

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### Saturday, Jan. 22

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School  
Wrestling Tournament at Arlington, 10 a.m.

### Monday, Jan. 24

JH Boys basketball at Northwestern. 7th grade game at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

**Postponed:** Boys Basketball (C, JV, V) at Northwestern.

Wrestling at Ipswich, 6 p.m.

### Thursday, Jan. 27

Girls Basketball at Northwestern. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

### Saturday, Jan. 29

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.

Boys Basketball at NEC-DAK12 Clash in Madison

### Monday, Jan. 31

Junior High Boys Basketball with Redfield at Groton. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game

### Tuesday, Feb. 1

Boys Basketball hosts Langford Area with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity

## Surplus Van for Sale

The Groton Area School District is accepting sealed bids for the sale of a 1994 Chevy Beauville Van with liftgate. For more information or to see the vehicle, contact Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at 605-397-8117 or Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us. Bids can be dropped off at the high school office (502 N 2nd Street, Groton, SD) or mailed to Groton Area School District PO Box 410, Groton, SD 57445. Envelopes should be marked "Van Bid." Bids will be opened on Friday, January 28 at 2:00 PM. (0112.0119)

## OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

**Groton Daily Independent**  
**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**  
**Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460**

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## Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated January 21, 2022; 11:02 AM

**Increase of 9 from  
Thursday**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														f	t
														f	a
														f	l
0	2	1	3	2	0	2	2	1	3	3	3	3	4	7	36
Change	0	0	+1	+1	0	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+2	0	0	+2	+9

## Department of Health Begins Statewide Distribution of One Million Free COVID-19 Tests

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) began operations to promptly and efficiently distribute one million Flowflex® COVID-19 Antigen home tests to sites across the state. The first batch of 187,500 FDA-authorized tests kits arrived in Pierre, were sorted and shipped to destinations both East and West River, prioritizing long-term care facilities statewide.

“We are delivering on the promise made by Governor Noem to get a free COVID-19 test in the hands of any citizen that wants one,” said Joan Adam, Interim Health Secretary. “Making access to testing fast and convenient is key in fighting back against COVID-19.”

On January 7, 2022, Governor Noem announced that the SD-DOH had procured an additional one million Flowflex® COVID-19 Antigen home tests to be distributed free of charge to state residents. These tests complement test kits by Vault Health® which have been available for over a year through the Department’s website.

Flowflex® COVID-19 antigen tests can be done at home in as little as 15 minutes using the provided step-by-step instruction guide included in each test kit. These antigen tests are reliable, and if you receive a positive result, you do not need confirmation through your healthcare provider. The Department encourages residents that test positive to follow CDC isolation guidance.

The SD-DOH expects the complete order of one million tests to be available in such places as courthouses, airports, schools, pharmacies, among other sites, over the next two weeks, if no further supply chain delays occur. As a reminder, those wishing to travel internationally and/or who must show proof of a PCR laboratory negative test, can still request a Vault Health® at-home test here. <https://learn.vaulthealth.com/southdakota/>

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## Northern State Opens I Hate Winter Defeating No. 13 Upper Iowa

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State University men’s basketball team upset the No. 13 Upper Iowa University on Friday evening by nine points. The Wolves shot 54.0% from the floor and hit nine 3-pointers in the win.

### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 90, UIU 81

Records: NSU 13-8 (7-6 NSIC), UIU 16-3 (10-3 NSIC)

Attendance: 3123

### HOW IT HAPPENED

- It was a high scoring affair as the Wolves notched 52 points in just the first half of play
- Northern finished the contest, shooting 54.0% from the floor, 39.1% from the 3-point line, and 86.7% from the foul line in the win
- NSU shot a game high 65.6% from the floor in the first half and 58.3% from the 3-point line
- The game saw seven lead changes and five tied scores, with the Wolves only holding a double figure lead through the middle minutes of the second half
- Each team tallied 28 rebounds in the game, with the Wolves notching eight second chance points
- The Wolves added 40 points in the paint and ten points off turnovers, as well as 23 points off the bench led by Cole Bergan
- Four Wolves scored in double figures in the win, while the team combined for 17 assists, seven steals, and two blocks

### NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Jacksen Moni: 21 points, 77.8 FG%, 3 rebounds
- Sam Masten: 20 points, 5 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals
- Jordan Belka: 18 points, 8 rebounds, 50.0 FG%, 3 assists
- Cole Bergan: 16 points, 7 rebounds, 70.0 FG%, 2 assists, 2 steals

### UP NEXT

Northern State takes on Winona State today at 6 p.m. from Wachs Arena.

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## Wolves Extend Win Streak to Four with Win Over Upper Iowa

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women’s basketball team earned the first win of I Hate Winter weekend as they defeated Upper Iowa 71-62 on Friday night. The win for the Wolves extended their win streak to four games and moved them to 4-0 in NSIC cross divisional play.

### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 71, UIU 62

Records: NSU 10-7 (7-5 NSIC), UIU 4-14 (1-10 NSIC)

Attendance: 2135

### HOW IT HAPPENED

- Upper Iowa came out shooting hot from deep to start the game as Katie Thornstrom and Brooke Evenson knocked down 3-point baskets to take an early 8-3 lead
- Kailee Oliverson scored the last four points of the quarter for Northern State to cut the UIU lead to 19-18 at the end of the first quarter
- Lydia Haack and Jessica Musgrave hit two jumpers in the paint to extend the Peacock lead to five early in the second quarter
- Lexi Roe scored the last two baskets for Northern heading into the halftime break, her last basket gave NSU a 30-29 lead at the half
- Northern State would not trail the remainder of the game, Oliverson knocked down a 3-pointer and Haley Johnson added another jumper to extend the lead to six early in the third period
- Brynn Alfson and Carly Mekash hit jumpers in the final minute and a half of the third quarter to extend the lead to double digits entering the fourth quarter
- With 3:26 remaining in the game Johnson made two free throws to give Northern State their largest lead of the game at 69-55
- Oliverson and Roe each grabbed 11 rebounds enroute to double-doubles and a 46-33 rebound advantage for NSU
- The Wolves shot 40.6 percent from the field, 36.4 percent from 3-point range, and 62.5 percent from the free throw line in the win

### NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Kailee Oliverson: 18 points, 11 rebounds, 4 assists

Haley Johnson: 15 points, 8 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals

Lexi Roe: 13 points, 11 rebounds

### UP NEXT

The Northern State women’s basketball team will close out I Hate Winter weekend and a four game homestand when they host Winona State this afternoon. The Wolves and Warriors are set to tip-off at 4 p.m. in Wachs Arena.

## **WEATHER POSTPONES DEADWOOD SNOCROSS TO MARCH 4-5**

DEADWOOD, S.D. (1/21/22) - Due to unseasonably dry conditions and warm temperatures hampering the ability to make snow, the 2022 Deadwood Snocross event scheduled for January 28-29 has been postponed with a new date slated for March 4-5, 2022. Snocross snowmaking crews have been on-site with equipment to make snow this past week but forecasted temperatures and snowfall amounts are not conducive to have enough snow to build the track. Organizers apologize for any inconvenience.

Tickets purchased for the original dates will be valid for the March 4-5 dates. Those unable to attend the new dates can request a refund by calling 1-800-344-8826 or emailing [tix@blackhillsvacations.com](mailto:tix@blackhillsvacations.com). More information on the Snocross Tour can be found at [www.snocross.com](http://www.snocross.com).

## **DANR Accepting Applications to Increase Access to Local Foods at Schools**

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) is pleased to announce \$80,000 in funding to help school districts use more local and fresh foods.

"I'm excited this funding is available to help our schools partner with farmers and ranchers across South Dakota," said DANR Secretary Hunter Roberts. "This program will give schools the funding they need to buy new equipment, source more local foods, and teach our children about where their food comes from."

DANR is partnering with Dakota Rural Action and South Dakota State University Extension to manage and promote the program.

The Farm to School Grant Program will offer grants up to \$5,000 for each school district that applies. School districts must participate in the USDA National School Lunch Program to be eligible. The program will reimburse schools for cafeteria equipment, gardening supplies, and other items to increase the use of local foods. All school districts are welcome to apply.

Applications are due May 1, 2022, with awards expected to be announced by the end of the summer. For more information and to apply, please visit our website.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service provided funding for this program.

## Groton Robotics Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 30, 2022

10:00am-1:00pm

Groton Community Center



Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice will be served!

Free will donation!

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics.

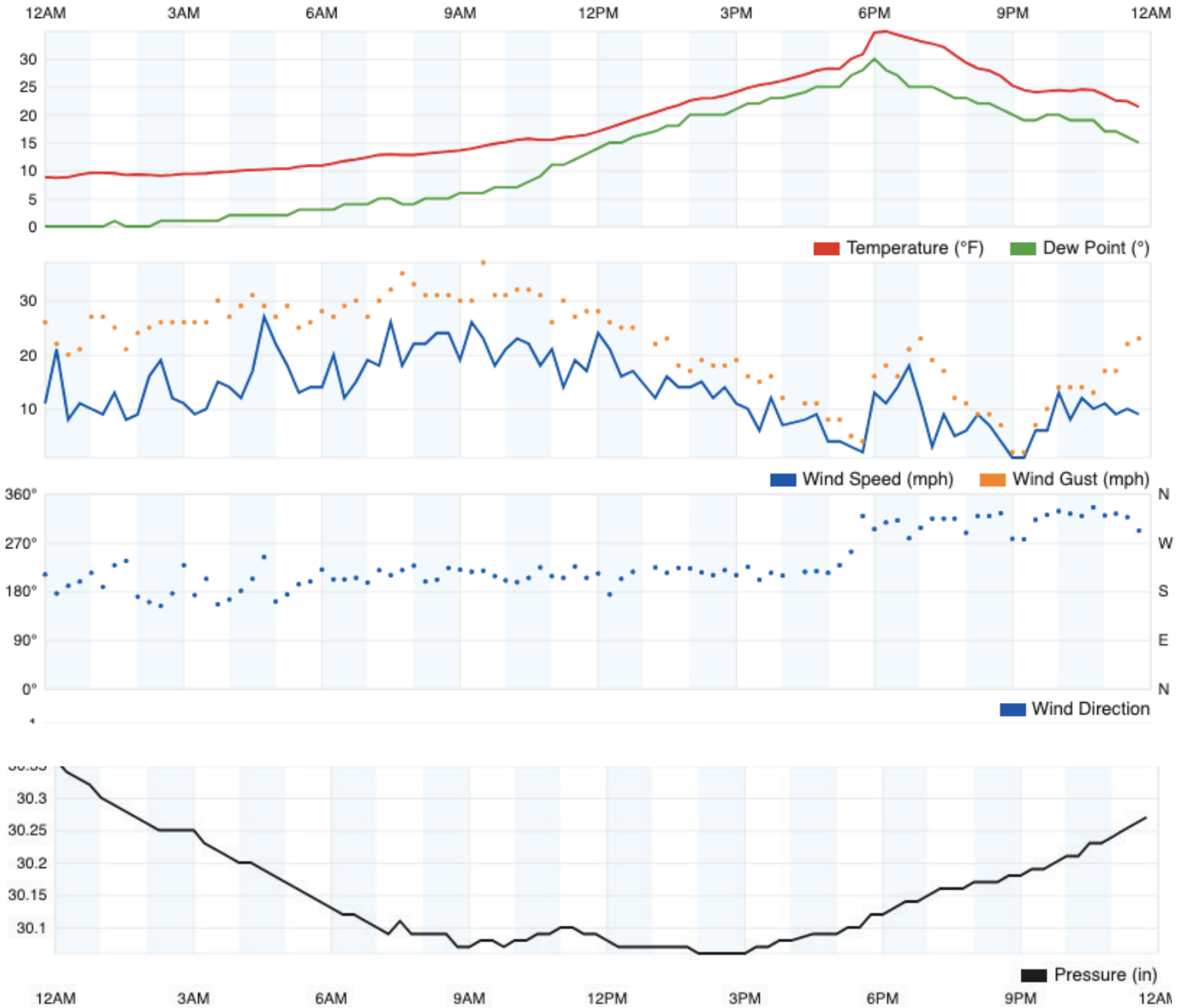


*Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Broton Daily Independent

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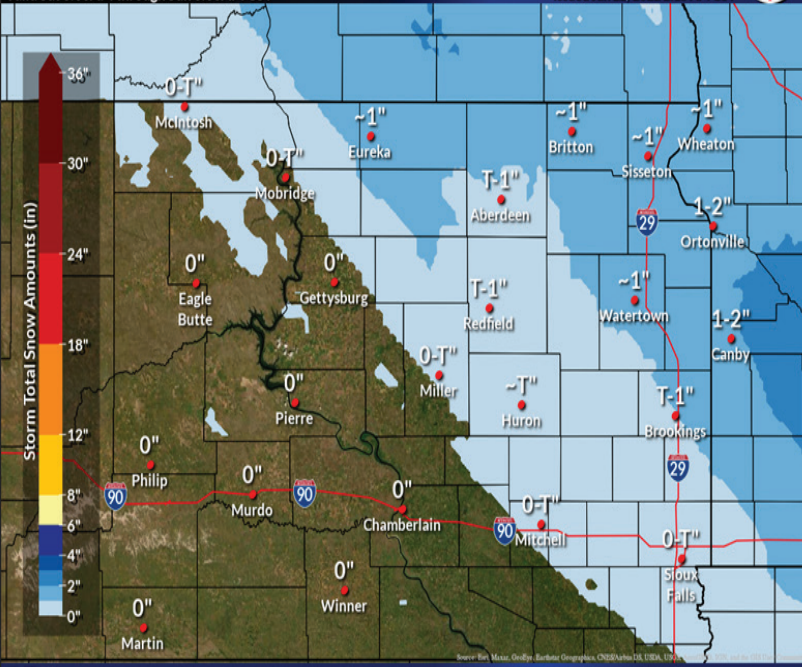
Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
50% → 80%	30%	30%	30%	
Chance Snow then Snow	Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Chance Snow	Chance Snow	Partly Sunny and Blustery
High: 24 °F	Low: 0 °F	High: 34 °F	Low: 7 °F	High: 24 °F



## Another Round Of Snow Today

**Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast**

Valid Sat 6:00AM through Sun 6:00AM CST



Weather Forecast Office  
Aberdeen, SD

Issued Jan 22, 2022 2:15 AM CST


### What & When

- 1.) Area of **Light Snow** develops across North Dakota later this morning
- 2.) Snow moves southeast into northeast South Dakota & western Minnesota, **briefly intensifies** and then pivots southeast.

### Impacts

Slick roads with accumulations for most areas only an inch or two, western MN could see some locally higher totals.

Winds will be breezy but shouldn't cause serious blowing/drifts issues.



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

[www.weather.gov](http://www.weather.gov)

Updated: 1/22/2022 3:36 AM CT

Another round of light snow is expected today with a fast moving but weak clipper system.



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## Today in Weather History

January 21-22, 1952: A significant winter storm impacted South Dakota, bringing snow, bitter cold temperatures, snow with snowdrifts of 10 to 15 feet. The cold temperatures and drifting snow claimed eight lives. At least 2,500 cattle were lost. Many roads were blocked for three to five days.

January 22, 1973: During the early morning hours, Chinook winds caused the temperature at Spearfish, South Dakota, to rise from 4 below zero to 45 above in just two minutes, the most dramatic temperature rise in the world. An hour and a half later, the mercury plunged from 54 above to 4 below zero in 27 minutes.

January 22, 1982: A winter storm lasting three days from the 22nd to the 24th virtually paralyzed South Dakota with snowfall of 6 to 20 inches. Subzero temperatures statewide coupled with strong winds of 30 to 50 mph brought wind chills of 50 to 70 below zero. One woman died of exposure near her home in Aurora County. Snow drifted as high as 15 feet. Blowing snow caused a reduction in visibility to near zero for most of the duration of the storm. Hundreds of motorists were stranded. Numerous traffic accidents occurred due to near zero visibilities. Some power outages occurred. Major highways, interstates, and airports were closed. Multiple businesses and schools were closed for several days.

January 22, 2010: A powerful mid-season winter storm moved northeast out of the four corners region of the United States and into the Northern Plains. Ahead of this system, warm and moist air streamed northward, creating widespread fog and freezing fog conditions during the days leading up to the event. Heavy rime frost began to accumulate on power lines and tower guide wires, placing a heavy strain on them when the freezing rain arrived in the late morning and afternoon hours on Friday, January 22nd. Along with the freezing rain, southeast winds gusting to 30 mph also strain sagging power lines. Scattered power outages were reported as early as Tuesday, January 19th, due to the frost-covered lines. Still, most of the power lines and power pole damage occurred during the evening of the 22nd and the morning of the 23rd. The freezing rain that arrived during the afternoon and evening of the 22nd was the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." By the time the rain, freezing rain, and snow ended Saturday morning, January 23rd, nearly every power cooperative across central and northeast South Dakota suffered large power pole and power line damage. Also, several radio and television towers were downed by the icing and strong winds. The heavy icing and strong winds downed over 5000 power poles and 21,000 miles of power lines across South Dakota, leaving thousands of households without power. Several homes sustained substantial damage caused by broken water pipes. Power was still not restored for many customers until several weeks after the event. Power line crews from Minnesota, Kansas, and Oklahoma were called upon to help restore power. Several counties, along with the state emergency operations center, opened emergency shelters for people to stay. Forty-one National Guard members were on active duty across the state, helping to restore power. Many flights were delayed or canceled at several airports. The ice and the wind also helped topple a canopy at a truck stop at Highway 20 and 212. On January 23rd, a radio and television transmission tower northwest of South Shore was downed along with a tower north of Reliance and a radio tower southwest of Marvin. The hardest-hit area with this storm was the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock Sioux reservations in central and north-central South Dakota. With no electricity, residents depended on donations of food, bottled water, blankets, heat and light sources, toiletries, and cots. The rural water system serving the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe was shut down, resulting in the state EOC shipping water to the reservation. The Governor asked for a presidential disaster declaration for most of the counties and three reservations. The request was for both public and individual assistance for total damages estimated over 20 million dollars for the state.

1904: An unusual estimated F4 tornado leveled the northern part of Moundville, Alabama, just after midnight, killing 37 people. The tornado reportedly had a phosphorescent glow. An engineer on a northbound Great Southern train saw the destruction right after it occurred and backed his train 12 miles in reverse to the town of Akron, where he sent a telegram for help.

1937: Low of 9 degrees above zero in Las Vegas froze many pipes. Schools had trouble keeping warm, and coal was in short supply in the city. January 1937 was the coldest month on record for Las Vegas, with an average temperature of 31.2 degrees, 17.5 degrees below normal.

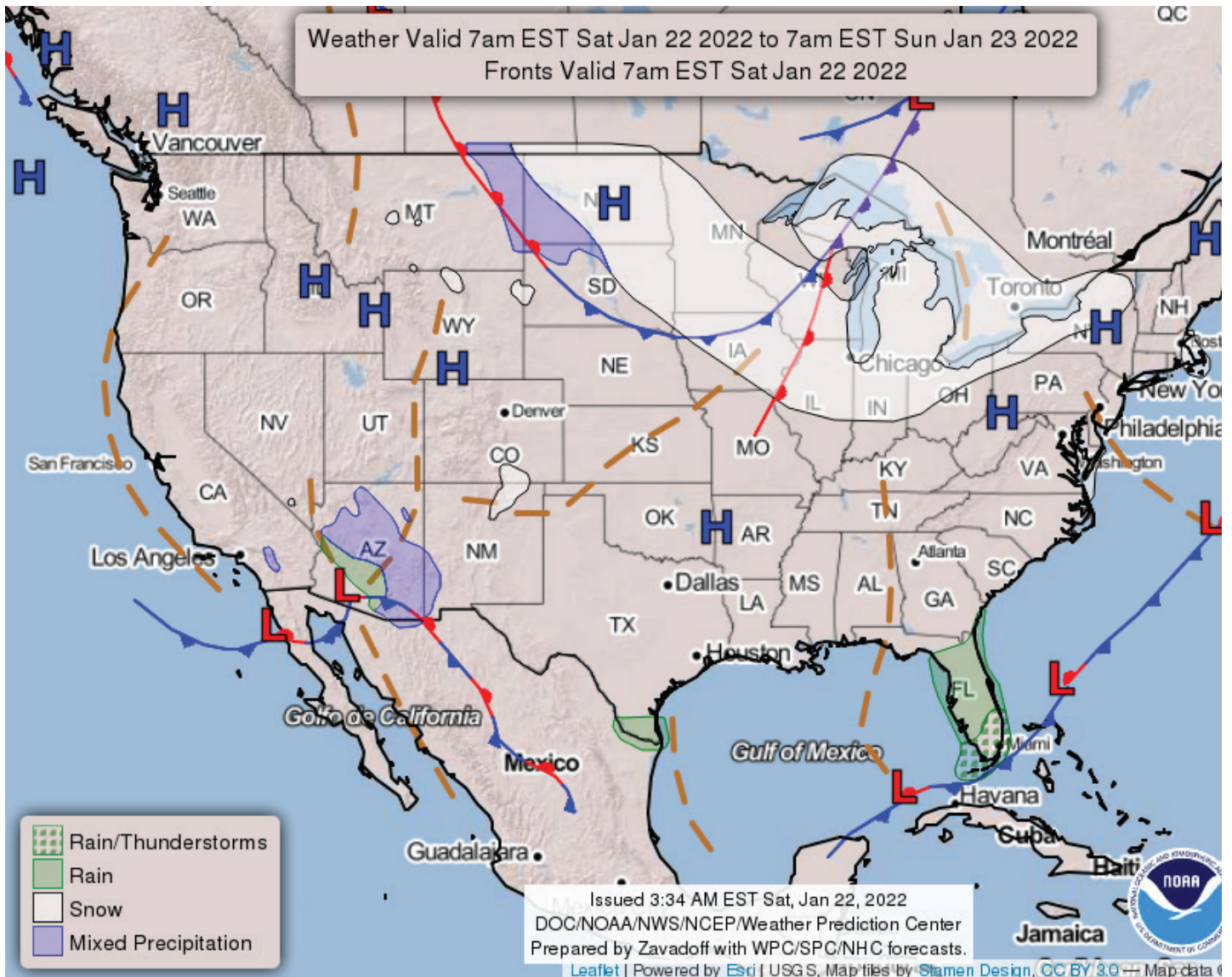
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 35 °F at 6:04 PM**  
**Low Temp: 9 °F at 12:01 AM**  
**Wind: 37 mph at 9:24 AM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 58 in 1942**  
**Record Low: -30 in 1937**  
**Average High: 24°F**  
**Average Low: 1°F**  
**Average Precip in Jan.: 0.41**  
**Precip to date in Jan.: 0.43**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.41**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.43**  
**Sunset Tonight: 5:26:35 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:00:36 AM**



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## GOD'S GREATEST GIFT

Betsy ended her prayer and was about to get in bed. With a puzzled look on her face, she turned to her Dad and asked, "Daddy, did I leave anything out? I have so many things to thank Jesus for. I sure don't want to forget any of them. Jesus is really good to us, isn't He Daddy?"

The author of Psalm 116 was also aware of God's goodness. Betsy wanted to make sure that she thanked God for being kind to her. She must have itemized her list in her mind like she had been to a grocery store and wanted to make sure that she remembered everything.

However, the Psalmist must have had a balance sheet in mind when he asked, "How can I repay the Lord for His goodness to me?" How different from Betsy. She simply wanted to offer her thanks for the gifts that He gave her. But the Psalmist looked at what God gave him from a different perspective: He wanted to pay God for what He had done for him. However, it is impossible to repay God! If we could somehow pay God for His gifts, they would not be gifts.

This brings us to the very heart of the Bible - a loving God who gives. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." God gives, and we are to receive.

