.

Meanwhile, NewYork-Presbyterian said it agreed over the weekend to a proposal from mediators that includes pay raises, preserves nurses' pensions, maintains their health benefits and increases staffing levels. The union responded that no deal has been reached and the strike remains in effect.

Jennifer Lynch was among the union members picketing in front of NewYork-Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital in Manhattan on Monday. She said staffing levels and job security were among the top sticking points in negotiations.

"It's incredibly frustrating that other employers are willing to give fair contracts to their employees and ours has yet to do that," she said.

Maria Tsoi, a NewYork-Presbyterian nurse, said her hospital treats as many as 300 patients in the emergency department at any given time -- far too many to handle at the current staffing levels.

"So what we're asking is for more nurses," Tsoi said. "That's why we want the hospital to hire more nurses, so that we can better care for our patients."

The affected hospitals have insisted their operations are running smoothly during the walkout, with organ transplants, cardiac surgeries and other complex procedures largely uninterrupted. Many of the medical centers, however, canceled scheduled surgeries, transferred some patients and discharged others ahead of the strike.

The striking nurses' priorities vary by hospital, but staffing has generally been a central issue. Nurses complained of being overworked, saying the hospitals held out for weeks on committing to more manageable patient loads. The union said Monday that the tentative agreements would increase staffing and otherwise address those concerns.

The union has also sought workplace security upgrades and restrictions on the use of artificial intelligence. Hospital staffers' longstanding security concerns flared into public view when a gunman entered Mount Sinai in November and a man holed up in a Brooklyn hospital with a sharp object last month. Police killed both men.

The hospitals said the union's demands were exorbitant. They say unionized nurses' salaries already average \$162,000 to \$165,000 a year, not including benefits.

The nurses have countered that top hospital executives make millions of dollars a year.

Not every hospital in the three health care systems was affected by the strike, nor were any city-run public hospitals. Other private hospitals reached last-minute deals with the union.

Nurses staged a three-day strike in 2023 in the Mount Sinai and Montefiore systems. They ultimately inked contracts that, among other measures, raised pay 19% over three years.

## **Ghislaine Maxwell appeals for clemency from Trump as she declines to answer questions from lawmakers**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ghislaine Maxwell, the former girlfriend of Jeffrey Epstein, declined to answer questions from House lawmakers in a deposition Monday, but indicated that if President Donald Trump ended her prison sentence, she was willing to testify that neither he nor former President Bill Clinton had done anything wrong in their connections with Epstein.

The House Oversight Committee had wanted Maxwell to answer questions during a video call to the federal prison camp in Texas where she's serving a 20-year sentence for sex trafficking, but she invoked her Fifth Amendment rights to avoid answering questions that would be self-incriminating. She's come under new scrutiny as lawmakers try to investigate how Epstein, a well-connected financier, was able to sexually abuse underage girls for years.

Amid a reckoning over Epstein's abuse that has spilled into the highest levels of businesses and governments around the globe, lawmakers are searching for anyone who was connected to Epstein and may have facilitated his abuse. So far, the revelations have shown how both Trump and Clinton spent time with Epstein in the 1990s and early 2000s, but they have not been credibly accused of wrongdoing.

Dressed in a brown, prison-issued shirt and sitting at a conference table with a bottle of water, Maxwell repeatedly said she was invoking "my Fifth Amendment right to silence," video later released by the committee showed.

During the closed-door deposition, Maxwell's attorney David Oscar Markus said in a statement to the committee that "Maxwell is prepared to speak fully and honestly if granted clemency by President Trump."

He added that both Trump and Clinton "are innocent of any wrongdoing," but that "Ms. Maxwell alone can explain why, and the public is entitled to that explanation."

Maxwell's appeal hits pushback

Democrats said that was a brazen effort by Maxwell to have Trump end her prison sentence.

"It's very clear she's campaigning for clemency," said Rep. Melanie Stansbury, a New Mexico Democrat.

Asked Monday about Maxwell's appeal, the White House pointed to previous remarks from the president

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that indicated the prospect of a pardon was not on his radar.

And other Republicans push backed to the notion quickly after Maxwell made the appeal.

"NO CLEMENCY. You comply or face punishment," Republican Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, wrote on social media. "You deserve JUSTICE for what you did you monster."

Maxwell has also been seeking to have her conviction overturned, arguing that she was wrongfully convicted. The Supreme Court rejected her appeal last year, but in December she requested that a federal judge in New York consider what her attorneys describe as "substantial new evidence" that her trial was spoiled by constitutional violations.

Maxwell's attorney cited that petition as he told lawmakers she would invoke her Fifth Amendment rights.

Family members of the late Virginia Giuffre, one of the most outspoken victims of Epstein, also released a letter to Maxwell making it clear they did not consider her "a bystander" to Epstein's abuse.

"You were a central, deliberate actor in a system built to find children, isolate them, groom them, and deliver them to abuse," Sky and Amanda Roberts wrote in the letter addressed to Maxwell.

Maxwell was moved from a federal prison in Florida to a low-security prison camp in Texas last summer after she participated in two-days of interviews with Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche.

The Republican chair of the committee, Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, had also subpoenaed her at the time, but her attorneys have consistently told the committee that she wouldn't answer questions. However, Comer came under pressure to hold the deposition as he pressed for the committee to enforce subpoenas on Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. After Comer threatened them with contempt of Congress charges, they both agreed to sit for depositions later this month.

Comer has been haggling with the Clintons over whether that testimony should be held in a public hearing, but Comer reiterated Monday that he would insist on holding closed-door depositions and later releasing transcripts and video.

Lawmakers review unredacted files

Meanwhile, several lawmakers visited a Justice Department office in Washington Monday to look through unredacted versions of the files on Epstein that the department has released to comply with a law passed by Congress last year. As part of an arrangement with the Justice Department, lawmakers were given access to the over 3 million released files in a reading room with four computers. Lawmakers can only make handwritten notes, and their staff are not allowed in with them.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, spent several hours in the reading room Monday morning. He told reporters as he returned to the Capitol that even if all the House members who triggered the vote on releasing the files "spent every waking hour over at the Department of Justice, it would still take us months to get through all of those documents."

Democrats on Raskin's committee are looking ahead to a Wednesday hearing with Attorney General Pam Bondi, where they are expected to sharply question her on the publication of the Epstein files. The Justice Department failed to redact the personal information of many victims, including inadvertently releasing nude photos of them.

"Over and over we begged them, please be careful, please be more careful," said Jennifer Freeman, an attorney representing survivors. "The damage has already been done. It feels incompetent, it feels intimidating and it feels intentional."

Democrats also say the Justice Department redacted information that should have been made public, including information that could lead to scrutiny of Epstein's associates.

Rep. Thomas Massie, a Kentucky Republican who sponsored the legislation to force the release of the files, said that after reviewing the unredacted versions for several hours, he had found the names of six men "that are likely incriminated by their inclusion." He called on the Justice Department to pursue accountability for the men, but said he could potentially name them in a House floor speech, where his actions would be constitutionally protected from lawsuits.

Massie, along with California Democratic Rep. Ro Khanna, said they also came across a number of files that still had redactions. They said that was likely because the FBI had turned over redacted versions of

the files to the Justice Department.

Khanna said "it wasn't just Epstein and Maxwell" who were involved in sexually abusing underage girls. Release of the files has set in motion multiple political crises around the world, including in the United Kingdom, where Prime Minister Keir Starmer is clinging to his job after it was revealed his former ambassador to the U.S. had maintained close ties to Epstein. But Democratic lawmakers bemoaned that so far U.S. political figures seem to be escaping unscathed.

"I'm just afraid that the general worsening and degradation of American life has somehow conditioned people not to take this as seriously as we should be taking it," Raskin said.

## Lindsey Vonn's father tells the AP he wants her to retire after her Olympic crash

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Lindsey Vonn's father said Monday that the American superstar will no longer race if he has any influence over her decision and that she will not return to the Winter Olympics after breaking her left leg in the downhill over the weekend.

"She's 41 years old and this is the end of her career," Alan Kildow said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "There will be no more ski races for Lindsey Vonn, as long as I have anything to say about it."

Kildow and the rest of Vonn's family — a brother and two sisters — have been with Vonn while she is being treated at a hospital in Treviso following her fall and helicopter evacuation from the course in Cortina on Sunday.

Vonn said late Monday on Instagram that she had sustained a "complex tibia fracture that is currently stable but will require multiple surgeries to fix properly."

Kildow declined to comment on the injuries, but he did address how Vonn was doing emotionally.

"She's a very strong individual," Kildow said. "She knows physical pain and she understands the circumstances that she finds herself in. And she's able to handle it. Better than I expected. She's a very, very strong person. And so I think she's handling it real well."

Kildow — a former ski racer himself who taught his daughter to race — said he slept in his daughter's hospital room overnight.

"She has somebody with her — or multiple people with her — at all times," Kildow said. "We'll have people here as long as she's here."

Kildow and the rest of Vonn's family watched the crash from the finish area with all of the other spectators.

"First, the shock and the horror of the whole thing, seeing a crash like that," Kildow said of what he felt watching the scene unfold. "It can be dramatic and traumatic. You're just horrified at what those kinds of impacts have."

