

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Feb. 9

Senior Menu: Hot turkey combo, mashed potatoes and gravy, mixed vegetables, fruit.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken sandwich, fries.

Boys Basketball at Redfield (Combined JH game at 5 p.m. followed by JV game 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

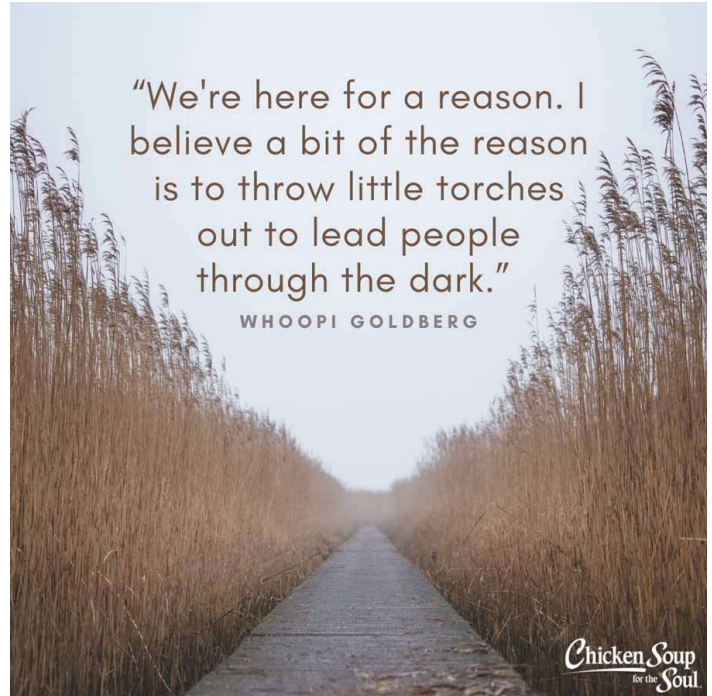
Girls Basketball hosts Elk Point-Jefferson. JV game at 4 p.m. followed by varsity)

FFA Alumni meeting, 7 p.m., Ag Room

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



"We're here for a reason. I believe a bit of the reason is to throw little torches out to lead people through the dark."

WHOOPI GOLDBERG

Friday, Feb. 10

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle casserole, peas and carrots, swedish apple pie square, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Girls Basketball hosts Redfield. (C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity)

MS Pep Band Night!

Little kids wrestling at Doland

Saturday, Feb. 11

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Basketball Double Header at Mobridge: (Boys JV in MS Gym, 1 p.m.; Girls JV in HS Gym, 1 p.m.; Varsity Girls to follow in HS Gym and then Varsity Boys).

Northeast Conference Wrestling at Webster, 11 a.m.

Middle School State wrestling at Pierre, 9 a.m.

Junior High Boys Basketball at Mobridge, 11 a.m. in the MS Gym - 2 games)

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

decision to supply the long-range missile systems that shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in 2014, a new report found.

- Ohio residents have been allowed to return to their homes in the town of East Palestine days after a train derailment that led to a toxic chemical leak.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia has "regained the initiative" by launching a new offensive in the Ukraine war, despite being blocked from making "significant gains," the Institute for the Study of War said.

- Pennsylvania Senator John Fetterman has been hospitalized after he "began feeling lightheaded" at a Senate Democratic retreat in Washington, D.C.

- The Pentagon said it is "100 percent" certain that the Chinese high-altitude balloon shot down last weekend was not "for civilian purposes."

- As predicted in the Bulletin yesterday, Disney announced plans to cut 7,000 jobs in order to save \$5.5 billion and turn its Disney+ streaming service profitable.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin likely signed off on the

Varin joins Writing Staff of Independent

Elizabeth Varin has joined the writing team of The Groton Independent / Groton Daily Independent. She is currently the multimedia coordinator at Northern State University. Her past experience has included the WEB Lead at the Aberdeen American News, store manager for Habitat for Humanity.



Varin has a Bachelor's degree in journalism from California State University, Chico with minors in English and communication design.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling

February 8 Team Standings: Shihtzus – 4, Chipmunks – 3, Foxes – 3, Jackelopes – 1, Cheetahs – 1, Coyotes – 0

Men's High Games: Tony Waage – 210, Tony Madsen – 195, Roger Spanier – 192

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter – 176, Lori Giedt – 172, Karen Spanier & Alexa Schuring – 170

Men's High Series: Tony Waage – 586, Brad Waage – 539, Roger Spanier – 488

Women's High Series: Alexa Schuring – 458, Vicki Walter – 451, Darci Spanier – 450

Fun Game – 2 or more strikes in the same frame – Shihtzus with 10!

The arts are the gateway to unique South Dakota destinations

By Jim Speirs, Executive Director, Arts South Dakota

Winter may still have its grip on South Dakota, but travelers and communities are already thinking about the upcoming tourist season, energized by the recent Governor's Conference on Tourism. And thinking about visitors to our state means thinking about our unique arts and cultural destinations.

The arts are the fourth largest factor in making travel decisions, with 68% of travel driven by arts and culture. Between Rapid City and Sioux Falls, arts and culture nonprofits—the organizations that support our museums and creative destination points—generate \$220 million in annual economic activity. Those same organizations support 7,000 full time jobs and generate \$19 million annually in state and local tax revenue.

In addition, 35 community arts councils are presenting events in every corner of South Dakota, connecting local and out-of-state tourists to festivals, performances and creative opportunities throughout the year. From Faulkton to Hill City, from Custer State Park to Vermillion, from Sisseton to Spearfish, there's just so much to see and do in South Dakota that's tied to our culture and creativity.

The State Tourism Department has long realized that the arts drive tourism—and exciting programs are available to capitalize on our state-wide creative energy. From #StateOfCreate—a mobile-exclusive passport of curated attractions, retailers, restaurants, parks and more—to 48 Hours of Culture in the Capital City and 48 Hours Exploring the Arts in Sioux Falls, SD Tourism offers great programming for visitors of all ages. Check out these offerings and more at travelsouthdakota.com.

This year, the Tourism Department has a goal to make South Dakota one of the Top Ten destinations in the U.S. We believe the arts are a key element in that strategy—in fact, our arts and culture are the gateway to our state's unique destinations. Let's shine the spotlight on cultural attractions in every community in South Dakota and spread those travelers throughout the state!

Please visit www.ArtsSouthDakota.org for ideas to make your community an arts destination for local, regional and national tourists.



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Groton Area Second Quarter Honor Roll

Seniors

4.0 GPA: Ethan Clark, Elliana Weismantel, Jackson Dinger, Jacob Lewandowski, Cole Simon, Shaylee Peterson, Ashtyn Bahr, Caleb Hanten, Kaleb Antonsen, Brooke Gengerke, Aspen Johnson, Cadance Tullis
3.99-3.50: Sierra Ehresmann, Carter Barse, Brenna Carda, Porter Johnson, Gracie Traphagen, Cole Bisbee, Cade Larson, Shallyn Foertsch, Tate Larson, Hollie Frost, Andrew Marzahn, KayLynn Overacker, Nathalia Garcia, Ethan Gengerke
3.49-3.00: Kamryn Fliehs, Tannon McGannon

Juniors

4.0 GPA: Claire Heinrich, Lydia Meier, Kyleigh Englund, Hannah Monson, Emily Clark, Ashlyn Sperry, Lexi Osterman, Holden Sippel, Emma Schinkel, Sara Menzia
3.99-3.50: Cadence Feist, Abigail Jensen, Anna Fjeldheim, Sydney Leicht, Colby Dunker, Lane Tietz, Camryn Kurtz, Bradin Althoff, Celia Moreno Mananes, Logan Ringgenberg
3.49-3.00: Dillon Abeln, Jaycie Lier, Bryson Wambach, Faith Fliehs, Karsyn Jangula, Anna Bisbee, Jackson Garstecki

Sophomores

4.0 GPA: Gretchen Dinger, Elizabeth Fliehs, Emma Kutter, Kayla Lehr, Payton Mitchell, Diego Eduardo Nava Remigio, Faith Traphagen, Axel Warrington
3.99-3.50: Kennedy Hansen, Blake Pauli, Brooklyn Hansen, Emily Overacker, Turner Thompson, Karrah-Jo Johnson, Jeslyn Kosel, Logan Pearson, Brevin Fliehs, Laila Roberts, Kaden Kampa, Korbin Kucker
3.49-3.00: Rebecca Poor, Carter Simon, Abby Yeadon, Riley Carman, Aiden Heathcote, Nicolas Fernandez Gonzalez, Corbin Weismantel, Drew Thurston, Kellen Antonsen, Karlie McKane, Christian Ehresmann, Emma Bahr, Quintyn Bedford

Freshmen

4.0 GPA: Lucas Carda, Carly Gilbert, Jerica Locke, Jaedyn Penning, Nathan Unzen, Natalia Warrington, Talli Wright
3.99-3.50: Mia Crank, Logan Warrington, Ryder Johnson, Paisley Mitchell, Benjamin Hoeft, De Eh Tha Say, Gage Sippel, London Bahr, Raelee Lilly, Olivia Stiegelmeier, Aiden Meyer, Rylee Dunker, Karter Moddy
3.49-3.00: Keegen Tracy, Cali Tollifson, Karsten Fliehs, Lincoln Krause, Cambria Bonn, Jayden Schwan, Breslyn Jeschke, Hannah Sandness, Drake Peterson, Jarrett Erdmann

Eighth Grade

4.0 GPA: Teagan Hanen, Carlee Johnson, Ashlynn Warrington
3.99-3.50: Kira Clocksene, Colt Williamson, Brody Lord, Liby Althoff, Emerlee Jones, Addison Hoffman Wipf, Aiden Strom, Taryn Traphagen, Halee Harder, Leah Jones, Gavin Kroll, McKenna Tietz, Walker Zoellner, Kella Tracy
3.49-3.00: Avery Crank, Blake Lord, Claire Schuelke, Zander Harry, Hailey Pauli, Brenna Imrie

Seventh Grade

4.0 GPA: Elizabeth Cole, Makenna Krause, Sydney Locke, Thomas Schuster
3.99-3.50: JoHanne Beauchamp, Mya Feser, Taryn Thompson, Easton Weber, Layne Johnson, Jace Johnson, Ryder Schelle, Addison Hoeft, Ethan Kroll, Rylie Rose, Chesney Weber, Kyleigh Kroll
3.49-3.00: Wyatt Wambach, Karson Zak, Rylen Ekern, Brysen Sandness, Ryelle Gilbert, Brayden Barrera, John Bisbee, Kason Oswald, Aimee Heilman, Journey Zieroth

Sixth Grade

4.0 GPA: Wesley Borg, Abby Fjeldheim, Zachary Fliehs, Novalea Warrington
3.99-3.50: Tevan Hanson, Neely Althoff, Brooklyn Spanier, Kolton Antonsen, Asher Johnson, Madison Herrick, Lincoln Shilhanek, Arianna Dinger, Aurora Washenberger, Aspen Beto, Adeline Kotzer, Tenley Frost
3.49-3.00: Logan Olson, Samuel Crank, Wesley Morehouse, Savannah Beauchamp, Skylor Bedford, Kae-dynce Bonn, May Dallaire, Grayson Flores, Jose Fernando Nava Remigio, Wyatt Hagen, Mathias Walters Weidner

You're Invited!

RESET

women's conference

ROSE HILL CHURCH

12099 ROSE HILL RD, LANGFORD SD

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2023

9:30 AM - 2:00 PM

*Women and girls of all generations
are welcome to enjoy a day to reset.*

GUEST SPEAKERS

**PASTORS LISA PALMER
AND MICAH LOMBARDI, A
MOTHER-DAUGHTER TEAM**



REGISTER ONLINE

**THIS IS A FREE EVENT.
REGISTER BY SCANNING
THE QR CODE OR AT
ROSEHILLEFC.COM**

CHILDCARE WILL BE AVAILABLE

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Groton Chamber of Commerce February 1, 2023

12pm City Hall

- Special thanks to Brian Bahr of Bahr Spray Foam for providing Jungle Pizza for all!
- Individuals present: Brian Bahr, Christine Hilton, Katelyn Nehlich, Doug Heinrich, Carol Kutter, April Abeln, Kellie Locke, and Ashley Bentz.
- Minutes from the previous meeting were approved on a motion by Heinrich and seconded by Locke. All members present voted aye.
- Treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$30,455.41. An estimated \$1500.00 is in the Bucks account. Report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Locke. All members present voted aye. \$8,600.00 has been received for 2023 dues which is down from last year. No 1099's will need to be issued for 2022.
- Rack cards have been printed and registered with the SD Dept. of Tourism Interstate Welcome Centers Publication Program. No date has been set for the Literature Drop but will be sometime this Spring.
- Jim Lane hasn't been able to fix the lighting on the 2 wood hwy signs that was malfunctioning; but lighting does seem to be better.
- Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to pay \$100 to Olive Grove Golf Course for a whole page ad in their Monday Night Football booklet. All members present voted aye.
- Our \$50 Facebook ad has ended for our electronic Hwy 12 sign drawing. Drawing will be held Wednesday, February 15th at 12pm at City Hall. Nehlich will put together drawing materials.
- Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to pay for a 6x4' baseball advertising sign for Dakota Broadcasting in exchange for 240 radio ads to be used in the next 4 years. All members present voted aye.
- Abeln will contact new business owner, Hunter Bahr from Northern Plains Insulation and set up a welcome visit.
- Groton Lions Club will be sponsoring their annual Easter Egg Hunt on April 1st. It was suggested the Chamber purchase youth shirts to be hidden in plastic eggs. We have 5 of the adult shirts left as well to use for promotions.
- It was mentioned to start brainstorming our 2023 shirt design.
- Next meeting:
 - o March 1st at City Hall 12-1pm BYOL
 - Upcoming events
 - o 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
 - o 02/15/2023 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing, 12pm, City Hall
 - o 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
 - o 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
 - o 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park
 - o 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo BB/SB Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
 - o 04/06/2023 Career Development Event
 - o 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am
 - o 04/23/2023 Princess Prom at GHS Arena 4:30-8pm
 - o 04/29/2023 Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip 9am-6pm
 - o 04/30/2023 Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip 12-4pm

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Groton City Council February 7 Meeting Minutes

February 7, 2023

The Groton City Council met on the above date at 7:00 p.m. at 120 N Main Street for their first monthly meeting with the following members present: Bahr, Wells, Wambach, Cutler, Nehls and Mayor Hanlon presiding. Also present were: Attorney Drew Johnson, Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich, Terry Herron, Dwight Zerr, Todd Gay, Stacy Mayou, Kami Lipp, Tricia Keith, Jarod Fliehs, Doug Hamilton, and Elizabeth Varin.