Suddenly, the Psalmist realized that the Lord is not a salesman who has anything to sell - but a Giver who gives His salvation freely. Rejoicing he said, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord."

There is nothing that delights our Creator more than for those who He created to accept the Gift of His Son.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the many gifts You lavish on us each day. We are unworthy, the gifts are so many, and we are so thankful for them. But we are most thankful to you for saving us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: - I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. Psalm 116:13

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## 2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)  
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,  
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)  
Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm  
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)  
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)  
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)  
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am  
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)  
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)  
SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start  
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start  
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start  
(4th of July)  
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)  
Dacotah Bank Back To School Supply Drive  
Professional Management Services Check-R-Board Days  
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion  
Baseball Tourney  
Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start  
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am  
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20  
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm  
JVT School Supply Drive  
Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm  
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm  
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot  
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)  
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm  
Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm  
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport  
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)  
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm  
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)  
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm  
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)  
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)  
Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course  
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

### Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White ..... \$41.54/year
- Colored ..... \$74.55/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly\* ..... \$21.30/year

\* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

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## Groton Daily Independent

[www.397news.com](http://www.397news.com)

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## News from the Associated Press

### 2 years of COVID-19 taking toll on health care workers

By ANNIE TODD Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Health care workers at local hospitals are saying that as more COVID-19 patients continue to flood into their intensive care units and emergency rooms, it's becoming increasingly harder for staff to continue on like they have for the past two years.

Care providers at Avera Health and Sanford Health in Sioux Falls told the Argus Leader that the last two years of COVID-19 have taken a toll on their staff, from those getting sick to those having to leave the profession entirely due to burnout. Staff are encouraging the public to get their vaccines and stay healthy so more people can stop coming into their ICUs needing critical COVID-19 care.

"It just feels like we've been working the same day for the last two years," Makayla Hagerty, an ICU charge nurse at Sanford Health said.

Taking care of COVID-19 patients over two years and the high level of stress that comes with treating the sickest of the sick has also led to some health care workers to either leave the ICU floor or the profession entirely.

Carrie Hoisington, a nursing education supervisor at the Avera Health Intensive Care Unit, said that she's seen nurses on her team leave because it's what's best for their mental health.

"We can definitely see emotionally that our nurses are getting tired," she said.

Her team relies on one another to get through the tough spots, but it's been hard to see so much death over the past two years.

COVID-19 patients, especially the unvaccinated ones who are in the ICU, don't get better overnight, Tony Hericks, a pulmonary critical care physician at Avera Health, said. It can take weeks or months for them to recover and it can be difficult for doctors who are used to seeing patients get better right away.

"It becomes very demoralizing at times to think about what you're going to do to try to help that person get better and realize that you're at the beck and call of whether their body's going to heal," Hericks said.

Professionals leaving has caused short-staffing at Avera and Sanford. Sanford, Hagerty said, is using more travel nurses than she's ever seen in her six years with the hospital.

Most of the time it's four patients to a nurse at Sanford Health but because of staffing, sometimes a nurse could be expected to take care of up to five patients, Matt Peterson, a charge nurse on the medical pulmonary unit at Sanford, explained. And COVID-19 patients keep coming into the ICU from an already full emergency room to independent clinic admissions.

"It is just always busy," he said. "You are constantly helping your other nurses. It's teamwork all the time."

The lack of community support has also impacted health care workers, and not just those treating patients, but janitorial and maintenance staff who help the hospital run.

"We've now become in some respects the enemy and looked down on," Hericks said. "I feel bad for my colleagues and my nursing staff because we see so much more than negativity then we do positivity as far as health care goes."

While Sanford and Avera are accepting traveling nurses to help in their COVID-19 units, nurses are constantly checking in with their team to see what they can do to help stress-wise.

"Nurses will work 100 hours a day. If you offered someone a break, they'll probably say no, but if you kind of force them to step away and take a breather, that can be helpful," Hagerty said. "We're glorifying overtime and it's just not sustainable."

Both Hagerty and Hoisington said they have great nursing teams that have been working hard for the past two years.

Hoisington said that her ICU team has worked together to get through the tough times.

"We have such a good team to lead on each other and that's really what's been kind of holding our staff together," she said.

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As COVID-19 continues to surge in the state, health care workers expect the next few weeks to be extremely difficult as more people continue to get sick.

"We may not have enough nurses or doctors to take care of patients in the hospital and those that are going to be there are already tired of working two years straight without much respite," Hericks said.

Health care workers encouraged those who have not gotten their COVID-19 vaccine to do so. The majority of COVID-19 patients who aren't doing well at Sanford and Avera are unvaccinated.

## Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Belle Fourche 60, Hot Springs 29

Beresford 56, Canton 38

Brandon Valley 43, Pierre 41

Burke 70, Bennett County 40

Castlewood 51, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 40

Dakota Valley 61, Tri-Valley 47

Deubrook 55, Dell Rapids St. Mary 46

Flandreau 67, McCook Central/Montrose 35

Freeman 45, Menno 40

Hamlin 66, Tiospa Zina Tribal 27

Hanson 70, Canistota 28

Huron 55, Spearfish 38

Lake Preston 44, Langford 22

Lennox 46, Platte-Geddes 37

Mitchell 56, Sturgis Brown 39

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 67, Kimball/White Lake 37

Rapid City Central 44, Brookings 36

Rapid City Stevens 50, Watertown 29

Sioux Falls Christian 53, Madison 25

Sioux Valley 57, Dell Rapids 31

Sisseton 67, Deuel 29

Vermillion 63, Garretson 38

Viborg-Hurley 56, Baltic 54

Webster 53, Great Plains Lutheran 42

LMC Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Bison 62, Tiospaye Topa 23

Lemmon 63, McIntosh 17

Semifinal=

Dupree 46, Harding County 35

Faith 52, Timber Lake 44

Panhandle Conference Tournament=

Third Place=

Crawford, Neb. 55, Edgemont 41

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Britton-Hecla vs. Warner, ppd.

Flandreau Indian vs. Lower Brule, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

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Beresford 71, Canton 68, OT  
Brandon Valley 60, Pierre 57, OT  
Castlewood 83, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 55  
Chamberlain 83, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 58  
Custer 64, Hill City 44  
Dakota Valley 66, Tri-Valley 32  
Edgemont 57, Hay Springs, Neb. 47  
Flandreau 71, McCook Central/Montrose 53  
Gayville-Volin 52, Colome 45  
Huron 72, Spearfish 64  
Kadoka Area 42, Jones County 37  
Lennox 57, Platte-Geddes 52  
Lower Brule 102, Omaha Nation, Neb. 46  
Milbank 47, Florence/Henry 44  
Mitchell 59, Sturgis Brown 29  
Philip 62, Bennett County 51  
Rapid City Central 47, Brookings 45  
Sioux Falls Christian 50, Madison 34  
Sioux Falls Jefferson 59, Harrisburg 48  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 56, Sioux Falls Lincoln 45  
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 73, Yankton 42  
Tiospa Zina Tribal 55, Hamlin 52  
Vermillion 53, Garretson 44  
Viborg-Hurley 53, Baltic 51  
Watertown 61, Rapid City Stevens 51  
Webster 68, Aberdeen Roncalli 39  
Wilmot 43, Waverly-South Shore 38  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Britton-Hecla vs. Warner, ppd.  
Flandreau Indian vs. Lower Brule, ppd.  
Groton Area vs. Clark/Willow Lake, ppd.

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

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) \_ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

38-45-46-55-67, Mega Ball: 18, Megaplier: 2

(thirty-eight, forty-five, forty-six, fifty-five, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: eighteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$376 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$76 million

## \$600M for water projects gains support, but senators pause

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A proposal from South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to use the bulk of federal coronavirus relief funding on water and sewage projects has so far met little opposition in the state Senate, but a powerful committee on Friday withheld its approval to vet the proposal further.



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The Senate State Affairs committee on Friday heard enthusiastic support from groups representing municipal governments, water utility providers and a conservation group for sending \$600 million of federal funds to a grant program that would fund water supply projects across the state.

But the Republican committee's chairman said he also wants to make sure the state is ready to disburse the funding before the bill gets the committee's blessing.

"A bill of this gravity — we don't want to rush it through," said Sen. Gary Cammack, the Senate Republican leader, adding that it was the largest single budget item he had ever tackled.

The funding would allow utility providers across the state to launch the next generation of water pipelines and treatment, said Kurt Pfeifle, the director of the South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems.

"It's going to ensure that we'll continue to provide adequate service," he said. "Making sure that the water's clean, safe, filtered."

Several large projects hoping to tap into the fund would pipe water from the Missouri River to both the Black Hills region and the northeast corner of the state, both of which have experienced droughts in recent years.

But even the \$600 million allotment won't come close to matching all the projects that have applied for funding. Hunter Roberts, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the state has received applications from 250 projects requesting over \$3.2 billion.

The state will use an existing loan program for water infrastructure projects to distribute the funds, but Cammack said lawmakers want to make sure the Board of Water and Natural Resources is ready to handle the influx of applications.

"It's huge, we really need some assurances along those lines," the senator said.

The state is looking to spend \$975 million from the federal government over the next five years. Cities and towns will get another \$276 million to spend on a wide variety of projects that qualify under the American Rescue Plan Act that Congress passed last year.

## Noem unveils abortion ban, mimics Texas' private enforcement

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Friday unveiled a proposal to ban nearly all abortions, mimicking a Texas law that leaves enforcement up to private citizens through lawsuits instead of through prosecutors and criminal charges.

The governor has previewed the legislation for weeks, and it has received an enthusiastic reception from fellow Republicans who dominate the Legislature. The law would prohibit abortions once medical professionals can detect fetal cardiac activity, which is usually around the sixth week and is before some women even know they're pregnant.

Courts have blocked some states from imposing similar restrictions, but Texas' law has so far been allowed to stand in part because it leaves enforcement up to private citizens. The conservative-led Supreme Court in December returned a lawsuit over Texas' six-week abortion ban to a federal appeals court that has twice allowed the law to stay in effect, rather than to a district judge who sought to block it.

Noem's law would punish people who aid someone in getting an abortion with a minimum \$10,000 penalty, in addition to legal fees and other potential compensation. It makes no exception for rape or incest, except stipulating that a man who commits the rape or incest cannot sue.

The private enforcement of the Texas law has been criticized as creating a "vigilante" justice system. It has also led some Texas women to seek care out of state.

"Personal privacy and reproductive rights are among our most important constitutional liberties," Jett Jonelis, the advocacy manager for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, said in a statement. "But Gov. Noem doesn't seem to care about our constitutional rights."

South Dakota has just one clinic that regularly offers abortions, but Noem's proposed restrictions, which also include one of the nation's strictest limitations on access to abortion pills, would wipe out nearly all abortion access in the state. Just 10 women in South Dakota received an abortion during their first six weeks of pregnancy in 2020, the most recent year for which data was available from the state's Depart-

ment of Health.

Noem said in a statement that she was hoping the Supreme Court would strike down Roe v. Wade — the 1973 landmark decision that established a nationwide right to an abortion. South Dakota has a law that would outlaw abortions if that happened.

The governor added, "But until that comes to pass, these bills will ensure that both unborn children and their mothers are protected in South Dakota."

## Noem's school 'prayer' bill rejected by House Republicans

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Republican-dominated South Dakota House committee on Friday rejected Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to require public schools to have a moment of silence to start the day.

The Republican governor first billed the proposal at a conservative Christian conference in Iowa last year as "putting prayer back in schools," but a House committee rejected the idea after education groups argued that voluntary prayer is already allowed in schools and the proposed law would have saddled teachers with an unclear mandate. The Republican-dominated House Education committee rejected the bill on a nine to six vote, but it could still be revived with support from one-third of House members.

"Maybe it's me, but I view prayer as something that is personal and not performative," said Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, who criticized the bill as vaguely written.

Organizations representing schools and the teacher's union asserted they had not been consulted by the governor's office on the proposal and it would have added a vague and potentially unwieldy mandate to classrooms. An aide for the governor acknowledged to the committee that Noem's office had not worked with school districts to craft the bill, but argued that 15 other states have enacted similar requirements and the moment of silence gave students an opportunity to focus before they start their day.

"This bill creates an affirmative opportunity for students to pray if they choose or to use their time quietly as they would otherwise see fit," Allen Cambon, the governor's policy advisor, told the committee. "Not only will this serve as a valuable learning opportunity, but it's a chance to establish a sense of calm and decorum before students and teachers begin their busy day."

The bill made it clear that schools could not use the time to conduct a religious exercise. But Noem, who is running for reelection and positioning herself for a 2024 White House bid, has in the past introduced religion-inspired ideas into public schools.

In 2019, she successfully required the national motto "In God We Trust" be displayed in all public schools, sparking a national debate and drawing criticism from groups that support the separation of government from religion.

Noem's spokesman Ian Fury indicated Noem would continue to push the issue, saying she is "committed to protecting (the) First Amendment rights" of students.

## Feds: Nursing home operator failed to pay \$29.5M in taxes

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — The operator of a failed multi-state nursing home chain failed to pay \$29.5 million in payroll and unemployment taxes for his employees at 95 facilities he operated in 11 states, federal prosecutors said.

Authorities on Thursday arrested Joseph Schwartz, 62, of Suffern, New York, and charged him in federal court in New Jersey with willful failure to pay over employment taxes, evasion of unemployment taxes and failure to file annual financial reports.

According to authorities, his New Jersey-based Skyline Management Group had approximately 15,000 employees and Schwartz failed to pay their taxes from mid-2017 through June 2018.

Prosecutors also alleged Schwartz failed to file annual financial reports related to Skyline's 401K retirement plan contributions that are automatically withdrawn from an employee's gross pay.

"Each count of willful failure to collect, account for, and pay over employment taxes and tax evasion is

punishable by a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a maximum \$10,000 fine," prosecutors said. Evasion of unemployment taxes is punishable by a maximum of 5 years in prison and each count of 401K benefit plan fraud is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

Court documents did not list a lawyer who could speak on his behalf and telephone calls to the company's office were not answered.

Schwartz was also sued in federal court in 2020 by former employees in multiple states who claimed they were left without health insurance even though money had been deducted from their paychecks.

Employees allegedly only found out they did not have health insurance when they were billed for medical procedures. One woman allegedly was left with a \$50,000 bill.

Five plaintiffs who worked at Skyline-operated facilities in South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska and Arkansas filed the suit. Skyline facilities were also in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida, Massachusetts, Kentucky and Tennessee, according to an Associated Press review.

Nebraska's attorney general on Thursday filed a lawsuit accusing Schwartz and his wife of committing Medicaid fraud involving several nursing homes in the state.

## **South Dakota man given 10 years for defrauding military**

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A former western Wisconsin man has been sentenced in federal court to 10 years in prison for committing fraud to obtain military contracts.

Craig Klund, of Yankton, South Dakota, was convicted of wire fraud, money laundering and aggravated identity theft for defrauding the U.S. Department of Defense by using shell companies, aliases and other deceptive practices.

U.S. District Judge James D. Peterson on Thursday also ordered Klund to pay nearly \$436,000 in restitution and serve three years on supervised release after his prison time, the Leader-Telegram reported.

U.S. Attorney Timothy O'Shea said the former Chippewa Falls man moved his company from Wisconsin to South Dakota to evade inspectors from the Defense Contract Management Agency who were suspicious about his actions. O'Shea said Klund had previously been convicted of defense contracting fraud.

Using his shell companies Klund won more than 1,900 military contracts worth about \$7.4 million from 2011 to 2019 and was paid nearly \$3 million.

According to prosecutors, Klund knowingly shipped nonconforming parts to the military and requested payment for them. Electrical parts Klund supplied had a number of uses, including in the Patriot Missile System and F-16 jet fighter.

In addition to securing the contracts through fraud, Klund also concealed proceeds from them by not reporting that money on his federal income tax returns and laundering the funds between different accounts.

## **Gov. Noem Proclaims Jan. 23-Jan. 29 "South Dakota School Choice Week" as Annual Celebration Launches Nationwide**

PIERRE, S.D., Jan. 21, 2022 /PRNewswire/ -- Gov. Noem has joined a growing list of governors, city, and county leaders nationwide in recognizing Jan. 23-Jan. 29 as School Choice Week. Her official declaration of "South Dakota School Choice Week" marks the third year in a row the Week has been formally proclaimed in South Dakota.

As learning disruptions continue nationwide, Gov. Noem's proclamation highlights the essential role of flexible education choices and encourages families to explore the options available to their children. South Dakota families will mark the Week with 60 celebratory events and activities.

From at-home activities to in-school celebrations, the diverse celebrations echo the diverse learning needs of students across the state. The goal of the Week's celebrations is to raise awareness about educational opportunities, bringing parents from every background and income level clear information about their learning options.

Nationwide, more than 26,000 events have been planned for Jan. 23-Jan.29, which will be the twelfth

annual national School Choice Week.

"We encourage families to celebrate their school choices, as well as start evaluating options for next school year, during School Choice Week," said Andrew Campanella, president of National School Choice Week. "We are thankful for Gov. Noem's proclamation and wish South Dakotan families the best in their National School Choice Week celebrations."

National School Choice Week shines a spotlight on effective K-12 education options for children. As a not-for-profit effort, the Week focuses equally on traditional public, charter, magnet, online, private, and home education options. Every January, participants plan tens of thousands of events and activities — such as school fairs, open houses, and student showcases — to raise awareness about school choice across all 50 states. Year-round, National School Choice Week develops resources and guides to assist families searching for schools or learning environments for their children. The effort is nonpolitical and nonpartisan and does not advocate for legislation.

For more information, visit [schoolchoiceweek.com/south-dakota](http://schoolchoiceweek.com/south-dakota).

## Houthis, aid group: Death toll from prison airstrike at 82

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The death toll from a Saudi-led coalition airstrike that hit a prison run by Yemen's Houthi rebels climbed to at least 82 detainees, the rebels and an aid group said Saturday.

Internet access in the Arab world's poorest country meanwhile remained largely down as the coalition continued airstrikes on the capital of Sanaa and elsewhere.

The airstrike in northern Saada province Friday was part of an intense air and ground offensive that marked an escalation in Yemen's yearslong civil war. The conflict pits the internationally recognized government, aided by the Saudi-led coalition, against the Iranian-backed rebels.

The escalation comes after the Houthis claimed a drone and missile attack that struck inside the United Arab Emirates' capital earlier in the week. It also comes as government forces, aided by UAE-backed troops and airstrikes from the coalition, have reclaimed the entire province of Shabwa from the Houthis and pressured them in the central province of Marib. Houthis there have for a year attempted to take control of its provincial capital.

Ahmed Mahat, head of Doctors Without Borders, a charity mission in Yemen, told The Associated Press they counted at least 82 dead and more than 265 wounded in the airstrike.

The Houthis' media office said rescuers were still searching for survivors and bodies in the rubble of the prison site in the province of Saada on the border with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi coalition spokesman Brig. Gen. Turki al-Malki alleged the Houthis hadn't reported the site as needing protection from airstrikes to the U.N. or the International Committee of the Red Cross. He claimed the Houthis' failure to do so represented the militia's "usual deceptive approach" in the conflict.

The Houthis used the prison complex to hold detained migrants, mostly Africans attempting to cross through the war-torn country into Saudi Arabia, according to the humanitarian organization Save the Children.

But Mahat, of Doctors Without Borders, said the airstrike hit a different part of the facility housing other types of detainees. "The migrants there are safe," he said.

Al-Malki said reports that the coalition targeted the prison were inaccurate and that the coalition would correspond "facts and details" to the U.N. and the ICRC, according to Saudi state-run television.

The Saada attack followed another Saudi-led coalition airstrike Friday at the Red Sea port city of Hodeida hit a telecommunications center key to Yemen's connection to the internet. Access to the internet has remained "largely down for more than 24 hours" in the country, advocacy group NetBlocks said Saturday.

The Saada air attack, one of the deadliest of the war, was not the first to hit a Houthi-run prison. In September 2019, an airstrike hit a detention center the southwestern Dhamar province, killing more than 100 people and wounding dozens.

Rights groups have previously documented that the Houthis use civilian detainees as human shields by

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placing them in detention centers next to military barracks under constant threat of airstrikes.

Friday's airstrikes in Saada and Hodeida have renewed criticism of the coalition from the United Nations and international aid and rights groups.

Saudi-led coalition airstrikes have hit schools, hospitals and wedding parties, killing thousands of civilians. The Houthis meanwhile have used child soldiers and indiscriminately laid land mines across the country. They also launched cross-border attacks using ballistic missiles and explosives-laden drones on Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The coalition continued its airstrikes on Sanaa and elsewhere Saturday, targeting a Houthi-held military facility and an abandoned headquarters of Yemeni state TV in the capital. The coalition said airstrikes also targeted the Houthis in the contested Harib district in Marib.

The UAE-backed Giants Brigades said they shot down three drones carrying explosives launched by the Houthis on government-held areas in Marib and Shabwa provinces.

The rebels, meanwhile, held a funeral procession in Sanaa for a senior military official killed along with family members in a coalition airstrike last week. Hundreds of Houthi supporters attended the military funeral of Gen. Abdalla Kassem al-Junaid, who headed the Air Academy, according to an Associated Press video journalist.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken urged the warring parties to end the escalation of fighting and attacks across Yemen. "We urge all parties to commit to a peaceful, diplomatic solution to ending the conflict. The Yemeni people deserve to live in peace and determine their own future," he wrote on Twitter.

The latest escalation comes almost a year after President Joe Biden's administration announced an end to U.S. support for the coalition and removed the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group as part of American efforts to end the grinding war.

The Houthi-claimed attack on the UAE on Monday prompted Biden to say that his administration would consider restoring the status of the Iranian-backed rebels as terrorists.

The latest escalation of fighting was the most intense since the 2018 battle for Hodeida and comes after a year of U.S. and U.N. diplomatic efforts failed to bring the two sides to the negotiating table.

The rebels have repeatedly pushed back against U.N. and U.S. calls to halt the offensive on oil-rich Marib province. The Houthis have been trying for a year to take Marib to complete their control of the northern half of Yemen. That would likely give them an upper hand in any future negotiations.

"The coalition has pulled the stops out to prevent a collapse in Marib and to shift the conflict towards a military equilibrium," said Peter Salisbury, Yemen expert at the International Crisis Group.

The conflict in the Arab world's poorest country began in 2014, when the Houthis took Sanaa and much of northern Yemen, forcing the government to flee to the south, then into exile in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-led coalition, backed at the time by the U.S., entered the war months later to try to restore the government to power.

The conflict has since become a regional proxy war that has killed tens of thousands of civilians and fighters. The war also created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical care shortages and pushing the country to the brink of famine.

## Thich Nhat Hanh, influential Zen Buddhist monk, dies at 95

By HAU DINH, ELAINE KURTENBACH and HRVOJE HRANJSKI Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Thich Nhat Hanh, the revered Zen Buddhist monk who helped spread the practice of mindfulness in the West and socially engaged Buddhism in the East, has died. He was 95.

The death was confirmed by a monk at Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue, Vietnam who said that Nhat Hanh, known as Thay to his followers, died at midnight on Saturday. The monk declined to be named because he is not authorized to speak to media.

A post on Nhat Hanh's verified Twitter page attributed to The International Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism also confirmed the news, saying, "We invite our beloved global spiritual family to take a few moments to be still, to come back to our mindful breathing, as we together hold Thay in our hearts."

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Born as Nguyen Xuan Bao in 1926 in Hue and ordained at age 16, Nhat Hanh distilled Buddhist teachings on compassion and suffering into easily grasped guidance over a lifetime dedicated to working for peace. In 1961 he went to the United States to study, teaching comparative religion for a time at Princeton and Columbia universities.

For most of the remainder of his life, he lived in exile at Plum Village, a retreat center he founded in southern France.