"You can go into a shock an emotional psychological shock," he added. "Because it's difficult to just accept what's happened. But she's well cared for. ... And the USOC and the U.S. Ski team have a very, very top-notch doctor with her and she is being very well cared for here in Italy."

Vonn raced the downhill despite tearing the ACL in her left knee nine days earlier in another crash.

"What happened to her had nothing to do with the ACL issue on her left leg. Nothing," Kildow said. "She had demonstrated that she was able to function at a very high level with the two downhill training runs. ... And she had been cleared by high level physicians to ski."

Kildow said the crash was less a result of Vonn's knee injury than the way she pushed the limits of her racing line to the point where she clipped a gate early in her run and got knocked out of control.

"There are times sometimes in any race, but especially in downhill, where you have to take a little speed off," he said. "You can give yourself a little bit more leeway on the line so you don't put yourself in a questionable position."

Vonn, who holds the record of 12 World Cup victories in Cortina, returned to the circuit last season after nearly six years of retirement and after a partial titanium replacement surgery in her right knee. She won

two downhill and finished on the podium in seven of the eight World Cup races that she finished this season — and came fourth in the other one.

"She won 84 World Cup races. And not many people do that," Kildow said, referring to Vonn's victory total, which place her second on the all-time women's list behind teammate Mikaela Shiffrin's record 108 wins.

"And there's a hell of a lot of the difference between a speed race, a downhill especially, and a slalom," Kildow added.

Vonn will not return to the Olympics to cheer on teammates or for anything else, Kildow said.

"No, she's not that in kind of situation," he said. "She will be going home at an appropriate point in time."

## Gabbard's office warns attorney against sharing classified complaint with Congress

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The general counsel for Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard on Monday warned the attorney for an anonymous government employee not to directly share a top-secret complaint about Gabbard's handling of classified material with members of Congress.

The letter to attorney Andrew Bakaj is the latest escalation in the back-and-forth accusations over the classified complaint, which alleges that Gabbard withheld top-secret material for political reasons.

Two inspectors general for the intelligence community reviewed the claim and found that particular allegation did not appear to be credible. Gabbard has denied any wrongdoing and said she did all she could to ensure the report reached Congress.

Democrats on the House and Senate intelligence committees have blasted Gabbard's office over the handling of the complaint, questioning why it took eight months for it to be sent to select members of Congress as required by law.

Here's what to know about the complaint and the next steps:

What is known about the complaint

The anonymous author of the complaint works for a U.S. intelligence agency and in May filed a report claiming that Gabbard withheld classified information for political reasons. Gabbard oversees the coordination of 18 intelligence agencies.

The complaint made two allegations, according to a memo sent to lawmakers by the current inspector general, Christopher Fox: The first is that the "distribution of a highly classified intelligence report was restricted for political purposes," while the second accuses Gabbard's general counsel of failing to report a potential crime to the Justice Department.

In June, the inspector general at the time, Tamara Johnson, found that the claim Gabbard distributed classified information along political lines did not appear to be credible, Fox said in the memo to lawmakers. Johnson was "unable to assess the apparent credibility" of the accusation about the general counsel's office, Fox wrote.

The watchdog said he would have deemed the complaint non-urgent, meaning it never would have been referred to lawmakers.

"If the same or similar matter came before me today, I would likely determine that the allegations do not meet the statutory definition of 'urgent concern,'" Fox wrote.

The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and other news outlets reported that the complaint stemmed from a call between two foreign nationals that mentioned someone close to President Donald Trump and was intercepted by the National Security Agency. The news reports, which cited anonymous sources, said the discussion involved Iran and that Gabbard notified the White House personally, while the complaint accused her of blocking the NSA from reporting the interaction to other agencies. The AP could not immediately confirm the reports.

The NSA declined to offer details about the complaint Monday, saying in a statement that it works closely with the FBI and others to investigate the mishandling or disclosure of classified information.

Gabbard's office warns attorney

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Bakaj, a former CIA officer and an attorney for the person making the complaint, offered to meet with certain lawmakers or their staffs to discuss the allegations and his concerns about Gabbard's review.

ODNI's general counsel warned against that in its letter Monday, noting that Bakaj or his client could face criminal charges if they improperly revealed classified material during the briefing.

"The highly classified nature of the underlying complaint increases the risk that you or your client inadvertently or otherwise breaks the law by divulging or mishandling classified information," the general counsel's office wrote. "You may have other means of appearing in front of Congress, but this is not it."

Bakaj did not immediately respond to questions Monday about the letter.

Under federal law, intelligence whistleblowers are entitled to ask to refer their complaints directly to key lawmakers even if the inspector general finds them non-credible, so long as they deem the allegations urgent. That determination was made by the original watchdog, but the complaint didn't reach lawmakers until last week.

Copies of the top-secret complaint were hand-delivered beginning last week to the "Gang of Eight" — a group comprised of the House and Senate leaders from both parties as well as the four top lawmakers on the House and Senate intelligence committees.

Additional meetings for the remaining members are tentatively set for Wednesday.

Democrats decry delay as GOP backs Gabbard

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the senior Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he will push Gabbard for more answers about the underlying complaint and why it took so long to get the report to lawmakers.

The number of redactions make it hard to evaluate the allegations, he said.

"The fact that this sat out there for six, seven, eight months now and we are only seeing it now, raises huge concerns in and of itself," Warner said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation."

The Republicans who lead the intelligence committees are backing Gabbard, making it less likely the panels take further steps to investigate the complaint.

"It seemed like an effort by the president's critics to undermine him," Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, the Senate Intelligence Committee's chairman, wrote Saturday on X.

Intelligence chief responds to critics

Gabbard noted in a lengthy social media post Saturday that Johnson was appointed interim inspector general for the intelligence community during President Joe Biden's administration.

She included a detailed timeline that she said shows she acted quickly to ensure the complaint reached Congress. Gabbard wrote that she was aware of the complaint in June and believed the investigation had ended after it was found non-credible, only for the inspector general's office to inform her in December that the complaint had to be reviewed, redacted and sent to members of Congress.

"I took immediate action to provide the security guidance to the Intelligence Community Inspector General who then shared the complaint and referenced intelligence with relevant members of Congress last week," Gabbard wrote.

She also accused Warner and the media of trying to use the complaint to smear her name.

## US stocks drift higher as gold, silver and bitcoin stabilize

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. stocks drifted higher on Monday following big rallies for markets in Asia earlier in the day.

The S&P 500 rose 0.5% and pulled closer to its all-time high set two weeks ago. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 20 points, or less than 0.1%, and the Nasdaq composite gained 0.9%.

The relatively modest moves followed a 3.9% burst higher for Japan's Nikkei 225 to a record. Stocks rallied there following a landslide victory for the prime minister's political party in a parliamentary election. The thought is that will give Sanae Takaichi more power to push through reforms that will boost the economy and market.

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On Wall Street, the U.S. stock market was coming off its best day since May to close last week, but several concerns still hang over the market. That includes criticism that stocks have simply become too expensive following their run to records.

Worries are also heavy about whether all the huge spending by Big Tech and other companies on artificial-intelligence technology will produce enough profit to make the investments worth it.

Some of the winners from that rush into AI drove the market higher on Monday. Chip companies rose, for example, with Nvidia up 2.4% and Broadcom up 3.3%. They were two of the strongest forces pushing the S&P 500 upward.

Kroger climbed 3.9% after the grocer named a former Walmart executive as its new chief executive officer.

Transocean reversed an early loss and rose 5.9% after the offshore drilling company said it would buy Valaris in an all-stock deal valued at \$5.8 billion. Valaris leaped 34.3%.

On the losing end was Hims & Hers, which sank 16% after Novo Nordisk filed a lawsuit and alleged Hims & Hers is unlawfully selling versions of its weight-loss treatments. The suit follows a move by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to restrict access to the ingredients needed to copy popular weight-loss medications.

Hims & Hers said, "Big Pharma is weaponizing the US judicial system to limit consumer choice" in a post on the X account for the company's communications team.

Novo Nordisk's stock that trades in the United States rose 3.6%.

Workday fell 5.1% after the AI platform said its CEO, Carl Eschenbach, is stepping down. Company co-founder Aneel Bhusri is returning as chief executive.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 32.52 points to 6,964.82. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 20.20 to 50,135.87, and the Nasdaq composite gained 207.46 to 23,238.67.

In the bond market, Treasury yields held relatively steady ahead of potentially market-moving reports coming later in the week. The U.S. government will offer the latest monthly update on the health of the job market on Wednesday. Friday will bring the latest monthly reading of inflation at the consumer level.

Either report could sway expectations for what the Federal Reserve will do with interest rates. The Fed has put its cuts to interest rates on hold, but a weakening of the job market could push it to resume more quickly. Too-hot inflation, on the other hand, could keep it on hold for longer.

One of the reasons the U.S. stock market remains close to records is the expectation that the Fed will continue cutting interest rates later this year. Lower rates can give the economy a boost, though they can also worsen inflation.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury eased to 4.20% from 4.22% late Friday.

Other markets that had whipped through more violent moves over recent weeks showed some more strength or stability.

Gold rose 2% to settle at \$5,079.40 per ounce. It's been swinging sharply after roughly doubling in price over 12 months, and it has bounced between \$4,500 and nearly \$5,600. Silver, whose price has been even wilder, jumped 6.9% Monday.