Public comments were welcomed pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1, but none were received.

Todd Gay, Electric Superintendent, addressed the council regarding his vacation leave accrual. Later in the meeting, it was decided that Todd would continue accruing vacation leave indefinitely at the rate he was in 2022 (4 weeks per year) on motion by Nehls and seconded by Cutler. All members present voted aye.

Department reports were reviewed.

Todd Gay, Terry Herron, and Dwight Zerr exited the meeting.

Jarod Fliehs and Doug Hamilton addressed the council regarding the baseball concession building and their want to construct a new facility before the 2024 season. Discussion also took place about funding opportunities to assist with the overall cost. The park bathroom facility was also briefly discussed.

Jarod Fliehs and Doug Hamilton exited the meeting.

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved on a motion by Bahr and seconded by Wambach. All members present voted aye.

Moved by Cutler and seconded by Nehls to authorize the following bills for payment. All members voted aye.

Payroll, \$43,940.59, Employee salaries; Executive, \$556.15, ; Administrative, \$8,855.72, ; Public Safety, \$9,278.66, ; Public Works, \$23,240.78, ; Culture & Recreation, \$2,009.28, ; Scott Hanlon, \$33.77, Parts for water fountain, tape for hockey sticks; NW Energy, \$66.34, Natural Gas Service - Water Tower; Groton Elementary School, \$160.00, Kevin Lovegreen full book set; Dacotah Bank, \$5,444.26, Withholding/SS/Medicare; Dakotaland FCU, \$730.00, Employee savings; Dacotah Bank, \$1,622.90, HSA contributions; IMEG Corp., \$5,704.39, Engineering fees; Landon Johnson, \$278.31, Mileage/Meal Reimbursement - JUTS 2023; Douglas Heinrich, \$349.00, Med Flex; Verizon Wireless, \$40.01, Wireless router; Guardian Insurance, \$38.49, Employee insurance; Employer's Mutual Insurance, \$85.20, Employee insurance; Aflac, \$336.62, Employee insurance; Allied Benefit Systems, \$10,978.48, Employee insurance; Colonial Life, \$69.40, Employee insurance; Accounts Management, Inc, \$75.00, Wage Assignment; Hauge Associates, Inc., \$250.00, Wage Assignment; Dacotah Bank, \$3,268.03, Withholding/SS/Medicare; Dacotah Bank, \$300.00, HSA contributions; April Abeln, \$104.50, Med Flex; Stacy Mayou, \$140.62, Med Flex; Dacotah Bank, \$5,541.43, Withholding/SS/Medicare; Dakotaland FCU, \$730.00, Employee Savings; Dacotah Bank, \$622.90, HSA contributions; USPS, \$282.21, Utility postage; XL Homes Corp., \$191.13, Utility deposit refund; Jessica & Brandon Papa, \$97.03, Utility deposit refund; Lena Cox, \$250.00, Utility deposit refund; City of Groton, \$211.84, Utility deposits applied to bills; Dakota Fluid Power, \$47.69, Coil for skid loader; Colonial Research, \$148.52, Urinal screens; JDDM, LLC., \$249.00, Repairs to warming house; Menards, \$91.44, Water fountain supplies; Geffdog Designs, LLC, \$140.00, Library banner; SD Department of Health, \$30.00, Water samples; JGE, \$1,518.61, Broom for skid loader; Dakota Doors, Inc., \$1,191.83, Installation of receivers & remotes at city shop; Locke Electric, Inc., \$1,795.19, Electric supplies, labor for repairs; ULINE, \$663.82, Two-tier folding chair dolly; Irby, Inc., \$4,565.00, Electric supplies; Runnings, \$915.34, 2-pack 20v batteries, fuel hose, shop towels, flint, 6' shelving unit; SD Supplemental Retirement, \$240.00, Supplemental Retirement; Farmers Union Co-op, \$2,430.00, #1 Dyed Diesel; NW Energy, \$13.81, Natural Gas Service - PD; S&S Lumber, \$306.86, Screws, washers, parts for water fountain, fuses, door handle, leather gloves, bolts, nuts, glue traps, rope, receiver hitch, hitch pin & clip, 2" ball for receiver, power steering fluid, brake fluid, grease coupler; Dollar General, \$170.75, Lighter, bottled water, candy, toilet paper, tissues, creamer, garbage bags, batteries, Febreze, glass cleaner; SD Retirement System, \$10,155.02, Employee Retirement; J's Superior Cleaning, \$240.00, Commercial cleaning services - January 2023; Drew Johnson, \$550.00, Legal Services - January 2023; Groton Chamber of Commerce, \$12,000.00, City Donation; Full Circle Ag, \$60.00,

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Tank rental; A&B Business Solutions, \$341.40, Printer lease; Bell Lumber and Pole Co., \$35,426.00, Electric poles; AutoZone, Inc., \$45.09, Oil filters, seat covers; Groton Daily Independent, \$67.88, Publishing Fees; Dacotah Bank Visa, \$2,193.07, Date stamper, labels, various books for library, fire resistant clothing - jeans & sweatshirts, envelopes, copy paper, light bulbs, postage, fuel, gloves; ; The second reading of Ordinance #767 – Amending Rates for Groton Municipal Electric Customers was tabled to the next meeting on a motion by Nehls and seconded by Wambach. All members present voted aye.

Moved by Cutler and seconded by Wells to authorize Douglas Heinrich to attend Finance Officer and Human Resources School in Pierre, SD on June 6th - 9th, 2023. All members present voted aye.

Moved by Wambach and seconded by Bahr to authorize Todd Gay to attend the Emergency Preparedness and Restoration Conference in St. Cloud, MN on February 22nd - 23rd, 2023. All members present voted aye.

Elizabeth Varin exited the meeting.

Moved by Bahr and seconded by Wells to adjourn into executive session for personnel and legal matters 1-25-2 (1) & (3) at 8:05pm. All members present voted aye. Council reconvened into regular session at 9:20pm.

Elizabeth Varin reentered the meeting.

Moved by Cutler and seconded by Wambach to hire Benjamin Smith as Police Officer at a wage of \$28.00/hour with a \$.50 increase following his 6-month probationary period. All members present voted aye.

The second reading of Ordinance #766 – 2023 Summer Salary Ordinance was tabled to the next meeting on a motion by Wells and seconded by Nehls. All members present voted aye.

Moved by Wells and seconded by Nehls to adjourn the meeting at 9:27pm. All members present voted aye.

Scott Hanlon, Mayor

Douglas Heinrich, Finance Officer



South Dakota women getting abortion meds from other states

Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

The border between Republican-led South Dakota and Democratic-controlled Minnesota has become a firing line in the national clash over abortion rights, with online doctor visits and mail-order prescriptions blurring the lines of state sovereignty and the reach of law enforcement.

On one side is South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who presides over some of the nation's strictest abortion laws and is a fierce opponent of medication abortion, a process that has become increasingly common since 2000, when the main pill, mifepristone, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Medication abortion currently accounts for 54% of abortions in the United States, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health organization.

On the other side is Julie Amaon, medical director of Just the Pill, a Twin Cities telemedicine abortion provider that helped 110 South Dakota residents in 2022 with online consultations and prescriptions for abortion medication. The patients cross the border for a consultation on their phone and receive a tracking number for their medication, which they pick up a few days later and then return to South Dakota to take the pills.

South Dakota women were seeking abortions in neighboring states even before the Supreme Court decision to overturn the landmark Roe v. Wade ruling in the summer of 2022, with access to reproductive services virtually shut down in South Dakota due to state laws complicating the process and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stakes are even higher now that the Supreme Court removed the federal constitutional right to an abortion, leaving it up to states to determine legality and access. South Dakota had a "trigger law" from 2005 that took effect, making it a Class 6 felony for anyone "who administers to any pregnant female or prescribes or procures for any pregnant female" a means for an abortion, except to save the life of the mother. The crime is punishable by two years in prison, a \$4,000 fine or both.

Just the Pill started as a nonprofit in 2020, mirroring the telemedicine model of Aid Access, an overseas provider that saw a surge in requests for mail-order abortion pills when states started outlawing abortion. Charging \$350 per patient, Just the Pill saw about 1,300 patients in 2021 and increased that number to more than 3,000 in 2022, utilizing online pharmacies such as American Mail Order out of Michigan and Honeybee Health out of California.

"Roe was always a skeleton – it's always mattered where you lived in terms of whether you could access care," Amaon said in an interview with News Watch. "So nothing much has changed for us. Even before the fall of Roe, we were having people travel across state lines for care."

The organization offers services in not just Minnesota but Wyoming, Montana and Colorado, allowing residents from eastern and western South Dakota and North Dakota to get out-of-state care. Of the 110 South Dakota residents that used Just the Pill in 2022, 65 traveled across the border to Minnesota, 41 to Wyoming, three to Montana and one to Colorado.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley told News Watch that his office is monitoring the situation and that he expects South Dakota laws to be followed.

The state prohibits abortion "unless there is appropriate and reasonable medical judgment that performance of an abortion is necessary to preserve the life of the pregnant female." South Dakota law focuses on the person providing abortion



Marty Jackley

services, not the woman terminating her pregnancy.

Asked if someone providing telemedicine abortion services to South Dakota residents in a different state could be prosecuted in South Dakota, Jackley said that could happen, but he hopes the situation doesn't escalate to that point.

"South Dakota law very clearly prohibits someone from procuring and dispensing abortion-inducing drugs," he said. "If you aid and abet or you conspire or you actively participate in a criminal act, our reach can go beyond the state's borders. Obviously, we don't want to do that, but we've made our stance pretty clear."

States seek crackdown on mail-order abortion pills

The Food and Drug Administration in January 2023 finalized a rule change that expanded the availability of abortion pills to more pharmacies, with the FDA no longer requiring that women pick up the medicine in person, finalizing a rule that started during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Noem and Jackley responded with a Jan. 24 letter to South Dakota pharmacists clarifying that "pharmacies, including chain drug stores, are prohibited from procuring and dispensing abortion-inducing drugs with the intent to induce an abortion and are subject to felony prosecution under the South Dakota law."

Along with 19 other state attorneys general, Jackley signed a letter to national pharmacies CVS and Walgreens from Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey citing the Comstock Act of 1873, which the letter said prohibits using the mail to send or receive any drug that will be "used or applied for producing abortion."

Asked by the U.S. Postal Service for an interpretation of the Comstock Law, the Biden Administration's Office of Legal Counsel released an opinion in January 2023 that sending the pills through the mail is not in violation if the sender does not know if the drugs will be used illegally, an interpretation that the Missouri AG's letter called "bizarre."

A court case in front of a federal judge in Texas invoking the Comstock Act and challenging the FDA approval of mifepristone could have far-reaching implications for medication abortion, the process of obtaining the pills, and whether the pills themselves are legal.

"They've loosened the requirements again and again and again," Denise Harle, senior counsel with anti-abortion group Alliance Defending Freedom, which brought the lawsuit, told NPR. "So now, mifepristone is being given to women who have never even seen a physician in person."

Until more legal clarity arrives, Jackley hopes that taking a public stance with other AGs will provide enough deterrent to compel pharmacies and medical providers to follow South Dakota abortion laws. He compared it to his public letter in 2011 regarding synthetic drugs, which were being sold by some retailers labeled as "bath salts" despite narcotic qualities that made them illegal.

"I recognized that after that press release on synthetic drugs, there were going to be some of the more shady or questionable actors that were still going to push the envelope," Jackley said. "The hope was that



South Dakota law makes it a felony for doctors or pharmacists to provide medical abortion medicines to women in the state. In response, some women are traveling to other states to obtain the medication. Mifepristone, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2000, is the first of a two-drug regimen for medication abortion. Photo: Michelle

Mishina-Kunz, New York Times

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the majority of law-abiding companies and individuals saw that and made the right decision. I guess if somebody wants to risk a felony prosecution, they may try to engage in this activity, especially if there's a profit involved."

Debate surrounds safety of medication abortion

Noem and Jackley have both cited safety concerns with medication abortion, saying that if something goes wrong, such as excess bleeding or infection, there won't be emergency medical care available if a woman is taking the pills at home. Jackley said criminal charges against the person who helped procure the pills could be "much more serious" than a Class 6 felony if a woman suffers harm as a result of taking the medication to end a pregnancy.

"These are very dangerous medical procedures," Noem said on CBS' "Face the Nation" in June 2023. "We don't believe it should be available, because it is a dangerous situation for those individuals without being medically supervised by a physician."

The Missouri AG's letter signed by Jackley raised the issue of coerced abortions and also cited a 2015 study that found medication abortions were "5.96 times as likely to result in a complication as first-trimester aspiration abortions." But Amaon pointed to a study published in Lancet Regional Health medical journal in 2022 that found a 98% success rate in ending the pregnancy for women who accessed abortion pills through a telehealth provider, with the same percentage of patients saying they were satisfied with the experience.

The first pill, mifepristone, works by blocking the hormone progesterone, which the body needs to continue a pregnancy. That process causes the uterine lining to stop thickening and break down, detaching the embryo. The second drug, misoprostol, taken 24 to 48 hours later, causes the uterus to contract and dilates the cervix, which expels the embryo.

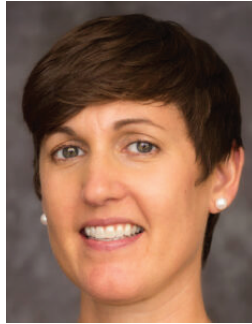
"When the FDA approved [mifepristone in 2000], we had lots of good data from Europe from 20 years before that, and now we have tons of good data [from the United States], especially from providing telehealth during the pandemic," Amaon said. "This is a safe medication that has less than 2 percent concerns with bleeding or infection, and we have a 24/7 call line so we can triage patients if they're having any of those very rare concerns. Of course, there are always facilities within their state that should be able to take care of those patients if they have any of those very rare issues. I would disagree that this is a medication that needs to be prescribed in person."

Political climate leads to action on abortion

Amaon grew up in Texas and took early notice of the "volatility" surrounding access to reproductive services in the heavily Republican state. After managing a Planned Parenthood clinic in the early 2000s, she decided she could make more of an impact as a doctor, so she started medical school at age 35 and earned her degree in 2017 from American University of Antigua.