There and in talks and retreats around the world, he introduced Zen Buddhism, at its essence, as peace through compassionate listening. Still and steadfast in his brown robes, he exuded an air of watchful, amused calm, sometimes sharing a stage with the somewhat livelier Tibetan Buddhist leader Dalai Lama.

"The peace we seek cannot be our personal possession. We need to find an inner peace which makes it possible for us to become one with those who suffer, and to do something to help our brothers and sisters, which is to say, ourselves," Nhat Hanh wrote in one of his dozens of books, "The Sun My Heart."

The Dalai Lama said he was saddened by the death of "his friend and spiritual brother."

"In his peaceful opposition to the Vietnam War, his support for Martin Luther King and most of all his dedication to sharing with others not only how mindfulness and compassion contribute to inner peace, but also how individuals cultivating peace of mind contribute to genuine world peace, the Venerable lived a truly meaningful life," he said.

Surviving a stroke in 2014 that left him unable to speak, Nhat Hanh returned from France to Vietnam in October 2018, spending his final years at the Tu Hieu Pagoda, the monastery where he was ordained nearly 80 years earlier.

Nhat Hanh plunged into anti-war activism after his return to his homeland in 1964 as the Vietnam War was escalating. There, he founded the Order of Inter-being, which espouses "engaged Buddhism" dedicated to nonviolence, mindfulness and social service.

In 1966, he met the U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in what was a remarkable encounter for both. Nhat Hanh told King he was a "Bodhisattva," or enlightened being, for his efforts to promote social justice.

The monk's efforts to promote reconciliation between the U.S.-backed South and communist North Vietnam so impressed King that a year later he nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In his exchanges with King, Nhat Hanh explained one of the rare controversies in his long life of advocating for peace — over the immolations of some Vietnamese monks and nuns to protest the war.

"I said this was not suicide, because in a difficult situation like Vietnam, to make your voice heard is difficult. So sometimes we have to burn ourselves alive in order for our voice to be heard so that is an act of compassion that you do that, the act of love and not of despair," he said in an interview with U.S. talk show host Oprah Winfrey. "Jesus Christ died in the same spirit."

Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai academic who embraced Nhat Hanh's idea of socially engaged Buddhism, said the Zen master had "suffered more than most monks and had been involved more for social justice."

"In Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s, he was very exposed to young people, and his society was in turmoil, in crisis. He was really in a difficult position, between the devil and the deep blue sea — the Communists on the one hand, the CIA on the other hand. In such a situation, he has been very honest — as an activist, as a contemplative monk, as a poet, and as a clear writer," Sivaraksa was quoted as saying.

According to Nhat Hanh, "Buddhism means to be awake — mindful of what is happening in one's body, feelings, mind and in the world. If you are awake, you cannot do otherwise than act compassionately to help relieve suffering you see around you. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged, it is not Buddhism."

Both North and South Vietnam barred Nhat Hanh from returning home after he went abroad in 1966 to campaign against the war, leaving him, he said, "like a bee without a beehive."

He was only allowed back into the country in 2005, when the communist-ruled government welcomed him back in the first of several visits. Nhat Hanh remained based in southern France.

The dramatic homecoming seemed to signal an easing of controls on religion. Nhat Hanh's followers

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were invited by the abbot of Bat Nha to settle at his mountain monastery, where they remained for several years until relations with the authorities began to sour over Nhat Hanh's calls for an end to government control over religion.

By late 2009 to early 2010, Nhat Hanh's followers were evicted from the monastery and from another temple where they had taken refuge.

Over nearly eight decades, Nhat Hanh's teachings were refined into concepts accessible to all.

To weather the storms of life and realize happiness, he counseled always a mindful "return to the breath," even while doing routine chores like sweeping and washing dishes.

"I try to live every moment like that, relaxed, dwelling peacefully in the present moment and respond to events with compassion," he told Winfrey.

Nhat Hanh moved to Thailand in late 2016 and then returned to Vietnam in late 2018, where he was receiving traditional medicine treatments for the after-effects of his stroke and enjoyed "strolls" around the temple grounds in his wheelchair, according to the Buddhist online newsletter LionsRoar.com.

It was a quiet, simple end to an extraordinary life, one entirely in keeping with his love for taking joy from the humblest aspects of life. "No mud, no lotus," says one of his many brief sayings.

## First flights leave Chinese city Xi'an as travel curbs ease

BEIJING (AP) — The first commercial airline flights in one month took off Saturday from Xi'an in western China as the government eased travel curbs imposed after a coronavirus outbreak ahead of next month's Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Seven planes took off, according to the website of Xi'an Xianyang International Airport. It said four were due to arrive Sunday.

Access to Xi'an, a city of 13 million people about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) southwest of Beijing, was suspended Dec. 22 following an outbreak attributed to the coronavirus's delta variant.

The ruling Communist Party has stepped up enforcement of its "zero tolerance" strategy that aims to keep the virus out of China by finding and isolating every infected person. It suspended access to Xi'an and other cities after outbreaks were found.

Nationwide, China reported 63 new confirmed infections in the 24 hours through midnight Friday. That included 10 in Beijing and six in the neighboring port city of Tianjin.

China's official death toll stands at 4,636 out of 105,547 confirmed cases.

Xi'an has reported 2,053 cases since Dec. 9. None were reported Friday.

Airline passengers who want to leave Xi'an are required to show a negative test within the past 48 hours, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. It said people from areas deemed at high risk for infection were barred from the airport.

Authorities said Jan. 16 restrictions on low-risk areas of Xi'an had been lifted at least in part. People who had been confined to their homes in other areas were allowed out to buy daily necessities.

The severity of the lockdown on Xi'an prompted complaints about food shortages. A pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage outside a hospital after being refused admission, reportedly because she lacked a valid virus test.

Authorities have called on the public to stay where they are during the Lunar New Year instead of traveling to their hometowns for the year's most important family holiday.

## Russia toughens its posture amid Ukraine tensions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — With tens of thousands of Russian troops positioned near Ukraine, the Kremlin has kept the U.S. and its allies guessing about its next moves in the worst security crisis to emerge between Moscow and the West since the Cold War.

Amid fears of an imminent attack on Ukraine, Russia has further upped the ante by announcing more military drills in the region. It also has refused to rule out the possibility of military deployments to the

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Caribbean, and President Vladimir Putin has reached out to leaders opposed to the West.

The military muscle-flexing reflects a bold attempt by the Kremlin to halt decades of NATO expansion after the end of the Cold War. In talks with the United States, Russia demands legally binding guarantees that the alliance will not embrace Ukraine and other former Soviet nations, or place weapons there. It also wants NATO to pull back its forces from countries in Central and Eastern Europe that joined the alliance since the 1990s.

Putin has described NATO membership for Ukraine and the others as well as the alliance's weapons deployments there as a red line for Moscow, warning that he would order unspecified "military-technical measures" if the demands aren't met.

Putin pointed to NATO drills with the Ukrainian military, increasingly frequent visits of the alliance warships in the Black Sea and the flights of U.S. bombers near Crimea to emphasize the urgency of Russia's security demands. He argued that by creating training centers in Ukraine, Western powers can establish a military foothold there even without its joining NATO.

"We have nowhere to retreat," Putin said. "They have taken it to the point where we simply must tell them: 'Stop!'"

Russia, which annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, has denied it intends to attack its neighbor. Last year, however, Putin issued a stark warning that an attempt by Ukraine to reclaim control of the areas in the east controlled by Russia-backed separatists would have "grave consequences for Ukrainian statehood."

While Ukrainian authorities denied planning such offensive, U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Russia had already deployed operatives to carry out acts of sabotage in the rebel east and blame them on Ukraine in a "false-flag operation" to create a pretext for possible invasion. Russia has rejected the claim as "total disinformation."

Putin has repeatedly asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people," and says large chunks of Ukrainian territory are historic parts of Russia — arbitrarily granted to Ukraine by Communist leaders during Soviet times.

Over 14,000 people have been killed in nearly eight years of fighting in Ukraine's industrial heartland called the Donbas, where the Moscow-supported insurgency erupted shortly after the annexation of Crimea. A 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany helped end large-scale battles, but a political settlement has stalled, and frequent skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

In early 2021, a spike in cease-fire violations in the east and a Russian troop concentration near Ukraine ignited the invasion fears, but tensions abated when Moscow pulled back the bulk of its forces after maneuvers in April.

The military buildup near Ukraine resumed in the fall, with Ukrainian and Western officials warning that the increasing troop concentration could herald a multipronged Russian attack.

Putin noted with satisfaction that Russia has caused a "certain stress" in the West. "It's necessary to keep them in that condition for as long as possible," he said in November, ordering his diplomats to push for binding guarantees against NATO expansion.

While the U.S. and its allies rejected the Russian demands for a halt to NATO expansion, some observers note that Moscow's insistence on a written reply may reflect an intention to use it as an argument for a possible escalation.

"At this stage, the parties don't intend to compromise and want to shift responsibility for a potential conflict," said Kirill Rogov, a Moscow-based independent analyst.

Adding to an estimated 100,000 troops deployed near Ukraine, Russia also has moved more troops from Siberia and the Far East for joint drills with its ally Belarus, which also borders Ukraine. In those exercises, Russian military units have moved to areas near Belarus' southern border, which is about 75 kilometers (47 miles) from Kyiv.

Earlier this week, the Russian Defense Ministry also announced a series of naval maneuvers in the Black Sea and more distant areas such as the Mediterranean, northeastern Atlantic and the Pacific. The exercises



that will start this month and last through February would involve over 140 ships, dozens of aircraft and more than 10,000 personnel.

Amid the tensions, Putin also worked to strengthen alliances with the countries opposed to the West. He has hosted Iran's hard-line president for talks on expanding cooperation and is set to travel to the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing where he will hold talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In recent days, Putin also spoke by phone with the leaders of Nicaragua and Venezuela, and a Russian government plane was recently seen cruising between Cuba and Venezuela in a possible harbinger of the next Kremlin moves.

After the U.S. and its allies rejected Russia's demands for a halt to NATO expansion, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov kept the door open for the deployment of military assets to Cuba and Venezuela.

While voicing concern that NATO could potentially use Ukrainian territory for the deployment of missiles capable of reaching Moscow in just five minutes, Putin has warned that Russian warships armed with the latest Zircon hypersonic cruise missile would give Russia a similar capability if deployed in neutral waters.

Fyodor Lukyanov, a leading Russian foreign policy expert, observed that with Russia and the West taking intransigent stands in the talks, an escalation appears inevitable.

"Tensions will be high, including demonstrations of force not necessarily near or in Ukraine," Lukyanov wrote in a commentary. "Real talks with some room for maneuvering and a broader agenda would ideally begin only after the next round of escalation in order to ease tensions."

## **1 NYPD officer killed, 1 severely injured in Harlem shooting**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York City police officer was killed and another critically wounded Friday night while answering a call about an argument between a woman and her adult son, officials said, making four officers shot in the city in as many days.

Just three weeks into their jobs, Mayor Eric Adams — a former police captain himself — and Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell stood before the media at a Harlem hospital, denouncing the spate of violence against the New York Police Department.

"Countless officers lined this hallway after carrying him in and grieve for their brother while praying with everything they have for the other" officer, Sewell said. "I am struggling to find the words to express the tragedy we are enduring. We're mourning, and we're angry."

Adams said, "This was just not an attack on these brave officers. This was an attack on the city of New York."

Adams called for federal authorities to do more to round up stolen guns like the one used in Friday's shooting inside a Harlem apartment.

"There are no gun manufacturers in New York City," he said. "We don't make guns here. How are we removing thousands of guns off the street and they still find their way into New York City, in the hands of people who are killers?"

Authorities said the officers, along with a third officer, went to the apartment on 135th Street after a call came in from a woman needing help with her son, identified by police as Lashawn J. McNeil, 47.

Authorities said the officers spoke with the woman and another son, but there was no mention of a weapon. Then two of them walked from the front of the apartment down a narrow, 30-foot (9-meter) hallway.

NYPD Chief of Detectives James Essig said McNeil swung open a bedroom door and opened fire at the officers, striking them.

The officer who was killed was identified as 22-year-old Jason Rivera, who joined the force in November 2020, and the wounded officer as Wilbert Mora, 27, who's been with the NYPD for four years.

As McNeil tried to flee, a third officer who'd stayed with McNeil's mother in the front of the apartment shot at McNeil and wounded him in the head and arm, Essig said.

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McNeil is alive and hospitalized in critical condition, NYPD spokesperson Lt. John Grimpel said, correcting earlier reports that he had been killed. Sewell and Adams did not take questions at the hospital press conference.

McNeil's last known address is in Allentown, Pennsylvania, about 90 miles (145 kilometers) west of New York City.

McNeil was on probation for a 2003 drug conviction in New York City. He also had several out of state arrests. In 1998, he was arrested in South Carolina for unlawfully carrying a pistol, but records show the matter was later dismissed. In 2002, he was arrested in Pennsylvania for assaulting a police officer, Essig said.

Police said the gun used in Friday night's shooting, a .45-caliber Glock with a high-capacity magazine capable of holding up to 40 extra rounds, had been stolen in Baltimore in 2017.

Friday night's shooting happened in a street-level apartment in a six-story apartment building on a block between two iconic Harlem avenues: Malcolm X Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.

It came three nights after an officer was wounded in the leg in the Bronx during a struggle with a teenager who also shot himself. On Thursday, a narcotics detective was shot in the leg on Staten Island.

Under Adams, the NYPD has reinstated a plainclothes anti-crime unit aimed at getting guns off the streets. The unit had been disbanded in 2020 over concerns it accounted for a disproportionate number of shootings and complaints.

The NYPD has also partnered with prosecutors, city and federal agencies in recent months on a task force that meets daily and works to track gun violence, accelerate gun tracing and build cases against shooters and gun traffickers.

Before Friday, the last NYPD officer killed in the line of duty was Anastasios Tsakos, who was struck by a suspected drunken driver in May 2021 while assisting officers at the scene of an earlier crash on a Queens highway.

The last NYPD officer fatally shot in the line of duty, Brian Mulkeen, was hit by friendly fire while struggling with an armed man after chasing and shooting at him in the Bronx in September 2019.

Mulkeen's death came about seven months after Det. Brian Simonsen was killed by friendly fire while he and other officers were confronting a robbery suspect at a cell phone store in Queens.

In 2017, Officer Miosotis Familia was ambushed by a gunman as she wrote in a notebook in a mobile command post. In 2016, Sgt. Paul Tuozzolo was killed in a gunfight with a man who'd broken into his estranged wife's home.

In 2015, Officer Randolph Holder was shot and killed by a man riding a stolen bicycle in Manhattan and Officer Brian Moore died after he was shot by a man in Queens.

The year before, Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos were fatally shot by a man who ambushed them as they sat in their patrol car in Brooklyn.

## China's success taming virus could make exit strategy harder

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — The sweeping "zero-tolerance" strategy that China has used to keep COVID-19 case numbers low and its economy functioning may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic.

Most experts say the coronavirus around the world isn't going away and believe it could eventually become, like the flu, a persistent but generally manageable threat if enough people gain immunity through infections and vaccines.

In countries like Britain and the U.S., which have had comparatively light restrictions against the omicron wave, there is a glimmer of hope that the process might be underway. Cases skyrocketed in recent weeks but have since dropped in Britain and may have leveled off in the U.S., perhaps because the extremely contagious variant is running out of people to infect. Some places already are talking about easing COVID-19 precautions.

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China, which will be in the international spotlight when the Beijing Winter Olympics begin in two weeks, is not seeing the same dynamic.

The communist government's practice throughout the pandemic of trying to find and isolate every infected person has largely protected hospitals from becoming overwhelmed and staved off the deaths that have engulfed most of the world.

But the uncompromising approach also means most people in China have never been exposed to the virus. At the same time, the effectiveness of China's most widely used vaccines has been called into question. New studies suggest they offer significantly less protection against infection from omicron, even after three doses, than people get after booster shots of the leading Western vaccines.

Together, those factors could complicate China's effort to get past the pandemic. Experts say if the country of 1.4 billion people were to relax restrictions, it could face a surge similar to what Singapore or Australia experienced, despite a highly vaccinated population.

"China's susceptibility to outbreaks is likely to be more because most people have not been exposed to the virus due to the stringent measures that were put in place, thus lacking hybrid immunity, which is supposed to prove better protection than vaccination alone," said Dr. Vineeta Bal, an immunologist at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research.

"It is risky for China to reopen right now because omicron is spreading globally, and even if the variant doesn't cause major illness, it'll spread like wildfire," she added.

Dali Yang, a professor who studies Chinese politics at the University of Chicago, said, "It's a big challenge, for leaders, especially their rhetoric on saving lives. How do you justify opening up and then having tens of thousands of people dying in the process?"

Chinese President Xi Jinping has cited China's approach as a "major strategic success" and evidence of the "significant advantages" of its political system over Western liberal democracies.

The world's most populous nation was the only major economy to grow in 2020, and it accounted for a fraction of global deaths and infections.

As part of the country's tough-minded strategy for keeping the virus at bay, residents in Chinese cities must display their infection status on a government-monitored app to enter supermarkets, offices or even the capital.

But weeks ahead of the Olympics, omicron is testing this approach with outbreaks in the southern province of Guangdong, as well as Beijing.

Organizers of the Olympics announced they will not sell tickets locally and will allow only select spectators in. Foreign fans are not allowed.

Authorities have also asked people to not visit their hometowns around the Lunar New Year at the start of February, a move that will dampen spending during China's most important family holiday. And the major city of Xi'an in the west and parts of Ningbo, a busy port south of Shanghai, are under lockdown.

With the Communist Party gearing up for a major meeting this fall, at which Xi is expected to be appointed to a third term as party leader, China is unlikely to relax its policies in a major way any time soon.

"If the numbers from COVID start to skyrocket to big levels, then this will reflect badly on his leadership," said Willy Lam, an expert on Chinese political leadership at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

China relies heavily on its own Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines, along with several others made domestically. It has not approved the Pfizer shot, even though a Chinese company bought distribution rights in 2020.

Instead, the focus is on developing China's own mRNA vaccines, like the Pfizer and Moderna formulas. One such vaccine is in late trials.

Another option for China may be to track how the virus is evolving and put off opening its borders until it becomes even milder. But it's anyone's guess when or if that might happen.

"What will the next variant be? How serious will it be? You can't tell," Bal said.

**British Conservatives set to go for top job if Johnson falls**

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By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Revelations that Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff partied while Britain was in a coronavirus lockdown have provoked public outrage and led some members of his Conservative Party to consider ousting their leader.

If they manage to push Johnson out — or if he resigns — the party would hold a leadership contest to choose his replacement.

Here's a look at who could rise if Johnson falls:

**RISHI SUNAK, TREASURY CHIEF**

Sunak, 41, is widely regarded as the brightest rising star in the party, the best known of the contenders to the public — and the bookies' favorite to succeed Johnson.

Sunak was thrust into the spotlight when he became treasury chief in early 2020, tasked with the unenviable job of steering the British economy through its worst economic slump on record due to the pandemic.

Sunak has dished out billions of pounds in emergency spending to help businesses and workers, and his pandemic policies have generally been seen in a positive light.

A big "Star Wars" fan, Sunak nurtures his personal brand with a slick Instagram account. Opinion polls have suggested that he is one of the most popular Conservative ministers among voters, though his elite education and past work for the investment bank Goldman Sachs and a hedge fund means some see him as out of touch with ordinary people.

He would be Britain's first prime minister who is not white. Born to Indian parents who immigrated to the U.K. from East Africa, Sunak attended the exclusive Winchester College private school, studied at Oxford University, and is married to Akshata Murthy, daughter of an Indian billionaire.

**LIZ TRUSS, FOREIGN SECRETARY**

Truss, 46, took on the high-profile job of foreign secretary in September after serving as trade minister and has been gaining momentum as a contender since.

As well as serving as Britain's chief diplomat, she is the U.K.'s new lead negotiator with the European Union to deal with lingering issues following Britain's exit from the bloc.

Once a campaigner for remaining in the EU, Truss has become a fervent champion for Brexit. Her prior role as international trade secretary saw her signing post-Brexit trade deals around the world and channeling Johnson's ambitions for "Global Britain."

Truss is popular with many Conservatives, who see in the free-market-loving politician echoes of the party's first female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. Her supporters have coined the slogan "In Liz We Truss."

She is less well known to the general public. "When you ask about Liz Truss, 50% of voters say 'Liz who?'" said Chris Curtis, a pollster at Opinium Research.

**SAJID JAVID, HEALTH SECRETARY**

Javid, 52, has been health secretary since June, leading Britain's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before that he served as treasury chief, but resigned in early 2020 after clashing with Johnson over the prime minister's order to fire his team of advisers.

The fact Johnson brought him back to the government to handle the coronavirus response reflects his reputation as a competent and safe pair of hands.

The son of Pakistani immigrants, Javid has billed himself as a common-man alternative to his private school-educated rivals — although he had a lucrative career in investment banking before entering politics.

As with Sunak, he'd make history if he were to win.

**MICHAEL GOVE, LEVELLING UP SECRETARY**

Gove, a party heavyweight, has held many key Cabinet posts and is currently in charge of delivering on the government's promise to "level up" Britain, that is, address inequality by increasing opportunities in deprived areas.

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Gove, 54, played a key role in the campaign to take Britain out of the EU and is widely respected in the party, but not completely trusted. In the 2016 Conservative leadership campaign, he backed Johnson for leader before deciding he would rather run himself — a betrayal that many Conservatives have not forgotten.

To the public, he may be best known for being filmed dancing to techno music at a nightclub in Aberdeen, Scotland, in August, in a clip that drew a lot of chuckles when it went viral on social media.

## JEREMY HUNT, FORMER CABINET MINISTER

Hunt, a former health secretary and foreign secretary, ran against Johnson in the 2019 leadership race, billing himself as the more sensible, serious candidate. He lost heavily, and was dumped from the Cabinet when Johnson took over.

In a recent interview, the 55-year-old was quoted as saying that his ambition to lead the country has not “completely vanished.”

He has remained a lawmaker, and kept himself in the public eye by grilling ministers and experts as head of the Health and Social Care Select Committee in Parliament.

As a critic of the government’s response to the pandemic, he may appeal to those seeking a change from Johnson — though some look on him unfavorably for implementing unpopular policies when he was health secretary.

## Where Ukraine’s sunflowers once sprouted, fears now grow

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — On a warm spring day in Ukraine 26 years ago, three men smiled for cameras as they planted symbolic sunflower seedlings in freshly tilled earth where Soviet nuclear missiles had once stood ready.

That placid scene was, briefly, a launchpad for hope that the demise of the Soviet Union would bury the threat of great power war and mark the start of lasting peace in an undivided Europe. Today Ukraine is ground zero for worry that Russia will ignite a conflict that could engulf the region.

On that early-June day in 1996, the American secretary of defense, William J. Perry, joined his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts in ceremonies marking the completion of Ukraine’s nuclear disarmament. Under Western pressure, Ukraine had agreed to give up the weapons it inherited with the breakup of the Soviet empire in exchange for a Russian and Western security guarantee.

Perry likened the moment to the parting of a dark cloud of Cold War fear.

“It is altogether fitting that we plant sunflowers here at Pervomaysk to symbolize the hope we all feel at seeing the sun shine through again,” he said, standing on a small concrete pad in the former missile field, where SS-19 nuclear missiles once stood in underground silos, prepared to launch toward targets in the United States. Nearby, American, Russian and Ukrainian national flags waved in a warm breeze.

That hopeful moment when American, Russian and Ukrainian officials grabbed white-handled spades to plant sunflowers has given way to today’s fears of renewed conflict and a new cold war. Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin stands accused by the West of violating that deal by targeting Ukraine with 100,000-plus troops.

Now it is Russia that wants a security guarantee from the West as well as legal guarantees that Ukraine never be permitted to join the NATO alliance, even as Moscow readies for a potential invasion of a neighbor with inferior military might and none of the 170-plus nuclear-tipped missiles it once held.