Bitcoin was hanging just below \$71,000 after drifting above the level during the weekend. It had dropped close to \$60,000 last week, more than halfway below its record set in October.

In stock markets abroad, indexes jumped across Asia with Japan's surge. South Korea's Kospi leaped 4.1%, while stocks rose 1.8% in Hong Kong and 1.4% in Shanghai.

The gains were more modest in Europe, where Germany's DAX returned 1.2% and France's CAC 40 rose 0.6%.

## Officials deny seeking quick end to asylum claims for the Minneapolis family of 5-year-old

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Federal authorities have denied attempting to expedite an end to asylum claims by the family of a 5-year-old boy who was detained with his father during the immigration crackdown that has shaken the Minneapolis area.

Images of Liam Conejo Ramos wearing a bunny hat and Spider-Man backpack surrounded by immigration officers stirred outrage over the crackdown.

Danielle Molliver, a lawyer for the boy and his father, told The New York Times that the government was attempting to speed up the deportation proceedings, calling the actions "extraordinary" and possibly "retaliatory."

The government denied that.

"These are regular removal proceedings. They are not in expedited removal," Department of Homeland Security official Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement, adding "there is nothing retaliatory about enforcing the nation's immigration laws."

Molliver told the Times that an immigration judge, during a closed Friday hearing, gave her additional time to argue the family's case.

The family is sequestered pending their next hearing this Friday, according to Kristen Stuenkel, spokesperson for Liam's district, the Columbia Heights Public Schools.

The boy and his father, Adrian Conejo Arias, who originally is from Ecuador, were detained in a Minneapolis suburb on Jan. 20. A judge ordered them released from a detention facility in Dilley, Texas, and they returned to Minnesota on Feb. 1.

Neighbors and school officials have accused federal immigration officers of using the preschooler as "bait" by telling him to knock on the door to his house so that his mother would come outside. DHS has called that description of events an "abject lie." It said the father fled on foot and left the boy in a running vehicle in their driveway.

The government said the boy's father entered the U.S. illegally in December 2024. The family's lawyer, however, said the father entered legally using the CBP One app and that his pending asylum claim allows him to stay in the U.S.

## **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 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, a contributor to 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."

## Palace says King Charles III will support police assessing former Prince Andrew's Epstein links

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III is ready to "support" UK police examining claims that the former Prince Andrew gave confidential information to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, Buckingham Palace said on Monday.

The statement came after Thames Valley Police said Monday that they were "assessing" reports that the former prince, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, sent trade reports to Epstein in 2010. The department, which serves an area west of London that includes Mountbatten-Windsor's former home, previously said it was evaluating allegations that Epstein flew a young woman to Britain to have sex with Andrew, also in 2010.

"The King has made clear, in words and through unprecedented actions, his profound concern at allegations which continue to come to light in respect of Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor's conduct," the palace said in a statement. "While the specific claims in question are for Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor to address, if we are approached by Thames Valley Police we stand ready to support them as you would expect."

The statement is just the latest effort by the palace to distance the royal family from Mountbatten-Windsor as the U.S. Justice Department's release of more than 3 million pages of documents from its investigation into Epstein reveal more embarrassing details about the relationship between the two men. Earlier in the

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day, Prince William and Princess Catherine released their own statement saying they have been “deeply concerned” by recent revelations.

The palace also reiterated Charles and Queen Camilla’s concern for the victims of Epstein’s abuse.

“As was previously stated, Their Majesties’ thoughts and sympathies have been, and remain with, the victims of any and all forms of abuse,” the palace said.

The jeopardy faced by the royal family could be seen Monday when Charles visited Lancashire, in north-west England. While most of the crowd clapped, cheered and waved flags, one person shouted, “How long have you known about Andrew?”

Concerns about Mountbatten-Windsor’s links to Epstein have dogged the royal family for more than a decade.

The late Queen Elizabeth II forced her second son to give up royal duties and end his charitable work in 2019 after he tried to explain away his friendship with Epstein during a catastrophic interview with the BBC. After more details about the relationship emerged in a book published last year, Charles stripped him of the right to be called a prince and ordered him to move out of a royal residence close to Windsor Castle.

But the Justice Department documents have brought new attention to Mountbatten-Windsor as reporters home in on dozens of email exchanges between Epstein and the former prince, many of which took place after the financier was convicted of soliciting a minor for prostitution in 2008.

Correspondence unearthed in recent days appear to show that Mountbatten-Windsor sent Epstein copies of his reports from a 2010 tour of Southeast Asia, which he undertook as Britain’s envoy for international trade. An earlier email appears to show Andrew sharing his itinerary for the two-week trip to Hanoi, Saigon, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong with Epstein.

“We can confirm receipt of this report and are assessing the information in line with our established procedures,” Thames Valley police said in a statement released on Monday.

Adding to the storm, a U.S.-based attorney said on Feb. 1 that he represented a woman who alleges Epstein flew her to Britain to have sex with Mountbatten-Windsor. The encounter took place at Royal Lodge, the former prince’s longtime home in Windsor, the attorney said in an interview with the BBC.

Police previously said they were assessing this report.

The king last week forced Mountbatten-Windsor to move out of Royal Lodge months ahead of schedule. Anger over Mountbatten-Windsor’s living arrangements had grown amid concern that he was still reaping rewards from his status as a royal even though he is no longer a working member of the royal family.

Mountbatten-Windsor is now living on the king’s Sandringham estate in eastern England. He will live temporarily at Wood Farm Cottage while his permanent home on the estate undergoes repairs. Unlike Royal Lodge, which is owned by the crown and managed for the benefit of taxpayers, Sandringham is owned privately by the king.

Thames Valley Police began its latest inquiry after Graham Smith, chief executive of the anti-monarchy group Republic, reported Mountbatten-Windsor for suspected abuse of public office and violations of Britain’s Official Secrets Act.

Smith, whose group seeks to replace the king with an elected head of state, compared Mountbatten-Windsor’s correspondence with Epstein to earlier revelations about Peter Mandelson, Britain’s former ambassador to the U.S., who is already the subject of a police investigation into whether he shared sensitive information with Epstein. Those communications were also revealed in the Justice Department documents.

“I cannot see any significant difference between these allegations and those against Peter Mandelson,” Smith said on social media.

## **Masks emerge as symbol of Trump’s ICE crackdown and a flashpoint in Congress**

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Beyond the car windows being smashed, people tackled on city streets — or even a little child with a floppy bunny ears snowcap detained — the images of masked federal officers

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has become a flashpoint in the Trump administration's immigration enforcement operations.

Not in recent U.S. memory has an American policing operation so consistently masked its thousands of officers from the public, a development that the Department of Homeland Security believes is important to safeguard employees from online harassment. But experts warn masking serves another purpose, inciting fear in communities, and risks shattering norms, accountability and trust between the police and its citizenry.

Whether to ban the masks — or allow the masking to continue — has emerged as a central question in the debate in Congress over funding Homeland Security ahead of Friday's midnight deadline, when it faces a partial agency shutdown.

"Humans read each others' faces — that's how we communicate," said Justin Smith, a former Colorado sheriff who is executive director and CEO of the National Sheriffs' Association.

"When you have a number of federal agents involved in these operations, and they can't be identified, you can't see their face, it just tends to make people uncomfortable," he said. "That's bringing up some questions."

Democrats demand 'masks off'

Masks on federal agents have been one constant throughout the first year of President Donald Trump's mass deportation operation.

What began as a jarring image last spring, when plain-clothed officers drawing up their masks surrounded and detained a Tufts University doctoral student near her Massachusetts home, has morphed into familiar scenes in Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities. The shooting deaths of two American citizens at the hands of federal immigration officers during demonstrations against ICE raids in Minneapolis sparked widespread public protest and spurred lawmakers to respond.

"Cameras on, masks off" has become a rallying cry among Democrats, who are also insisting the officers wear body cameras as a way to provide greater accountability and oversight of the operations.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries told reporters at the Capitol that unmasking the federal agents is a "hard red line" in the negotiations ahead.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement says on its website that its officers "wear masks to prevent doxing, which can (and has) placed them and their families at risk. All ICE law enforcement officers carry badges and credentials and will identify themselves when required for public safety or legal necessity."

Fueled with funds from the Trump's big tax cuts bill, which poured some \$170 billion into Homeland Security, ICE has grown to become among the largest law enforcement operations in the nation. Last year, it announced it had more than doubled its ranks, to 22,000, with rapid hiring — and \$50,000 signing bonuses. Homeland Security did not respond to an emailed request for further comment.

Most Republicans say the current political climate leaves the immigration officers, many of them new to the job, exposed if their faces and identities are made public.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said he just can't agree with Democrats' demand that officers unmask themselves.

"You know, there's a lot of vicious people out there, and they'll take a picture of your face, and the next thing you know, your children or your wife or your husband are being threatened at home," he said. "That's just the reality of the world that we're in."

ICE stands apart with masks

It appears no other policing agency in the country regularly uses masking on a widespread basis. Instead, masks are used during special operations, particularly undercover work or at times during large crowd control or protest situations, and when there is inclement weather or individual health concerns.

Experts said only perhaps during the Ku Klux Klan raids or in the Old West has masking been a more widely used tool.

"It is without precedent in modern American history," said the American Civil Liberties Union's Naureen Shah in Washington.