Amaon's residency was in reproductive health education at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, which led to a role as Just the Pill's medical director in July 2020. The plan was to use mobile clinics to provide in-person services to rural patients or those from states that heavily restrict abortion. But when a federal court ordered the FDA to allow the mailing of abortion pills due to the pandemic, the group pivoted to providing telemedicine and mail-order services.

"People normally find us online, or we have relationships with clinics in banned or restricted states, and they get referred that way," Amaon said. "They fill out their health information online, sign a consent form, and we explain our process via a HIPAA-compliant secure messaging system. Then they would drive over the border and have a telehealth conversation with a clinician where they discuss health history, how to take



"It's always mattered where you lived in terms of whether you could access [abortion care] ... so nothing much has changed for us. Even before the fall of Roe, we were having people travel across state lines for care." --

- Julie Amaon, medical director of Just the Pill, a Minnesota telemedicine abortion provider

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the medication, exactly what to expect, when to call us with concerns on our 24/7 call line and so forth. Then that person would drive home and we would let them know that these medications are being sent to either general delivery at the post office or a FedEx pickup spot and we give them tracking numbers.”

There is a follow-up in seven to 14 days, said Amaon, to check on the patient and “make sure everything went as expected. We also reach out at four to five weeks for a pregnancy test at home, to make sure the process is complete. There is a rare 2% failure rate for medication abortion, so we always set up procedures to finish the process if there is a failure. We cover that cost for the patient and help them get to and from the (in person) procedure.”

Amaon, who can generally provide services to 60-70 people a week, knows that a federal court ruling or change in presidential administration can change the way her nonprofit organization does business, or if it does business at all. She also knows that states such as South Dakota are watching closely and determining a path toward cracking down on groups that procure abortion pills for state residents.

“We have an amazing group of pro bono lawyers, and we feel very confident that we can mail and provide services in Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming and Colorado currently,” Amaon said. “As an abortion provider, though, I always feel like I’m a little uneasy, just because of the political climate that we’re in. Am I concerned that this might be brought up? Sure. But I think the point of a lot of these lawsuits is to cause fear. Nothing has been tested at this point, so I can’t live in perpetual fear. I can keep only my eyes open.”

Voters could determine South Dakota abortion laws

South Dakota’s hard line on reproductive rights runs counter to recent News Watch polling on the issue. The July 2022 survey of registered voters showed that a majority (57%) of respondents support allowing legal access to abortion medications in the state, including 42% who “strongly support” such access. Nearly two-thirds (65%) said they support having a statewide referendum to determine South Dakota’s laws regarding reproductive rights.

The poll also showed that nearly 8 in 10 respondents (79%) oppose criminal penalties for anyone who helps a South Dakota resident obtain an abortion where it is legal, such as in a neighboring state. An overwhelming majority (71%) also support permitting South Dakota residents to leave the state to obtain abortions.

The random survey was conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy and contacted voters in all South Dakota counties by landline and cellphone; it was co-sponsored by News Watch and the Chiesman Center for Democracy at the University of South Dakota. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.5%.

Rick Weiland, whose Dakotans for Health organization plans to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2024 to legalize but regulate access to abortion in South Dakota, said those poll numbers helped galvanize supporters of overturning the state’s trigger law and that he’s confident the amendment will make the ballot.



Abortion services have ceased in South Dakota since the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2022 overturned the Roe v. Wade decision that legalized abortion nationwide, but dissent remains over whether a woman should have the right to choose. These protesters displayed their opinions on signs in Sioux Falls in October 2020. Photo: News Watch file

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"There's been tremendous overreach," said Weiland, adding that his group has been circulating petitions since Nov. 5, 2022, the first day allowable by law, with "more than 600 volunteer circulators" compiling signatures.

The constitutional amendment would prevent the state from regulating abortions during the first trimester. During the second trimester, the state could regulate "the abortion decision and its effectuation only in ways that are reasonably related to the physical health of the pregnant woman." After the end of the second trimester, abortion could be regulated or prohibited except to preserve "the life or health" of the mother.

It wouldn't be the first time South Dakotans have gone to the ballot box to determine state abortion laws. In 2006, the Legislature passed a law to ban all abortions except to save the life of a pregnant woman. The measure was signed by then-Gov. Mike Rounds, but opponents gathered enough signatures to refer it to the ballot, where it was defeated with more than 55% percent of the vote.

Two years later, voters rejected by a margin of 55% to 45% a ballot initiative that would have banned all abortions in the state except in cases of rape or incest or "to preserve the health or life of the woman."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at SDNewsWatch.org.



ABOUT STU WHITNEY

Stu Whitney is an investigative reporter for South Dakota News Watch. A resident of Sioux Falls, Whitney is an award-winning reporter, editor and novelist with more than 30 years of experience in journalism.

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GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball at the Groton Area Arena
Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023

Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson

JV game at 4 p.m. sponsored by Mr. Anonymous

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheething



Games called by Shane Clark

\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball
Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023

Groton Area at Redfield

JH Boys game at 5 p.m. (1 combined game)
sponsored by Akaska Tavern & Bait Shop

JV game at 6 p.m. sponsored by Grandma & Grandpa

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheething



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball
Friday, Feb. 10, 2023

Groton Area hosting Redfield

C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV sponsored by Mr. Anonymous

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheething



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Double Header Basketball at Mobridge-Pollock
Saturday, Feb. 11, 2023

Girls JV Game @ 1 PM in HS Gym sponsored by Larry & Val Flihs
Boys JV Game @ 1 PM in MS Gym sponsored by Ed & Connie Stauch

Varsity Games to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Transgender youth health care ban passes another committee

BY JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 8, 2023

A bill that would ban some forms of health care for transgender youth passed the state Senate Health and Human Services committee 4-2 Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre, after testimony similar to earlier hearings.

Senators Sydney Davis, R-Burbank; Michael Diedrich, R-Rapid City; Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen; and Erin Tobin, R-Winner, all voted to pass the bill.

Senators Shawn Bordeaux, D-Mission, and Tim Reed, R-Brookings, were the no votes. Sen. Michael Rohl, R-Aberdeen, was excused.

Reed tweeted afterward, "While I agree with most of the bill I did not agree with not allowing puberty blockers to help a child deal with their gender dysphoria."

The bill already passed the full House of Representatives and now heads to the full Senate, its last legislative stop before it could potentially be sent to the governor to be signed into law.

The bill has been met with resistance from LGBTQ advocacy groups, medical professionals and concerned citizens. They argue the bill violates the rights of transgender children and their parents.

"It's a huge government overreach into the patient-provider relationship," said Samantha Chapman, of the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

If the legislation becomes law, health care professionals treating transgender children would be banned from prescribing drugs such as puberty blockers and prohibited from performing some types of surgeries.

Supporters of the bill argue those types of treatments – often referred to as gender-affirming care – are not appropriate for minors. They say minors are not capable of making informed decisions about their own medical care and that such treatments can do permanent physical and psychological harm.

Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, introduced the "Help Not Harm Bill" and said Gov. Kristi Noem supports it. "We need to stand up for the vulnerable children in our state," Soye said.

The bill says health care providers could lose their license if caught providing the banned services, and could also be held liable in lawsuits.

Exemptions

There are several exemptions in the legislation, including one for children who are "born with a medically verifiable disorder of sex development."

The bill's proponents intend the exception to cover medical situations when a child's physical sex is un-



Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, speaks on Jan. 17, 2023, at the Capitol in Pierre about a bill she introduced to ban some forms of health care for transgender youth.

(Joshua Haiar/SD Searchlight)

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clear. They make a distinction between those kinds of physical diagnoses and the mental-health problems that they view as causing someone to consider themselves transgender.

"We do have exceptions in the bill that if there is a medically verifiable 'incongruence,' that it can be addressed," Soye told South Dakota Searchlight.

But opponents say being transgender is a medically verifiable condition.

The World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases is the basis for health statistics around the world. It's used by physicians, nurses, researchers, health insurers and others. The classifications are determined by delegations from member states who participate in the World Health Assembly.

During the past several years, the World Health Organization changed its classifications. People who have a gender identity that does not match their physical, sexual characteristics are no longer classified as having a mental or behavioral disorder. They're regarded as having a condition related to sexual health.

Soye said she's not familiar with the World Health Organization's new classification.

Another bill supporter, Norman Woods, director of the Family Heritage Alliance, rejects the World Health Organization's classification.

"That's what they want people to believe," he told South Dakota Searchlight.

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

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Committee approves bill to lower costs for pharmacies

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 8, 2023 2:17 PM

Over 20 pharmacies have closed across South Dakota since 2018. And over 55% of the state's counties either lack a pharmacy or only have one.

The industry is facing a pharmacy technician shortage, and a looming pharmacist shortage.

South Dakota pharmacists believe a bill that would provide more transparency in prescription drug pricing by pharmaceutical companies is one of the ways to address those problems.

That bill, HB 1135, unanimously passed the House Commerce and Energy Committee on Wednesday after over an hour and a half of discussion and testimony at the Capitol in Pierre.

"We think it'll slow the bleeding at least," said Craig Matson, a lobbyist with the South Dakota Pharmacists Association.

The bill would "level the playing field" between independent pharmacies and pharmacy benefit managers, which act as the middleman in the drug supply chain between manufacturers and consumers, Matson said.

The managers act on behalf of insurance providers to pay retail pharmacies for drugs dispensed to patients. The companies were formed to ensure better prices for drugs, representing a wide number of insurance groups.

However, it is an "unregulated relationship," said Rep. Mike Weisgram, R-Pierre, who is sponsoring the bill. He told South Dakota Searchlight in an interview that the top three PBMs control 80% of the market, giving them stronger negotiating power over pharmacists, forcing pharmacies to sign payment agreements and contracts that don't adequately disclose prices.

"The standards are theirs to decide whenever they want to decide," said Hugh Mack, a pharmacist from Redfield, during Wednesday's committee meeting. "We can't see the standard. They do the measuring and you do the paying back."

Lindsey Osterkamp, who owns True Care Family Pharmacy in Sioux Falls, testified that her pharmacy loses tens of thousands of dollars each year due to retroactive fees and underpayments from the companies because of the lack of transparency in contracts and business dealings.

"If not for the egregious PBM practices ... I could have hired another pharmacist years ago," Osterkamp told legislators during virtual testimony. She is the sole pharmacist at True Care and works six-day weeks.

Proponents of the bill included several pharmacists and lobbyists from Avera, Hy-Vee (a grocery store chain that also operates pharmacies) and Wellmark health insurance.

A similar bill introduced last year failed because it did not have the support of Wellmark, one of the largest health insurance providers in the state. Wellmark and South Dakota pharmacists collaborated on this year's bill.

Opponents included a lobbyist representing the Pharmaceutical Case Management Association for the third-party payers, who said the bill would allow the government to overstep into business affairs and cautioned legislators that the bill could result in higher prescription costs for South Dakotans.

"It's an attempt to legislate where profits should go — whether pharmacists should receive more," said Dick Tieszen, representing PCMA. "If somebody's going to get paid more, who's paying?"

Another lobbyist representing health insurance plans partially opposed the bill as well due to some wording.

Proponents argued that regulatory efforts have been passed in several other states, including one passed in Iowa last year, without issue.

The bill now heads to the House floor.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

Truth in sentencing cost: \$21.5 million

Estimate for parole reform comes as repeal of mandatory cost reports moves forward

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 8, 2023 11:54 AM

Lawmakers sent a bill to the governor Friday that would repeal mandatory prison-jail cost estimates, but not before one of the last such estimates landed in their laps with a \$21.5 million thud.

The House and Senate have both approved a bill to repeal a rule that requires a prison-jail cost impact statement for any proposal that would put more people behind bars.

House Bill 1003 also has an emergency clause, meaning it would take effect with Gov. Kristi Noem's signature, rather than on July 1, like most new laws.

The bill was delivered to Noem on Friday, but that wasn't soon enough to prevent a cost estimate for one of the most significant public safety proposals on offer in Pierre this session.

Senate Bill 146 would keep violent offenders in prison for their full prison term for committing 13 of the state's most serious crimes. Inmates convicted of 10 other violent crimes would need to serve 85% of their terms before a chance at parole.

The Legislative Research Council's prison-jail cost estimate for SB 146 landed this week. Without adjusting for inflation, the "truth in sentencing" bill would cost taxpayers \$21.5 million over 26 years, the estimate says.

SB 146's sponsor, Sioux Falls Republican Brent Hoffman, cited some non-financial figures from the LRC document on Tuesday, the day the senator's bill sailed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee on a 6-1 vote.

Hoffman told committee members that inmates serve about a third of their sentence for the most violent crimes, and that his proposal "attempts to address that incongruity."

The senator did not mention the total cost.

The issue did come up, however. Justin Bell, a lobbyist for the South Dakota Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys, told the committee that states implementing a truth in sentencing system typically see spikes in prison populations.

"Other states show a massive increase in prison populations after bills of this nature pass," Bell said. "And I think the proponents will say, 'Oh, yeah, that's the point, right? I mean, we want to put more people in who are committing violent crimes. But we are, right now, as everyone on this committee knows, looking a lot at prisons and the cost of prisons.'"

Bell was referencing the cost of a \$60 million proposal for a new women's prison this year, as well as a move to replace the South Dakota State Penitentiary in the near future.

Minnehaha County Sheriff Mike Milstead did not testify on behalf of SB 146, but he did tell South Dakota Searchlight recently that the public safety payoff for longer prison terms is worth the investment.

The \$21.5 million figure comes with significant caveats. The estimate is based on several assumptions on the future behavior of judges. One of those assumptions is that judges would suspend around half of their sentences for the violent crimes mentioned in the bill, for example. It also assumes that those eligible for early release would earn it, and that those released early would behave and avoid returning to prison.

Beyond that, the number of years covered by the LRC opens the estimate up to scrutiny. Department of Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko, speaking on DOC population estimates in the Joint Appropriations Committee last week, told lawmakers that she doesn't put much stock in estimates that stretch further than five years because so much can change.

Wasko has not staked out a position on SB 146, but her comments speak to one of the reasons lawmakers have pushed to do away with the prison-jail cost estimates in the first place.

The estimates are wildly inaccurate, according to House Speaker Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown, and Senate President Pro Tem Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, who sponsored HB 1003 in their respective chambers.

"You never get any good information out of them. If you're not getting anything out of them and it's taking staff time, it just slows up the work," Bartels said in January.