Moscow wants a stop to NATO’s eastward expansion, which it asserts Washington promised in the early aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 in the context of the reunification of Germany. The U.S. and its NATO allies deny any such promise was given. The opportunity for countries to join NATO is enshrined in Article 10 of the organization’s founding treaty, and this “open door” policy was reaffirmed in 2008 when alliance leaders agreed that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members of NATO” but set no timeline and offered them no formal path to membership. Ukraine remains without a NATO invitation, and none is likely for the foreseeable future.

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Ukraine gave up its inherited nuclear weapons — an estimated 1,900 warheads that at the time constituted the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world — after getting the security assurance it wanted. It is known as the Budapest Memorandum, named for the Hungarian capital in which it was signed in 1994 by the United States, Britain and Russia. Its words seem to defy the reality of today's Ukraine crisis.

The three signatory nations pledged to "respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine." They promised to "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self defense or otherwise in accordance with the charter of the United Nations."

Thus began a long road to today's crisis in which Ukraine's future may be in doubt. It already has lost control of the eastern Donbas region bordering Russia, following a Russian intervention in 2014 in support of separatists. That same year, Russia seized and annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

After those Russian moves, the United States and NATO distanced themselves from Russia, and Washington has provided substantial — but still limited — military assistance to Kyiv. Ukraine continues to seek closer ties to the West, including membership in the NATO alliance, which Putin sees as a threat to Russia for having expanded eastward toward its borders multiple times since 1999.

President Joe Biden says the United States stands with Ukraine. But he also notes that since Ukraine is not in NATO, it has no guarantee of U.S. military backing. Biden also has noted the historic significance of a nuclear-armed Russia potentially invading a neighbor that swore off nuclear weapons.

"This will be the most consequential thing that's happened in the world, in terms of war and peace, since World War II," he said.

Among the U.S. officials at Pervomaysk for the sunflower planting in 1996 was Ashton Carter, who years later would become secretary of defense. In a memoir, Carter recalled Ukraine's decision to disarm, which he saw as marking the true end of the Cold War that divided Europe for nearly half a century. He said it showed that even insecure nations can give up the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons — "placing their trust instead in a world order dedicated to peace and a powerful America dedicated to international partnerships."

At the time, Perry spoke of prospects for "a permanent season of peace." But looking back, he concluded that the spirit of goodwill was all too short-lived.

"I am saddened to realize," he wrote in 2015, "that such a scene and such cooperation are unthinkable today."

## Sinema faces blowback in Arizona for votes defying Democrats

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema is growing increasingly isolated from some of her party's most influential officials and donors after playing a key role in scuttling voting rights legislation that many Democrats consider essential to preserving democracy.

Sinema faces a vote of disapproval and possible censure from leaders of the Arizona Democratic Party on Saturday, a symbolic condemnation for the woman who just three years ago brought the party an Arizona Senate seat for the first time in a generation.

Donors are threatening to walk away. Several groups are already collecting money for an eventual primary challenge, even though she's not on the ballot until 2024. Young activists are holding a second hunger strike to draw attention to Sinema's vote.

The moves offer a preview of the persistent opposition Sinema will likely face within her own party in the two years before she next appears on a ballot. The independent streak that has given her tremendous leverage over the agenda in Washington has enraged many Democrats back home who are intent on preventing her reelection.

"Any reservoir of goodwill that she had is gone," said Rep. Ruben Gallego, an Arizona Democrat who may challenge Sinema from the left.

Sinema's defenders say nobody who's watched her for the past decade should be surprised by her posi-

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tion. She often bucked her party in the House, ran an aggressively moderate campaign for Senate and has never wavered in her support for upholding the filibuster.

"During three terms in the U.S. House, and now in the Senate, Kyrsten has always promised Arizonans she would be an independent voice for the state — not for either political party," Hannah Hurley, Sinema's spokesperson, said in a statement. "She's delivered for Arizonans and has always been honest about where she stands."

Her influence is driven by the Senate's 50-50 split, which essentially gives any senator the ability to kill legislation, an option Sinema has repeatedly exercised.

But she faces political dynamics unlike the other Senate moderate thwarting Democratic ambitions, Joe Manchin of West Virginia. Representing a state that former President Donald Trump carried by nearly 39 percentage points in 2020, Manchin is unlikely to face a progressive challenger who would gain traction.

In Arizona, however, Democrats are ascendant. Joe Biden was the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry the state since 1996, and the party is eager to build on that success. That makes it harder for a Democrat to simply ignore the left here, particularly in a primary election.

Sinema supports the Democrats' voting rights legislation but steadfastly opposes passing it by changing or eliminating the Senate's filibuster rule, which effectively requires 60 of 100 votes to pass most legislation. On Wednesday night, she joined Manchin and all Republicans to oppose a one-time rule change so the bill could pass with a simple majority.

Laphonza Butler, president of Emily's List, an important fundraising group for Democratic women who support abortion rights, said in a statement that Sinema's vote "means she will find herself standing alone in the next election." She said the group would not endorse her reelection if she doesn't support a path forward for voting rights legislation.

Primary Sinema Project, which is raising money for an eventual primary challenge, said it's collected more than \$300,000 from nearly 12,000 donors.

"We are quite literally doing everything we physically, possibly can in terms of putting our bodies on the line and trying to plead for this action because the consequences (of inaction) are far worse than starving or going to jail or both," said Shana Gallagher, one of about three dozen young people holding a hunger strike to protest Sinema and Manchin. Gallagher is co-founder of Un-PAC, launched last year to organize young people in favor of passing voting rights legislation.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent whose fundraising and mobilization abilities are virtually unmatched on the left, suggested he'd support primary challengers to Sinema and Manchin.

Sinema says the filibuster forces bipartisanship on Capitol Hill and ensures that the millions of Americans represented by the minority party have a voice. Repealing it would lead to wild swings in legislation depending on the party in power, she says.

"When one party need only negotiate with itself, policy will inextricably be pushed from the middle towards the extremes," she said in a floor speech last week, her most expansive explanation of her views on the issue.

Antagonizing the left shores up her standing among the independent women who decide close races in Arizona, said Brian Murray, a GOP consultant in Phoenix and former executive director of the Arizona Republican Party. Sinema has shown the "maverick" sensibilities that made the late GOP Sen. John McCain a favorite son in Arizona, and with her appeal to independents, "she's going to be nearly impossible to beat," he said.

"Bernie Sanders is attacking an Arizona senator?" Murray said. "I'd say: 'Hey, thank you. You're helping me get reelected.'"

Even Republican Gov. Doug Ducey gave Sinema "credit for standing up and protecting a Senate rule that she believes in."

"I'm glad that she's trying to bring people together," Ducey told reporters. Sinema was one of Ducey's fiercest critics in 2020, when she relentlessly lambasted his light-touch response to the pandemic.

Sinema's fight with the left has overshadowed the 2022 reelection bid of Mark Kelly, Arizona's other Democratic senator, who will be trying to hold on to the seat he won in a special election.

With Sinema taking most of the attention, Kelly managed to avoid taking a position on the filibuster throughout his 2020 campaign and his first year in office. Hours before he had to vote Wednesday, Kelly came out in favor of a one-time workaround to pass the voting rights bill.

The Arizona Democratic Party meets Saturday, and leaders are poised to take the highly unusual step of formally condemning Sinema, which could take the form of a vote of no confidence or a censure. A larger group of leaders voted in September to put Sinema "on notice" that her votes on the filibuster and other Democratic priorities, including Biden's big increase in social services spending, will be closely scrutinized.

The move has no practical consequences but demonstrates the frustration of key Democratic activists. Whether the party pulls its support for Sinema's 2024 bid would be up to the leaders elected after the 2022 midterms.

Sinema has "fallen short" on protecting voter rights, said Raquel Terán, a state senator and chair of the Arizona Democratic Party.

"She has an incredible ability to work across the aisle," Terán said. "Let's see that ability put to work for voting rights."

## 'Wuhan, I Am Here': Film follows volunteers in sealed city

By EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The homeless, the sick, the elderly: For people who fell through the cracks of the official system, the then-unprecedented decision to isolate the central Chinese city of Wuhan and its 13 million people was a matter of life or death.

Film director Lan Bo hopes to sound the alarm with a documentary, "Wuhan, I Am Here," about volunteers who helped neighbors get food and medical care following the lockdown in early 2020 of the city where the coronavirus pandemic began.

The documentary comes as China has renewed similar lockdowns in three other cities since mid-December to contain COVID-19 outbreaks. The number of people confined to their homes totaled some 20 million people in early January.

The government's decision to commandeer Wuhan's hospitals to treat COVID-19 patients meant many people with other problems were turned away.

The film begins with a woman in tears outside a hospital that wouldn't admit her husband for treatment of lung cancer. Volunteers secured a bed for him by talking with a Beijing hospital and working medical connections.

Other families struggled to get treatment for children with severe conditions.

"At that time, medical resources focused on COVID-19 patients, so it wasn't their turn" to be treated, said Lan.

"Those who needed dialysis, those who had cancer and AIDS patients who needed medicine," said Lan. "In addition, patients in critical condition and needed to be hospitalized — what were they going to do? We were all thinking about these questions."

The government sent truckloads of food daily to apartment compounds. But elderly people who couldn't leave their homes and the homeless relied on volunteers to get food for them.

Lan chronicles the hurdles volunteers encountered. They needed permits to drive in different areas of Wuhan. They were stopped by local officials who said they lacked permission to distribute food and other supplies.

The lockdown of Wuhan, which spread to other Chinese cities, was later imitated by some Asian and Western governments as the virus spread.

China's unusually stringent "zero tolerance" strategy that aimed to find and isolate every infected person helped to keep the country's case numbers relatively low.

The National Health Commission has reported a total of 4,636 fatalities — and none since early 2021 — out of 105,484 confirmed cases.

In the latest lockdown, most access to Xi'an in the west and its 13 million people was suspended in



mid-December.

The city government has been criticized for food shortages and the severity of anti-disease measures imposed under pressure from Beijing to bring down case numbers.

A pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage after being turned away from a hospital, reportedly for lacking current COVID-19 test results.

Xi'an failed to learn from Wuhan about the importance of volunteers, Lan said.

"Especially the pandemic in Xi'an, what I saw is the government's neglect of civilian forces, which resulted in the lack of adequate treatment at the grassroots level," Lan said.

"Why was Wuhan able to get through this?" Lan said. "I think in addition to our country and the government's huge input into resources, it was also because of the contributions of the tens of thousands of volunteers that worked in obscurity."

Lan has applied for government approval to release the "Wuhan, I Am Here" in China. It was screened at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan last year.

Under a lockdown, "it is this kind of daily life that sometimes determines the life and death of a person and determines the destiny of the person," Lan said.

## Despite key win, Venezuela's opposition split over strategy

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

BARINAS, Venezuela (AP) — Iglenda Monzón lost her restaurant to Venezuela's protracted economic crisis. Her daughters then emigrated to Colombia to find work and left behind two children. She and the boys sometimes go hungry and often do not have running water, electricity or gas.

Theirs is a common tale across the troubled South American country, and like millions of others desperate for a change, Monzón voted in the country's recent regional elections.

Her ballot contributed to a deeply symbolic opposition win in the heartland of the ruling socialist party. But just by casting a ballot, she stepped into the most divisive issue for parties seeking a new government — whether or not to take part in elections most see as deeply unfair.

The gubernatorial victory in the northwest state of Barinas — where the late President Hugo Chávez was born and his family governed for more than two decades — has been celebrated by the opposition.

Voters like Monzón who contributed to that win see ballots as a tool for the change they crave.

"(Change) is by vote, it is the decision of the people.... Those are our weapons: the vote. They are the only weapons that we, the opposition, have," Monzón, 46, said.

But the victory hasn't convinced skeptics who doubt the value of participating in contests that most independent monitors still see as profoundly tilted in favor of President Nicolás Maduro's government.

Twice in less than two months, the opposition shocked the ruling socialist party by prevailing in Barinas. Sergio Garrido, a local leader unknown to most of the country, won a special election held on Jan. 9 after Venezuela's highest court retroactively disqualified the opposition contender in November's regular contest as he was leading in the vote count.

November's state and local elections were the first in years in which most major opposition parties participated. The outcome underscored the opposition's dilemma: The government finally accepted a loss in Barinas, but only after it had claimed victory in most other contests nationwide and only after it made things as hard as possible on its rivals.

Electoral authorities first let opposition candidate Freddy Superlano participate in Barinas, then the high court disqualified him just as it appeared he had won. His wife, who was chosen as his successor, was also ruled ineligible. So was her substitute. The previously obscure Garrido finally was allowed to stand.

The main opposition coalition, the "Unitary Platform" led by Juan Guaidó, boycotted previous elections, including the reelection of Maduro as president in May 2018, arguing that Venezuela lacks the conditions for free and just voting.

Government loyalists dominate the electoral authority and courts, which have frequently barred or prosecuted leaders challenging Maduro. And after the government lost control of congress in 2015, officials

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moved to create a new super-legislature to overrule it.

The opposition somewhat grudgingly agreed to take part in November after two opposition stalwarts were added to the five-member electoral authority.

But Guaidó — the former congressional leader who is recognized by the U.S., Britain and other countries as Venezuela's legitimate president — didn't encourage people to vote in November. While his party ran candidates, he did not cast a ballot.

After the win in Barinas, he told reporters that that outcome was a great lesson in organization and mobilization — but said the opposition still needs to demand negotiations on fairer electoral conditions and an end to political conflict.

"This is something simple: that the political persecution be put to an end, that the political prisoners be freed, that we achieve a schedule for free and fair elections, that we achieve the economic reactivation of the country," he said.

Former lawmaker María Corina Machado took a blunter stance against participating, saying those who did were "washing the face of" Maduro's government.

"This is not an election, but a simulation that allocates slots with no real power," she tweeted on election day. "This fight requires delegitimizing and destabilizing the tyranny."

Venezuela's opposition has been divided over boycotts at least since 2005, when the main parties withdrew from congressional elections, arguing problems with the voting system and a biased electoral council.

The result was widely seen as a disaster for the opposition: a near-total victory for Chavez that gave him carte blanche to pass legislation.

International observers determined that vote was basically transparent. But electoral conditions have grown steadily more hostile since then: Independent and opposition media have been closed, opposition parties taken over and their leaders jailed or forced into exile.

"The problem is that electoral participation is the issue that most divides the opposition," said David Smilde, senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America and professor at Tulane University.

"They decided to go to the 2021 regional elections, but making minimal effort to unify candidacies and actually seeking to discourage the vote," he said.

Turnout on Nov. 21 was just 42%. Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela won more than 200 of 322 municipalities and most governor's offices even though its overall vote total, 3.7 million, trailed the 3.9 million of its adversaries.

Part of the poor opposition showing resulted from its inability to line up behind a single candidate, splitting support. That was the case in Miranda state, where incumbent Gov. Héctor Rodríguez was reelected after a bitter dispute among two opposition candidates.

Smilde said the opposition needs to find a way to "resolve conflict and forge a coherent strategy"

"It's not realistic to think a diverse coalition will come to a consensus on ideology," he said. "But if they can agree on mechanisms to form an effective coalition, they will be successful, as Barinas just showed."

While Guaidó and others say democracy will only return to Venezuela through a negotiated process with the government, such efforts have failed repeatedly, most recently in October, when the government halted discussions after a close ally of Maduro was extradited to the U.S. on money-laundering charges.

During the dialogue guided by Norwegian diplomats last year in Mexico City, both sides made concessions, but neither got close to their main objectives: an end to international sanctions for the government and much fairer electoral conditions for the opposition.

Conservative COPEI party leader Roberto Enriquez, an opposition delegate at the talks, said that Maduro's government feeds off his adversaries' "chaos" and warned against "predatory or annihilating behaviors among ourselves."

"Key times are ahead. It is true that we have had many different visions and strategies, (but) those differences must be left behind," he said.

The next presidential election is set for 2024, but some are pushing for an effort to oust Maduro sooner.

Venezuela's constitution allows a referendum to remove a president who has served at least half his term. A few groups this month filed petitions to start the process and the electoral authorities allowed them to

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go forward — though Guaidó and others expressed skepticism about their intentions.

In Barinas, the opposition united behind one candidate and won over people like Maria Bolivar, who is formally employed by a public hospital but long since stopped working as her \$7 monthly wage was not enough to feed herself.

Bolivar, 62, said the rest of the country should take note of what happened:

"May this serve as an example for the rest of the country who have to fight."

## Jewish leaders urge worship attendance after hostage siege

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

On the eve of her 100th birthday Saturday, Ruth Salton told her daughter she was going one way or another to Friday night Shabbat services at Congregation Beth Israel, just days after a gunman voicing antisemitic conspiracy theories held four worshippers hostage for 10 hours at the Fort Worth-area synagogue.

"I want to support my people," said Salton, a Holocaust survivor. She said she told her daughter "if she doesn't take me, I'll go by myself, because I feel I belong there. I am Jewish, and this is my faith, and I am supporting it."

She's far from alone.

Jewish leaders throughout the U.S. are calling for a strong turnout at this weekend's worship services as a statement of defiance against antisemitic acts such as last weekend's hostage siege at Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas.

"SHOW UP IN SHUL THIS SHABBAT ... IN DEFIANCE/JOY/TO SEE FELLOW JEWS," Emory University history professor Deborah Lipstadt tweeted, using a traditional term for synagogue. She is President Biden's nominee as a special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism abroad.

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers of the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, who survived the Oct. 27, 2018, mass shooting at his synagogue, echoed the call. After a gunman killed 11 worshipers from three congregations at the synagogue in the deadliest antisemitic hate crime in U.S. history, people packed synagogues around the country the following weekend.

"Do not let the antisemites terrorize us and win by keeping us out of our sacred spaces," Myers wrote in his blog. "Show up in synagogue, and loudly state by your presence that you will not be driven into hiding. ... (Antisemites) will not chase us from our home. Not now. Not ever."

Authorities say Malik Faisal Akram, a British national, took the four people who were at Congregation Beth Israel last Saturday hostage. He was demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan and who is serving a lengthy sentence in a prison in Fort Worth, which is 15 miles (23 kilometers) southwest of Colleyville.

The hostages said Akram cited antisemitic stereotypes, believing that Jews could wield power over President Joe Biden to have Siddiqui released.

The siege ended after the last hostage ran out of the synagogue and an FBI SWAT team rushed in. Akram was killed by multiple gunshot wounds. The Tarrant County Medical Examiner ruled the case a homicide, which under Texas law indicates that one person was killed by another but does not necessarily mean the killing was a crime.

Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was among the hostages, said Thursday that the congregation was "doing its best to heal."

"We're going to have services on Shabbat evening. We're going to have services on Shabbat morning. We're going to have religious school on Sunday," Cytron-Walker said during a webinar Thursday hosted by the Anti-Defamation League.

"I stand before you with great gratitude just to be alive," he added during a Friday news conference.

Cytron-Walker encouraged those in the Jewish community "to have a Shabbat shalom, a Sabbath of peace."

"God willing, we're able to find a sense of wholeness with our families, with our communities. ... And I would extend that not only to the Jewish community, I would extend that to all communities," he said.

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Congregation Beth Israel's services this weekend were being held at another location because the investigation at the synagogue is ongoing. Attendance was limited to members.

"I expect it to be emotional, because we have not had the opportunity to come together and express or experience whatever emotions we have," said Anna Eisen, Salton's daughter. "I'm ready to hug people."

Rabbi Noah Farkas, president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, said congregations in his region were preparing for greater attendance and were taking coronavirus-related precautions.

"In face of a new wave of antisemitism, where Jews are threatened online, forced to prove themselves on campus and fear eating in restaurants, we must not let the fear our enemies want to instill in us define us," he said Friday. He called on Jews everywhere to "show the world that we are not afraid to live Jewishly."

Many Jewish leaders have said the hostage standoff was an example of a larger rise in antisemitic acts. The Anti-Defamation League says such incidents have reached their highest levels since it began tracking them decades ago.

Eisen said that the supportive response of local police and the FBI has made her "feel safer in my community and my country," but that it's also important to confront antisemitism.

Eisen, co-author of books about her father's Holocaust experience and her own as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, said synagogues in Nazi-controlled Europe "were attacked, and people were attacked and killed, because of the same kind of hatred" that was shown last Saturday by the hostage-taker.

"It's nothing new to me. I hate antisemitism. I don't understand why people feel that way about us," Salton said.

At the same time, having survived the Holocaust and much else, she is ready to celebrate her centennial.

"I would very much like to be 18, but since I'm 100, I'm grateful that I came to a point to live to 100 years," she said.

## Rare blast of snow, ice takes aim at Southeast US coast

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Freezing rain, sleet and snow blew into coastal areas stretching from South Carolina to Virginia on Friday in a winter storm that forecasters say could snarl a region that's unaccustomed to winter precipitation.

Authorities along the North and South Carolina coast warned that ice accumulations could cause major power outages, while areas to the northeast, stretching into Virginia, could see several inches (centimeters) of snow.

In North Carolina, a Delta Air Lines plane with 19 passengers on board skidded off the runway and rolled into mud while taxiing at snowy Raleigh-Durham International Airport on Friday night, according to airport officials. No injuries were reported aboard the flight from Washington, D.C.

Most of the precipitation is expected to pass by sunrise Saturday. But forecasters said temperatures likely won't rise above the 30s in North Carolina and Virginia during the day and will drop into the 20s and even teens in some places on Saturday night.

The snow will "probably be sticking around for a little bit," said Alec Butner, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Wakefield, Virginia. "We finally get into the 40s on Sunday. We might have some melting by that point."

Transportation officials in the southeast corner of Virginia said Friday morning that crews had been working overnight to treat the roads, but warned people to stay off of them.

"Road temps are below freezing on all roads in the area, which means high potential for slick spots, black ice and slushy conditions. Stay home where it's safe and warm, unless travel is unavoidable," the Virginia Department of Transportation's Hampton Roads District said in a tweet.

In the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, area, a fire chief warned that even walking out the front door could be treacherous.

"One of our biggest concerns are slips, trips and falls. We're not used to the ice around here as much. Be very careful just stepping out of your own home," Horry County Fire Chief Joey Tanner said.

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Near Raleigh, an ambulance transporting a patient slid off an icy road early Friday, injuring two workers aboard, according to the state Highway Patrol. The patient died after the crash, but the cause of death hasn't been confirmed. The governor's office said numerous crashes were reported Friday morning after the storm's first wave.

Forecasters predict 4 to 6 inches (10 to 15 centimeters) of snow in the northeastern corner of North Carolina and Virginia's Hampton Roads region, which includes Norfolk and Virginia Beach.

Chris Stokes, 41, a construction worker who lives in Norfolk, stocked up at a Harris Teeter grocery store Friday morning, rounding out his provisions with bottled water, eggs, chicken, wine and other items.

"I already had a couple of things, but now they're making it seem like it's gonna be a lot worse," Stokes said.

School was canceled for his kids. His construction jobs were on hold. Stokes' plan was to put some chicken in the slow cooker and assemble some toys that his kids got for Christmas.

"I bought some salt, so I'll sprinkle that outside the walkway and just kind of brace for it," Stokes said.

"Luckily, I got a 4-wheel drive (pickup truck)," he added. "So, if anything happens I'm not stuck for real. I can probably make it to where I need to go. But I'm sure nothing will be open."

In North Carolina, the heaviest amounts of ice will likely develop near New Bern, where two U.S. highways cross, said Ryan Ellis of the National Weather Service office in Newport/Morehead City.

"We could see up to a half an inch of ice there, and with that amount you're really starting to get into concerns about power outages," Ellis said. Ice will be a concern along the coast from Jacksonville, North Carolina, to the northeastern corner of South Carolina.

In New Bern, Annabelle's restaurant closed early on Friday afternoon.