She said the idea of masked patrols on city streets seeking immigrants can leave people scared and confused about who they are encountering — which she suggested is part of the point.

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"I think it's calculated to terrify people," she said. "I don't think anybody viscerally feels like, OK, this is something we want to become a permanent fixture in our streets."

Toward the end of the first Trump administration, Congress sought to clamp down after masked federal agents showed up in 2020 to quell protests in Portland and other cities. A provision requiring agents to clearly identify themselves was tucked into a massive defense authorization bill that Trump signed into law.

Last year, California became the first state in the nation to ban most law enforcement officers, including federal immigration agents, from covering their faces. The Trump administration's Justice Department sued, saying the state's policies "create risk" for the agents.

Police seek middle ground, advocates say unmasking is not enough

Smith, of the sheriffs' association, said there's no easy answer to the current masking debate.

He suggested perhaps a middle ground could be reached — one that would allow officers to wear masks, but also require their badge or other identifying numbers to be prominently displayed.

Advocates said while unmasking the federal agents would be an important step, other restraints on immigration enforcement operations may be even more so.

They are pushing Congress to curb the ability of ICE officers to rely on administrative warrants in immigration operations, particularly to enter people's homes, insisting such actions should be required to use judicial warrants, with sign off from the courts.

There is also an effort to end roving patrols — the ability of immigration officers to use a person's race, language or job location to question their legal status, sometimes called "Kavanaugh stops" after Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's concurring opinion to a Supreme Court decision last summer.

Greg Chen, senior director of government affairs at the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said because Congress gave Homeland Security such robust funding in the tax cuts bill, "That's why the policy reforms are so important right now to bring the agency in check."

Rep. Ayanna Pressley, D-Mass., who recently returned from Minnesota, said the weight of the masked enforcement operation can be felt in ways that impact everyone — regardless of a person's own immigration status.

"It's a very a heavy presence of surveillance and intimidation," she said. "No one is exempt."

## Arizona holds No. 1 spot for 9th week in AP Top 25; Houston rises to No. 3, Kentucky returns at 25th

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Arizona remained firmly atop The Associated Press Top 25 men's college basketball poll for a ninth consecutive week Monday, while Houston jumped back into the top 5 and Kentucky returned to the rankings for the first time since December.

Tommy Lloyd's Wildcats (23-0) claimed all 59 first-place votes in the latest poll, making them the unanimous choice for a fourth consecutive week. That comes after Arizona — one of two unbeaten teams left in Division I — won at rival Arizona State, then returned home to beat Oklahoma State by 37 points.

Michigan (22-1) remained at No. 2, marking the sixth time in Arizona's current reign that the Wolverines sat right behind the Wildcats.

There's been little question as to those two teams being regarded as the nation's best, though the major analytics data sites have preferred a reverse order. KenPom, Evan Miyakawa and Bart Torvik all rank Michigan ahead of Arizona.

The top tier

Houston (21-2) moved up five spots to No. 3 after wins against UCF and at BYU, returning Kelvin Sampson's Cougars inside the top 5 after a November stint that included a week at No. 1.

Duke held its position at No. 4 for a third consecutive week despite losing at rival North Carolina on Seth Trimble's last-second 3-pointer.

Iowa State was fifth, followed by UConn after the Huskies slid three spots following their loss to St.

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John's that ended an 18-game win streak. Nebraska, Illinois, Kansas and Michigan State rounded out the top 10, with the Illini also falling three spots after their overtime road loss to the Spartans.

## Rising

St. John's jumped five spots to No. 17 to match Houston for the week's biggest jump after the UConn win, which pushed the Red Storm's winning streak to nine games entering this week.

No. 11 UNC, No. 14 Florida and No. 15 Virginia all climbed three spots.

In all, nine teams moved up from last week's position.

## Sliding

No. 12 Gonzaga and No. 22 BYU shared honors for the week's biggest tumble by falling six spots. The Zags suffered their first loss since November by losing at Portland, while the Cougars enter this week having lost four straight and five of six.

No. 19 Vanderbilt fell four spots after a home loss to Oklahoma, which dropped the Commodores to 3-4 since a 16-0 start.

Seven teams fell from their position last week while remaining in the poll.

## Status quo

Eight teams held their position from last week, including No. 20 Clemson, No. 21 Arkansas, No. 23 Miami (Ohio) — the nation's other unbeaten team — and No. 24 Louisville.

## Comings and goings

Kentucky was the week's lone addition at No. 25, returning to the poll for the first time since early December in a season that started with a No. 9 preseason ranking.

The Wildcats have won eight of nine, with Saturday's home win against Tennessee knocking the Volunteers out of the poll (from No. 25).

## Conference watch

The Big 12 has a national-best six ranked teams, followed by the Big Ten and the Atlantic Coast Conference with five each. Of those leagues, the Big 12 and Big Ten each have four teams inside the top 10.

The Southeastern Conference is next with four ranked teams, followed by the Big East with two. The West Coast Conference, Atlantic-10 and Mid-American Conference each have one.

## **Duke surges to No. 11 in AP Top 25 women's poll with 15-game win streak; UConn-UCLA still 1-2**

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Duke climbed up to No. 11 in The Associated Press women's basketball Top 25 poll on Monday thanks to a 15-game winning streak.

The Blue Devils took over sole possession of first-place in the ACC last week with a one-point victory over then-No. 6 Louisville. Duke, which jumped six places this week, hasn't lost since a 16-point defeat to LSU on Dec. 4 that left the team 3-6.

UConn remained the unanimous No. 1 team in the poll as the Huskies continue to steamroll through the regular season. They received all 31 first-place votes from a national media panel after routing DePaul by 46 points and Butler by 32 last week. UConn has won 20 consecutive games by at least 25 points — the longest such streak by a Division I team in over 25 years.

UCLA, South Carolina and Texas followed the Huskies. The Bruins edged then-No. 8 Michigan by three points Sunday to remain in first and undefeated in the Big Ten. The Longhorns beat LSU, which dropped one spot to sixth. Vanderbilt moved back up to fifth.

Michigan, Ohio State, Louisville and Oklahoma round out the top 10 this week.

## Falling just short

Three of Michigan's four losses this season have come by three points to No. 1 UConn, No. 2 UCLA and No. 5 Vanderbilt. The Wolverines have shown they can consistently play with the best teams in the country.

## Conference supremacy

The SEC remained the top conference with nine teams in the poll. The Big Ten is next with seven. The

Big 12 has four teams, the Atlantic Coast Conference has three, and the Big East and Ivy League each have one.

Games of the week

No. 17 TCU at No. 12 Baylor, Thursday. First place in the Big 12 will be on the line as the Bears have a one-game lead in the standings on the Horned Frogs, who also host third-place West Virginia on Sunday.

No. 24 Princeton at Columbia, Friday. The top spot in the Ivy League will be on the line as the Tigers visit the Lions. Princeton holds a one-game lead in the standings over Columbia and Harvard. The Lions handed the Tigers their lone loss in conference play when they met two weeks ago.

## On Capitol Hill, Treasury Secretary Bessent's testimony descends into insults and shouting matches

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A hearing about oversight of the U.S. financial system devolved into insults several times Wednesday as Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent clashed with Democratic lawmakers over fiscal policy, the business dealings of the Trump family and other issues.

Appearances by treasury secretaries on Capitol Hill are more typically known for staid exchanges over economic policy than for political theater, but Wednesday's hearing of the House Financial Services Committee hearing featured several fiery exchanges between the Republican Cabinet member and Democrats, with Bessent even lobbing insults back to the lawmakers.

Bessent called Rep. Sylvia Garcia "confused" when she questioned how undocumented immigrants could affect housing affordability across the country, prompting the Texas Democrat to snap back, "Don't be demeaning to me, alright?"

Bessent later mocked a question from Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-Mass., about shuttered investigations into cryptocurrency firms. Lynch expressed frustration with Bessent's interruptions, saying, "Mister Chairman, the answers have to be responsive if we are going to have a serious hearing."

Bessent replied, "Well, the questions have to be serious."

After a back-and-forth over whether tariffs cause inflation or one-time price increases for consumers, California Democratic Rep. Maxine Waters asked committee leaders to intervene with Bessent: "Can someone shut him up?"

And in a fiery exchange with Rep. Gregory Meeks over the Abu Dhabi royal family's investment into the Trump family's World Liberty Financial cryptocurrency firm last year, the New York Democrat shouted at Bessent: "Stop covering for the president! Stop being a flunky!"

The Treasury Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the fireworks.

Bessent's performance was "not a role you typically see a treasury secretary play," said Graham Steele, a former assistant secretary for financial institutions under Biden-era Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen. The department has traditionally "been removed from some of the day-to-day, hand-to-hand political combat," Steele said in an interview.

He recalled his former boss having tense exchanges over climate change and policy issues with Republican lawmakers during committee hearings, but the exchanges were not personal, he said, noting treasury secretaries have to strike a "delicate balance" of working with the White House while safeguarding the "economic stature" of the country internationally.

In recent months, Bessent has ratcheted up his insults when it comes to Democratic leaders.

He has called California Gov. Gavin Newsom "economically illiterate," compared him to the fictional serial killer Patrick Bateman, and called him "a brontosaurus with a brain the size of a walnut." He has on several occasions called Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren an "American Peronist" after she told American financial institutions not to finance the Trump administration's massive support package for Argentina.