The law requiring prison-jail impact statements may change soon, but the law isn't the only path to an LRC report on a bill's potential price.

Hoffman said he never intended to avoid a fiscal estimate for his bill. He told South Dakota Searchlight on Wednesday that if the governor would have signed the repeal of obligatory prison-jail cost estimates before his bill received one, he would have requested a fiscal note from the LRC and gotten "the same result."

"The fiscal note follows the same spirit and intent, without the bureaucratic requirement," he said. Here's the full cost estimate document for SB 146.

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

U.S. House GOP preps for debates on 'parents rights,' school vouchers and transgender athletes

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 8, 2023 5:18 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans laid the groundwork for some top legislative priorities during a Wednesday hearing that examined public funding for charter schools and voucher programs, as well as increasing parents' oversight of school curriculum.

The Republican chair of the Education and the Workforce Committee, North Carolina Rep. Virginia Foxx, provided a forum for a discussion of legislation that would prioritize tax incentives for private or alternative schooling over public schools, allow parental access to public school curriculum and bar many transgender athletes from competing in school sports.

Public education has become a major cause for the GOP, mainly in Republican-controlled state legislatures and at local school board meetings at which conservatives target books, often with themes or characters centering on LGBTQ individuals or people of color. The results have been the banning of thousands of books as well as a culture war over school curriculum that centers on diversity, gender identity and inclusion.

Now with Republicans in control of the U.S. House, the battle has made its way to the federal stage, though progress may be difficult for the GOP given a Democratic-controlled Senate and a Democratic president. Education policy also has traditionally largely remained in the hands of states and local school bodies.

Foxx said that she intends to champion a bill that GOP Rep. Julia Letlow of Louisiana, a member of the committee, introduced in the prior Congress, known as the Parents Bill of Rights Act. Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri also introduced a Senate version of the bill, which boosts the so-called parents' rights movement pushed by conservatives.

Letlow's bill, which garnered 116 Republican co-sponsors, has several broad provisions, such as a requirement that schools provide parents with a list of books in the schools' libraries and give parents the right to meet with their child's teacher at least twice a year.

The measure specifies that parents are allowed to review curriculum and instructional materials.

"It is time for the education complex to understand that children belong to their parents, not the state," Foxx said in her opening statement.

'Educational gag orders'

Democrats pushed back, arguing that Republicans were not addressing the real issues in education such as low teacher pay and school shootings.

They criticized Republicans for instead focusing on advancing and passing "educational gag orders" — a term used by ranking member Bobby Scott of Virginia — such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, book bans and restrictions on how educators can teach topics related to race and gender.

"Many of these attacks have been launched under the guise of transparency and expanding parents' rights," Scott said in his opening statement. "While parental engagement is critical for a student's success, the bills introduced have been crafted to give a vocal minority the power to impose personal beliefs over all students."

Scott, the top Democrat on the committee, said that in his state, Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin set up an emergency hotline for people to call about the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 public schools.

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"That dedicated phone line was shut down since there were no complaints about CRT being taught in elementary or secondary schools," Scott said. "That's maybe because it's only taught in a few law schools."

Schools targeted

The spotlight on public education has increased since 2020, when schools were shut down by the pandemic and parents and educators fought over mask mandates when schools reopened.

Targeting education is a strategy that worked for Youngkin in 2021, when he campaigned on his opposition to critical race theory, though it did not prove as successful for Republican candidates across the country in 2022.

Youngkin also aired strong objections to schools' use of the late novelist Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Beloved," a story about a former slave who runs away and is haunted by the ghosts of her past.

One of the Republican witnesses at Wednesday's hearing, Virginia Gentles of the Independent Women's Forum, said she supported several Republican-led education bills such as Letlow's and also the Education Choice for Children's Act, which the late Republican Rep. Jackie Walorski of Indiana introduced in the previous Congress. The bill would create a tax credit for individuals or corporations donating to scholarship-granting organizations that provide private school vouchers to students.

"Students must be allowed to escape the residentially assigned public schools that are not effectively educating them," Gentles said.

In a House Oversight hearing last year, Gentles argued that parents should be allowed to not send their children to public school, and should be provided with vouchers to send their children to private institutions that have a curriculum with which they agree.

Gentles is the director of the Education Freedom Center at IWF, a right-wing public policy group that is financially backed by the Koch brothers, who are billionaires that fund conservative movements.

School vouchers in general allow taxpayer money to be used by parents to help pay tuition for private education. Charter schools are publicly funded but privately run and divert money away from public schools.

'Real crisis'

Democratic Rep. Suzanne Marie Bonamici of Oregon said the solution to addressing problems in America's education system is not "to funnel taxpayer dollars to unaccountable private schools and for-profit charter schools," because it undermines the effectiveness of public schools and education.

"A real crisis in American education is that many of my colleagues, in Congress and in state legislatures, are applying a divisive strategy rooted in discrimination toward and exclusion of LGBTQ students and students with disabilities, trying to censor and silence content that does not fit their political ideology and agenda, defunding public schools and failing to address gun violence," Bonamici said.

She asked the witness tapped by Democrats, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, about how his state's public schools were working with parents to involve them in their children's education while also supporting the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students.

Polis said that a critical part of a school system's success is how much it includes parents.

"I've seen school leaders do (an) inventory of skills of parents and find ways that parents can supplement and provide additional learning opportunities for kids at the classroom level, making sure that parents are partners and know what their students assign for homework," he said.

Democratic Rep. Frederica Wilson of Florida pushed for support of her legislation, which would establish a minimum salary for teachers of \$60,000, arguing that "low teacher pay is one of the many factors contributing to teacher shortages across the nation."

And Democratic Rep. Lucy McBath of Georgia said that the five-year anniversary of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, is next week, and said the committee needed to address the epidemic of school shootings.

Transgender athletes

Gentles also brought up her support of a bill introduced in the last Congress by Republican Rep. Greg Steube of Florida titled The Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act. According to a summary, it would

"make it a violation of federal law for a recipient of federal funds who operates, sponsors, or facilitates athletic programs or activities to permit a person whose sex is male to participate in an athletic program or activity that is designated for women or girls."

It says that for purposes of the bill, "sex shall be recognized based solely on a person's reproductive biology and genetics at birth."

Republican Rep. Jim Banks of Indiana asked Polis if he thought boys and girls should be competing with each other.

Polis said that his 8-year-old daughter plays baseball on a coed team that is about 90% boys and 10% girls, and he said that "she's every bit as competitive as them." He added that if he was not running the state of Colorado, he would be the baseball coach of her Little League team.

"Pretty soon your 8-year-old will be 15 to 16, and I wonder how you'll feel at that point," Banks said.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Longtime tensions over federal wetlands rule return in U.S. House hearing

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 8, 2023 3:50 PM

A U.S. House panel renewed the decades-long fight Wednesday over how standing waters on farmland and other private property should be defined and regulated by federal authorities, with Republicans calling for a pause until the U.S. Supreme Court can provide more clarity.

The definition of so-called Waters of the United States, or WOTUS — wetlands that fall under federal jurisdiction of the Clean Water Act — has been in a state of flux for years, often in conjunction with changing administrations in the White House.

Republicans and their rural constituents have argued the Biden administration's approach unfairly restricts farmers from improving their own property, while Democrats say strong water regulations are fundamental to healthy communities.

Members of both parties on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment groused at a Wednesday hearing over the issue's uncertainty.

"Regulations of any type should be simple and easy to follow," subcommittee Chairman David Rouzer, a North Carolina Republican, said. "They should carry out the intent of the law in a clear and transparent manner, making them easily enforced. There should be no subjectivity or wiggle room for any bureaucrat or bureaucrats to substitute their own biases. Unfortunately, that's not the case here."

Challenge from Idaho

The Supreme Court is expected to rule on a case in which Idaho landowners challenged the Biden administration's definition of Waters of the United States.

Republicans said Wednesday the administration should suspend enforcement action until the court settles the matter. Full committee Chairman Sam Graves, a Missouri Republican, sponsored a Congressional Review Act resolution this week to nullify the administration's rulemaking on the matter.

Unlike most legislation, that resolution would need only a simple majority in the House and Senate, increasing its chances of success.

Graves, Rouzer and others who support the measure say it would be prudent because the Biden administration's rule could easily be stripped by the Supreme Court in the coming weeks or months anyway. The administration never should have wasted time writing a regulation that could soon be overturned, they said.

"It would be common sense to pause and wait to see what the Supreme Court decides before jamming this through now," Rouzer said of the Biden administration's rule.

The panel's ranking Democrat, Washington's Rick Larsen, countered that Congress moving to reverse the rule would create even more uncertainty. Whatever the Supreme Court's eventual ruling, adding another

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chapter to the back-and-forth recent history of Waters of the United States would not help, he said.

"Should that resolution become law, it has the potential to cause even more chaos and confusion," Larsen said.

The Obama administration formulated a rule in 2015 seeking to clarify what waters on private properties the Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers could regulate. The Trump administration significantly narrowed what could be included and Biden expanded it again.

But the issue goes back even further, California Democrat Jared Huffman noted Wednesday. The Obama administration got involved precisely because "incredible uncertainty" already existed.

State empowerment

Republicans, Democrats and the witnesses they had testify Wednesday disagreed about the merits of a broad definition of Waters of the United States.

Larsen said his state was "defined by" its clean waters. Maintaining pristine lakes, rivers, streams and the Puget Sound required a strong partnership between the state and the federal government, he said.

Dave Owen, a professor at the University of California College of Law, said a broad definition allowed for stronger enforcement of the 1972 Clean Water Act, which was intended to help build state-federal partnerships to allow states to address water issues that went beyond their borders.

"The Clean Water Act was designed to address major issues that states could not address on their own," Owen said. "Polluting industries will play states against each other, creating a race to the bottom and seeking the weakest possible form of regulation."

The Biden rule actually more clearly defines what is covered by the Clean Water Act by its more broad definition, Owen said. The Trump administration's distinction between waters that were covered and those that were not created more uncertainty, he said.

GOP cites overreach

But Republicans argued the Biden administration's enforcement of the rule was divorced from the reality experienced by the people it affected.

"Sweeping legislation like the Clean Water Act, while certainly beneficial, can lead to bureaucratic overreach and regulatory headaches that often don't make sense to regulated communities," Rouzer said.

Wisconsin Republican Derrick Van Orden said he had manure on his boots from visiting family farms and hearing how federal regulations affected them. He implied that Owen, who articulated a defense of strong federal oversight, did not have that experience.

EPA and Army Corps of Engineers regulators were in a similar position, Van Orden said.

"We have a bunch of nameless bureaucrats who are trying to apply a 4,000-mile screwdriver to fix a problem that they can't even see," Van Orden said. "So, when we have people that are deciding the fates of our family farmers, without firsthand knowledge, they're actually degrading the ability of them to produce food for the world. And that is shameful."

Farmers have a stake in upkeep of the environment and would be keen to contribute to conservation — if federal regulators would make it easier, Missouri Farm Bureau President Garrett Hawkins told the panel.

Hawkins questioned whether conservation efforts on his farm could land him in trouble with federal authorities.

"If you make the programs workable, if you cut red tape, my fellow farmers and ranchers will raise their hand and walk through the door of their USDA office and say they want to put more conservation on the ground," he said.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Woman jailed for collecting 4 ballots in Arizona sparks fear of voting in majority Latino city

BY: KIRA LERNER - FEBRUARY 8, 2023 3:42 PM

This story was produced in partnership with Type Investigations, with support from the Fund for Constitutional Government.

SAN LUIS, ARIZONA – The small city of San Luis is tucked away in the far corner of Arizona, closer to Mexico than to any major U.S. city. The community is nearly 95% Latino and tight-knit — the type of place where you know your neighbors and their parents and cousins.

It's not uncommon here for residents to frequently cross the border into Mexico to go shopping or see a dentist, as the vast majority of residents are U.S. citizens who can go back and forth freely. And they do not take their right to vote in the U.S. for granted. Election Days in San Luis were typically joyous occasions, with music and celebrations in the streets.

Luis Marquez, the president of the local school district and a community leader in San Luis, said they felt "like a state fair."

"Everybody would get involved, people would have their carne asada and music and it was just something very active," he said.

But election celebrations have stopped here in recent years. A 2016 law pushed by state Republicans made it a felony punishable by prison time to collect a voter's ballot unless the collector is their relative, household member, or caregiver. Since then, the excitement and joy surrounding voting have been replaced with fear. "Now, it's been really quiet," Marquez said. "There's no action."

In some states, there's no prohibition on collecting ballots from other community members, a common occurrence in places where residents have limited access to polls. But Arizona is one of more than 30 states that restrict or ban the practice.

The law was signed in 2016 and upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2021 after it was challenged in the lower courts. Since then, the Arizona attorney general's office has prosecuted four community members, including the city's former mayor, Guillermina Fuentes, who was jailed for 30 days, for alleged unlawful ballot collection.

Allies of former President Donald Trump say these arrests are indicative of the type of voter fraud that cost him the 2020 election. But democracy advocates say prosecuting these cases suppresses the right to vote.

"This is what opponents of the ballot collection law always feared – the arbitrary enforcement of the law against people of color, women of color, without any kind of evidence of any type of fraud or intent to do wrongdoing," said Darrell Hill, policy director for the ACLU of Arizona. "These are people who are just helping their neighbors, helping their community, and are now facing serious charges."

On Oct. 13, Fuentes, a 66-year-old grandmother, former farmworker, school board member, and local Democratic leader, was sentenced to one month in jail and two years of probation for collecting four completed mail ballots that belonged to community members during the August 2020 primary. Fuentes and her neighbor, Alma Juarez, were the first people prosecuted under the state's ballot collection law.

He shared the footage with David Lara, another local Republican who had unsuccessfully run for office numerous times in San Luis. In an interview, Lara and Snyder said the footage showed the type of voter fraud that has swung elections in San Luis for decades.

"If there would have been 10 Gary Snyders with cameras, we would have caught many people doing the same thing all throughout the day," Lara said.

"Out of 10 elections in San Luis, eight or nine have been won because of fraud," he added.

In the video recorded by Snyder, Fuentes appears to write something on the ballot and then hands Juarez a stack of ballots to bring into the polling place. The interaction was the type of voter assistance Fuentes had provided for countless other community members. Yuma County officials later verified that the voters signed their own ballot envelopes, and the ballots were counted.