"We've done about a fifth of what we would normally do on a lunch," said manager Keith Strange, whose family owns the restaurant in the picturesque river town of about 30,000 people. "Plus, we're working with a volunteer staff and don't want to have people driving if conditions get worse later."

The storm that's been forecast is a rare event, which people are taking pretty seriously, Strange said.

"Essentials are hard to find," he said. "I know several grocery stores were completely out of milk and bread yesterday at different times. People were buying hamburger buns."

Duke Energy said in a news release that it has readied 2,500 workers around the Carolinas to help restore power after the storm, drawing crews from as far away as Florida and Indiana.

In South Carolina, areas that typically consider hurricanes their biggest weather threat were preparing for ice.

Crews treated the high, long bridges along the state's coast before the freezing rain started, warning they could become especially dangerous due to freezing rain. Myrtle Beach planned to close at least one bridge for safety before any bad weather started. In Charleston, schools were closed and many offices and businesses shut down after lunch.

The U.S. Navy is requiring only mission-essential personnel to report to its installations along Virginia's coast, including the world's largest Navy base in Norfolk. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune and Air Station New River in Jacksonville, North Carolina, also announced that nonessential employees weren't required to report to work Friday.

## US, Russia to try more diplomacy amid tensions over Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Top U.S. and Russian diplomats agreed Friday to keep talking in the standoff over Ukraine, even though their meeting produced no movement in the crisis that has seen Moscow mass tens of thousands of troops at the border and the West ramp up supplies of weapons to Kyiv.

With fears of an invasion of Ukraine running high and seemingly intractable demands, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met for about 90 minutes in Geneva at what the American said was a "critical moment."

Expectations were low going in, and there was no breakthrough.

Blinken told Lavrov the U.S. would give Russia written responses to Moscow's proposals next week and

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suggested the two would likely meet again shortly after that — offering some hope that any invasion would be delayed for at least a few more days.

Blinken said the U.S. and its allies remain resolute in rejecting Russia's most important demands, which were reiterated Friday. Moscow wants NATO to promise that Ukraine will never be added as a member, that no alliance weapons will be deployed near Russian borders, and that it pull back its forces from Central and Eastern Europe.

Despite that, there was no indication the U.S. responses would be any different from the flat-out rejections already expressed by Washington and its allies, clouding future diplomatic efforts.

"We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clearer path to understanding each other's positions," Blinken said after the meeting.

Blinken said he also wanted to use the opportunity to share directly with Lavrov some "concrete ideas to address some of the concerns that you have raised, as well as the deep concerns that many of us have about Russia's actions."

Blinken said Lavrov repeated Russia's insistence that it has no plans to invade Ukraine, but the U.S. and its allies were not convinced.

"We're looking at what is visible to all, and it is deeds and actions and not words that make all the difference," he said, adding that Russia should remove its troops from the Ukrainian border if it wanted to prove its point.

Lavrov, meanwhile, called the talks "constructive and useful" but declined to characterize the U.S. pledge.

"I can't say whether we are on the right track or not," he told reporters. "We will understand that when we receive the U.S. written response to all of our proposals."

Blinken suggested there was no leeway on Russia's demands, saying firmly: "There is no trade space there: None."

The U.S. and its allies say Russian President Vladimir Putin knows the demands are nonstarters, adding that they're open to less-dramatic moves.

Blinken said the U.S. would be open to a meeting between Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden, if it would be "useful and productive." The two have met once in person in Geneva and have had several virtual conversations on Ukraine that have proven largely inconclusive.

An estimated 100,000 Russian troops have been sent to areas near Ukraine, and more were moving into the neighborhood for training exercises with neighboring Belarus.

Late Friday, the U.S. embassy in Kyiv tweeted photos of a shipment it said had just arrived from the U.S., with "close to 200,000 pounds of lethal aid, including ammunition for the front line defenders of Ukraine."

Western allies were also supplying weaponry and equipment to Ukraine. Britain sent anti-tank missiles earlier this week, while the defense ministers of the Baltic nations issued a statement saying they received U.S. approval to send Stinger air defense missiles and Javelin anti-tank missiles to strengthen Kyiv's defenses.

"Today Ukraine is at the forefront of separating Europe from the military conflict with Russia," said Estonian Defense Minister Kalle Laanet. "Let's face it — the war in Ukraine is ongoing and it is important to support Ukraine in every way we can so that they can resist the aggressor."

The Pentagon said the USS Harry S Truman aircraft carrier and its strike group will participate in a NATO maritime exercise in the Mediterranean, which will continue through Feb. 4 — something that has been planned since 2020, said Pentagon press secretary John Kirby. He said officials considered whether to go ahead with the exercise, because of the ongoing tensions, and decided to move ahead.

Kirby said the exercise wasn't planned anticipating a Russian move on Ukraine and is "not designed against any of the kinds of scenarios that might happen with respect to Ukraine."

On Thursday, Russia had announced sweeping naval maneuvers through February, some apparently in the Black Sea.

The U.S. and its allies scrambled to present a united front. Washington and its allies have repeatedly promised consequences such as biting economic sanctions against Russia — though not military action — if it invades.

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Blinken repeated that Friday, saying the U.S. and its allies were committed to diplomacy but also committed "if that proves impossible, and Russia decides to pursue aggression against Ukraine, to a united, swift and severe response."

After the meeting, Blinken spoke by phone with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to brief him on his talks this week and reaffirm U.S. support for Kyiv's sovereignty and stress that no decisions would be made without his country's input, State Department spokesman Ned Price said. He also will brief the foreign ministers of Washington's European allies.

Biden plans to spend the weekend huddling with his national security team at Camp David, press secretary Jen Psaki said.

In other diplomatic moves, President Sauli Niinistö of Finland said he spoke with Putin by phone on European security and Ukraine, saying it was "imperative to preserve peace in Europe," according to his office.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of NATO member Turkey, which touted its strong ties with Russia and Ukraine, renewed an offer to mediate between the two countries. Erdogan said he plans to visit Kyiv next month, adding that he would also hold talks with Putin.

Ukraine is already beset by conflict. Russia seized control of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, part of a simmering but largely stalemated conflict that has killed 14,000. Putin faced limited international consequences for those moves, but the West says a new invasion would be different.

Blinken met Ukraine's president in Kyiv and top diplomats from Britain, France and Germany in Berlin this week.

Blinken's effort to stress U.S. unity with its allies took an apparent hit Wednesday when Biden drew widespread criticism for saying retaliation for Russian aggression in Ukraine would depend on the details and that a "minor incursion" could prompt discord among Western allies.

On Thursday, Biden sought to clarify his comments by cautioning that any Russian troop movements across Ukraine's border would constitute an invasion and that Moscow would "pay a heavy price" for such an action.

"I've been absolutely clear with President Putin," Biden said. "He has no misunderstanding: Any, any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border, that is an invasion."

Adding to its warnings, Washington stepped up sanctions Thursday by slapping new measures on four Ukrainian officials who Blinken said were at the center of a Kremlin effort begun in 2020 to damage Kyiv's ability to "independently function."

The United States and allies say countries like Ukraine are entitled to their own alliances as part of sovereign security measures, but Lavrov countered that Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have also agreed that no nation can ensure its security by undermining security of others.

In eastern Ukraine, a soldier stationed near the front line with Russia-backed separatists called Blinken's visit to Kyiv "very important for our country." The soldier, who identified himself only by his first name, Serhiy, in line with official rules, voiced hope that if Russia attacked, "we can count on our forces' and our allies' power."

## McConnell responds to uproar over comment about Black voters

By PIPER HUDSPETH BLACKBURN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell pushed back Friday against the uproar over a comment he made about African American voters, calling the criticism directed his way "outrageous."

McConnell had been accused of racism for saying that "African American" voters cast ballots at similar rates to "Americans." The comment implied that Black voters are somehow not American and underscored the concerns of voting rights advocates that Republicans in state legislatures across the country are explicitly seeking to disenfranchise Black voters.

Following a speech Friday at an annual conference in Louisville, the Republican leader said he misspoke Wednesday when he made the comment during a Washington news conference.

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"I've never been accused of this sort of thing before, and it's hurtful and offensive," he said. "And I think some of the critics know it's totally nonsense."

McConnell on Wednesday had said that "African American voters are voting in just as high a percentage as Americans." McConnell explained on Friday that he should have said the word "all" before "Americans."

He also defended his record on race by noting that he attended the Rev. Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963. He also said he helped organize a civil rights march at Kentucky's state Capitol and was present when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

When asked what he would say to those who had been offended by his words, McConnell said he would discuss his record relating to voting rights, and brought up his role as a mentor to Kentucky's Attorney General Daniel Cameron, who is Black and one of many Republicans who came to the minority leader's defense this week.

"I think he would confirm with you that I recruited him to run. I've supported him, and I'm proud of him," McConnell said. "I have had African American speechwriters, schedulers, office managers over the years."

Charles Booker, a Kentucky Democrat running for the U.S. Senate, had been among many who had blasted the Republican earlier in the week. Booker, who is Black, did not back down from criticizing McConnell on Friday.

"Mitch McConnell wants you to know it's fine for him to block Voting Rights because he has Black friends," tweeted Booker, who unsuccessfully ran for McConnell's seat in 2020 and is challenging GOP Sen. Rand Paul this year.

McConnell tried to rebuff concerns among Democrats that GOP state lawmakers across the country are trying to disenfranchise minority voters by pointing to record-high turnout for all voters in the 2020 election.

Federal legislation like the kind he and other GOP lawmakers blocked on Wednesday also wasn't necessary, he said, because the Voting Rights Act was still law and concerns over specific state voting laws could be worked out through the court system.

"They co-opted Congressman Lewis' name, stuck it on a bill that really was not related to the Voting Rights Act ... in order to try to achieve a partisan advantage by federalizing election laws," McConnell said, referencing the Freedom to Vote: John R. Lewis Act.

The part of the bill named after Lewis, the late civil rights leader and Democratic congressman from Georgia, would have updated the Voting Rights Act and was a direct response to a Supreme Court ruling that weakened the law's oversight of states with a history of discriminating against Black and other minority voters.

## Meat Loaf, 'Bat Out of Hell' rock superstar, dies at 74

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Meat Loaf, the heavyweight rock superstar loved by millions for his "Bat Out of Hell" album and for such theatrical, dark-hearted anthems as "Paradise By the Dashboard Light," "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad," and "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)," has died. He was 74.

The singer born Marvin Lee Aday died Thursday, according to a family statement provided by his long-time agent Michael Greene.

"Our hearts are broken to announce that the incomparable Meat Loaf passed away tonight," the statement said. "We know how much he meant to so many of you and we truly appreciate all of the love and support as we move through this time of grief in losing such an inspiring artist and beautiful man... From his heart to your souls... don't ever stop rocking!"

No cause or other details were given, but Aday had numerous health scares over the years.

"Bat Out of Hell," his mega-selling collaboration with songwriter Jim Steinman and producer Todd Rundgren, came out in 1977 and made him one of the most recognizable performers in rock. Fans fell hard for the roaring vocals of the long-haired, 250-plus pound singer and for the comic non-romance of the title track, "You Took The Words Right Out of My Mouth," "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad" and "Paradise By the Dashboard Light," an operatic cautionary tale about going all the way.



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"Paradise" was a duet with Ellen Foley about two kids "barely 17" and "barely dressed," featuring play-by-play from New York Yankees broadcaster Phil Rizzuto, who alleged — to much skepticism — that he was unaware of any alternate meanings to reaching third base and heading for home. Speaking to The Associated Press on Friday, Foley remembered him as "larger than life" and noted the role "Paradise" had in the lives of fans and how they told of losing their virginity to it or singing it at special occasions: "I did it at karaoke, at my wedding, at my high school reunion, at my Bar Mitzvah."

After a slow start and mixed reviews, "Bat Out of Hell" became one of the top-selling albums in history, with worldwide sales of more than 40 million copies. Meat Loaf wasn't a consistent hit maker, especially after falling out for years with Steinman. But he maintained close ties with his fans through his manic live shows, social media and his many television, radio and film appearances, including "Fight Club" and cameos on "Glee" and "South Park."

Friends and fans mourned his death on social media. Andrew Lloyd Webber tweeted: "The vaults of heaven will be ringing with rock." And Adam Lambert called Meat Loaf: "A gentle hearted powerhouse rock star forever and ever. You were so kind. Your music will always be iconic."

Meat Loaf's biggest musical success after "Bat Out of Hell" was "Bat Out of Hell II: Back into Hell," a 1993 reunion with Steinman that sold more than 15 million copies and featured the Grammy-winning single "I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)."

Steinman died in April.

Aday's other albums included "Bat Out of Hell III: The Monster is Loose," "Hell in a Handbasket" and "Braver Than We Are." His more recent songs included "Dead Ringer for Love" with Cher, who tweeted that she "had so much fun" on the duet.

He is survived by Deborah Gillespie, his wife since 2007, and by daughters Pearl and Amanda Aday.

A native of Dallas, Aday was the son of a school teacher who raised him on her own after divorcing his alcoholic father, a police officer. Aday was singing and acting in high school (Mick Jagger was an early favorite, so was Ethel Merman) and attended Lubbock Christian College and what is now the University of North Texas. Among his more notable childhood memories: Seeing John F. Kennedy arrive at Love Field in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, then learning the president had been assassinated and driving to Parkland Hospital and watching a bloodied Jackie Kennedy step out of a car.

He was still a teenager when his mother died and when he acquired the nickname Meat Loaf, the alleged origins of which range from his weight to a favorite recipe of his mother's. He left for Los Angeles after college and was soon fronting the band Meat Loaf Soul. For years, he alternated between music and the stage, recording briefly for Motown, opening for such acts as the Who and the Grateful Dead and appearing in the Broadway production of "Hair."

By the mid-1970s, he was playing the lobotomized biker Eddie in the theater and film versions of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," had served as an understudy for his friend John Belushi for the stage production of National Lampoon and had begun working with Steinman on "Bat Out of Hell." The dense, pounding production was openly influenced by Wagner, Phil Spector and Bruce Springsteen, whose bandmates Roy Bittan and Max Weinberg played on the record. Rundgren initially thought of the album as a parody of Springsteen's grandiose style.

Steinman had known Meat Loaf since the singer appeared in his 1973 musical "More Than You Deserve" and some of the songs on "Bat Out of Hell," including "All Revved Up With No Place to Go," were initially written for a planned stage show based on the story of Peter Pan. "Bat Out of Hell" took more than two years to find a taker as numerous record executives turned it down, including RCA's Clive Davis, who disparaged Steinman's songs and acknowledged that he had misjudged the singer: "The songs were coming over as very theatrical, and Meat Loaf, despite a powerful voice, just didn't look like a star," Davis wrote in his memoir, "The Soundtrack of My Life."

With the help of another Springsteen sideman, Steve Van Zandt, "Bat Out of Hell" was acquired by Cleveland International, a subsidiary of Epic Records. The album made little impact until months after its release, when a concert video of the title track was aired on the British program the Old Grey Whistle

Test. In the U.S., his connection to "Rocky Horror" helped when he convinced producer Lou Adler to use a video for "Paradise By the Dashboard Light" as a trailer for the cult movie. But Meat Loaf was so little known at first that he began his "Bat Out of Hell" tour in Chicago as the opening act for Cheap Trick, then one of the world's hottest groups.

"I remember pulling up at the theater and it says, 'TONIGHT: CHEAP TRICK, WITH MEAT LOAF.' And I said to myself, 'These people think we're serving dinner,'" Meat Loaf explained in 2013 on the syndicated radio show "In the Studio."

"And we walk out on stage and these people were such Cheap Trick fans they booed us from the start. They were getting up and giving us the finger. The first six rows stood up and screamed... When we finished, most of the boos had stopped and we were almost getting applause."

## Abuse victims see inequity in payouts at 2 Michigan schools

By COREY WILLAMS and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

Two former University of Michigan football stars who stand to receive as much as \$500,000 each through the school's sexual abuse settlement with more than 1,000 students say the per-victim payouts should be much higher, pointing to a similar case at rival Michigan State.

Dwight Hicks and Jon Vaughn, both former NFL players, told The Associated Press that the \$490 million settlement the Ann Arbor school announced this week is another example of Black victims receiving less than white victims in big-money payouts. The majority of the claimants in the settlement are Black men, said John Manly, an attorney involved in the case.

Although the victims of the school's former sports doctor Robert Anderson are expected to receive between \$400,000 and \$500,000, the victims of Larry Nassar — who sexually assaulted gymnasts at Michigan State University — averaged \$1.2 million in payouts.

"The differences: One, they were women. Two, they were white," said Hicks, 65, who attended Michigan from 1974-78 and spent eight seasons in the NFL with Indianapolis and San Francisco.

He said the fact that there was a smaller pool of victims, about 300, in Michigan State's \$500 million settlement in 2018, "I don't feel we should get less. This is the damage that was done to us and perpetrated on us as Black men."

"At the end of the day, none of this is fair," Vaughn told The Associated Press on Friday.

A 2018 report says insurance companies and courts rely on testimony of economic experts' calculation of damages using wage tables, and that data often is based on the race, ethnicity and gender of the person filing the lawsuit, according to the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

Blacks, Latinos and Hispanics and women of all races typically earn less than white men, meaning damages awarded often are less than what white men would receive, the report said.

Law firms involved in the Anderson litigation have not shared the racial breakdown of their clients, said attorney Jamie White, who added that about 93% of the 78 or so Anderson clients his firm represents are Black.

Anderson, in his roles as director of the university's Health Service and a physician for football and other athletic teams, has been accused by former students and student-athletes of molesting them during routine physicals or other visits. The abuse occurred throughout Anderson's 37-year career at the university, a law firm hired by the school said in a report released last spring.

Anderson retired in 2003. He died in 2008.

Nassar, who also worked as a sports doctor for USA Gymnastics, pleaded guilty in 2018 to molesting women and girls under the guise of treatment. He also was caught with child pornography. He is serving three prison sentences that will likely keep him locked up for life.

None of the 332 initial individuals represented by his firm in the Nassar case were Black, White said, adding that all were white and only one was a man.

"It's not unheard of that men are discounted, so to speak, when it comes to these sorts of cases," he said. "We have to appreciate the University of Michigan coming forward and doing what they did. There were a

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lot of claimants. The numbers are difficult, but on its face it is what it is. We've got \$1.2 million for young, Caucasian women and we have an average of \$460,000 for the majority of these African American men."

Vaughn, 51, lives in Texas, but has been spending time since October in a camper outside the home of the University of Michigan's president as a way of protesting the school's handling of the Anderson case. He said he was given 50 prostate exams by Anderson during his two years at the University of Michigan.

"There's a myriad of reasons or facts in this case that are different than Nassar," he said. "I should have never had my first prostate exam at 18 and should not have had 49 more."

What each will receive in the settlement is not the major reason why they spoke up about Anderson, White added.

"They're older and many of them are accomplished," he said. "This was not about money for the vast majority of them. They really just felt they needed to voice-up and have some accountability."

But — as student athletes — they were younger and had much more at stake, White said.

"They were there to practice. They were there to go to school and they had a lot to lose," White said. "They were there and their one job was to play football, and if they strayed from that path in any way, shape or form they (believed they) were disposable."

White said the money from the University of Michigan settlement will not be distributed equally among Anderson's victims and that there is an allocation process that will be overseen by a retired federal judge.

A spokesman for the University of Michigan told the AP Friday that the school and attorneys hired by the Anderson claimants agreed "this was a fair settlement" and that the university will have no role in how the money is divided.

## Texas hostages escaped synagogue as FBI SWAT team rushed in

By JAKE BLEIBERG and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

COLLEYVILLE, Texas (AP) — In the final moments of a 10-hour standoff with a gunman at a Texas synagogue, the remaining hostages and officials trying to negotiate their release took "near simultaneous plans of action," with the hostages escaping as an FBI tactical team moved in, an official said Friday.

"I think we both kind of realized around the same time that: It's time to go," Matt DeSarno, the FBI's special agent in charge in Dallas, said at a news conference.

DeSarno said that just after 9 p.m. on Jan. 15, he authorized his teams to enter the synagogue at the moment the hostages came to "a similar conclusion" to escape.

As agents approached the building, he said, they encountered the three remaining hostages running out and continued moving toward the synagogue to face Malik Faisal Akram, the 44-year-old British citizen who had taken four hostages during morning services at Congregation Beth Israel in the Dallas-area suburb of Colleyville.

Akram had released a hostage shortly after 5 p.m. but those remaining said he became more belligerent and threatening as the night wore on. Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker said Friday that while Akram had a drink in his hand, he threw a chair at Akram and he and the two other remaining hostages fled.

"We were constantly looking for an opportunity to leave," Cytron-Walker said.

As the moment came, the FBI rushed in and fatally shot Akram, DeSarno said.

The Tarrant County Medical examiner on Friday said Akram was killed by multiple gunshot wounds and ruled his death a homicide, a determination that does not necessarily indicate it was a crime. The medical examiner determined that Akram died at 9:22 p.m.

DeSarno, who had attracted attention for saying on Jan. 15 that the hostage-taker was focused on an issue not specifically connected to the Jewish community, took pains Friday to stress that the FBI regarded the episode as an act of terrorism that threatened the Jewish community and "intentionally targeted" a house of worship. The act, he said, "was committed by a terrorist espousing an anti-Semitic worldview."

"This was both a hate crime and an act of terrorism," DeSarno said.

DeSarno said Akram is believed to have selected the synagogue because it is closest to a federal prison in nearby Fort Worth that houses a "convicted terrorist" with suspected al-Qaida links. During negotia-

tions, Akram demanded the release of that prisoner in exchange for letting the hostages free. Though he did not name the prisoner, other law enforcement officials have identified her as Aafia Siddiqui, who is serving an 86-year prison sentence after being convicted of shooting at American military personnel after being detained in Afghanistan.

Siddiqui's attorney said she had no connection to Akram.

Akram was from the English industrial city of Blackburn. His family said he had been "suffering from mental health issues."

He arrived in New York on a tourist visa about two weeks before the attack and cleared checks against law enforcement databases without raising any red flags, officials said. He spent time in Dallas-area homeless shelters before the attack, and visited an area mosque at least twice to pray.

Investigators had been trying to determine how Akram got to Colleyville from Dallas. On Friday, the Colleyville police chief said they'd found a mountain bike at a nearby soccer complex, and they were able to unlock it with a key found on Akram's body.

The FBI is still investigating how Akram got the gun used in the attack, though it has had success in tracking his movements from the time he arrived in New York on Dec. 29 until his entrance into the synagogue. DeSarno said agents were still reviewing his devices and scrutinizing his contacts but that he was not known to the FBI or U.S. intelligence communities until the hostage-taking.

DeSarno said that where and how Akram acquired the gun is "a primary gap" in the investigation.

## **FBI: Laundrie admitted killing Gabby Petito in notebook**

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

FORT COLLINS, Colo. (AP) — The boyfriend of slain cross-country traveler Gabby Petito admitted killing her in a notebook discovered near his body in a Florida swamp, the FBI announced Friday.

It was the first time authorities squarely pinned the blame for Petito's death on Brian Laundrie, though he was the prime suspect all along.

Investigators meanwhile announced that Laundrie, 23, had sent text messages to intentionally deceive people that Petito, 22, was still alive after he beat and strangled her in late August, according to a statement released by the FBI in Denver.

"All logical investigative steps have been concluded in this case," FBI Denver Division Special Agent in Charge Michael Schneider said in the statement. "The investigation did not identify any other individuals other than Brian Laundrie directly involved in the tragic death of Gabby Petito."

Petito's body was found Sept. 19 at a campground near Grand Teton National Park in northwestern Wyoming. A coroner determined she'd died about three weeks earlier of "blunt-force injuries to the head and neck, with manual strangulation."

Laundrie returned home to Florida in early September but went missing soon after. In October, his parents found an item belonging to him in a nature preserve near their house.