Bessent's combativeness is, in part, a sign of the times, said David Lublin, chair of the Department of Government at American University's School of Public Affairs.

"President Trump has shown he likes belligerence and he likes nominees and others who defend him vociferously," Lublin told The Associated Press.

"It's hard to say that this is unusual for this political environment. What used to be the normal modicum of respect for Congress has frayed to the point of vanishing," Lublin said.

What was unusual, in Lublin's view, was for Bessent to reveal his thoughts on monetary policy — normally the purview of the Federal Reserve — and his insistence that Trump has the right to interfere with the decision-making of the central bank. "You have a cabinet secretary defending the president's efforts to erode institutions," Lublin said.

On Thursday, Bessent will get another opportunity to spar with lawmakers. He is scheduled to appear before the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee on the same topic: the annual report by the Financial Stability Oversight Council, which Bessent leads.

## **Migrants languish in US detention centers facing dire conditions and prolonged waits**

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Felipe Hernandez Espinosa spent 45 days at "Alligator Alcatraz," an immigration holding center in Florida where detainees have reported worms in their food, toilets that don't flush and overflowing sewage. Mosquitoes and other insects are everywhere.

For the past five months, the 34-year-old asylum-seeker has been at an immigration detention camp at the Fort Bliss Army base in El Paso, Texas, where two migrants died in January and which has many of the same conditions, according to human rights groups. Hernandez said he asked to be returned to Nicaragua but was told he has to see a judge. After nearly seven months in detention, his hearing was scheduled for Feb. 26.

Prolonged detention has become more common in President Donald Trump's second term, at least partly because a new policy generally prohibits immigration judges from releasing detainees while their deportation cases wind through backlogged courts. Many, like Hernandez, are prepared to give up any efforts to stay in the United States.

"I came to this country thinking they would help me, and I've been detained for six months without having committed a crime," he said in a phone interview from Fort Bliss. "It is been too long. I am desperate."

The Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that Immigration and Customs Enforcement cannot hold immigrants indefinitely, finding that six months was a reasonable cap.

With the number of people in ICE detention topping 70,000 for the first time, 7,252 people had been in custody at least six months in mid-January, including 79 held for more than two years, according to agency data. That's more than double the 2,849 who were in ICE custody at least six months in December 2024, the last full month of Joe Biden's presidency.

The Trump administration is offering plane fare and \$2,600 for people who leave the country voluntarily. Yet Hernandez and others are told they can't leave detention until seeing a judge.

Legal advisers warn that these are not isolated cases

The first three detainees that attorney Ana Alicia Huerta met on her monthly trip to an ICE detention center in McFarland, California, to offer free legal advice in January said they signed a form agreeing to leave the United States but were still waiting.

"All are telling me: 'I don't understand why I'm here. I'm ready to be deported,'" said Huerta, a senior attorney at the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice. "That's an experience that I've never had before."

A Chinese man has been held for more than a year without seeing an immigration judge, even though he told authorities he was ready to be deported. In the past, Huerta said, she encountered cases like this once every three or four months.

The Department of Homeland Security said its policies follow the law. It noted a court ruling that the administration can continue to detain immigrants without bond.

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"The conditions are so poor and so bad that people say, 'I'm going to give up,'" said Sui Chung, executive director at Americans for Immigrant Justice.

The wait time may depend on the country. Deportations to Mexico are routine, but countries including Cuba, Nicaragua, Colombia and Venezuela have at times resisted accepting deportees.

Among those detained for months are people who have won protection under the United Nations Convention Against Torture, who cannot be deported to their home country but may be sent elsewhere.

In the past, those migrants were released and could get a work permit. Not anymore, said Sarah Houston, managing attorney at Immigrant Defenders Law Center, who has at least three clients with protection under the U.N. torture convention who have been in custody for more than six months. One is from El Salvador, detained for three years. He won his case in October 2025 but is still in custody in California.

"They're just holding these people indefinitely," said Houston, noting that every 90 days, attorneys request the release of these migrants and ICE denies those requests. "We're seeing people who actually win their immigration cases just languishing in jail."

The Nicaraguan who wants to be deported

Hernandez, who doesn't have a lawyer, said he signed documents requesting to be returned to his country or Mexico at least five times. An Oct. 9 hearing was abruptly canceled without explanation. He waited months with no news, until early February, when he learned his new hearing date.

Hernandez, who has allergies and needs a gluten-free diet that he says he hasn't been getting since November, was arrested in July on a lunch break from his job installing power generators in South Florida. His wife was detained with him but a judge allowed her to return to Nicaragua without a formal deportation order on Aug. 28.

Both crossed the Mexican border in 2022 and requested asylum. He said he received death threats after participating in marches against co-presidents and spouses Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

If he returns, they plan to go to Panama or Spain because they fear for their lives in Nicaragua, he said. His files say only that his case is pending.

DHS said Hernandez appealed a deportation order in January 2025 and he cannot be removed now because it could violate his due process rights.

The Dominican who became a father while in detention

Yshael Almonte Mejia has been detained eight months since the government sought dismissal of his asylum case in May 2025, said his aunt, Judith Mejia Lanfranco.

Since then, he has been transferred from a detention center in Florida to Texas to New Mexico.

In November, Almonte married his pregnant American girlfriend via a video call and became the father of a daughter he hasn't seen in person. He was unable to attend the funeral of his sister who died in November.

"He has gone through depression. He has been very bad," his aunt said. "He is desperate and he doesn't even know what's going to happen."

Almonte, 29, came to the U.S. in 2024 and told authorities he cannot return to the Dominican Republic because he fears for his life. In January, he passed his initial asylum screening interview.

DHS did not comment on Almonte.

A Mexican man detained for a year

Some detainees are finding relief in federal court.

A Mexican man detained in October 2024 in Florida was held for a year even though he won a protection under the U.N. torture convention in March 2025.

"Time was passing and I was desperate, afraid that they would send me to another country," the 38-year-old said.

"I didn't know what was going to happen to me," he said, noting that immigration officials weren't giving him any answers.

DHS could not comment on the Mexican man because he shared his story on condition of anonymity out of fear that it could damage his case.

The man said he had lived illegally in the United States from age 10 until he was deported. In Mexico,

he ran his own business, but in 2023 decided to return and illegally crossed the border into the United States. He said he was looking for safety after being threatened by drug cartels who demanded monthly payments.

He was taking antidepressants when he found an attorney who filed a petition in federal court alleging he was being held illegally. He was freed in October 2025, seven months after a judge ordered his release.

But for Hernandez, the Nicaraguan asylum-seeker, desperation led him to request to be returned to the country he had fled.

"I've experienced a lot of trauma. It's very difficult," Hernandez said from Fort Bliss. "I'm always thinking about when I'm going to get out."

## Norwegian ambassador resigns as she faces scrutiny over contacts with Epstein

OSLO, Norway (AP) — A Norwegian ambassador who was involved in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts in the 1990s and most recently served in Jordan has resigned as she faces scrutiny over her contacts with Jeffrey Epstein, the country's Foreign Ministry said.

The ministry announced Mona Juul's resignation on Sunday evening, days after she was suspended as Norway's ambassador to Jordan. That followed reports that Epstein left the children of Juul and her husband, Terje Rød-Larsen, \$10 million in a will drawn up shortly before his death by suicide in a New York prison in 2019.

Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said Juul's decision was "correct and necessary." Her contact with the convicted sex offender showed a "serious lapse in judgment," he said, adding that "the case makes it difficult to restore the trust that the role requires."

A ministry investigation into Juul's knowledge of and contact with Epstein will continue, and Juul will continue discussions with the ministry "so that the matter can be clarified," Eide said.

The ministry said it also launched a review of its funding of and contact with the International Peace Institute, a New York-based think tank, during the period when it was headed by Rød-Larsen. Eide said Rød-Larsen also had shown poor judgment regarding Epstein.

Revelations from the Epstein files have reverberated across several countries — most prominently the U.K., where the former Prince Andrew has long been under pressure. Prime Minister Keir Starmer now faces calls to resign as he contends with fallout from the relationship between Epstein and former British ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson. Starmer appointed Mandelson in 2024 despite knowing he had ties to Epstein.

Rød-Larsen and Juul were among those involved in facilitating the landmark Oslo Accords aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 1990s.

Norway's National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime, or Økokrim, said Monday that it decided last week to open an investigation of Juul and Rød-Larsen.

It said in a statement that Juul is suspected of gross corruption based on her position at the Foreign Ministry, and Rød-Larsen of aiding and abetting gross corruption. Investigators will look among other things into whether Juul received benefits in connection with her position. On Monday, they searched an apartment in Oslo's Frogner district and the home of a witness.

Juul acknowledged in a statement to Norwegian news agency NTB last week that it had been "imprecise" to describe her contact with Epstein as minimal, but said that the contact originated in her husband's relationship with Epstein and she had no independent social or professional relationship with him.

She wrote that her contact with Epstein had been sporadic and private, not part of her official duties, but acknowledged that she should have been much more careful.

The latest batch of Epstein files has cast an unflattering spotlight on other prominent figures in Norway. Crown Princess Mette-Marit on Friday issued an apology "to all of you whom I have disappointed" after documents offered more details of her relationship with Epstein.

Økokrim already 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.