The Yuma County Sheriff's Office and the state attorney general's office eventually learned of the foot-

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age, and Brnovich's Election Integrity Unit launched an investigation. People in San Luis reported that uniformed sheriff's deputies knocked on their doors early in the morning to ask about their voting history, which alarmed many residents, according to a brief filed by Arizona voting rights groups in the Supreme Court case.

Prosecutors charged Fuentes with conspiracy, forgery, and two counts of ballot abuse. In court documents, the state said Fuentes "appears to have been caught on video running a modern-day political machine seeking to influence the outcome of the municipal election in San Luis, collecting votes through illegal methods, and then using another person to bring the ballots the last few yards into the ballot box." She pleaded guilty to one count of ballot abuse, a felony, and the state dropped the more serious charges.

Lara and Snyder said that Catherine Engelbrecht and Gregg Phillips, the leaders of True the Vote — a far-right group that has promoted conspiracy theories about voter fraud — reached out to them. The claims of ballot harvesting in San Luis became a crucial component of "2000 Mules," a documentary directed by right-wing filmmaker Dinesh D'Souza in May 2022 which falsely claimed that voter fraud, specifically a significant amount of ballot harvesting by so-called "ballot mules," swung the results of the 2020 election.

"They're the ones that actually helped us to make this problem national," Lara said in an interview.

But many in San Luis said they don't trust Lara and Snyder, whom they described as disgruntled former candidates for office who are trying to discredit Democrats. Yuma County Supervisor Lynne Pancrazi said she is upset by the national reputation they've attached to San Luis. They "are giving such a bad name to this community," she said.

Fuentes jailed, held in isolation

Across San Luis in mid-October, people who know Fuentes appeared shocked that their friend and former mayor was two dozen miles away in Yuma, Arizona, jailed and held in isolation for a month either because of her age and health or her position as a public figure. Chapman said the jail has given different explanations for why she was held in a cell alone.

Soaking in the October sun outside the San Luis library, Pancrazi, who served as a character witness at a hearing prior to Fuentes' sentencing, described Fuentes' quiet but caring demeanor.

"She's not a criminal," Pancrazi said. "She's someone who was helping her community just like she's done her entire life."

Manuel Castro, a pastor at the Gethsemane Baptist Church in San Luis, agreed. "It's too much punishment for people doing a little mistake," he said. "In my opinion, it's a little mistake."

The harsh sentence will also help conservatives "further the narrative that there is actual fraud in our elections, which there was no evidence of here," said Andy Gaona, a Phoenix-based election lawyer who represented Fuentes in a special action petition with a state appeals court.

San Luis residents also lamented the inequities in voter fraud prosecution. Brnovich's office requested a year in prison for Fuentes, and while the judge only sentenced her to a month in jail plus two years' probation, even that is inconsistent with the sentences others have received for similar crimes.

Chapman commissioned a report from Rich Robertson, a legal investigator and former journalist, to put the state's recommended sentence into perspective.

Robertson's report detailed 79 prosecutions for voting crimes in Arizona between 2005 and August 2022. In general, he found that, other than Fuentes, people without a prior criminal history or who are not already imprisoned do not receive jail or prison time for voting crimes.

"Nobody goes to jail or prison for this stuff, unless they've already had some kind of priors," Robertson said. He found two exceptions: One person who received a suspended sentence, and another was also convicted of influencing a witness and not just a voting crime.

In one notable example included in Robertson's report, Brnovich's office requested a lighter sentence for Tracey Kay McKee, a 64-year-old Republican white woman in the more affluent city of Scottsdale, Arizona, who pleaded guilty to casting a ballot in her dead mother's name. She was sentenced in April to two years of probation and no jail time.

Juarez, who carried the voted ballots into the polling place, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and was sentenced to one year of probation and no jail time.

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Robertson said he believes there were “a lot of political aspects” to this prosecution and that Fuentes was given a harsher sentence because of the national attention and her prominence as a target in the far-right “Stop the Steal” campaign.

“There was a lot of political pressure being exerted all over the place to make an example out of this particular defendant,” he said. “If it hadn’t been for the national spotlight being on Yuma County and Ms. Fuentes, I don’t think this outcome would have been the same.”

Norm Eisen, a longtime election lawyer who advised the Obama White House on ethics and government reform, called Fuentes’ sentence an “outrageous miscarriage of justice.”

“The relatively narrow conduct that formed the basis of the sentencing should not result in jail time and indeed in the vast majority of the United States, would not do so,” he said.

He called Brnovich’s sentencing request “a tragic and a cruel posture,” especially in “a smaller community where this kind of a sentencing has a chilling effect, even on legal behavior.”

At a hearing in October, Fuentes’ attorneys presented a number of character witnesses who spoke about her childhood, her work growing a business, and her position as a leader in the community. But at Fuentes’ sentencing hearing, Yuma County Superior Court Judge Roger Nelson said he does not believe she accepted responsibility for her crime and that her role as a community leader, although admirable, actually works against her.

“Many of the things that were put forward as mitigating factors, I think they’re also aggravating factors,” he said. “You have been a leader in the San Luis community for a long time. People look up to you, people respect you, and they look to what you do.”

Life after jail

Fuentes was released from jail in November and is now back in the community on probation, coming to terms with having lost her voting rights for the next two years because of her felony conviction. She said she already knows of San Luis residents who have stopped voting after seeing what she went through.

“I say don’t be afraid,” she said, explaining what she tells her friends and neighbors in San Luis. “And they say, because you weren’t afraid, you were in jail, Guilla.”

Fuentes said that the San Luis community stood behind her throughout the legal process, showing up to support her and her family when she was at her lowest. The day she was released from jail, her family and friends gathered at her mom’s house. She walked in and saw the large crowd holding signs and two big pots of menudo, a traditional Mexican soup, that she had requested as her first meal back.

It was just what she needed — to be around friends and a home cooked meal after spending a month in isolation. “I lost 10 pounds in jail and I gained them back the day I left,” she said.

When Brnovich announced indictments of two more women — San Luis City Council Member Gloria Torres and Nadia Lizarraga-Mayorquin — in October for allegedly collecting other people’s ballots, Marquez said he feared that more people would face jail time. A representative for Kris Mayes, Arizona’s newly elected Democratic attorney general, said the office is still undecided on how it will handle their prosecutions, but Mayes has said she will transition the office’s Election Integrity Unit from prosecuting voter fraud to protecting voting rights.

Democrats in the Arizona House introduced a bill this session to repeal the ballot collection ban, but it’s unlikely to move forward given the Republican majority.

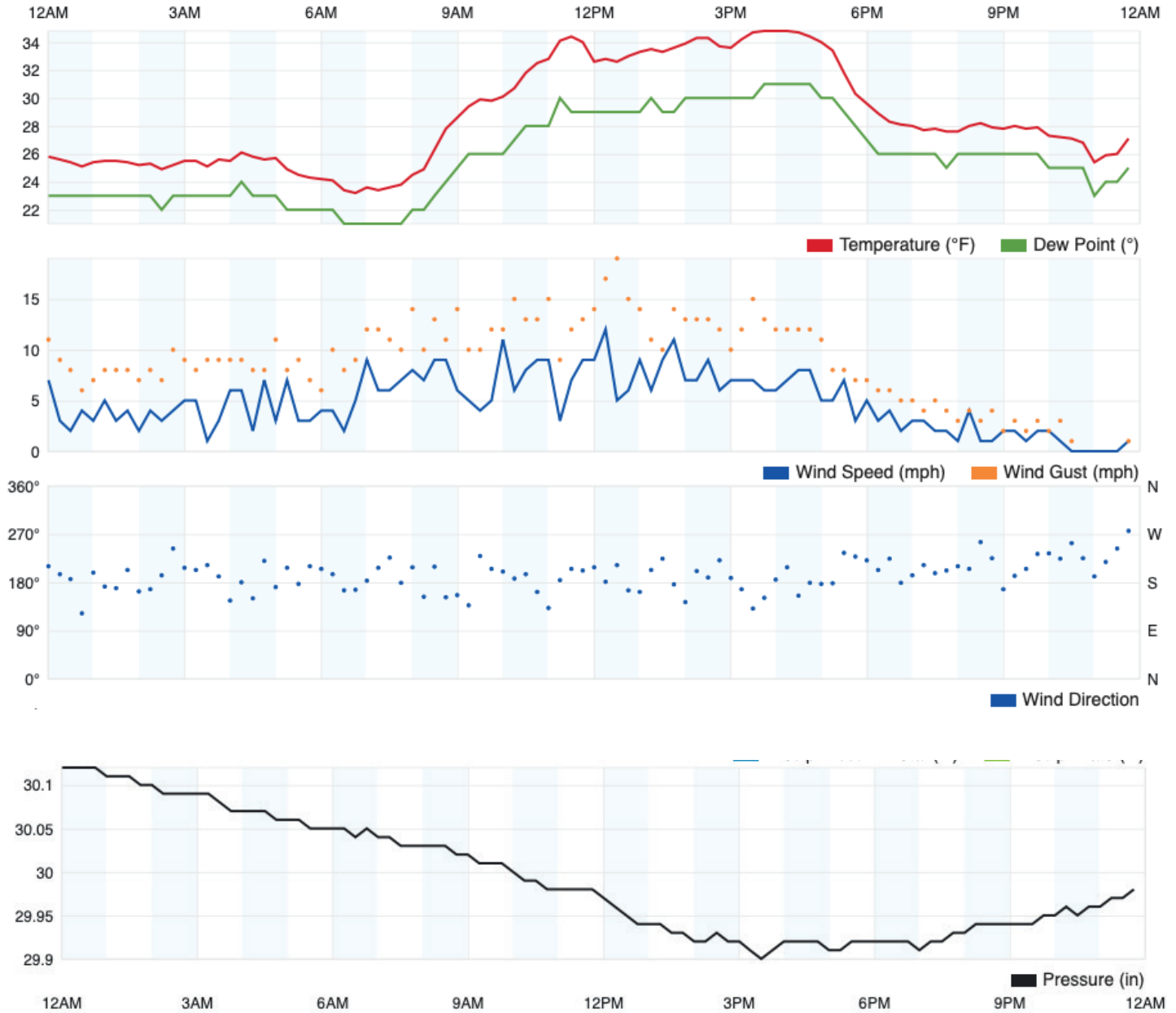
“It’s starting again for other people,” Castro said. “It never ends. It’s never finished. It’s so hard for the community, really. It’s so hard.”

Kira was the democracy reporter for States Newsroom where she covered voting, elections, redistricting, and efforts to subvert democracy.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wind Advisory

Today



20%
Windy. Slight
Chance Snow
then Sunny

High: 30 °F ↓

Tonight



Mostly Clear
then Patchy
Fog

Low: 0 °F

Friday



Patchy Fog
then Sunny

High: 27 °F

Friday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 15 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 35 °F

Saturday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 14 °F

Sunday



Partly Sunny

High: 33 °F



Key Points

- Northerly wind gusts of 35 to 50 mph through the early afternoon
- Light mixed precipitation this morning, sunny by this afternoon
- Decreasing temperatures through the day, becoming cold tonight



Blustery Thursday

Max Wind Gust Timing

	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm
Aberdeen	37	40	47	47	47	46	43	41	40	36	31	24	20	17	13	12	12	9
Britton	37	40	45	46	45	44	41	39	36	36	31	23	17	14	12	9	9	8
Eagle Butte	44	45	45	44	40	38	37	37	33	32	30	25	18	16	14	12	10	10
Eureka	36	37	37	36	39	39	37	36	35	32	29	24	16	13	13	10	9	8
Gettysburg	38	39	36	39	40	40	39	39	38	37	33	26	22	20	18	16	14	10
Kennebec	43	40	41	41	41	41	41	40	39	37	33	25	18	15	13	10	9	9
McIntosh	36	37	38	36	33	31	30	28	26	24	21	16	12	12	10	10	9	10
Milbank	37	40	41	43	46	45	46	45	44	41	38	36	35	30	30	24	23	21
Miller	36	38	37	40	41	40	39	39	38	37	32	26	21	21	17	15	15	14
Mobridge	36	37	35	33	35	36	33	33	28	26	23	18	14	13	9	9	7	7
Murdo	43	41	43	41	43	41	40	37	35	33	30	25	21	17	16	12	10	10
Pierre	36	37	36	36	37	37	35	35	33	30	28	23	18	14	9	8	9	8
Redfield	37	40	44	46	45	44	41	41	38	36	32	25	22	20	16	14	12	10
Sisseton	37	39	43	43	44	44	44	40	40	38	37	32	30	29	28	21	22	18
Watertown	33	37	43	46	47	46	47	45	44	41	37	33	30	28	25	21	18	16
Webster	39	43	48	49	49	49	49	47	45	45	41	36	33	30	25	17	16	14
Wheaton	32	36	36	40	40	40	40	39	38	37	36	32	30	29	25	22	22	18

*Table values in mph

Don't see your city? Check out weather.gov/forecastpoints



February 9, 2023 5:13 AM

A cold front moving south through the region this morning will be responsible for gusty northerly winds and a few snow showers or pockets of freezing drizzle. Temperatures are expected to slowly fall through the day as the colder air moves in. An abundance of cloud cover will also accompany the colder air, but expect these clouds to depart by afternoon, making way for mostly sunny skies.