Further searching turned up Laundrie's remains, a revolver, backpack and the notebook. Medical examiners determined Laundrie died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The FBI did not specify what, exactly, Laundrie had written in the notebook and in the texts he'd sent to mislead. The texts were sent between Laundrie's phone and Petito's phone, according to the statement.

"The timing and content of these messages are indicative of Mr. Laundrie attempting to deceive law enforcement by giving the impression that Ms. Petito was still alive," the statement said.

Grand Teton was the last place the couple visited during a cross-country van trip last summer that ended with Laundrie mysteriously returning home alone in the vehicle. Laundrie and Petito grew up on Long Island, New York, but were living in Florida in recent years.

The couple documented their trip on Instagram. They crossed Colorado and on Aug. 12 were stopped by police near Moab, Utah, after the two got into a scuffle.

Police video showed Petito describing a fight that escalated. Police concluded Petito was the aggressor but officers decided to separate them for the night rather than file charges.

An independent report released last week faulted Utah police for not issuing a domestic violence citation to Petito after she told police she had hit Laundrie first. The report also pointed to indications Petito was likely a victim in their overall relationship and faulted investigators for not taking a statement from a 911 caller who reported seeing the couple outside their van and a man slapping a girl.

The ultimately tragic search for Petito drew worldwide attention, sparking social media sleuthing, discussions about dating violence and shining a light on the disproportionate coverage of missing white women in the U.S. compared to other missing persons.

Attorneys for the Petito and Laundrie families did not immediately respond Friday to emails and text messages seeking comment about the FBI's conclusions.

## **EXPLAINER: Will Chauvin testify at trial of 3 other cops?**

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — As the federal trial for three former Minneapolis officers charged with violating George Floyd's civil rights is set to begin Monday, some wonder whether Derek Chauvin — the officer already convicted of Floyd's murder — will take the stand. Many legal experts say they don't anticipate that. If he does testify, he could face some hard questions.

### WHAT IS THIS TRIAL ABOUT?

Tou Thao, Thomas Lane and J. Kueng are broadly charged in federal court with depriving Floyd of his civil rights while acting under government authority as Chauvin used his knee to pin the Black man to the street for 9½ minutes on May 25, 2020.

Kueng and Lane helped restrain the 46-year-old Floyd. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back, and Lane held Floyd's legs. Thao kept bystanders from intervening in the videotaped killing that triggered worldwide protests, violence and a reexamination of racism and policing.

The federal indictment alleges that Kueng, Lane and Thao willfully deprived Floyd of the right to be free from an officer's deliberate indifference to his medical needs. Thao and Kueng also are charged with willfully violating Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not intervening.

### DETAILS ABOUT CHAUVIN

Months after his conviction in state court, Chauvin pleaded guilty to a federal civil rights violation.

During his federal plea hearing, he admitted he knew what he did to Floyd was wrong and he had a "callous and wanton disregard" for Floyd's life. The plea agreement also says Chauvin "was aware that Mr. Floyd not only stopped resisting, but also stopped talking, stopped moving, stopped breathing, and lost consciousness and a pulse."

Chauvin did not testify in his state trial.

### WILL HE TESTIFY NOW?

Legal experts who spoke to The Associated Press say it's possible, but probably not: The prosecutors don't need his testimony because they have powerful video evidence, and defense attorneys likely don't want Chauvin in court.

"My guess is that neither party will call him," said F. Clayton Tyler, a Minneapolis defense attorney not connected to the case. He said prosecutors may call Chauvin if their case is going poorly, but "you can imagine how the other attorneys are going to be able to jump on him. It could get ugly if he gets on the stand."

Tyler said the defense won't call Chauvin as a witness unless they know he's going to testify in their favor.

"They're going to point the finger at him anyway, without him being there," Tyler said, noting that Chauvin was the senior officer on the scene and that Lane and Kueng were rookies just a few days into their jobs as full-fledged officers.

### IS HE REQUIRED TO TESTIFY?

Federal defendants sometimes agree to testify or offer "substantial assistance" to prosecutors in hopes of getting a reduced sentence. Nothing in Chauvin's plea deal or other public documents indicates an agreement like this was reached.

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Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, declined to comment. Prosecutors are not commenting beyond the court filings.

## ARE THERE ANY HINTS IN THE PLEA AGREEMENT?

Mark Osler, a former federal prosecutor and professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, said Chauvin's plea agreement was actually crafted in a way to limit his usefulness to Kueng, Lane and Thao.

Chauvin's agreement says he knew that officers — regardless of their rank — are trained to intervene if another officer is using inappropriate force, and that Chauvin didn't threaten or force any of the three officers to disregard that duty.

The agreement also says that Chauvin did not observe Thao or Kueng do or say anything to try to get Chauvin to stop. It says Chauvin heard Lane ask twice whether Floyd should be rolled on his side, but that Chauvin "did not hear or observe Officer Lane press the point, and did not hear or observe Officer Lane say or do anything else to try to get Officer Kueng and the defendant off of Mr. Floyd."

Osler said those details are unusual and "quite intentional."

"There must be some fear that he would fall on his sword and say, 'It was all on me, not these other guys,'" Osler said.

## STILL, IT'S POSSIBLE

Mike Brandt, another defense attorney who is watching the case, said the language in the plea agreement doesn't preclude Chauvin from coming to court and taking the fall. But, he said, it does take some of the steam out of defense arguments that Chauvin was the leader and the rookies were doing what he said.

"We'll kind of have to wait and see," he said.

## Latin America, Asia latest to get hit with omicron surge

By JAVIER CORDOBA and CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica (AP) — In Costa Rica, officials are encouraging those infected with the coronavirus to skip voting in upcoming national elections. On the other side of the world, Beijing is locking down residential communities as the country anxiously awaits the start of the Winter Olympics on Feb. 4.

In Latin America and Asia, where the omicron variant is making its latest appearance, some countries are imposing such restrictions while others are loath to place new limits on populations already exhausted by previous constraints.

Omicron quickly swept through the places it first hit, such as South Africa, the U.K. and the United States, pushing daily cases far higher than at any time during the pandemic.

The Americas reported nearly 7.2 million new COVID infections and more than 15,000 COVID-related deaths over the past week, the Pan American Health Organization said Wednesday. Coronavirus infections across the Americas almost doubled between Jan. 1 and Jan. 8, from 3.4 million cases to 6.1 million, PAHO said.

Infections are accelerating in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Peru, and hospitalizations are rising in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, said PAHO Director Carissa Etienne. The Caribbean islands are experiencing their steepest increase in COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic, Etienne noted.

"Although omicron infections appear to be milder, we continue to urge caution because the virus is spreading more actively than ever before," Etienne said.

Infections are also increasing in Asia, including in the Philippines, which has seen its worst coronavirus outbreak in recent weeks.

Countries in both regions are searching for a mix of restrictions that their exhausted populations will accept and that won't inflict undue damage on their economies.

"We're already going on three years of the pandemic and the population is tired," said Brazil's president of the Council of State Health Secretariats, Carlos Lula. "There is no space for many restrictions. We're going to have to face a third wave with precautions like masking, distancing and vaccination."

Argentina and Mexico also have largely ruled out imposing any national restrictions, instead banking on their vaccination campaigns and the apparently less severe symptoms of the omicron variant.

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Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, having just emerged from a week of isolation after his second coronavirus infection in the past year, downplayed the threat. "It is demonstrable that this variant does not have the same seriousness as the earlier, the delta," López Obrador said this week.

Antonio Pérez, 67, runs a small stand in a Mexico City market selling notebooks, pens and other school supplies. He was forced to shutter his shop for three months early in the pandemic, rocking him financially. But he agreed with the government's decision then — a time when little was known about the virus's spread and no one was vaccinated — and with the hands-off approach now, when most of the population is vaccinated and there is less pressure on hospitals.

Immunization, masks and social distancing are the way to go now, he said, speaking through his own N95 mask. "I don't think you can do anything else."

Some states in Brazil have reimposed restrictions but stopped short of closing down businesses as they did last year. Peru, however, has revived a nationwide curfew, and Ecuador has banned public and private events or large gatherings of any kind.

In Costa Rica, public health concerns are colliding with constitutional guarantees for the Feb. 6 presidential and congressional elections. Authorities concede they can't stop people from voting, but Eugenia Zamora, president of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, recently told news outlets that those who test positive for coronavirus should "abstain" from going out to vote.

Demographer Luis Rosero said that according to his projections, the new wave of infections could peak right around election day. Under current health protocols, those who test positive in Costa Rica are obligated to isolate.

Costa Rica's daily confirmed infection totals have risen from fewer than 100 in December to more than 5,000 this month. So far, however, the government has imposed few restrictions, such as requiring soccer clubs to play without fans.

Two other Central American countries, Panama and Honduras, have not imposed any restrictions despite seeing their cases more than double during the past week.

Puerto Rico, among the hardest-hit places in the Caribbean amid the region's current surge, tightened restrictions again this month after the U.S. territory saw its COVID-19 test positivity rate jump from 5% late last year to more than 40% in recent weeks.

Gov. Pedro Pierluisi has required that those working in the health, food, education, tourism and entertainment sectors get their booster shots, as well as public school students age 12 and older. He also reinstated a ban on alcohol sales from 12 a.m. to 5 a.m. and prohibited most businesses from operating during those hours.

In Chile, infections grew 151% in one week, but the only restriction the government has imposed so far is to lower the capacity limit for public spaces. The country has a high vaccination rate, with more than 92% of those 18 and older and 78% of minors having received two doses. The government started offering a fourth dose this month.

Still, in some South American countries, omicron is having a dire effect.

A major hospital in Bolivia's largest city stopped admitting new patients because of a lack of personnel, and one of Brazil's most populous states canceled scheduled surgeries for a month. Argentina's federation of private health care providers estimates about 15% of its workers currently have the virus.

In Asia, South Korea actually eased its restrictions on gatherings slightly this week. But officials have expressed concern about a surge in infections over the Lunar New Year holiday, which begins at the end of the month, when millions of people usually travel across the country to meet relatives.

In China, Beijing has moved classes online and locked down some office buildings. Japan, meanwhile, is maintaining strict border controls as infections surge, but otherwise doing little more than shortening business hours for restaurants and bars.

Hong Kong authorities have banned indoor dining after 6 p.m. and ordered certain businesses, such as museums and gyms, to close until at least early February. The city is also culling small animals including hamsters and chinchillas and halting their import and sales after several hamsters in a pet shop tested positive for the coronavirus.

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In the Philippines, officials this week started banning commuters who have not been fully vaccinated from riding public transportation in greater Manila, a region of more than 13 million people. The move sparked protests from human rights groups. Daily confirmed infections soared from a few hundred last month to more than 30,000 in recent days.

Roman Catholic Church leaders in the Philippines capital were forced to cancel the Jan. 9 procession of the Black Nazarene, a centuries-old black statue of Jesus Christ, for a second year. Because the event is one of Asia's biggest religious festivals, drawing millions of mostly barefoot pilgrims, officials feared it could become a superspreader during the omicron surge.

Warning that the sometimes-weaker omicron variant can still kill, President Rodrigo Duterte implored people to get fully immunized.

"If you're vaccinated, you have a fighting chance. If not, we'll be burying, filling our cemeteries," Duterte said in televised remarks.

## Anti-abortion protesters optimistic at March for Life in DC

By ASHRAF KHALIL, KEVIN FREKING, PAUL J. WEBER and EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — The annual anti-abortion rally in the nation's capital sounded more like a victory celebration as speakers expressed a growing sense of optimism that their long-sought goal, a sweeping rollback of abortion rights in America, was finally in reach.

Thousands of protesters rallied in the bitter cold Friday and marched to the Supreme Court, which has indicated it will allow states to impose tighter restrictions on abortion with a ruling in the coming months — and possibly overturn the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that affirmed the constitutional right to an abortion.

"It doesn't feel real. There's so much hope and vibrancy and happiness and joy at this thing," said Jordan Moorman of Cincinnati. "I really do believe that we're in a post-Roe generation."

The annual March for Life rally, held one day before the 49th anniversary of the Roe decision, took place amid a COVID-19 surge that limited turnout at the National Mall. Some abortion opponents posted on the event's Facebook page that they would not attend because of vaccine mandates for people going to restaurants and other places in the District of Columbia.

Still, the rally drew a crowd of thousands, with a heavy contingent of young people and students bussed in by schools and church groups. The mood was overwhelmingly upbeat, with many treating the end of Roe v. Wade as inevitable.

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, in a statement released Saturday, said the right established under Roe "is under assault as never before" and they said they were committed "to ensuring that this country is not pushed backwards on women's equality."

"We must ensure that our daughters and granddaughters have the same fundamental rights that their mothers and grandmothers fought for and won on this day, 49 years ago," they said.

On Friday, Jeanne Mancini, president of the March for Life Education and Defense Fund, told the crowd that Roe is not settled law and "we are hoping and praying that this year, 2022, will bring a historic change for life."

"If Roe falls, the battle lines will change, but make no mistake the fight for life will need to continue in the states and here in D.C.," Mancini said.

The Rev. Andrew Rudmann, a Catholic priest from New Orleans, was attending his 11th event. "Hopefully this will be the last March for Life," he said.

"Sometimes I would come to the March and it would be great to be united with people who share my beliefs, but there would also be this heaviness," he said. "This time the whole language and vibe is different."

The celebratory and triumphant mood of the day was perhaps best encapsulated by a contingent from New York City that bounced past the Supreme Court building with dancing nuns and drummers playing Latin rhythms.

Abortion rights groups worry that at least 26 states are in line to further limit abortion access if Roe is



weakened or overturned. In December, the court indicated in a major case that it would uphold a Mississippi ban on abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, and allow states to ban abortion even earlier. The Mississippi case directly challenges Roe.

Courts have also dealt Texas abortion providers a string of defeats over efforts to block a law that since September has banned abortions once cardiac activity is detected, which is usually around six weeks and before some women know they are pregnant. Another loss for Texas clinics came Thursday, when the Supreme Court refused to speed up the ongoing challenge over the law, which providers say is now likely to stay in effect for the foreseeable future.

"This law is cruel and unconstitutional, and I am deeply disappointed that our judicial system has done very little to stop it," said Amy Hagstrom Miller, president of Whole Woman's Health, which operates four abortion clinics in Texas.

## Miranda talks about Bruno, and the 'Encanto' phenomenon

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A month after "Encanto" debuted in theaters, Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote the movie's Colombia-inflected songs, took a long vacation. By the time he returned, something almost as extraordinary as the enchanted home of the movie had transpired.

"Encanto" became the first movie soundtrack since 2019 to reach No. 1 on the Billboard charts earlier this month. The film's most popular song, "We Don't Talk About Bruno," became the highest-charting song from a Disney animated film in more than 26 years, ranking higher than even "Let It Go."

The music of "Encanto" was suddenly everywhere. Everyone was talking about Bruno.

"By the time I got back, 'We Don't Talk About Bruno' had kind of taken over the world along with the rest of the 'Encanto' soundtrack," Miranda says, laughing. "It helps you have the perspective of: The opening weekend is not the life of the movie. It's just the very roughest draft. Two months out, people are talking about Bruno, and his whole family."

It's not unusual for songs by Miranda, the composer of "Hamilton" and "In the Heights," to capture the zeitgeist. But what the soundtrack to "Encanto" is doing, long after it arrived in theaters on Nov. 24, is almost unheard of — particularly during a pandemic that has muted the ability of movies to make a lasting impression. "Encanto," a warm celebration of family centered on the Madrigals, a Colombian clan with magical powers, has been the most successful animated film at the box office during the pandemic, with \$223 million in ticket sales worldwide. But the soundtrack explosion — prompted by its Christmas debut on Disney+ — has propelled a rare kind of pop-culture sensation.

"Encanto" didn't displace just anybody from the top spot. It overtook Adele. Six songs from the film have charted on the Billboard 100, including "Surface Pressure," "The Family Madrigal," "What Else Can I Do?" "Waiting on a Miracle" and "Dos Oruguitas." All also rank among the most streamed songs on Spotify. There, "We Don't Talk About Bruno" has been streamed more than 100 million times. On YouTube, you can not talk about Bruno in Hungarian and Bahasa Malaysia.

Miranda took in the phenomenon of the "Encanto" soundtrack for the first time in an interview, speaking by phone on his way to a night of theater. ("Very on brand for me," he said from the back of a car.) He's mostly been experiencing "Encanto" mania through a text thread with directors Byron Howard and Jared Bush, co-director Charise Castro Smith and Tom MacDougall, head of music at Disney. They share things like clips of choreography or TikTok videos of people singing along. (The #Encanto hashtag has been viewed more than 11.5 billion times on TikTok.)

"I just got a text 10 minutes ago of someone tweeting 'If you don't speak Spanish and you put on the closed captioning for 'Dos Oruguitas,' you're really going to cry,'" says Miranda, chuckling.

To Miranda, what's most rewarding is how people are connecting to the songs and its characters as expressions of their own family roles and dynamics. For example: "Surface Pressure," sung by Jessica Darrow, taps into the weight of responsibility felt by an older sibling. Miranda wrote it with his older sister, Luz Miranda-Crespo, in mind. In one of the most popular "Encanto" TikToks, a young woman named Maribel

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Martinez says she not only looks like the muscular sister Luisa, but that "Surface Pressure" "tells my story."

"The thing we were chasing was: Can we get the complexity of family, a multi-generational Latin family, into a Disney film?" says Miranda. "That's what people seem to be responding to: 'I'm bopping my head to this but it's kind of deep and there's layers to it.'"

But Miranda never saw the massive popularity of "We Don't Talk About Bruno" coming. The song now ranks historically with anthems like "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" from "The Lion King" and "A Whole New World" from "Aladdin." But "Bruno" is a song you can dance to. It's a quirkier tune lifted by its infectious groove and a medley of voices that splinter and meld in a gossipy song about family secrets.

"I was saying to a friend: I think this is my 'Send in the Clowns,'" says Miranda. "Send in the Clowns" was Stephen Sondheim's only chart-topper. Who would have guessed out of the millions of songs he wrote that it would be 'Send in the Clowns'? It feels random in one sense.

"But on the other hand, we've all been locked up for two years," he continued. "The notion of a bunch of voices happening within one home feels very resonant, with hindsight. There's kind of a part for everyone to play in singing along with the song. If you're not bopping to this melody, another melody is coming along in two seconds because almost every character gets a little feature in it."

"We Don't Talk About Bruno" came to Miranda quickly. In an early demo track, Miranda sang all 10 parts in a feat of choral schizophrenia. He hasn't released the demo, but that hasn't stopped one impersonator from trying out his best imitation.

"That's always the process with me. There's lots of terrible demos. Often those are sung at 3 or 4 a.m., so they don't sound great," says Miranda, laughing. "I think TikTok has had a field day with the demos I've released because I'm warbling and my voice is cracking."

"Movies take a long time," he adds. "There was a lot of just singing these songs around your house for years, and trying to make them better and better."

As much as "Bruno" has broken out, it won't be competing at the Oscars. ("No, no, no," as the song goes.) The Oscar-submission from "Encanto" is the moving, allegorical ballad "Dos Oruguitas" (which translates as "Two Caterpillars"), sung by Colombian singer-songwriter Sebastián Yatra. Miranda composed it striving for the simplicity and metaphor of an old folk song. "Dos Oruguitas" has already been shortlisted for the Academy Awards; if it were to be nominated and ultimately win, it would give Miranda his first Oscar — and since he's already won Tonys, Grammys and Emmys — EGOT status.

"It's not a thing you consciously chase," he says. "I'm thrilled to be even within spitting distance of it."

The phenomenon of "Encanto" has capped a whirlwind two years for Miranda that has included documentaries tracing his origins, the release of a filmed "Hamilton," the long-awaited and much-debated big-screen spectacular "In the Heights" and his feature filmmaking debut in the Jonathan Larson musical "Tick, Tick ... BOOM."

"I have a weirdly empty desk for the first time in maybe 13 years," Miranda says. "I was working on everything, and it all came out last year."

## Kansas teen's death has spotlight on 'stand your ground' law

By JOHN HANNA and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas lawmakers were thinking of homeowners facing down burglars and people attacked on the street when they wrote a "stand your ground" law more than a decade ago allowing use of deadly force in self defense. They didn't envision it applying to police officers, jail guards or government employees.

Now even some Republicans in the GOP-controlled Legislature who support the idea behind the law want to revisit it. The reason: A prosecutor said this week that it prevented him from criminally charging employees of a juvenile intake center in Wichita in the death of a Black teenager who'd been restrained on the ground on his stomach, shackled and handcuffed for more than 30 minutes.

Police took 17-year-old Cedric Lofton to the center after a foster care agency said he needed a mental health exam for increasingly erratic behavior.

Sedgwick County District Attorney Marc Bennett said any criminal charges were likely to be dismissed

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by a judge because Bennett concluded that the juvenile center's employees believed they were acting in self-defense during the Sept. 24 altercation with Lofton. He said that Kansas courts have expanded self-defense rights to the point that, "How could any cop ever be prosecuted, then, for shooting somebody?"

While other legal experts and supporters of the law don't think Bennett is correct, critics of stand your ground laws in about 30 states say they're increasingly being used by law enforcement to shield officers who use deadly force.

"I don't know how you apply stand your ground to that scenario," said Senate President Ty Masterson, a Wichita-area Republican who voted in 2010 for the law currently on the books. "It's meant to be for self-defense, to allow you to protect yourself."

Kansas lawmakers focused on the self-defense rights of private individuals in a 2010 version. The votes for the law were unanimous, with Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly and Republican Attorney General Derek Schmidt voting yes as state senators.

Kansas House Speaker Ron Ryckman Jr., a Kansas City-area Republican, said Bennett's comments quickly prompted a discussion among GOP committee chairs about the law, and "I thought we'd take a look at it."

A House committee is preparing to examine Lofton's case as early as next week, and Ryckman said, "I'm assuming that stand your ground will come up."

The Kansas law eliminated people's duty to retreat before using deadly force against attackers when they believe it's "necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm" to themselves or others. Another section grants them immunity from criminal prosecution or civil lawsuits.

The law wasn't meant to apply to cases like Lofton's, said spokesperson John Milburn, a spokesperson for Schmidt, who helped draft it and is now running against Kelly in this year's race for governor. Kelly declined to comment Friday when asked about Bennett's comments.

Milburn said that after years of judicial decisions on the stand your ground law and others on self-defense, "It may be prudent for the legislature to review all of them to ensure they are being interpreted and are working as intended."

Robert Spitzer, professor emeritus of political science at the State University of New York, Cortland, whose research focuses on gun policy and politics, called Bennett's conclusion in the Lofton case "a perfectly logical application" of the stand your ground laws that demonstrates why they're problematic. He is the author of a book, "Guns Across America: Reconciling Gun Rules and Rights."

State Rep. JoElla Hoye, a Kansas City-area Democrat and a gun safety activist, said she's working on legislation to revise the law. But no measure has a chance without Republican support, making Ryckman's interest crucial.

Kansas Republicans' interest in reviewing the law won't necessarily prompt a lessening of "Stand Your Ground" protections in a GOP-leaning state where strong support for gun rights is a political obligation in many areas. Nationally, experts said they don't know of a case of a state backing off, and in 2017, Florida legislators strengthened their state's law.

Lofton's case is not the first in which Bennett has cited the Stand Your Ground law in not filing a criminal charge. Last May, he announced he wouldn't file charges against a Kansas sheriff's deputy who fatally shot an unarmed woman who refused to pull over during a high-speed police chase.

Nor is Bennett alone among prosecutors in invoking the law.

In Johnson County in the Kansas City area, District Attorney Steve Howe cited the law in 2018 in declining to charge an Overland Park police officer for fatally shooting a 17-year-old boy who was backing out of his family's driveway.