## Hong Kong ex-publisher Jimmy Lai's sentence raises international outcry as China defends it

HONG KONG (AP) — Monday's sentencing of Hong Kong democracy advocate and one-time media magnate Jimmy Lai brought an outcry from governments and rights groups. Chinese and Hong Kong authorities defended it, saying it reflected the spirit of the rule of law.

The 78-year-old Lai was sentenced to 20 years in prison after being found guilty in December of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and conspiring with others to publish seditious articles. His co-defendants, who entered guilty pleas to the collusion-related charge, received prison terms ranging from six years and three months to 10 years.

Some foreign governments called for the release of Lai, a British citizen. China's Foreign Ministry maintained that Lai is a Chinese citizen and urged countries to respect its sovereignty.

Here are reactions:

United Nations

The U.N. human rights chief, Volker Türk, said Lai was punished for "exercising rights protected under international law" and that the sentence must be quashed. His office raised concerns that the charges' broad scope risks criminalizing legitimate activities of civil society organizations and journalists.

"This is part of a broader repressive trend in Hong Kong, where hundreds have been arrested and prosecuted under these laws," Türk said.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong's secretary for security, Chris Tang, accused "external forces" of ignoring the facts while criticizing the case as a "so-called 'political prosecution'."

Hong Kong leader John Lee said Lai had used Apple Daily to "poison" residents and incite hatred. He said Lai deserved the sentence because he openly asked for foreign sanctions against China as well as Hong Kong and harmed their interests.

"His heavy sentence of 20 years in prison demonstrated the rule of law, upheld justice and brought great satisfaction to the people," he said.

The United States

The U.S. State Department called the sentence "an unjust and tragic conclusion to this case" and urged Chinese authorities to grant Lai humanitarian parole, adding that the case "shows the world that Beijing will go to extraordinary lengths to silence those who advocate fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong."

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D.-Oregon, who in 2023 nominated Lai for the Nobel Peace Prize, said the sentencing "should put to rest any illusion that the Chinese government will relent until it exercises total control over the people of Hong Kong."

Merkley has co-sponsored a bill seeking to strip Hong Kong's economic and trade offices in the U.S. of their diplomatic privileges, citing Beijing's dismantling of the territory's autonomy.

Britain

U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper said Lai was sentenced for exercising his right to freedom of expression after a "politically motivated prosecution." She called on the Hong Kong authorities to release him on humanitarian grounds.

"For the 78-year-old, this is tantamount to a life sentence," she said, adding that her government will "rapidly engage further" on the case.

The British government said it is expanding an immigration route to more residents of Hong Kong, a former British colony, "amid continuing deterioration of rights and freedoms in the territory." It estimated that some 26,000 Hong Kongers could relocate to the U.K. in the next five years.

China

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian told reporters at a daily briefing that Lai is a Chinese citizen,

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calling him a major planner and participant in a series of anti-China destabilizing activities in Hong Kong. Lin said the judicial cases are purely Hong Kong's internal affairs, urging "relevant countries" to avoid interfering in those or in China's internal affairs.

Beijing's office in Hong Kong affairs said Lai's sentence reflected Hong Kong's determination in safeguarding national security.

The European Union

The EU reiterated its call for the immediate and unconditional release of Lai, citing his advanced age and health condition.

"The politically motivated prosecution of Jimmy Lai and the former Apple Daily executives and journalists harms Hong Kong's reputation," it said. "The EU calls on the Hong Kong authorities to restore confidence in press freedom in Hong Kong, one of the pillars of its historic success as an international financial center, and to stop prosecuting journalists."

Australia

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said the prosecutions have had a chilling effect on free speech in Hong Kong. She called on China to stop suppression of freedom of expression, media and civil society, and to repeal the security law, under which Lai was convicted.

Taiwan

Taiwan's mainland affairs council condemned the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for suppressing human rights in the name of national security, and called for Lai's release. It reminded Taiwanese people to take Hong Kong's painful experience as a warning to safeguard their hard-won free way of life.

Rights groups

Reporters Without Borders' Director General Thibaut Bruttin said the court decision underscores the collapse of press freedom in Hong Kong and the authorities' contempt for independent journalism.

"We have already witnessed press freedom defender Liu Xiaobo die in prison due to insufficient international pressure. We cannot allow Jimmy Lai to suffer a similar fate," he said.

## Olympic town warms up as climate change puts Winter Games on thin ice

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Olympic fans came to Cortina with heavy winter coats and gloves. Those coats were unzipped Sunday and gloves pocketed as snow melted from rooftops — signs of a warming world.

"I definitely thought we'd be wearing all the layers," said Jay Tucker, who came from Virginia to cheer on Team USA and bought hand warmers and heated socks in preparation. "I don't even have gloves on."

The timing of winter, the amount of snowfall and temperatures are all less reliable and less predictable because Earth is warming at a record rate, said Shel Winkley, a Climate Central meteorologist. This poses a growing and significant challenge for organizers of winter sports; The International Olympic Committee said last week it could move up the start date for future Winter Games to January from February because of rising temperatures.

While the beginning of the 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Cortina truly had a wintry feel, as the town was blanketed in heavy snow. The temperature reached about 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4.5 degrees Celsius) Sunday afternoon. It felt hotter in the sun.

This type of February "warmth" for Cortina is made at least three times more likely due to climate change, Winkley said. In the 70 years since Cortina first held the Winter Games, February temperatures there have climbed 6.4 degrees Fahrenheit (3.6 degrees Celsius), he added.

Coping with varying climates across host cities

For the Milan Cortina Games, there's an added layer of complexity. It's the most spread-out Winter Games in history, so Olympic venues are in localities with very different weather conditions. Bormio and Livigno, for example, are less than an hour apart by car, but they are separated by a high mountain pass

that can divide the two places climatically.

The organizing committee is working closely with four regional and provincial public weather agencies. It has positioned weather sensors at strategic points for the competitions, including close to the ski jumping ramps, along the Alpine skiing tracks and at the biathlon shooting range.

Where automatic stations cannot collect everything of interest, the committee has observers — “scientists of the snow”— from the agencies ready to collect data, according to Matteo Pasotti, a weather specialist for the organizing committee.

The hope? Clear skies, light winds and low temperatures on race days to ensure good visibility and preserve the snow layer.

The reality: “It’s actually pretty warm out. We expected it to be a lot colder,” said Karli Poliziani, an American who lives in Milan. Poliziani was in Cortina with her father, who considered going out Sunday in just a sweatshirt.

And forecasts indicate that more days with above-average temperatures lie ahead for the Olympic competitions, Pasotti said.

#### Weather can affect competition

Weather plays a critical role in the smooth running and safety of winter sports competitions, according to Filippo Bazzanella, head of sport services and planning for the organizing committee. High temperatures can impact the snow layer on Alpine skiing courses and visibility is essential. Humidity and high temperatures can affect the quality of the ice at indoor arenas and sliding centers, too.

Visibility and wind are the two factors most likely to cause changes to the competition schedule, Bazzanella added. Wind can be a safety issue or a fairness one, such as in the biathlon where slight variations can disrupt the athletes’ precise shooting.

American alpine skier Jackie Wiles said many races this year have been challenging because of the weather.

“I feel like we’re pretty good about keeping our heads in the game because a lot of people are going to get taken out by that immediately,” she said at a team press conference last week. “Having that mindset of: it’s going to be what it’s going to be, and we still have to go out there and fight like hell regardless.”

## How Keir Starmer could be replaced as UK leader if Epstein fallout brings him down

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer is facing a battle to stay in post as he comes under heavy criticism for his decision in 2024 to appoint veteran politician Peter Mandelson as the British ambassador to the U.S. despite the latter’s ties to late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Starmer’s judgment is in the spotlight like never before after the recent release of millions of pages of Epstein-related documents by the U.S. Justice Department showed how close Mandelson and Epstein were.

There’s widespread anger that the prime minister appointed Mandelson, long a key figure of Starmer’s own Labour Party, to such a sensitive and high-profile post.

Starmer fired Mandelson in September after an earlier batch of emails was published showing he remained friends with Epstein after the late financier’s 2008 conviction for sex offenses involving a minor.

But the newly released emails show that Mandelson also passed on sensitive — and potentially market-moving — government information to the disgraced financier in 2009, when he was a member of the Labour Cabinet.

Starmer’s leadership has now been called into question, and several Labour lawmakers have called for him to quit. His chief of staff resigned on Sunday, taking the blame for advising Starmer to appoint Mandelson, and his communications director quit on Monday.

Many believe that is not enough to keep Starmer in the job.

The prime minister is trying to persuade his party members to back him. He has apologized to the British public and to the victims of Epstein’s sex trafficking for believing what he has termed “Mandelson’s lies.”

There are a number of ways in which Starmer could go, some more straightforward than others.

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The easiest way

The simplest option is that Starmer announces his intention to resign, triggering an election for the Labour leadership. A resignation could possibly come if a delegation of Cabinet members tell Starmer he has lost too much support within the party or if members of his government quit in protest.

Those considered to harbor leadership ambitions include Health Secretary Wes Streeting, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood and former deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, who had to resign last year after admitting she didn't pay enough tax on a house purchase. An investigation into that is ongoing.

But there's no clear front-runner.

Andy Burnham, the popular mayor of Manchester who was blocked from standing at a special election in the city later this month, would not be eligible because by longstanding convention the prime minister must be a member of Parliament.