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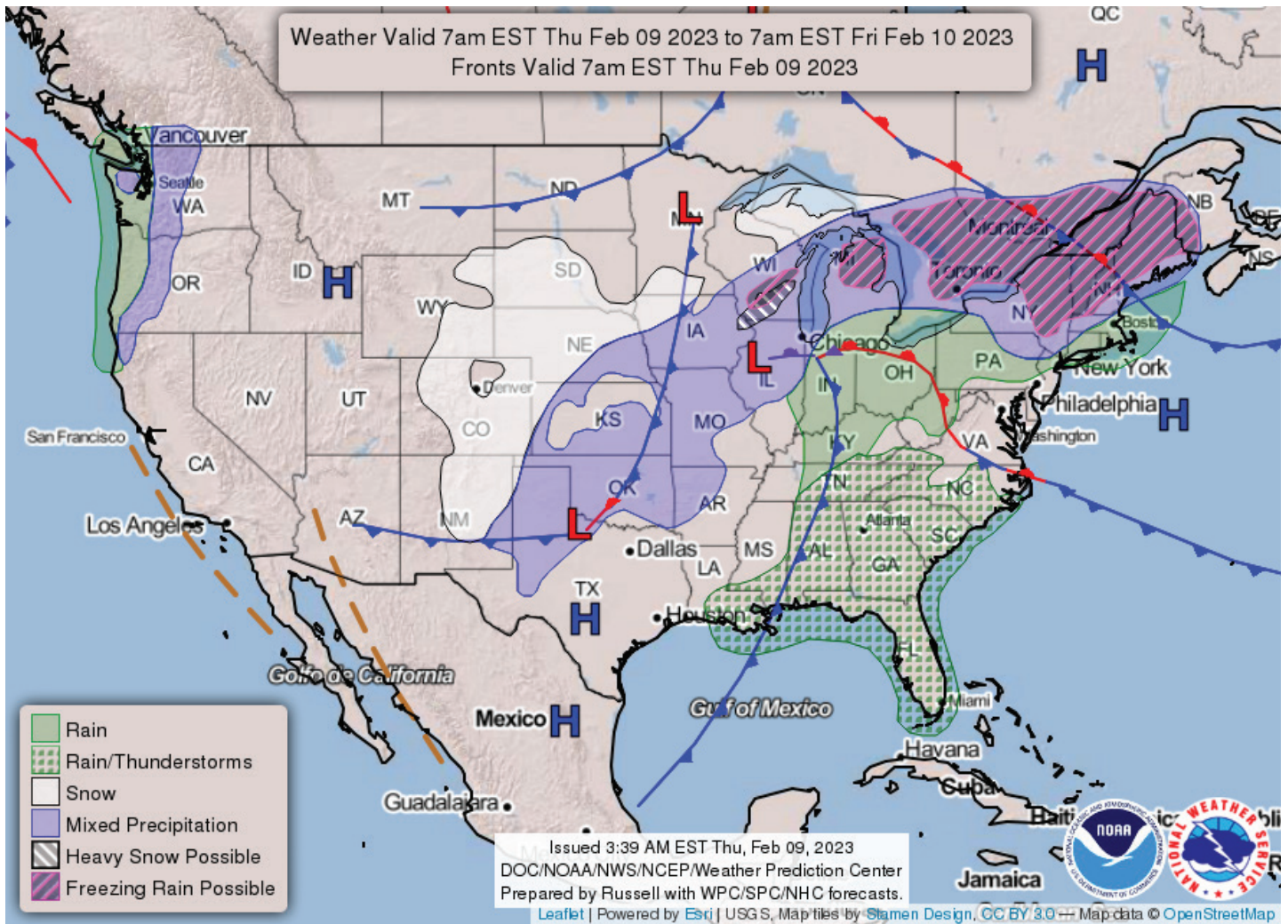
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 35 °F at 3:51 PM
Low Temp: 23 °F at 6:39 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 12:23 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 10 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1987
Record Low: -45 in 1994
Average High: 27
Average Low: 4
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.18
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.73
Precip Year to Date: 0.25
Sunset Tonight: 5::52:01 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:39:41 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 9, 1899: Extreme cold blanketed most locations east of the Rocky Mountains during the first half of February. For South Dakota, the minimum temperature was the lowest experienced for many years, at least, and probably since its settlement. The week ending the 13th of February, the Weather Bureau stated: "With respect to temperature, this week is probably the most remarkable in the history of the Weather Bureau, over the greater part of the country east of the Rocky Mountains a large number of stations reporting the lowest temperatures recorded since their establishment. Over the whole region, extending from the eastern Rocky Mountain slope to the Atlantic coast and from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, the average daily deficiency exceeded 20 degrees. It ranged from 30 degrees to 35 degrees over an extensive area embracing the central valleys and portions of the Lake Region."

In South Dakota, the cold weather that culminated in the extremes began on January 26th and continued with little abatement over most of the state until February 12th. During the first twelve days of February, the Weather Bureau stations' daily average temperatures ranged from zero to 27 degrees below zero.

Some low-temperature readings from February 8th through the 12th include:

-29 in Spearfish on the 11th	-39 in Mellette on the 11th
-30 in Yankton on the 11th	-39 in Mitchell on the 11th
-34 in Milbank on the 9th	-39 in Pierre on the 12th
-34 in Rapid City on the 11th	-39 in Wessington Springs on the 9th
-35 in Aberdeen on the 8th and 12th	-40 in DeSmet on the 10th
-36 in Chamberlain on the 9th	-40 in Highmore on the 12th
-36 in Waubay on the 8th	-42 in Gann Valley on the 8th
-37 in Ipswich on the 8th	-40 in Redfield on the 9th
-38 in Watertown on the 11th	-42 Sioux Falls on the 9th

February 9, 1994: Widespread record cold occurred across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. Record lows were set at Aberdeen, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, and Wheaton, with overnight lows in the 30s below to 40s below zero across the entire area. Aberdeen fell to 45 degrees below zero or one degree off the record low of 46 degrees below zero. Mobridge dropped to 38 degrees below zero, and Pierre fell to 35 degrees below zero. Watertown came just one degree short of their daytime record, with 35 degrees below zero.

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

1899: One of the most significant cold outbreaks to ever impact the United States occurred early to mid-February. From the 8th-11th, the statewide average temperature across Iowa was 14.6 degrees below zero, making it the coldest four-day stretch on record in the state. On the 8th, Sioux City experienced its coldest day on record, with a daily average temperature of 24 degrees below zero. Then on the 11th, they reached their second-coldest temperature on record with a low of minus 31. Overall the coldest readings were obtained on the morning of the 9th when reported low temperatures included -21 at Keokuk, -23 at Des Moines, -33 at New Hampton, -35 at Le Mars, -38 at Estherville, and -40 at Sibley. The cold across the middle of the country was so extreme and persistent that ice floes down the Mississippi River into the deep south, emerging into the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans on February 17th. This has happened only one other time: February 13, 1784. The temperature dropped to 63 degrees below zero at Norway House, Manitoba, Canada setting the province's low-temperature record.

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

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

BEING GOOD AND DOING GOOD

Character counts. Character makes a difference. Character can be measured. Character is the difference that God brings to our lives. Character matters because God matters. When He is present and in control of our lives, everything changes because He changes everything. We view life differently because we view life through His eyes, hear voices through His ears, feel pain as He feels pain, and He gives willingly as He willingly gave us His Son.

This "wife of noble character" has an impact on every aspect of her husband's life: "She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life." Imagine an obituary that included that statement, and ended with the words that included "whatever he accomplished in life was because of her homemaking talents and dedication to the well-being of her family." Certainly a stretch in today's environment. But, that's the implication and message.

An important message in this verse is that the wife is focused on the career of her husband and her home. If the wife has a career outside of the home, it is secondary to everything else. This is far different from what we see in society today. The career of the husband and the management of the home is first and foremost according to Solomon.

Notice one small, three-letter word: her. It may be a subtle implication but the burden for managing the home seems to shift from the wife to the husband if she is called home before him. Husbands and fathers need to be "in training" to assume her tasks if necessary.

Prayer: We pray Lord, for husbands and fathers who willingly become involved in caring for their wife and their homes. May they accept their responsibility. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. Proverbs 31:12



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

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.07.23

9 15 46 55 57 4

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$50,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 40
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.23

4 5 29 36 37 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$34,900,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 40
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.23

2 10 32 37 40 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 10 Mins 50
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.23

1 9 16 26 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$47,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 40
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.23

40 41 57 64 65 21

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 39
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.08.23

52 58 59 64 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$34,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 39
DRAW: Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Chasing Horse charged with federal crimes in sex abuse probe

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

NORTH LAS VEGAS, Nev. (AP) — A former “Dances With Wolves” actor accused of sexually abusing Indigenous women and girls for decades was charged with federal crimes Wednesday, adding to the growing list of criminal cases against Nathan Chasing Horse since his arrest last week in Nevada.

Chasing Horse, 46, now faces two counts of sexual exploitation of children and one count of possession of child pornography, according to a criminal complaint filed Wednesday afternoon in Nevada U.S. District Court. Authorities have said Chasing Horse filmed sexual assaults.

The federal charges came hours after a state judge on Wednesday granted \$300,000 bail to Chasing Horse, who has been in Las Vegas police custody since his Jan. 31 arrest near the home he shared with his five wives.

Earlier Wednesday, about two dozen of Chasing Horse’s relatives and friends had filed into a North Las Vegas courtroom in a show of support, hoping he would be released on bail. They cheered and celebrated the judge’s decision as they left the courthouse, waving signs that translate to “Justice for Chasing Horse.” Now, if he posts bail, he is likely to be taken into federal custody.

In state court, Chasing Horse is charged with eight felonies, including sexual assault, sex trafficking and child abuse. He has not entered a plea.

Canadian police in British Columbia confirmed this week they also are pursuing a criminal case against the former actor, who is known for his portrayal of Smiles A Lot in Kevin Costner’s 1990 Oscar-winning film. He is accused in a 2018 sexual assault in the British Columbia village of Keremeos near the Washington state border.

Authorities in Nevada have said his crimes date to the early 2000s and stretch across the United States and into Canada.

It wasn’t immediately clear how, if at all, the federal charges will affect Chasing Horse’s case in Clark County. His public defender, Kristy Holston, did not immediately respond Wednesday evening to a request for comment.

At his bail hearing Wednesday morning, Clark County Chief Deputy District Attorney William Rowles told the judge that Chasing Horse should remain in custody because he was “grooming” girls to replace his older wives at the time of his arrest.

“There is evidence that this individual is still in the process of grooming young children to replace the others as they grow up,” Rowles said.

Nevada authorities have described Chasing Horse in more than a hundred pages of court documents as the leader of a cult known as The Circle, whose followers believed Chasing Horse, as a “medicine man,” could communicate with higher beings. Police said he abused that position to physically and sexually assault women and girls and take underage wives.

At its peak, Rowles said, The Circle had about 300 members.

Investigators and victims had been expected to speak in court Wednesday, because Nevada law requires prosecutors to show convincing evidence that a defendant should remain jailed as they await trial. But after delays in the proceedings, the judge heard only from Rowles, who requested \$2 million bail, and Holston, who asked the judge to set bail at \$50,000.

After the hearing, Holston told The Associated Press she also was happy with the judge’s decision and said she is looking forward to his next court date in North Las Vegas, currently scheduled for Feb. 22. At that hearing, a judge is expected to hear evidence in the case and decide whether Chasing Horse will stand trial.

“We’re really looking forward to the preliminary hearing in this case,” she said, “because it’s another public hearing where we will have an opportunity to point out the weaknesses in the state’s case.”

Rulon Pete, a representative of the victims and the executive director of the Las Vegas Indian Center, said they were disappointed with the judge's decision. Some of the victims were in the courtroom Wednesday. "What happened this morning was like a slap in the face," Pete told The Associated Press.

Police have said they have identified at least six victims, including one who was 13 when she said she was abused, and another who said she was offered to Chasing Horse as a "gift" when she was 15.

Chasing Horse was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, home to the Sicangu Sioux, one of the seven tribes of the Lakota nation. In 2015, he was banished from the Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Montana, following allegations of human trafficking.

Lawmakers in GOP states target medical care for trans kids

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Republican attacks on gender affirming medical care for young people continued Wednesday in several conservative states that are among more than two dozen considering similar bans nationwide.

Lawmakers in Nebraska, Oklahoma and South Dakota considered bills Wednesday that would prohibit gender affirming treatments, like the use of puberty-blocking drugs and hormones, despite the endorsement of such treatments by major medical associations. Those measures passed legislative committees in Oklahoma and South Dakota, and also are expected to advance in conservative Nebraska, which has a nonpartisan Legislature.

In Utah, the Republican governor recently signed a ban into law, and judges have temporarily blocked similar laws in Arkansas and Alabama.

"We're going to do what we can to help children and families, allow the child to reach a certain level of maturity, where they then, on their own or in consultation with their parents, will make these decisions," said state Sen. Julie Daniels, a Republican who wrote Oklahoma's bill and said she would personally prefer to ban such care for anyone under age 21.

In Nebraska, hundreds of people descended on the state Capitol in Lincoln Wednesday to protest a measure that would prohibit gender affirming medical procedures for those 19 and younger by putting medical professionals in danger of losing their license and facing civil liability.

"This bill is insulting. It is dehumanizing. It is wrong," said Omaha Sen. John Frederickson, the first openly gay man to be elected to the Nebraska Legislature, who spoke before the crowd to denounce the bill, saying its genesis is "hypocrisy and hatred."

The bill's main sponsor, Sen. Kathleen Kauth of Omaha, defended it before the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee as a way to protect children from "radical, experimental and dangerous procedures." Several people she invited to the hearing testified to either regretting efforts at transitioning or relief at being stopped from transitioning while they were teens.

The Oklahoma bill carries hefty penalties for medical professionals who violate the ban, including potential felony charges that carry up to 10 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine, as well as civil liability and a loss of a doctor's medical license. Oklahoma's Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt urged lawmakers to send him such a bill during his State of the State address on Monday, receiving a standing ovation from GOP lawmakers when he did so, as more than 100 trans-rights activists packed the rotunda chanting "trans lives matter."

"I think Oklahoma is currently positioning itself to be the most dangerous state for trans people in the country," said Nicole McAfee, director of the LGBTQ rights organization Freedom Oklahoma. "What we just saw ... is essentially a de facto ban on best-practice medical care for transgender people of all ages."

Oklahoma's Senate Rules Committee also passed a "companion bill" that would prevent the use of any public funds to entities or organizations that provide such care, even to adults.

Transgender people, especially those who are school-aged, have increasingly been targeted by lawmakers in GOP states with laws that prohibit them from playing on sports teams or using bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity.

In Montana, more than two dozen Republican lawmakers are co-sponsoring a bill that would allow stu-

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dents to misgender and dead name their transgender peers without punishment, a move that some argue would further the bullying of kids already struggling for acceptance.

South Dakota has seen proposals to ban gender affirming medical treatment in recent years, but the focus this year on treatment for children is what's furthered it. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who signed a bill last year preventing trans girls and college-aged women from playing on sports teams that correspond with their gender identity, added her stamp of approval to Rep. Bethany Soye's ban that has now passed through three hearings.

"All that we are asking for here is a little more time to make a permanent life decision," Soye told the committee on Wednesday.

South Dakota medical providers said the state lacks the medical expertise to provide gender affirming care to minors as is, but questioned the validity of testimony's scientific data. They said they were out of touch with today's gender affirming care practices.