Howe said in 2017 that the Legislature needed to re-examine the law. Bennett also has been arguing as much for at least several years.

"What I find irritating or when I have a hard time masking my irritation is when there's something going on for 10 years and suddenly people are angry about it," Bennett said. "Like, where you been?"

**Giuliani associate gets year in prison in foreign donor case**

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By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A Florida man who helped Rudy Giuliani seek damaging information against Joe Biden in Ukraine was sentenced to a year and a day in prison and fined \$10,000 Friday in an unrelated campaign finance case.

Igor Fruman was told to report to prison March 14. He pleaded guilty in September to a single charge of solicitation of a contribution by a foreign national.

As part of the plea, he admitted soliciting a million dollars from a Russian entrepreneur, Andrey Muraviev, to donate to Republicans in Nevada, Florida and other states as part of an effort to launch a recreational marijuana business.

Federal prosecutors in New York had urged Judge J. Paul Oetken to sentence Fruman to between three and four years in prison. Defense lawyers had argued he should face no incarceration because he has otherwise led a law-abiding life.

Oetken said the crime of soliciting foreign money for U.S. political campaigns was serious and deserved incarceration.

"It undermines the integrity of elections in our country," he said as he announced the sentence. "It undermines democracy."

Fruman, 55, the father of four children, told the judge he had reflected on his crime.

"It's a shame that will live with me forever," he said through a white face mask as several family members watched from wooden benches in an area for spectators.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Hagan Scotten had urged a sentence of at least three years behind bars, saying the crime had caused "incalculable damage" because it harms the trust the public has in U.S. elections.

"That all the things they fear are happening with politicians are happening," he said.

Scotten said the crime does "grave damage to the integrity of the electoral system."

Defense lawyer Todd Blanche said his client had suffered from eight days in jail after his arrest and two years and four months of home incarceration.

"That's punishment enough, your honor," he said.

Fruman was charged in the case along with Lev Parnas, another Florida businessman who helped Giuliani's attempt to spoil Biden's quest for the presidency on the Democratic ticket.

The pair served as liaisons between Giuliani and Ukrainian officials and business tycoons as the former New York City mayor tried to persuade prosecutors in that country to investigate Biden's son, Hunter, over his work for an energy company.

U.S. prosecutors haven't brought any charges in connection with the Ukrainian influence campaign, which was the subject of one of former President Donald Trump's impeachment trials, but focused instead on donations that Fruman and Parnas made to U.S. politicians as they sought to build influence in Republican political circles.

Parnas was convicted in October of campaign finance crimes and awaits sentencing.

Politicians who got the illegal donations, including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Former Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt, have said they were unaware the money secretly came from a foreign source. Muraviev was not charged in the case.

Giuliani, who worked for Trump as a personal attorney, faces a continuing investigation into whether he was required to register as an agent of a foreign government during his dealings with Ukraine authorities.

The inquiry partly involves an examination of whether Giuliani offered to lobby or influence the Trump administration on behalf of Ukrainian figures. Giuliani has said everything he did in Ukraine was done on Trump's behalf and there is no reason he would have had to register as a foreign agent.

Following raids on Giuliani's home and business last year, former federal judge Barbara Jones was appointed by a judge to determine what materials on electronic devices seized in the raid can be turned over to criminal prosecutors.

In a four-page report issued Friday, Jones said only a few dozen items among tens of thousands of communications on seven of his electronic devices have been prevented from being turned over to pros-

ecutors because they contain privileged communications. She said she was awaiting further assignments.

## 'SNL' comics Jost, Davidson buy Staten Island Ferry boat

By KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — "Saturday Night Live" comics Colin Jost and Pete Davidson have purchased a decommissioned Staten Island Ferry boat for \$280,100 with plans to turn it into New York's hottest club.

Jost and Davidson teamed up with comedy club owner Paul Italia on Wednesday's winning bid for the John F. Kennedy, a 277-foot (84-meter) vessel that shuttled commuters between the New York City boroughs of Manhattan and Staten Island from 1965 until it was taken out of service last August.

"The Staten Island Ferry is definitely something iconic," Italia, a real estate investor and co-owner of the restaurant and comedy club The Stand, said Friday. "We wanted to figure out a way to save it and to do something special with it."

Italia said transforming the 2,109-ton ferry into an entertainment venue will cost millions of dollars and won't happen anytime soon.

"It's really early stages here," he said. "You have a great idea and you're working on executing it and the first step is the acquisition of the boat, and I think that that's the story right now. We were successful in acquiring the boat and making sure it didn't go into the scrapyards like the last two."

Messages seeking comment were sent to representatives of Jost and Davidson, who both grew up on Staten Island and often joke about their home borough and its best-known mode of transport.

Named after the 35th U.S. president, the John F. Kennedy was the oldest ferry in the fleet when it was decommissioned last summer.

The new owners have 10 business days to secure a place to dock the vessel and tow it there. "We're working on that," Italia said.

The boat was auctioned by New York City's Department of Citywide Administrative Services, and other city departments will have to sign off on operating it as a floating nightclub.

It could help that the city's new mayor is on board. "I love this idea. What a great way to give an NYC icon a second life," Mayor Eric Adams tweeted Friday.

Adams, who took office on Jan. 1 and was portrayed by Chris Redd on "Saturday Night Live" on Jan. 15, added, "Let us know how we can help and we'll be there for the maiden voyage."

## Booster shots needed against omicron, CDC studies show

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Three studies released Friday offered more evidence that COVID-19 vaccines are standing up to the omicron variant, at least among people who received booster shots.

They are the first large U.S. studies to look at vaccine protection against omicron, health officials said.

The papers echo previous research — including studies in Germany, South Africa and the U.K. — indicating available vaccines are less effective against omicron than earlier versions of the coronavirus, but also that booster doses rev up virus-fighting antibodies to increase the chance of avoiding symptomatic infection.

The first study looked at hospitalizations and emergency room and urgent care center visits in 10 states, from August to this month.

It found vaccine effectiveness was best after three doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines in preventing COVID-19-associated emergency department and urgent care visits. Protection dropped from 94% during the delta wave to 82% during the omicron wave. Protection from just two doses was lower, especially if six months had passed since the second dose.

Officials have stressed the goal of preventing not just infection but severe disease. On that count, some good news: A third dose was at least 90% effective at preventing hospitalizations for COVID-19, both during the delta and omicron periods, the study also found.

The second study focused on COVID-19 case and death rates in 25 states from the beginning of April through Christmas. People who were boosted had the highest protection against coronavirus infection,

both during the time delta was dominant and also when omicron was taking over.

Those two articles were published online by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Journal of the American Medical Association published the third study, also led by CDC researchers. It looked at people who tested positive for COVID-19 from Dec. 10 to Jan. 1 at more than 4,600 testing sites across the U.S.

Three shots of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were about 67% effective against omicron-related symptomatic disease compared with unvaccinated people. Two doses, however, offered no significant protection against omicron when measured several months after completion of the original series, the researchers found.

"It really shows the importance of getting a booster dose," said the CDC's Emma Accorsi, one of the study's authors.

Americans should get boosters if at least five months have passed since they completed their Pfizer or Moderna series, but millions who are eligible have not gotten them.

"If you are eligible for a booster and you haven't gotten it, you are not up to date and you need to get your booster," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing Friday.

## Los Angeles weighs phasing out oil and gas drilling

BY DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

The University Park neighborhood of Los Angeles has a lot in common with urban areas across the U.S.: A dense population with lots of businesses and housing. A cluster of car dealerships. A row of restaurants. Schools and a community center.

But nestled in the predominantly Latino community is something rarely found in urban areas outside California: an oil field.

Pat Diaz, a 65-year old activist and University Park resident who grew up near a busy intersection, has felt the presence of the field since she was a child.

She remembers the basement of her family home that she now owns smelled like tar and her mother used to get spontaneous nosebleeds and persistent headaches.

When Diaz moved back to the neighborhood as an adult in 2009, she says she developed a chronic cough and lost her sense of taste. After comparing notes with neighbors in 2011, she realized such ailments were a widespread problem that residents blame on living near oil fields most recently operated by AllenCo Energy.

"It has been the bane of my existence since I was young," she said.

After a decade of complaints from residents like Diaz, the Los Angeles City Council is expected to vote as soon as next week on a measure that would ban new oil and gas wells in the nation's second most populous city and phase out existing wells over a five-year period.

### HUNDREDS OF WELLS

The AllenCo Energy oil wells there are just a few among hundreds located in Los Angeles, which has the country's largest concentration of urban oil fields. There are approximately 1,000 active or idle wells in the city, according to a city controller's report citing data from the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources.

Los Angeles doesn't have pumpjacks dotting a desolate desert like western Texas. Its oil and gas operations are near places where people live and gather. The AllenCo Energy facility is less than a 10-minute drive from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the Shrine Auditorium.

While these landmarks reflect L.A.'s glitz, glamor and history, University Park is a diverse working-class neighborhood in the oil field's shadows.

Air pollution from oil fields in Los Angeles disproportionately affects areas that are predominantly Latino or Black, said Martha Dina Argüello, executive director of the Los Angeles chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

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"We got involved because we were hearing from communities that were experiencing health impacts because they were living next to these oil fields. And what we were finding was that in low-income communities and communities of color, we had less protections," Argüello said. Her public health nonprofit is part of a coalition pushing for tighter regulation or elimination of oil and gas wells in the city.

## COMMUNITY HEALTH COMPLAINTS

Pollution from these facilities is associated with chronic health impacts, according to a study last year in the journal *Environmental Research*. USC researchers found people living near wells in Diaz's neighborhood and nearby Jefferson Park reported significantly higher rates of wheezing, eye and nose irritation, sore throat and dizziness than neighbors living farther away. The researchers likened the respiratory harm caused by living near the oil fields to daily exposure to secondhand smoke or exhaust from a busy highway.

While it's difficult to prove a direct connection, lead author Jill Johnston said the findings provide some validation of longstanding community complaints about health woes they attributed to the oil fields.

Diaz and her neighbors had been lobbying the city council, local agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to do something about the oil wells.

The Los Angeles measure was introduced by council members Nury Martinez and Paul Krekorian in December 2020 after years of complaints from residents about the impact of oil wells on their communities.

The effort to shut down the city's wells is part of a region-wide movement to push oil and gas drilling out of Los Angeles County. In 2021, similar measures were passed to ban drilling in Culver City and unincorporated parts of the county.

## INDUSTRY WARNINGS ABOUT BANS

The oil and gas industry opposes moves to rid the region of drilling, saying that would raise gas prices, eliminate jobs and make the area more dependent on foreign oil.

Rock Zierman, chief executive officer of the California Independent Petroleum Association, an industry group that represents nearly 400 oil and gas companies, said there will likely be a legal challenge if the measure passes, saying it would constitute an "unlawful and uncompensated taking of private property."

"We're an energy island," said Ray Watson, an industry worker who spoke at a recent city council meeting. "There aren't any magic pipelines that run anywhere else in the United States to California to supply oil. It's going to come on dirty supertankers from despotic regimes like Saudi Arabia if we don't produce it here."

There's a statewide push to more tightly regulate fossil fuel production. In October, the California Geologic Energy Management Division, the state's oil and gas regulator, proposed a ban on new oil and gas wells within 3,200 feet (975 meters) of schools, homes and hospitals.

If those proposed rules become state policy, existing wells would be required to enact new pollution controls, not shut down. The measure before the Los Angeles City Council, however, would phase out oil and gas drilling entirely.

Javier Martinez, who lives three blocks from the AllenCo Energy oil field, applauds efforts by Gov. Gavin Newsom and others to phase out and ban oil and gas extraction.

When the AllenCo Energy site was active, fumes from the pump jacks would make nearby streets "smell really bad, ... like something had been burnt," Martinez said, adding that he and neighbors would complain of nose irritation. "The problem here is that it is affecting people's health and that people live close to the wells."

Attorneys for AllenCo Energy say they don't think the wells are causing health issues for residents. "Not one gallon of oil has come out of that site since 2013, yet the neighbors complain of headaches and nosebleeds," said Carmen Trutanich, one of the company's attorneys. "Strikes me as perhaps there may be another reason for what's going on out there."

## FIGHT OVER FUTURE WITHOUT WELLS

Still, advocates for phasing out oil drilling in L.A. say residents don't want to live near wells.

Diaz said she is trying to decide whether to sell her childhood home and move. It would be "wonderful" if the city shut down oil and gas drilling, she said, noting that the neighborhood has already tasted life without the oil wells operating.

The AllenCo Energy wells have been idle since Environmental Protection Agency inspectors were sickened

by fumes at the property in 2013. Diaz said the air has improved, her coughing stopped and her sense of taste returned. AllenCo Energy attorneys said they no longer have interest in extracting oil from the site.

Despite the closure, the USC study found people in neighborhoods near oil wells reported experiencing negative health impacts as recently as 2019. And the city brought criminal charges against the company in 2020 for allegedly failing to properly abandon its wells. Attorneys for AllenCo Energy maintain the city and the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which owns the land, are responsible for properly shutting down the site.

City officials say the Los Angeles oil and gas sites will likely need years of remediation to avoid contaminating the community. And even though only a few hundred jobs are connected to the sites, people like Diaz, a former labor organizer, want to see those jobs replaced.

"I really believe that if they do transitional education, that they'll find jobs," Diaz said. And while she's worried about gas prices rising from a ban, she said it's a temporary inconvenience.

"We have to stop using fossil fuel. We're hurting the Earth," she said. "We have to sacrifice today for the kids of tomorrow."

## Norway killer Breivik tests limits of lenient justice system

By MARK LEWIS Associated Press

STAVANGER, Norway (AP) — Convicted mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik spends his days in a spacious three-room cell, playing video games, exercising, watching TV and taking university-level courses in mathematics and business.

Halfway through a 21-year sentence and seeking early release, Breivik, 42, is being treated in a way that might seem shocking to people outside of Norway, where he killed eight in an Oslo bombing in 2011, and then stalked and gunned down 69 people, mostly teens, at a summer camp.

But here — no matter how wicked the crime — convicts benefit from a criminal justice system that is designed to offer prisoners some of the comforts and opportunities of life on the outside.

Still, Breivik's extreme case is testing the limits of Norway's commitment to tolerance and rehabilitation.

"We have never had anyone in Norway who has been responsible for this level of violence before. And there has been debate here about whether part of the justice system should be changed for someone like him," said Erik Kursetgjerde, who survived the slaughter on Utoya island as an 18 year old. However, he advises a slow approach that does not bend to Breivik's desire to subvert the system.

During a three-day parole hearing this week that was broadcast to journalists, Breivik renounced violence, but also flashed a Nazi salute and espoused white supremacy, echoing ideas in a manifesto he released at the time of his killing spree. The outburst was familiar to Norwegians who had watched him deliver rambling diatribes during his partially televised criminal trial.

"Obviously this has been extremely trying for survivors, the bereaved and Norwegian society as a whole," said Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, professor of law at the University of Oslo, adding that there is debate in Norway over whether parole regulations should be overhauled in a bid to prevent this type of grandstanding.

In 2016, Breivik successfully sued the Norwegian government for human rights abuses, complaining about his isolation from other prisoners, frequent strip searches and the fact that he was often handcuffed during the early part of his incarceration. He also complained about the quality of the prison food, having to eat with plastic utensils and not being able to communicate with sympathizers.

While Breivik's human rights case was ultimately overturned by a higher court, the episode showed just how far the Norwegian criminal justice system could bend in favor of prisoners' rights and living conditions.

"His conditions according to Norwegian standards are excellent," said his prison psychiatrist, Randi Rosenqvist. She testified at the parole hearing that Breivik is still a public threat.

Even after Breivik's outbursts at this week's parole hearing, Norwegian authorities show no sign of wavering from treating him like any other inmate at Skien prison.

"In a Nordic prison sentence, the main punishment is deprivation of liberty. All the Nordic countries have systems based on a lenient and humane criminal policy that starts from the mutual understanding that



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punishment should not be any stricter than necessary," said Professor Johan Boucht from the University of Oslo Department of Public and International law, who has also worked in Sweden and Finland. "The second aspect is rehabilitation, and the principle that it is better in the long run to rehabilitate the inmate than create a factory for criminals."

Up until about 50 years ago, Norway's justice system focused on punishment. But in the late 1960s there was a backlash to the harsh conditions of prisons, leading to criminal justice reforms that emphasized kinder treatment and rehabilitation.

Norwegian sentencing and prison conditions are sharply at odds with other European countries such as France, where the worst criminals can face life imprisonment, with the possibility of an appeal only after 22 years.

Relatively few French defendants get the longest sentence, but among those facing it are Salah Abdeslam, who is the only surviving member of the Islamic State cell that attacked Paris in November 2015. Abdeslam has complained bitterly about his conditions in the Fleury-Mérogis prison, where he is under 24-hour surveillance in solitary confinement, the furniture is fixed to the floor of his tiny cell and he can exercise for just one hour daily.

Breivik's comparatively lenient treatment inside prison does not mean he'll get out anytime soon, or even in 2032, when his sentence ends.

While the maximum prison sentence in Norway is 21 years, the law was amended in 2002 so that, in rare cases, sentences can be extended indefinitely in five-year increments if someone is still considered a danger to the public.

Breivik's lawyer, Øystein Storrvik, said in his closing arguments at the parole hearing that Breivik should be released to prove that he is reformed and no longer a threat to society, and that is not possible to prove while he is in total isolation.

But Breivik's behavior during this week's parole hearing was proof enough to some that he should never again see freedom.

Kristine Roeyneland, who leads a group for families of Breivik's victims and survivors, said his comfortable prison conditions and ability to spread extremist views through publicized parole hearings are reprehensible.

Whatever the outcome of Breivik's request for early parole, which will be decided by a three-judge panel in coming weeks, some take an enlightened view of the Norwegian government's apparent commitment to treat him like any other prisoner.

"People might be afraid that he's using the law as a stage," said Sandvik, the law professor. "But you can also say that, you know, he is being used by the law. He's a megaphone for the rule of law."

## Climate, COVID, China: Takeaways from online Davos event

GENEVA (AP) — Government and business leaders have urged cooperation on the world's biggest issues — climate change, the coronavirus pandemic and the economic recovery — at the World Economic Forum's virtual gathering.

Speeches and discussions from the likes of Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres moved online this week after COVID-19 concerns delayed the forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. Critics regularly fault the Davos event for hosting elites touting high-minded but often empty goals deemed out of touch with regular people.

As usual, big ideas were debated, but no concrete deals emerged. The forum announced Friday that it plans to hold its in-person gathering May 22-26 after two years of delays.

Here are some takeaways from the online event:

### CLIMATE CHANGE

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz vowed to use his country's Group of Seven presidency to have industrial nations lead a "paradigm shift in international climate policy."

The new head of Europe's biggest economy said Wednesday that the "climate club" would agree on "joint minimum standards." Its goals are already part of the Paris climate accord, including limiting global

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warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels.

Scholz said the club could seek to achieve those goals "by pricing carbon and preventing carbon leakage" — designed to stop companies from shifting carbon-heavy industries to countries with looser emissions rules.

Others urged help for developing nations. Guterres called for debt relief to wean them off coal, and Latin American leaders said funding for green agendas is critical.

With Africa "the most negatively affected" by climate change though the continent contributes "the least" to it, Nigerian Vice President Yemi Osinbajo asked Friday for developed nations to remain committed to their pledge of providing \$100 billion annually to support climate efforts in developing countries.

Meanwhile, a panel with U.S. climate envoy John Kerry and billionaire Bill Gates touted that innovations not invented or used widely yet would help slash emissions. That idea is popular in some circles but also divisive because technologies like carbon capture are expensive and energy intensive.

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Global efforts to combat inequalities in the health crisis was a through line.

The World Health Organization's head of emergencies said quickly addressing huge inequities in vaccinations and medicines could mean the worst of the pandemic — deaths, hospitalizations and lockdowns — ends soon.

Dr. Michael Ryan said the virus may never be over, but "we have a chance to end the public health emergency this year if we do the things that we've been talking about."

WHO has called the COVID-19 vaccination imbalance between rich and poor countries a catastrophic moral failure. Just over 10% of Africa's population is fully vaccinated.

Limited resources would mean the full rollout of vaccines "may take several years," Nigeria's vice president said Friday, and support is needed for donations and local production of doses.

China's president announced plans Monday to send an additional 1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine to other countries, including a donation of 600 million doses to Africa.

In another panel, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said the vaccine maker was working on a single-shot booster for both COVID-19 and the flu, saying it could be ready in some countries next year.

## THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Top economic issues were rising consumer prices and likely interest rate hikes by the U.S. Federal Reserve this year, which would have ripple effects worldwide due to the role played by the U.S. dollar.

Many of the poorest countries face debt trouble as their economic recovery lags that of the developed world, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva warned in a panel discussion Friday. The Fed's moves could strengthen the dollar, making debts bigger in local currencies.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a separate address that the Biden administration's pandemic relief and infrastructure plans have boosted economic growth. She underlined the necessity of a global minimum corporate tax that over 130 countries have backed at a time when tax burdens have shifted to middle-class workers.

European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said the 19 countries using the euro were at a different stage of recovery than the U.S. and suggested temporary factors like high energy costs may be fueling inflation in Europe.

During the economy panel, she said the bank was "trying to figure out how long it will last" and that it would act to counter high inflation, including through interest rate hikes, once certain "criteria are satisfied."

The bank plans to phase out its efforts to boost the pandemic-hit economy in March. Compared with the U.S., Europe lacks "excessive demand" following major lockdowns that would push up prices longer term, she said.

## CHINA'S TALKING POINTS

While urging the world to share vaccines, fight climate change and promote development, Xi also took a veiled swipe at the United States in a recorded speech.

"We need to discard Cold War mentality and seek peaceful coexistence and win-win outcomes," Xi said through a translator. "Protectionism and unilateralism can protect no one. ... Even worse are the practices

of hegemony and bullying, which run counter to the tide of history.”

Those are terms Beijing has used to describe U.S. policy and actions amid tensions over Taiwan, human rights and other issues. Xi touched on standard themes, including responding to trading partners' complaints by promising to open China's state-dominated economy wider to private and foreign competition.

He also said China “stands ready to work with” other countries on climate change but announced no new initiatives and offered no resources. He said it was up to developed countries to provide money and technology.

## Omicron surge is undermining care for other health problems

By BEN FINLEY and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

Roger Strukhoff was being treated for intestinal bleeding at a hospital outside Chicago this month when he suffered a mild heart attack.

Normally, the 67-year-old would have been sent to the intensive care unit. But Strukhoff said it was over-run with COVID-19 patients, and the staff instead had to wheel a heart monitor into his room and quickly administer nitroglycerin and morphine.

“A doctor I know pretty well said, ‘Roger, we’re going to have to improvise right here,’” said Strukhoff, who lives in DeKalb, Illinois.

The omicron surge this winter has not only swamped U.S. hospitals with record numbers of patients with COVID-19, it has also caused frightening moments and major headaches for people trying to get treatment for other ailments.

Less-urgent procedures have been put on hold around the country, such as cochlear implant surgeries and steroid injections for rheumatoid arthritis. And people with all sorts of medical complaints have had to wait in emergency rooms for hours longer than usual.

Mat Gleason said he wheeled his 92-year-old father, Eugene Gleason, into a Los Angeles-area emergency room last week for a transfusion to treat a blood disorder. It should have taken about seven to 10 hours, Gleason said, but his dad was there for 48 hours.

He said his father called him after 10 hours, asking for a blanket.

“He told me later, ‘I just assumed they forgot about me,’” said Gleason, 57, who works as an art critic. “And yet he wasn’t the only person in that room. There were dozens of people” But Gleason added: “I’m not begrudging the hospital at all. They did a great job.”