Whoever does run, the election would likely take weeks, with Starmer likely staying in post until that concludes.

If Starmer decides to resign immediately, the Cabinet and Labour's governing body would likely pick an interim leader to be prime minister, probably someone not standing to be Labour leader. Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy could fit the bill.

Under Labour's rules, candidates must have the support of a fifth of party lawmakers — about 80.

The wider party membership would then vote to choose a winner.

King Charles III would invite the winner to become prime minister and form a government.

The not so easy way

If Starmer does not resign, he could face a challenge, potentially from within his Cabinet.

Unlike the Conservative Party, which has a history of getting rid of leaders such as Margaret Thatcher in 1990 and Boris Johnson in 2022, Labour does not have that muscle memory. No Labour prime minister has ever been dislodged, though Tony Blair announced his plan to resign in 2007 after a series of low-level resignations.

Challengers would have to meet the eligibility thresholds above, but Starmer would automatically be on the ballot.

Starmer faces a series of hurdles in the weeks ahead. The first will probably be when files related to the vetting of Mandelson are published. Starmer will be hoping they show the scale of Mandelson's lies. Should they not, that could be a point of high jeopardy for the prime minister.

Another potential pitfall could be the special election in Gorton and Denton on Feb. 26, traditionally a safe Labour seat. However, this time it will be a tough fight, with challenges from the anti-immigration Reform U.K. on the right and the Greens on the left.

After that comes a raft of elections in May. Many in Labour fear the party could lose power in Wales for the first time since the legislature was created in 1999, fall way short in Scotland and get battered in local elections in England.

It's clear that Starmer faces a difficult landscape.

And that's barring surprise developments that could further rock his premiership.

"Events, dear boy, events," Harold Macmillan, prime minister between 1957 and 1963, said when asked what the greatest challenges for leaders were.

## Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi looks to translate her election gains into a new conservative shift

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's gamble that her personal popularity would lead to big election gains for her struggling party paid off hugely.

On Monday, she began the process of translating that new power, made manifest in a two-thirds supermajority gained in parliamentary elections the day before, into what she hopes will be sweeping conservative legislation that will shift Japanese security, immigration, economic and social policies.

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The first steps include reappointing her Cabinet and pushing forward on a delayed budget and the votes next week that will reelect her as prime minister.

Takaichi told reporters Monday that her efforts are aimed at making Japan safe, strong and prosperous. "We have no time to bask in the afterglow of the (election) victory."

"Through this election, the people showed their determination to join me in the challenge," she said. "I'm not afraid of making challenges and I will not sway. I will make a decision and accomplish it."

Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, alone secured 316 seats, comfortably surpassing a 261-seat absolute majority in the 465-member lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two-chamber parliament, officials said. That is a record since the party's foundation in 1955. With the 36 seats won by its new ally, Japan Innovation Party, the ruling coalition won 352 seats.

A smiling Takaichi placed a big red ribbon above each winner's name on a signboard at LDP headquarters as accompanying party executives applauded.

Despite the lack of a majority in the upper house, the huge jump from the preelection share in the more powerful lower house allows Takaichi to make progress on policies seeking to boost Japan's economy and military as tensions grow with China and she tries to nurture ties with the United States.

Takaichi said she would be "humble" and seek support from the opposition while firmly pushing forward with her policy goals.

Takaichi is popular, but the LDP, which has ruled Japan for most of the last seven decades, has been hit with funding and religious scandals. She called Sunday's early election after only three months in office, hoping to turn that around while her popularity is high.

Popular leader

Takaichi, who took office as Japan's first female leader in October, pledged to "work, work, work," and her style, which is seen as both playful and tough, has resonated with younger fans who say they weren't previously interested in politics.

The opposition, despite the formation of a new centrist alliance and a rising far-right, was too splintered to be a real challenger. The new opposition alliance of LDP's former coalition partner, Buddhist-backed dovish Komeito and the liberal-leaning Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan fell to less than one-third of their combined preelection share of 167 seats.

Takaichi was betting with this election that her LDP party, together with its new partner, the JIP, would secure a majority.

U.S. President Donald Trump in a post on his Truth Social platform Sunday congratulated Takaichi "on a LANDSLIDE Victory in today's very important Vote. She is a highly respected and very popular Leader. Sanae's bold and wise decision to call for an Election paid off big time."

Akihito Iwatake, a 53-year-old office worker, said he welcomed the big LDP win because he felt the party became too liberal in recent years. "With Takaichi shifting things more toward the conservative side, I think that brought this positive result," he said.

Takaichi's policies

Japan has recently seen far-right populists gain ground, such as the anti-globalist and surging nationalist party Sanseito. Exit polls projected a big gain for Sanseito.

The first major task for Takaichi when the lower house reconvenes in mid-February is to work on a budget bill, delayed by the election, to fund economic measures that address rising costs and sluggish wages.

Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defense policies by December to bolster Japan's offensive military capabilities, lifting a ban on weapons exports and moving further away from the country's postwar pacifist principles.

She has been pushing for tougher policies on foreigners, anti-espionage and other measures that resonate with a far-right audience, but ones that experts say could undermine civil rights.

Takaichi also wants to increase defense spending in response to Trump's pressure for Japan to spend more.

She now has time to work on these policies, without an election until 2028.

Divisive policies

Though Takaichi said she's seeking to win support for policies seen as divisive in Japan, she largely avoided discussing ways to fund soaring military spending, how to fix diplomatic tension with China and other issues.

In her campaign speeches, Takaichi enthusiastically talked about the need for government spending to fund "crisis management investment and growth," such as measures to strengthen economic security, technology and other industries. Takaichi also seeks to push tougher measures on immigration, including stricter requirements for foreign property owners and a cap on foreign residents.

Masato Kamikubo, a politics professor at Ritsumeikan University, said most people are not familiar with her policies, but were attracted by her image, "like her perceived tough stance on security and her remark that angered China, something rather vague."

## **Israeli forces capture a Hamas ally in south Lebanon as an Israeli drone kills 3, including a child**

BEIRUT (AP) — Israelis forces seized a local official with a Sunni Islamist group and an ally of the Palestinian militant Hamas group in an operation in southern Lebanon early on Monday, and took him to Israel for questioning, the Israeli military and Lebanese state media reported.

Also on Monday, an Israeli drone struck a car in the southern Lebanese village of Yanouh, killing three people, including a 3-year-old child, Lebanon's state-run National News Agency said, quoting the Health Ministry.

The Israeli military later said it struck Hezbollah artillery official Ahmad Salami. It said it was aware of a "claim that uninvolved civilians were killed" and that the case is under review.

According to the NNA agency, Atwi Atwi — a local official with the Sunni Islamist group al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group in English — was taken in the southern village of Hebbarieh, in the region of Hasbaya and close to the border with Israel.

A statement from the Israeli military said Israeli troops apprehended an Islamic Group official in a "targeted intelligence-based operation." It did not release the official's name.

The Islamic Group condemned the seizure, saying it was part of Israel's daily attacks and violations of Lebanon's sovereignty. It called on the Lebanese state to work for the release of Atwi.

The Islamic Group is Lebanon's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamist political group, with an armed wing in Lebanon known as Fajr Forces.

After the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, the Fajr Forces joined forces with the Lebanese Shiite militant Hezbollah group, launching rockets across the border into Israel that it said were in support of Hamas in Gaza.

The Brotherhood has been outlawed in much of the Middle East and labeled a terror group. Last month, the Trump administration designated the Lebanese, Jordanian and Egyptian branches of the Brotherhood as terrorist organizations.

Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya's leader, Mohammed Takkoush, said during the 14-month war between Hezbollah and Israel that his group and Hezbollah put aside their differences on conflicts in Syria and Yemen to join forces against Israel.

Hezbollah started attacking Israel on Oct. 8, 2023, a day after Hamas attacked southern Israel, triggering the latest Israel-Hamas war. Israel later launched a widespread bombardment of Lebanon that severely weakened Hezbollah, followed by a ground invasion.

The conflict ended with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire in 2024, and since then, Israel has carried out almost daily airstrikes and ground incursions into Lebanon that left more than 100 civilians dead according to the United Nations. Israel says it's carrying out the operations to remove Hezbollah strongholds and threats against Israel.

The Israel-Hezbollah war killed more than 4,000 people in Lebanon, including hundreds of civilians, and caused an estimated \$11 billion in damage and destruction, according to the World Bank. In Israel, 127 people died, including 80 soldiers.

## From Darnold's big day to Bad Bunny and MVP Matthew Stafford returning, an eventful Super Bowl week

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Sports Writer

SANTA CLARA, Calif. (AP) — Sam Darnold and that stingy Seattle Seahawks defense captured the franchise's second Super Bowl championship on the familiar field of their rival — the San Francisco 49ers.

General manager John Schneider considered that an advantage in his team's 29-13 victory against the New England Patriots on Sunday night after Seattle won 13-3 at Levi's Stadium just last month.

"They've been a very confident group," Schneider said.

Here's a look at some top moments from Sunday's game and the week leading up to Super Bowl 60 in the Bay Area:

**Maye's health**

Patriots quarterback Drake Maye received an injection before the game to numb his troublesome shoulder, then finished 27 for 43 for 295 yards, two touchdowns and a pair of interceptions for the AFC champions.