"It's disappointing that they didn't listen to reasonable medical opinions and that they continue to push to intrude into the patient-physician relationship and take away rights of the parents of their child," Dr. Daniel Heinemann said.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. February 7, 2023.

Editorial: MMIP: The Statistics And The Faces

Many of us don't know Ashleigh Wabasha as anything other than a mystery and a statistic.

That is, we know her as a 19-year-old young woman and a member of the Santee Sioux tribe who went missing last March.

We know that her family and the tribe searched for her, even pleading to her directly through social media to contact them if possible.

We know that the search for her ended three weeks later when Wabasha's body was found, most likely somewhere on the Santee reservation in northeastern Nebraska.

And beyond that, we know little else, other than that the federal investigation into her death remains open.

But we also know her as one of many.

Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) cases are a very real problem across the country, and no place is immune. On its website, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) labels it a crisis.

"For decades, Native American and Alaska Native communities have struggled with high rates of assault, abduction and murder of women," the BIA website says. "Community advocates describe the crisis as a legacy of generations of government policies of forced removal, land seizures and violence inflicted on Native peoples."

According to estimates reported by a University of North Dakota journal last October, more than 4,000 Native Americans have gone missing or have been murdered the past several years. Also, murder was listed as the third-leading cause of death among young Native American women.

That statistic is appalling.

And yet, that fact sometimes seems to barely move the needle on this issue.

Efforts are being made to shine a broader spotlight on this crisis.

Today (Wednesday), the Nebraska Legislature's Judiciary Committee is scheduled to hold a hearing on a bill that would create an MMIP liaison in the Nebraska attorney general's office. Scott Shafer, who is with the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, told the Press & Dakotan that Wabasha's case may be one of the pieces of evidence presented during testimony.

South Dakota has been slightly ahead of Nebraska on this front, although the effort has not moved forward without hitches.

Gov. Kristi Noem signed a bill in 2021 creating an Office of Liaison for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons within the state attorney general's office. However, according to KELO, a lack of funding left the

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position open for a year.

In 2022, the money issues were worked out as then-Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg requested funding, with the Chamberlain-based nonprofit Native Hope pledging funds.

The state finally created the positions of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons coordinator and human trafficking coordinator last fall. They have been filled by Allison Morrisette of Rapid City and Mary Beth Holzwarth of Pierre. Among other things, their jobs include bringing all the loose threads of the many different agencies involved in MMIP cases under one umbrella to produce a sharper, more productive focus to this nebulous issue.

The creation and funding of these positions are not an end but a beginning.

That's because indigenous people are disappearing. People are being found dead. There are more and more questions that elude answers.

Those questions are tied to more than statistics. They are people with faces, names and families. People who deserve better.

People like Ashleigh Wabasha, who can never find rest until justice is done and the questions finally answered.

END

Survivors of Turkey, Syria quake struggle to stay warm, fed

By MEHMET GUZEL, GHAITH ALSAYED, SUZAN FRASER and ZEYNEP BILGINSOY Associated Press

ANTAKYA, Turkey (AP) — Thousands who lost their homes in a catastrophic earthquake huddled around campfires and clamored for food and water in the bitter cold, three days after the temblor and series of aftershocks hit Turkey and Syria, killing more than 17,000.

Rescuers continued their race to pull more people alive from the rubble, with the window closing to find trapped survivors. While stories of miraculous rescues briefly buoyed spirits, the grim reality of the hardship facing tens of thousands who survived the disaster cast a pall.

In the Turkish city of Antakya, dozens of people scrambled for aid in front of a truck distributing children's coats and other supplies.

Ahmet Tokgoz, a survivor, called for the government to evacuate people from the devastated region. While many of the tens of thousands who have lost their homes have found shelter in tents, stadiums and other temporary accommodation, others have spent the nights outdoors since Monday's 7.8 magnitude quake.

"Especially in this cold, it is not possible to live here," he said. "People are warming up around campfires, but campfires can only warm you up so much. ... If people haven't died from being stuck under the rubble, they'll die from the cold."

Meanwhile, the first U.N. aid trucks to enter rebel-held northwest Syria from Turkey since the quake arrived Thursday morning. Smaller aid organizations have sent in shipments, but the U.N. is only authorized to deliver aid through one border crossing and road damage has prevented that thus far.

Winter weather and damage to roads and airports from the quake have hampered the response throughout a region already contending with the repercussions of more than a decade of civil war in Syria. That conflict displaced millions of people within Syria and left many reliant on humanitarian aid, while also sending millions more over the border into Turkey to seek refuge.

Some in Turkey have complained the response was too slow. Any perception that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has mismanaged the crisis could hurt him at a time when he faces a tough battle for reelection in May. Erdogan — who was scheduled to continue his tour of devastated areas on Thursday — has sought to play down the criticism.

Meanwhile, emergency crews on both sides of the border worked through the night to find survivors. Experts said the survival window for those trapped under the rubble or otherwise unable to obtain basic necessities was closing rapidly. At the same time, they said it was too soon to abandon hope.

In the Turkish town of Elbistan, rescuers formed human chains as they dug through collapsed buildings, urging quiet in the hopes of hearing stifled pleas for help. But more and more often, they pulled out dead

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bodies from under the rubble.

The family of Havva Havam still hoped to see three of its members alive again, sitting by the fire opposite their former home, now the pile of debris.

In Antakya to the south, rescuers pulled out a young girl, Hazal Guner, from the ruins of a building and also rescued her father, Soner Guner, news agency IHA reported.

As they prepared to load the man into an ambulance, rescue crews told him that his daughter was alive. "I love you all," he faintly whispered.

Elsewhere in the city, Serap Arslan said machinery only started to move some of the heavy concrete covering trapped people on Wednesday.

"We tried to clear the debris on our own, but unfortunately our efforts have been insufficient," the 45-year-old said.

Turkey's disaster management agency said more than 110,000 rescue personnel were now taking part in the effort and more than 5,500 vehicles, including tractors, cranes, bulldozers and excavators had been shipped.

In the Syrian government-held city of Aleppo, rescue workers pulled seven people out alive and 44 bodies on Thursday from a collapsed building in the city center, state TV reported.

"We are racing against time. Time is running out," said the Syrian paramedic group in the rebel-held northwest known as White Helmets. "Every second could mean saving a life."

As in Turkey, heavy machinery was urgently needed there to speed up rescue operations, the group said.

Aid efforts in Syria have been hampered by the ongoing war and the isolation of the rebel-held region along the border, which is surrounded by Russia-backed government forces. Syria itself is an international pariah under Western sanctions linked to the war.

On Thursday, the first U.N. aid trucks crossed into northwest Syria from Turkey. U.N. officials said they are also trying to scale up deliveries to the area from the capital, Damascus.

The shipment was scheduled before the earthquake happened but was delayed by the road damage. U.N. officials said more trucks were set to follow with assistance specifically for the current crisis.

Still, the scale of loss and suffering to tend to is massive. Erdogan announced Thursday that the death toll had risen to more than 14,000 in his country, with more than 63,000 injured. On the Syrian side, which includes in government-held and rebel-held areas, of the border, more than 3,100 have been reported dead and more than 5,000 injured.

On Wednesday, Erdogan sought to deflect criticism of the response — and vowed it was improving.

"It is not possible to be prepared for such a disaster," Erdogan said as he visited the hard-hit province of Hatay. "We will not leave any of our citizens uncared for." He also hit back at critics, saying "dishonorable people" were spreading "lies and slander" about the government's actions.

He said the government would distribute 10,000 Turkish lira (\$532) to affected families.

The earthquake's toll is the highest worldwide since a 2011 earthquake off Japan triggered a tsunami, killing nearly 20,000 people.

FTX founder keeps talking, ignoring typical legal strategy

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For federal prosecutors, Sam Bankman-Fried could be the gift that keeps on giving. After the November collapse of FTX, the cryptocurrency exchange he founded in 2019, Bankman-Fried unexpectedly gave a series of interviews intended to present his version of events. He was indicted in December and charged with perpetrating one of the biggest frauds in U.S. history — and he's still talking, either in person or on the internet.

The atypical chattiness for a criminal defendant is likely causing Bankman-Fried's attorneys to scratch their heads, or worse. Prosecutors can use any statements, tweets or other communications against him at his trial, which is scheduled for October.

"Prosecutors love when defendants shoot their mouths off," said Daniel R. Alonso, a former federal pros-

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ecutor who is now a white-collar criminal defense attorney. If Bankman-Fried's public comments before trial can be proven false during the trial, it may undermine his credibility with a jury, he said.

Bankman-Fried's most immediate concern, however, is a recent private communication. Prosecutors say he sent an encrypted message over the Signal texting app on Jan. 15 to the general counsel of FTX US, a likely witness for the government. Bankman-Fried will be back in a New York court Thursday, where a judge could impose new bail restrictions because of what could be seen as an attempt to influence a witness.

Before its collapse, FTX was the world's second-largest crypto exchange and Bankman-Fried, 30, was its CEO and a billionaire several times over, at least on paper. Celebrities and politicians alike vouched for FTX and its founder, and Bankman-Fried was considered a leading figure in the crypto world.

However, the broad collapse of cryptocurrencies last year caused severe financial stress for numerous companies in the crypto universe, from lenders to exchanges to firms focused on investing in digital assets. FTX sought bankruptcy protection in November after customers pulled out their money in the crypto equivalent of a bank run.

Federal prosecutors have said Bankman-Fried devised "a scheme and artifice to defraud" FTX's customers and investors right from FTX's inception. They say he illegally diverted their money to cover expenses, debts and risky trades at Alameda Research, the crypto hedge fund he started in 2017, and to make lavish real estate purchases and large political donations.

In interviews and Twitter posts, Bankman-Fried has said he never intended to defraud anyone. He's maintained that running FTX took up all his time and that he was unaware of the financial problems at the hedge fund until it was too late.

Those assertions are likely to be refuted by one of the government's key witnesses. Caroline Ellison, the former CEO of Alameda, has agreed to plead guilty for her role in FTX's collapse and to testify against Bankman-Fried. In a plea hearing in December, Ellison said she knew FTX had used billions in customer funds to make loans to Alameda and agreed with Bankman-Fried and others to take steps to conceal the nature of the loans.

Gary Wang, who co-founded FTX with Bankman-Fried, also struck a deal for cooperation. At his own plea hearing, Wang said that he made changes to computer code to enable FTX customer funds to be transferred to Alameda.

Another claim made often by Bankman-Fried is that he's trying to help recover funds for FTX customers, but that FTX's new management has cut him off and has taken steps, including filing for bankruptcy protection, that could inhibit customers from getting their money back.

For instance, Bankman-Fried says that when FTX collapsed, outside parties had made funding offers totaling billions of dollars, and if given a few weeks the company could have raised enough money "to make customers substantially whole." Instead, it was "strong-armed" into filing for bankruptcy protection by its main law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell, a claim the firm denies.

Bankman-Fried has also frequently taken issue with decisions made by FTX's new CEO, John Ray. Bankman-Fried has often claimed that FTX's U.S. operation, which was considerably smaller than the international operations, was solvent at the time of the bankruptcy filing, a contention that Ray disputes.

"I'm still waiting for him to finally admit that FTX US is solvent and give customers their money back," Bankman-Fried tweeted on Jan. 19.

Bankman-Fried was scheduled to testify under oath in front of Congress in December with Ray, but that appearance was cancelled because of his arrest in the Bahamas, where FTX is based.

"The real risk Bankman-Fried runs in making public comments 'explaining' what happened is they could be seen as continuing efforts to mislead investors by regulators and prosecutors," said Jeff Linehan, a former prosecutor in the financial crimes division of the New York State Attorney General's Office. Linehan is now a criminal defense attorney.

Bankman-Fried's comments at the time of FTX's collapse could also come back to haunt him. On Nov. 7, as customers furiously demanded their money back, he tweeted "FTX is fine. Assets are fine." He deleted the tweet the next day. On Nov. 11, FTX filed Chapter 11.

Through a spokesman, Bankman-Fried decline to comment for this article.

Some defendants will go through their entire legal ordeal without saying anything that isn't first cleared by their attorneys. Even putting defendants on the witness stand at trial has long been seen by defense attorneys as a last-resort option because it opens them up to interrogation by prosecutors and often does more harm than good.

"As the prosecution prepares their case, it's really important to figure out what the defense's strategy could be, and a defense wants to keep that strategy under wraps as much as possible," said Alonso, the former federal prosecutor.

Bankman-Fried faces the possibility of decades in prison if convicted on all counts. Even if he were to agree to a plea bargain, a judge would have full discretion on what sentence to impose. If the judge does not believe Bankman-Fried is truly sorry for his actions, based partly on his public statements, he could ignore the prosecution's recommendations and imposing a stricter sentence, legal experts say.

Before FTX collapsed, Bankman-Fried had built up a gigantic public persona. He spoke often to reporters, testified in front of Congress, and appeared at conferences to advocate for cryptocurrencies and his firm. He gave millions of dollars to political candidates and advocated for charitable causes such as food issues in the Bahamas. It could be difficult to give up that sort of public influence.

"Some people simply can't help themselves," Alonso said.

The spy who wasn't? New York police officer wants badge back

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

GARDEN CITY, N.Y. (AP) — On a September day in 2020, New York City Police Officer Baimadajie Angwang kissed his toddler goodbye and was about to drive to work when he was surrounded by rifle-toting FBI agents.

You're under arrest, the bewildered cop was told. The charge: Being a secret agent for China.

Angwang, a former U.S. Marine, spent six months in a federal detention center before he was freed on bail while awaiting trial on charges that he fed information about New York's Tibetan community to officials at the Chinese consulate in New York.

Then, just as suddenly, it was over. Federal prosecutors in Brooklyn dropped the charges Jan. 19, saying only that they were acting "in the interest of justice." They didn't explain further.

Now Angwang says he wants to be reinstated to the police force, which suspended him with pay while the case was pending. But more than that, he wants answers.

"Why did you start the investigation on me? Why did you drop all the charges?" said Angwang, who was born in Tibet but was granted political asylum in the U.S. as a teenager.

"We want an explanation. We're demanding it because you owe me," he said during an interview at his attorney's office. "You can't just put me in jail for six months and ruin my name, ruin my reputation and give all this stress to my family members and friends, and then you say, 'in the interest of justice.' You just going to leave it like that?"

China's Communist Party has ruled over Tibet for seven decades and China has claimed a vast stretch of the Himalayas as part of its territory since the 13th century. But the relationship has been fraught with tension, with many Tibetans — some in exile — seeking independence.