An average of almost 144,000 people were in the hospital in the U.S. with COVID-19 as of Tuesday, the highest level on record, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hospitals in a few states such as New York and Connecticut that experienced early omicron surges are starting to see an easing of the patient load, but many other places are overwhelmed.

Hospitals say the COVID-19 patients aren’t as sick as those during the last surge. And many of them are being admitted for reasons other than COVID-19 and only incidentally testing positive for the virus.

Rick Pollack, CEO and president of the American Hospital Association, said the surge has had a widespread effect on the availability of care for people who have non-COVID-19 health problems. He said a number of factors are at play: More people are in the hospital, and a high number of health care workers are out with COVID-19, worsening staffing shortages that existed well before the pandemic.

As of Wednesday, roughly 23% of hospitals nationwide were reporting critical staff shortages, Pollack said.

Many people are also unable or unwilling to seek care for symptoms that do not seem like emergencies, he said. Pollack said that has led to delays in diagnosing conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure that get worse the longer they go untreated.

Dr. Claudia Fegan, chief medical officer for Cook County Health in Chicago, said some people, particularly older patients, have been avoiding checkups and other routine care during the pandemic out of fear of COVID-19.

And as a result, “the patients we’re seeing now are much sicker,” she said, citing cases of advanced heart failure and cancer that might have been diagnosed earlier.

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Mike Bawden, a 59-year-old marketing consultant with a history of blood clots in his lungs, said he couldn't get an appointment to see his doctor in Davenport, Iowa, because his coughing symptoms were too similar to COVID-19. The doctor's office was concerned about the virus spreading to others.

After nearly two weeks, Bawden went to a walk-in clinic, which sent him to the emergency room at Genesis Medical Center-East in Davenport. He said he waited almost six hours in an overflowing ER before he was seen. A scan showed clots in his lungs, as he suspected, and he was prescribed blood thinners.

If not for the surge, Bawden said, he would have gotten a scan much earlier at a doctor's office.

"It's always so easy to Monday morning quarterback the ER, but everyone was really nice — even the other patients," Bawden said. "I think it's important for folks to realize that nobody's the villain."

Craig Cooper, a Genesis spokesman, declined to comment on any individual cases. But he said in an email: "We are not exempt from the challenges medical centers across the United States are experiencing because of significant impact from COVID. We urge individuals to get vaccinated."

Strukhoff, who is a researcher for tech startups, said he arrived at Northwestern Medicine Kishwaukee Hospital in DeKalb for what he suspected was internal bleeding.

He was diagnosed and given a bed in the emergency room. He waited there for six hours, feeling dizzy, before he was wheeled to his own room through hallways where people lay on stretchers.

"I was in no distress at that point," Strukhoff said. "I was worried about clogging up the works in the emergency room and taking up a spot for other people."

Christopher King, a spokesman for Northwestern Medicine, declined to comment on Strukhoff's care because of privacy laws. But he confirmed that wait times were higher than normal throughout the hospital system, as they are across the country.

Strukhoff said that once he got his own hospital room, a colonoscopy revealed the bleeding. Doctors treated it by cauterizing a vein. He then suffered the heart attack while he was recovering. He said it took five hours for him to get into the ICU.

"It's not something they were set up to do, but they did it," Strukhoff said of the doctors and nurses who rose to the challenge. "These people are heroes."

## Has rule-breaker Boris Johnson met his match in 'partygate'?

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For Boris Johnson, facts have always been flexible.

The British prime minister's career is littered with doctored quotes, tall tales, exaggerations and mistruths. When called out, he has generally offered an apologetic shrug or a guilty grin, and moved on. Plenty of people were willing to forgive him.

At least until now. Revelations that the prime minister and his staff partied while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions have provoked public outrage and prompted many in the Conservative Party to consider dumping their leader.

The Conservatives picked Johnson because his image as a cheerful rule-breaker — the naughty schoolboy of British politics — gave him a rare ability to connect with voters. Now, many are having second thoughts.

"His fans would say he's a force of nature — he doesn't let things get in his way," said Steven Fielding, professor of political history at the University of Nottingham.

"Sometimes he's been caught out, but mostly he's got away with it," Fielding added. "Now the reality is becoming more apparent to more and more people."

Johnson has often been able to talk his way out of crises. The Oxford-educated politician has used words to create the image of a rumpled jokester with a mop of blond hair who doesn't take himself too seriously. Quips and jokes tumble out of him, sometimes in Latin or ancient Greek.

That persona made Johnson a popular guest on the humorous TV show "Have I Got News for You" from the late 1990s onwards, and brought him global fame as London's boosterish mayor between 2008 and 2016.

Many people thought he was too lightweight ever to become prime minister, and Johnson didn't contradict them. He disguised his ambition with jokes, saying he had as much chance of becoming prime minister

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as of “finding Elvis on Mars” or being “reincarnated as an olive.”

In fact, he had long dreamed of power. His sister Rachel Johnson has said his childhood ambition was to be “world king.” But his route to the top was haphazard.

As a young journalist at The Times of London, he fabricated a quote about King Edward II from a historian, who also happened to be his godfather. He was fired, but that didn’t stop him becoming Brussels correspondent for the Daily Telegraph in the early 1990s, filing exaggerated stories of EU waste and red tape. Those “Euromyths” about one-size-fits-all condoms and plans to ban “bendy bananas” helped turn British opinion against the bloc, and ultimately led to Johnson becoming the Brexit champion who would years later bring the U.K. out of the EU.

Brexit was won in a 2016 referendum campaign that contained many questionable claims, notably the allegation — often repeated by Johnson — that Britain gave the EU 350 million pounds a week that could instead be spent on the U.K.’s health service.

Johnson suffered an early political setback when then-Conservative leader Michael Howard fired him in 2004 for lying about an extramarital affair. A month earlier, Howard forced him to apologize to the city of Liverpool for accusing its residents of “wallowing” in victimhood.

Opponents long argued that Johnson’s loose grasp of facts — and history of glibly offensive comments — made him unfit for high office. Over the years Johnson has called Papua New Guineans cannibals, claimed that “part Kenyan” Barack Obama had an ancestral dislike of Britain and compared Muslim women who wear face-covering veils to “letter boxes.”

Johnson has usually responded by dismissing offensive comments as jokes, or by accusing journalists of dredging up long-ago remarks. Attacking the media — along with “lefty London lawyers” — is a long-standing populist tactic of Johnson. His biographer Andrew Gimson has called him the “Merry England PM” who depicts his opponents as joyless puritans.

Now, though, Johnson’s allies worry that the tide has turned. Johnson has apologized for the lockdown-breaching parties in uncharacteristically subdued and carefully worded statements. He has stopped short of admitting personal wrongdoing, saying he believed he acted within the rules.

But many Britons who stuck to lockdown rules imposed by the government — cut off from friends and family, unable to visit relatives in nursing homes and hospitals — have scoffed at Johnson’s “partygate” excuses, including his claim that he thought a “bring your own booze” garden party was a work event.

Chris Curtis, head of political polling at Opinium Research, said public trust in the prime minister had plummeted and Johnson’s personal approval ratings were now “pretty dire.”

“It has always been true that the public would prefer to have a pint with Boris Johnson but wouldn’t necessarily trust him to look after their kids,” Curtis said. “But what we’ve seen happen with this crisis is that now people say they would be less keen to have a pint with him — and people really wouldn’t trust him to look after their kids.”

Next week, senior civil servant Sue Gray is expected to conclude an investigation into the partying allegations. If she does not find that Johnson knowingly broke the rules, Conservative lawmakers may hold back from a no-confidence vote to topple him.

But Fielding said Johnson’s brand has now been irrevocably tarnished, even if the immediate crisis passes.

“It will recede, but I don’t think it will recede to the level that makes him a viable leader for the Conservative Party going into the next election,” Fielding said. “He’s a dead duck.”

## Think your home value is soaring? Talk to a farmer

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Fourth-generation corn and soybean farmer Jeff Frank doesn’t feel rich, but simply based on the skyrocketing value of his land in northwest Iowa, it’s an apt way to describe him, even if he laughs at the idea.

He lives in the same nearly century-old house, grows veggies in the family garden and shops at the same grocery store about 15 miles (24 kilometers) down the road. “We live the same way we have all of

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our lives," he said.

Still, even if Frank's life hasn't changed, the several hundred acres he owns about 80 miles (129 kilometers) northwest of Des Moines have suddenly made him worth millions of dollars.

It may come as a surprise to city dwellers excited by their home values that countless farmers like Frank are actually experiencing a real estate boom that makes residential prices pale in comparison. While median existing-home prices rose by 15.8% in the U.S. last year, farmland values went up about double that rate in places like Iowa.

"I'm definitely surprised by the magnitude," said Wendong Zhang, an economist at Iowa State University who oversees an annual farmland value survey.

The rising values, especially in the Midwest, are due to high prices being paid for the key commodity crops of corn and soybeans, plentiful harvests in recent years coupled with low interest rates and optimism the good times will continue.

But they're a mixed blessing. They're enriching farmers who already have a lot of land, but making it much harder for small operators or younger farmers starting out to get land unless they happen to inherit it.

Most purchases are by operations that see the value of larger scale, seizing the chance to buy nearby land.

"If you miss this opportunity, you may not get another chance," Zhang said, describing the current mood.

As for consumers, higher land costs typically don't affect grocery prices.

Historically, farmland values rise and fall, but in the past couple decades they have mostly risen, and in the past year they have risen a lot — 33% in Frank's part of the state and 29% throughout Iowa, one of the nation's top agricultural states. Agricultural prices also have soared elsewhere in the Midwest and have climbed in most other parts of the country, too.

Federal Reserve Banks in Chicago and Kansas City reported double-digit increases in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri and Nebraska.

In Iowa, average farmland has risen from \$7,559 an acre in 2020 to \$9,751 an acre in 2021.

Nationally, farmland was up an average of 7% but that doesn't include the last half of 2021, when prices really took off in many areas.

Farmland prices have even climbed in California despite concerns about persistent drought. In 2021, the average prices of \$10,900 an acre was up 9% from 2020.

The land purchases augment an existing national trend of more agricultural production coming from ever-larger farms.

Dan Sumner, an agricultural economist at the University of California-Davis, credits some of the rising value in switching to higher-value crops, such as replacing alfalfa with nut trees.

Overall, though, Sumner said farmers are feeling good about their future.

"It reflects confidence in the economics of agriculture," he said.

The upswing follows tumultuous years of trade wars, market breakdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic and drought in much of the West.

For individual farmers, the biggest benefit of rising values is that they can borrow money at better rates for annual needs like seed and fertilizer and longer-term investments like tractors and even more land.

The high prices have prompted plenty of people to buy and sell land, leading to a record of \$765 million in agricultural land sales last year overseen by Farmers National Company, one of the nation's largest landowner services companies.

Randy Dickhut, a Farmers National real estate broker in Omaha, Nebraska, said a more typical year would see about \$500 million in sales.

"It's been very busy," Dickhut said. "It's certainly easy to sell."

But Holly Rippon-Butler, who runs a dairy with her parents in upstate New York, called the farmland prices increases "just nuts."

"The hard reality is, buying land is almost impossible unless you have some preexisting source of generational family wealth," said Rippon-Butler, who works with the National Young Farmers Coalition, an organization the among other priorities advocates for policy changes and public funding that would enable more people to have access to land.

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Given high land prices, Rippon-Butler said beginning farmers she encounters typically work as little as a quarter-acre of land and see 20 acres as a relatively large operation. Many farmers also rent land, and as values rise, so do rental rates.

Frank, the farmer in northwest Iowa, said that even though he's technically wealthier now, it's hard for him to expand his holdings as he prepares to pass along the property to the next generation.

"I have a son who farms with me and of course he'd like to expand but buying farmland right now is a big undertaking," he said. "Even for a small farm you're talking about millions of dollars."

## Anisimova upsets defending champion Osaka at Australian Open

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Within an hour of her third-round loss at the Australian Open, defending champion Naomi Osaka had consigned it to the past.

It's part of her new resolution for 2022. No dwelling on what's already happened.

Osaka had two match points against 60th-ranked Amanda Anisimova in the third set Friday, and she missed two backhands.

Anisimova held serve to force a tiebreaker, which she dominated, and finished with an ace for a 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (5) comeback victory over the four-time major champion.

In doing so, the 20-year-old American ensured that the so-called final-before-the-final — a much-anticipated fourth-round showdown between Osaka and top-ranked Ash Barty — won't happen.

"I'm not sure if I'm going to have regrets about those two match points," Osaka said. "Like, I thought she played really well. But I can't really look in the past anymore, you know?"

"Like I just have to focus on what I can do in the future to hopefully evade those situations."

Anisimova, who had lost her previous nine matches against top 20 players and had to rebound from a set and a break down to survive her first-round match, hit 46 winners to Osaka's 21.

Osaka, one of the most powerful hitters in the women's draw, praised Anisimova's service returns and described how the ball kept coming back at her so low and fast that she couldn't adjust her footwork to counter it.

"I just want to soak in this moment," said Anisimova, who took out Olympic champion Belinda Bencic in the second round. "It was an amazing match. It was very close. You know, there were a bit of nerves, and to play Naomi for the first time ... it's unreal, honestly."

Anisimova won her first WTA hardcourt title at a tuneup tournament in Melbourne this month and is now on an eight-match winning streak — the longest of her career in main draw matches.

It's the fourth time Osaka has been unable to defend a major title, and the 11th time in her 21 trips to Grand Slam events she has been knocked out in the third round, including last year's U.S. Open.

After winning the title last year — her second at Melbourne Park in three years — Osaka withdrew from the French Open in the second round and skipped Wimbledon to take a break for her mental health. After her tearful exit at the U.S. Open, she took an extended layoff to reset and arrived at the year's first major with a seeding of No. 13. She also brought a new approach, vowing to enjoy the game more and never again cry in a news conference. She's spent time meditating, keeping a journal of things she needs to be grateful for, and more time hanging out with family and friends.

"I can't win every match. So I just have to, like, take that into account," Osaka said. "I feel like I grew a lot in this match. The last match that I played in New York I think I had a completely different attitude, so I'm really happy with — you know, of course I lost, but I'm happy with how it went."

Barty is hoping to become the first Australian woman to win the championship here since 1978.

She advanced to the fourth round with a 6-2, 6-3 win over 30th-seeded Camila Giorgi and has only conceded eight games and spent less than three hours on court.

A career break a few years back, to play professional cricket, did Barty a world of good. Since her return, she won her first Grand Slam title at the 2019 French Open — beating Anisimova in the semifinals — and won Wimbledon last year.

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The hype surrounding the fourth round didn't impact her planning.

"Each match is uncertain. You just have to navigate your way through as best you can that given moment," Barty said. "I've done a good job of that this week. Now it's exciting to get to play Amanda again."

Osaka's loss means Victoria Azarenka remains the last woman to successfully defend an Australian Open singles title. She overpowered 15th-seeded Elina Svitolina 6-0, 6-2 to reach the fourth round at Melbourne Park for the first time since 2016.

She had her son with her at a news conference and five-year-old Leo, wearing his sunglasses and sitting on his mother's knee, described the two-time champion's form as: "Awesome!"

The 2012 and 2013 titlist will next play French Open champion Barbora Krejckova, who rallied from a set and a break down to beat 26th-seeded Jelena Ostapenko 2-6, 6-4, 6-4.

Since a quarterfinal run in Australia in 2016, Azarenka lost first-round matches last year and in 2019, and missed the hard-court tournament in 2017, 2018 and 2020.

Other fourth-round pairings that were set up Friday include fifth-seeded Maria Sakkari against 21st-seeded Jessica Pegula and No. 8 Paula Badosa against Madison Keys, who held off Wang Qiang 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (2) on Friday.

Rafael Nadal wrapped up the Day 5 program on Rod Laver Arena by beating Olympic silver medalist Karen Khachanov 6-3, 6-2, 3-6, 6-1 and continuing his bid for a men's record 21st Grand Slam title.

Olympic gold medalist Alexander Zverev had a 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 win earlier over Radu Albot, a 124th-ranked qualifier from Moldova. The third-seeded Zverev will next play No. 14 Denis Shapovalov, who beat Reilly Opelka 7-6 (4), 4-6, 6-3, 6-4.

Wimbledon runner-up Matteo Berrettini fended off 18-year-old Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz 6-2, 7-6 (3), 4-6, 2-6, 7-6 (5).

Miomir Kecmanovic continued to make the most of the absence of fellow Serbian Novak Djokovic, reaching the fourth round at a major for the first time with a 6-4, 6-7 (8), 6-2, 7-5 win over 25th-seeded Lorenzo Sonego.

He will next play 17th-seeded Gael Monfils, who beat No. 16 Cristian Garin 7-6 (4), 6-1, 6-3.

Kecmanovic had been drawn to play the top-ranked Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, in the first round. But Djokovic was deported on the eve of the tournament for failing to meet Australia's strict COVID-19 regulations.

## In kids' book, Sotomayor asks: Whom have you helped today?

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — "Whom have I helped today?" That's the question Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor tells kids she asks herself every night before she goes to sleep.

Her new children's book, "Just Help! How to Build a Better World," challenges kids to ask how they will help, too. The book comes out Tuesday and is Sotomayor's third book for young readers.

In the book, children help in a variety of ways: sending care packages to American soldiers overseas, recycling plastic bags, cleaning up a park, donating toys to a children's hospital and encouraging others to vote.

"I want kids to do this intentionally, to think that this is a requirement of living almost, that trying to figure out how they will make a better world should be a part of the charge of their living," said Sotomayor, 67, in a telephone interview ahead of the book's publication.

Sotomayor said she wants kids not only to help family and friends but also to "think about how to help neighbors and how to help our community, and that it takes active thought and active action to change the world."

The story starts with Sotomayor as a child being asked by her mother how she will help that day and follows her and other kids as they find ways to assist. Sotomayor tells readers that she remembers throughout her childhood seeing her mother helping others, both as a nurse and in the community where she lived in the Bronx.



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Sotomayor's mom, Celina Baez Sotomayor, died last year and is the inspiration for Sotomayor's next book, tentatively titled "Just Shine," she said. The book will talk about how her mother "let others shine," Sotomayor said. "That's how she approached the world."

Sotomayor said losing her mother has been "a difficult blow," but "being able to speak about how she inspired my life of service" seemed to be "a wonderful way to pay her tribute." There's a subtle tribute in her new book, too. An older man named John who encourages kids to vote is her nod to the late John Lewis, whom Sotomayor said she "greatly admired."

Sotomayor's other books include "Turning Pages: My Life Story" and "Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You," about children with challenges including autism, dyslexia and Down syndrome. All the books by the court's first Latina justice have also been published in Spanish.

Sotomayor's last book, "Just Ask," grew out of her experience living with diabetes, which she was diagnosed with as a child. It's a topic that's newly relevant for many young people. A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report found that children who had COVID-19 were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as those who had not had the virus.

Sotomayor says her message to newly diagnosed children is that the experience of having a chronic disease can make them stronger.

"Any condition in life can be viewed as either a burden or it can be viewed as an opportunity to grow. Because when you face life challenges, whether it's a condition like diabetes or it's any other condition that might be an illness, you have to learn how to be more resourceful and more disciplined about taking care of yourself and about maintaining your health," she said.

Sotomayor says living with diabetes has taught her to take care of and listen to her body. This month, as coronavirus cases have soared, she participated in arguments at the high court remotely, from her office. Her colleagues, with the exception of Justice Neil Gorsuch, wore masks in the courtroom for the first time since the justices returned to hearing in-person arguments in October. That prompted stories alleging Sotomayor didn't want to sit near anyone who was unmasked. Sotomayor and Gorsuch released a statement Wednesday noting that while they "sometimes disagree about the law" they are "warm colleagues and friends."

In talking about her book, Sotomayor declined to discuss her decision to participate remotely in arguments, saying only, "I pay attention to my health."

The ongoing pandemic means Sotomayor will be making virtual appearances in connection with her new book, including one hosted by the Chicago Public Library and another where she'll talk with actress America Ferrera. On previous book tours, she often took pictures with kids and dispensed hugs. Sotomayor said she has continued to meet with schoolchildren virtually during the pandemic but acknowledged it's "not as personally satisfying as getting hugs from kids."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Jan. 22, the 22nd day of 2022. There are 343 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its Roe v. Wade decision, declared a nationwide constitutional right to abortion.

On this date:

In 1901, Britain's Queen Victoria died at age 81 after a reign of 63 years; she was succeeded by her eldest son, Edward VII.

In 1938, Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town" was performed publicly for the first time in Princeton, New Jersey.

In 1944, during World War II, Allied forces began landing at Anzio, Italy.

In 1947, America's first commercially licensed television station west of the Mississippi, KTLA-TV in Los

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Angeles, made its official debut.

In 1995, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy died at the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, at age 104.

In 1997, the Senate confirmed Madeleine Albright as the nation's first female secretary of state.

In 1998, Theodore Kaczynski (kah-ZIHN'-skee) pleaded guilty in Sacramento, California, to being the Unabomber responsible for three deaths and 29 injuries in return for a sentence of life in prison without parole.

In 2006, Kobe Bryant scored 81 points, the second-highest in NBA history, in the Los Angeles Lakers' 122-104 victory over the Toronto Raptors.

In 2007, a double car bombing of a predominantly Shiite commercial area in Baghdad killed 88 people. Iran announced it had barred 38 nuclear inspectors on a United Nations list from entering the country in apparent retaliation for U.N. sanctions imposed the previous month.

In 2008, actor Heath Ledger, 28, was found dead of an accidental prescription overdose in a New York City apartment.

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed an executive order to close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp within a year. (The facility remained in operation as lawmakers blocked efforts to transfer terror suspects to the United States; President Donald Trump later issued an order to keep the jail open and allow the Pentagon to bring new prisoners there.)

In 2020, Chinese health authorities urged people in the city of Wuhan to avoid crowds and public gatherings after warning that a new viral illness that had infected hundreds of people and caused at least nine deaths could spread further. Health officials in Washington state said they were actively monitoring 16 people who'd come in close contact with a traveler to China, the first U.S. resident known to be infected with the virus.

Ten years ago: Longtime Penn State coach Joe Paterno, who'd won more games than anyone in major college football but was fired amid a child sex abuse scandal that scarred his reputation, died at age 85.

Five years ago: After a combative start to his presidency, Donald Trump delivered a more unifying message and sought to reassure Americans he was ready to begin governing a divided nation.

One year ago: Senate leaders announced that opening statements in the impeachment trial of Donald Trump over the Capitol riot would begin the week of Feb. 8; it would be the first time a former president would face such charges after leaving office. Former Atlanta Braves slugger Hank Aaron, who endured racist threats with stoic dignity during his successful pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record, died at 86. Former "Nightly News" anchor Tom Brokaw said he was retiring from NBC News after working at the network for 55 years.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Piper Laurie is 90. Celebrity chef Graham Kerr (TV: "The Galloping Gourmet") is 88. Author Joseph Wambaugh is 85. Singer Steve Perry is 73. Country singer-musician Teddy Gentry (Alabama) is 70. Movie director Jim Jarmusch is 69. Actor John Wesley Shipp is 67. Hockey Hall of Famer Mike Bossy is 65. Actor Linda Blair is 63. Actor Diane Lane is 57. Actor and rap DJ Jazzy Jeff is 57. Celebrity chef Guy Fieri is 54. Actor Olivia d'Abo is 53. Actor Katie Finneran is 51. Actor Gabriel Macht is 50. Actor Balthazar Getty is 47. Actor Christopher Kennedy Masterson is 42. Jazz singer Lizz Wright is 42. Pop singer Willa Ford is 41. Actor Beverley Mitchell is 41. Rock singer-musician Ben Moody is 41. Actor Kevin Sheridan is 40. Actor-singer Phoebe Strole is 39. Rapper Logic is 32. Tennis player Alizé Cornet (uh-LEEZ' kohr-NAY') is 32. Actor Sami Gayle is 26.