"There were more sways in the first half where I feel like I could have made a better throw or made a better decision," he said.

Maye returned to health in the Super Bowl lead up after he didn't throw much last week because of his troublesome shoulder, which he injured on a scramble during the AFC championship game against the Denver Broncos.

**Bad Bunny**

Puerto Rican star Bad Bunny brought some of his country's rich culture and history to the Super Bowl, not to mention a surprise during his colorful halftime show: Lady Gaga. Ricky Martin, too.

Bad Bunny gave a roll call of the nations of North, South and Central America, including Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, the United States and Canada. A parade of flags from those nations made its way through the sugar cane fields that functioned as the show's centerpiece.

Lady Gaga appeared at a real wedding scene on stage. The couple parted to show her on the stage, and she joined Bad Bunny in performing "Baile Inolvidable."

**Stafford stays**

Matthew Stafford won the AP Most Valuable Player award with his four daughters in tow Thursday night, then announced he would return to the Los Angeles Rams for another season.

Stafford turned 38 on Saturday and wants to chase another championship.

"Oh yeah, I'll be back," the quarterback declared.

**Welcome back, coach**

For Terrell Williams, coaching at the Super Bowl meant so much after being away from the team during a nearly five-month fight with prostate cancer.

The Patriots welcomed back their defensive coordinator, who hadn't been traveling or on the sideline during his ordeal.

"It feels good," Williams said. "Harold Landry made the comment that when I come in the building, I put a smile on their face because they see how hard I'm working and they know it's not easy. But my comment to Harold was: You guys are putting a smile on my face.' So it's really like we're all working together. I'm happy to see them, they're happy to see me. What you realize is that we all struggle."

**Seahawks staff**

The Super Bowl marked the final game for this Seahawks coaching staff. Offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak will depart to coach the Las Vegas Raiders. Kubiak will likely take some Seattle assistants along with him.

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## Today in History: February 10, 'Bridge of Spies' prisoner exchange

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 10, the 41st day of 2026. There are 324 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 10, 1962, on the Glienicke Bridge connecting West Berlin and East Germany, the Soviet Union exchanged captured American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Rudolf Abel, a Soviet spy held by the United States.

Also on this date:

In 1763, the treaty ending the Seven Years' War was signed in Paris, with France ceding its territory in Canada to Great Britain.

In 1936, Nazi Germany's Reichstag passed a law investing the Gestapo secret police with absolute authority, exempt from any legal review.

In 1959, an F4-intensity tornado tore through the St. Louis area, killing 21 people and injuring 345.

In 1967, the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, dealing with presidential disability and succession, was adopted as Minnesota and Nevada ratified it.

In 1973, at least 40 workers were killed in an explosion and collapse of a large liquefied natural gas tank that was undergoing routine maintenance in the New York City borough of Staten Island.

In 1981, eight people were killed when a fire set by a busboy broke out at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel.

In 1996, world chess champion Garry Kasparov lost the first game of a match in Philadelphia against an IBM computer dubbed "Deep Blue." (Kasparov ended up winning the match, 4 games to 2; however, he was defeated by Deep Blue in a rematch the following year.)

In 2009, a U.S. commercial satellite and a defunct Russian satellite accidentally collided in orbit over Siberia, destroying both and creating a large debris field in space.

In 2018, a double-decker bus lost control and crashed in a Hong Kong suburb, killing 19 people and injuring dozens more in the southern Chinese city.

In 2021, severe winter storms caused catastrophic wide-scale power outages in Texas that left millions in the dark and lasted several days. At least 40 people died in Texas in the storm and its aftermath.

Today's birthdays: Opera singer Leontyne Price is 99. Actor Robert Wagner is 96. Olympic swimming gold medalist Mark Spitz is 76. Golf Hall of Famer Greg Norman is 71. Basketball Hall of Fame coach John Calipari is 67. Filmmaker Alexander Payne is 65. TV host-political commentator George Stephanopoulos is 65. Actor Laura Dern is 59. Writer-producer-director Vince Gilligan (TV: "Breaking Bad") is 59. Football Hall of Famer Ty Law is 52. Actor-filmmaker Elizabeth Banks is 52. Basketball Hall of Famer Tina Thompson is 51. Reggaeton singer Don Omar is 48. Actor Uzo Aduba is 45. Actor Stephanie Beatriz is 45. Actor Emma Roberts is 35. Olympic swimming gold medalist Lilly King is 29. Actor Chloe Grace Moretz is 29. Actor Yara Shahidi is 26.

## Groton School Board accepts resignation of Opportunity Coordinator, retirement of two long-time district employees

by Elizabeth Varin

Monday night's school board meeting included an emotional moment as members faced what several described as a difficult decision.

The board accepted the resignation of middle school/high school Opportunity Coordinator Jodi Schwan, who has served in that role since August 2017. Jodi Schwan is married to district Superintendent Joe Schwan, who sat silently during the discussion.

Before taking action, board members discussed the possibility of tabling the item and expressed appreciation for Schwan's work and dedication to students and staff during her tenure.

Board member Tigh Fliehs made the motion to accept her resignation, "out of respect for her and her families, and I know that's what their wishes are."

Several members voiced their support for Schwan and her family, praising the impact she has made in the district over the past eight years.

"This has been hard, I know. The students, the teachers, the staff have all reached out," said Grant Rix, board president. "This is going to be hard for our school district to move on. Tell Jodi she did an excellent job with teachers and staff, students. The students' all loved her.

"This is something that they want for their family," Rix continued. "It's a good movement for them. I understand wanting to think about it a little bit more. I will entertain a motion to table it, but don't believe that will change anything."

Ultimately, the board voted to accept her resignation, acknowledging both the challenge of the decision and the contributions she has made to the school community.

Marty Weismantel seconded the motion to accept Jodi Schwan's resignation, "with the understanding that she has the full support of all of us in this room, and her family does too. And to thank her for everything she's done.

"I know I've got one daughter who thought the world of her when she was here," he added.

Low voices answered when Rix called for the vote. Weismantel was the lone "no" vote, commenting on opposing his own second.

### More personnel decisions made

The board also accepted the retirement of two long-time district staff members.

Diane Kurtz, middle school/high school English teacher, has spent 34 years teaching in Groton, but plans to leave at the end of the school year, according to the retirement letter read by the board.

Also leaving at the end of the school year is Kami Lipp, paraprofessional at the elementary school.

The board approved reassigning Kelly Oswald from paraprofessional to administrative assistant/study hall effective Monday.

The final personnel-related item approved Monday was hiring a grade 5-12 instrumental music instructor for the 2026-2027 school year. The board approved hiring Megan Dockter to fill the position for the next school year.

Dockter graduated from Northern State University in spring 2024. She is currently studying for in the master's degree program in clarinet performance at North Dakota State University. She already has experience in Groton as well, having been a student teacher in spring 2023.

While plans are in place for the next school year, the instrumental music teacher position remains open and applications are still being accepted for the spring semester. However, Sharon Schwan, who spend more than 30 years as the director of the Warner High School Mighty Monarchs pep band and marching band, has stepped in as substitute teacher.

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## Emergency closure policy change discussed

Board members also spent time discussing a possible revision to the district's emergency closure policy, weighing whether activities should remain at the administration's discretion on no-school days or be automatically canceled.

The policy change was among a handful of others brought before the board for a first reading at Monday's meeting.

The proposed emergency weather change would require that all games, contests, meets, events, practices and district facilities be closed when school is called off.

Board members voiced arguments on both sides of the issue, but no decision was finalized. Superintendent Joe Schwan said he would bring that policy back for further consideration at a future meeting.

Middle school and high school math and social science teachers updated the board on their classes and curriculum changes.

Greg Kjellsen, who teaches algebra, pre-algebra and pre-calculus this year, has seen a downward shift in his class numbers, some of which is due to students taking college algebra online.

While the number of students in algebra are down this year, there are some positives, he said. It allows for a class of just eighth graders instead of sixth, seventh and eighth graders combined. There's also a class of sophomores, juniors and seniors, which allows Kjellsen to see if they are struggling with any of the concepts and slow down if needed.

Jordan Cason discussed integrating technology into math lessons, like GeoGebra, which allows students to break down shapes on graphs better understand them. He also discussed the personal finance class, inviting any professionals who want to come and speak to the class to reach out to him.

Rounding out the math group, Eric Swenson discussed some of the difficulties with the middle school class sizes. Currently there are 51 seventh graders in his class and 31 eighth graders. A total of 16 have independent education plans or 504 plans, meaning about 20 percent of those classes need extra support.

All three spoke of a curriculum review they will undertake next year.

Social science teachers know well about curriculum changes, being challenged to implement new state standards.

Both Scott Thorson and Shaun Wanner said it's been a challenge to get the new curriculum in place.

Eighth grade civics class has been changed to social studies, Thorson said. Government is now condensed into a semester in senior year, which is going to make it harder.

The new standards went more into Native American and South Dakota history, and a lot of it is online, Wanner said. It's been a work in progress getting it into place.

- The board approved moving funds to purchase a transit van, something officials have been looking for for awhile. The district will move \$42,500 from cash on hand to the transportation fund for vehicles to purchase the 14-person transit van.

- The district has been in discussion with Langford about forming a cooperative agreement for wrestling beginning with the 2026-2027 school year.