The original charge against Angwang was that he began supplying information to Chinese officials on Tibetan independence groups in New York in 2018.

In court documents, prosecutors said Angwang was a threat to national security. He was charged with being an unregistered foreign agent, making false statements to federal investigators, obstruction of justice and wire fraud. There were no allegations of espionage, a more serious accusation.

In building its initial case against Angwang, prosecutors argued that he provided intelligence on ethnic Tibetans who might cooperate with Chinese officials and advised them on how to expand China's "soft power" in New York.

Specifically, the government said, he sought a tit-for-tat arrangement that would give him a 10-year visa to his homeland in return for surveillance information and access to the police department.

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The case was built partly on recorded phone calls, including some in which authorities said Angwang called a consular official "big brother" and "boss."

Angwang told The Associated Press his words were either mistranslated from Mandarin or taken out of context. He said he became superficially friendly with Chinese officials because he needed the visa to visit his homeland, so his parents and other relatives could finally meet his daughter.

The judge presiding over the case sought answers about why the charges were dismissed, but federal prosecutors declined to divulge classified information that might have given clues.

The U.S. attorney's office in Brooklyn declined to comment.

The judge agreed to dismiss the case without prejudice, meaning the government could press charges again, a possibility hanging over Angwang but his lawyer suggests is unlikely.

The attorney, John Carman, surmised his client became caught up in the Trump administration's effort to root out Chinese espionage across U.S. institutions, including the economy, academics and other facets of public life. Angwang contends there were shades of racism targeting people with Chinese links.

"I think our criminal justice system sometimes goes off the track when it has a publicity aspect to it and when it has a political aspect to it. And this case had both," Carman said.

Angwang first visited the U.S. as a teen on a cultural exchange visa. He went back to Tibet but later returned to the U.S., saying he had been arrested and beaten by Chinese authorities. He moved in with an uncle in Queens and was granted asylum at age 17.

In his adopted country, Angwang enlisted in the U.S. Marines and served in Afghanistan. After being discharged, he joined the Army Reserves and enrolled in the police academy.

He said it was his way of giving back to a country that has been so good to him.

With the charges dropped, he said he wants to regain the good graces of his Tibetan community, which remains suspicious.

"I'm very proud of my heritage. I love my culture and I love the community," Angwang said. He said he was wrongly depicted as a three-way traitor.

"So I'm a traitor of my birthplace? I'm a traitor of America? I'm a traitor of the Tibetan community — which I was never a traitor. I never betrayed anyone — my fellow Tibetans, my fellow Americans, anybody."

Norbu Choezung, the president of the Tibetan Community of New York and New Jersey, a group comprising some 10,000 members of Tibetan heritage, remains wary. He, too, wants the government to provide more details about why it dropped the case.

"It's a little fishy," Choezung said. "We as a community definitely want to dig deeper why his charges have been dropped, and how those things happened."

U.S. District Judge Eric Komitee, who presided over the case, was left with questions but said he was glad Angwang's ordeal was over.

"In some ways a straightforward case but also in some ways, especially given the landscape of statutes at issue, a complicated matter," the judge said, also noting the "fanfare" in which the case was brought.

"It's unfortunate, obviously, that Mr. Angwang did serve as much time as he did in jail pretrial or in detention pretrial," the judge said, "but better late, as they say, than never."

Fiery Ohio derailment raises railroad safety questions

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The fiery derailment of a train carrying toxic chemicals — sending a huge plume of smoke in the air and forcing residents of a small Ohio town to evacuate — has highlighted the potentially disastrous consequences of train accidents and raised questions about railroad safety.

The railroad industry is generally regarded as the safest option for most goods and federal data show accidents involving hazardous materials are exceedingly rare. But with rails crossing through the heart of nearly every city and town nationwide, even one hazardous materials accident could be disastrous, especially in a populated area.

Rail unions believe the industry has gotten riskier in recent years after widespread job cuts left workers

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spread thin.

"It raises all kinds of questions," Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine told "Fox & Friends" this week when he was asked whether hazardous materials are too dangerous to transport by rail.

"We've seen it up close and personal the last few days," DeWine said. "This is a big, big deal."

About half of the 4,800 residents in the eastern Ohio town of East Palestine and those in the surrounding area, including parts of Pennsylvania, had to evacuate as officials monitored air and water quality following a controlled burn of chemicals released from damaged tank cars. The evacuation order was lifted Wednesday after the air was deemed safe.

"I'm scared to go back home," resident Brittany Dailey had said Monday. "I'm eventually going to have to go back, but it makes me want to sell my house and move at this point."

Ian Jefferies, head of the Association of American Railroads trade group, said 99.9% of all hazardous materials shipments reach their destinations safely.

Federal Railroad Administration data showed hazardous chemicals were released during 11 train accidents nationwide last year, out of roughly 535 million miles (861 million kilometers), with only two injuries reported. In the past decade, releases of hazardous materials peaked at 20 in both 2018 and 2020.

"Railroads are the safest form of moving goods across land in the country without question," Jefferies said. "But railroads are also working to drive toward zero incidents. Until we reach that goal, we haven't got to where we want to be."

Railroads try to route hazardous materials shipments on the safest path. Most of the worst derailments in recent years happened in rural areas, but in 2013 a derailment in Canada killed 47 people in the town of Lac Megantic and caused millions of dollars in damage. A 2005 derailment in Graniteville, South Carolina, killed nine people and injured more than 250 after toxic chlorine gases were released.

Hazardous materials account for about 7-8% of the 30 million shipments that railroads deliver across the country every year. But because of the way railroads mix freight together, at least a couple cars of hazardous materials can be found on nearly any train besides grain or coal trains.

"Railroads are a very safe form of transportation from a standpoint of statistics," said professor David Clarke, who previously led the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee. "That doesn't mean that you're never going to have an accident. That would be unrealistic for any type of transportation to have zero accidents"

Some say that's not enough. An East Palestine business owner and two other residents sued the rail operator in federal court on Tuesday, alleging negligence. Among other things, the lawsuit says the railroad failed to maintain and inspect its tracks and rail cars, failed to provide appropriate employee training, and failed to reasonably warn the public.

Greg Regan, president of the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department coalition, said he worries the chances of a catastrophic derailment are increasing because major freight railroads have eliminated roughly one-third of their workers over the past six years. Companies have shifted to running fewer, longer trains and say they don't need as many crews, mechanics and locomotives.

Before those operating changes, Regan said inspectors used to have about two minutes to inspect every railcar. Now they only get roughly 30 to 45 seconds to check each car. Signalmen who maintain crossing guards and safety signals along the tracks also have bigger territories, making it harder to keep up with preventative maintenance.

"They're really just trying to squeeze as much productivity out of these workers as they can," Regan said. "And when you're focused on timing and rushing, unfortunately sometimes things can fall through the cracks."

Government accident data shows an uptick in accidents in recent years, although the numbers remain quite small at 8,929 last year. Accidents were tallied at a rate of 17.4 per million train miles (17.4 per 1.6 million train kilometers) in 2019, but that drops to 2.9 accidents per million train miles without incidents at railroad crossings and those involving trespassers that are largely out of railroads' control.

Regulators at the Federal Railroad Administration say the accident data so far does not show the indus-

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try's new operating model is unsafe. But unions say the new system is risky.

"There isn't a lot of room for error," Regan said. "And certainly when you have hazmat on trains all across the country going through communities, we shouldn't be making any compromises on safety whatsoever."

Professor Allan Zarembski, who leads the University of Delaware's Rail Engineering and Safety Program, said railroads are continually working to improve safety and prevent derailments.

Railroads are developing new acoustic detectors being placed along tracks to signal if a bearing is about to fail. Heat sensors also have been in place for years to spot overheating bearings, which is one of the most common causes of an axle failure, Zarembski said.

Federal investigators have said the Norfolk Southern train crew received a warning about a mechanical problem shortly before an axle failed and caused the Ohio derailment.

Railroads and the shipping companies that own tank cars also have been steadily improving them to reduce the chances they will rupture in a derailment. The walls and shields protecting cars have been thickened, more insulation has been added between the walls of those cars and the release valves are better protected to reduce the possibility they will be torn open in a crash.

Railroads also invest about \$24 billion per year in maintaining and improving tracks to help prevent problems.

Zelenskyy wraps up European tour with visit to EU summit

By RAF CASERT and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was wrapping up a whirlwind tour of his major European backers on Thursday, seeking assurances that Ukraine could one day become part of the European Union.

Zelenskyy will already head home with heaps of goodwill and commitments of more military aid.

He arrived to the European Parliament to rapturous applause, cheering and hoots from legislators, insisting in his plenary speech that Ukraine's fight against Russia was one fought for the freedom of Europe as a whole.

"A Ukraine that is winning is going to be member of the European Union," Zelenskyy said to applause, building his address around the common destiny that Ukraine and the 27-nation bloc face in confronting Russia head-on.

"Europe will always be, and remain Europe as long as we are together and as long as we take care of our Europe, as we take care of the European way of life," he said.

Zelenskyy added that Russia wants to destroy the European way of life, but "we will not allow that."

He held up an EU flag after his address and the entire legislature stood in somber silence as the Ukrainian national anthem and then European anthem "Ode to Joy" were played.

Zelenskyy then headed to the urn-shaped Europa building where the 27 EU leaders were meeting to push those same points.

Before Zelenskyy spoke, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola said allies should consider "quickly, as a next step, providing long-range systems" and fighter jets to Ukraine. Metsola said the response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine "must be proportional to the threat, and the threat is existential."

Metsola also told him that "we have your back. We were with you then, we are with you now, we will be with you for as long as it takes."

EU leaders were hoping to impress on Zelenskyy that the powerful bloc is steadfast in its support for Ukraine as Russia is feared to be making moves for a new offensive around the Feb. 24 anniversary of the war.

The latest draft of the summit conclusions seen by The Associated Press says "the European Union will stand by Ukraine with steadfast support for as long as it takes."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the bloc will send Zelenskyy "this signal of unity and solidarity, and can show that we will continue our support for Ukraine in defending its independence and integrity for

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as long as this is necessary.”

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said that “it is my plea that everyone will do what they can. The price will go up with every delay.”

Zelenskyy’s high-profile pursuit of more Western military aid came as evidence mounted that Russia’s anticipated offensive around the anniversary of the invasion is starting to take shape.

The Kremlin’s forces “have regained the initiative in Ukraine and have begun their next major offensive” in the eastern Luhansk region, most of which is occupied by Russia, the Institute for the Study of War, said in its latest assessment.

“Russian forces are gradually beginning an offensive, but its success is not inherent or predetermined,” the U.S.-based think tank said.

Zelenskyy used the dais of the European Parliament hoping to match Wednesday’s speech to Britain’s legislature when he thanked the nation for its unrelenting support.

That same support has come from the EU. The bloc and its member states have already backed Kyiv with about 50 billion euros (\$53.6 billion) in aid, provided military hardware and imposed nine packages of sanctions on the Kremlin.

French President Emmanuel Macron’s office has already confirmed the bloc “will reiterate Europeans’ unwavering support to Ukraine and the Ukrainian people.” Few would expect anything less.

The EU is in the midst of brokering a new sanctions package worth about 10 billion euros (\$10.7 billion) before the war’s anniversary. And there is still plenty of scope for exporting more military hardware to Ukraine as a Russian spring offensive is expected.

Russia is also watching Zelenskyy’s movements closely. On Wednesday, Russian state television showed the flight path of a British air force plane that Zelenskyy used to travel to London taken from a flight monitoring site. The anchor noted that the plane flew from the Polish air base in Rzeszow that serves as a hub for Western arms deliveries to Ukraine.

One topic that wasn’t on the agenda in Britain but will be in Brussels is Ukraine’s desire to become a member of the European Union as soon as possible.

A high-profile visit to EU headquarters can only add to the goodwill to help his country on to the road of accession talks. Ukraine is talking about joining the EU in a matter of years, while practice has shown it can take decades before aspiring members are considered fit to join.

Zelenskyy knows well that the EU sometimes moves at a snail’s pace while he himself had to be lightning fast to stave off an early Russian victory and set up a defense of his vast nation that very few would have deemed possible a year ago.

Now, after initial hesitation, EU nations have finally started to step up their military contributions as well.

Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands said Tuesday that they plan to provide Ukraine with at least 100 refurbished German-made Leopard 1 battle tanks in the coming months. The announcement followed Germany agreeing last month to allow deliveries of the more modern Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine.

Beyond EU top officials like the summit host, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Zelenskyy should find time for bilateral meetings with leaders to press for more hardware, ranging from ammunition to warplanes — something the bloc as a whole doesn’t possess but individual countries do.

Air near Ohio derailment safe for residents to return home

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio (AP) — Evacuated residents can return to the Ohio village where crews burned toxic chemicals after a train derailed five days ago near the Pennsylvania state line now that monitors show no dangerous levels in the air, authorities said Wednesday.

Around-the-clock testing inside and outside the evacuation zone around the village of East Palestine and a sliver of Pennsylvania showed the air had returned to normal levels that would have been seen before the derailment, said James Justice of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

“Hundreds and hundreds of data points we’ve collected over the time show the air quality is safe,” he said.

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Residents were ordered to evacuate when authorities decided on Monday to release and burn five tankers filled with vinyl chloride, sending hydrogen chloride and the toxic gas phosgene into the air.

Monitors did detect toxins in the air during the controlled burn at the derailment site, but other samples outside that area did not, Justice said.

The village's mayor expressed relief that the evacuation had been lifted.

"We know everybody's frustrated. Everybody wants to be in their homes. We did the best we can," said Mayor Trent Conaway. "The number one goal is public safety, and we accomplished that. Nobody was injured, nobody died."

He credited the village's part-time firefighters and their quick response to the derailment for saving the town.

Some residents have said they were worried about returning even if authorities say it's OK to go home despite reassurances from officials.

It's unlikely though, Justice said, that there be would any dangerous levels of toxins inside any homes or businesses based on readings from air monitors around the community.

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said some residents may want to wait until their homes are checked. Rail operator Norfolk Southern Railway said it would provide testing and continue to operate its family assistance center "for the foreseeable future."

"It's very understandable you may want that testing done before you go back in your house," DeWine said.

The governor said the railroad will have to pay for the cleanup and make sure something like this doesn't happen again. "The burden is upon them is to assure the public that what they do everyday is safe," DeWine said.

Testing on rivers, streams and drinking water wells will continue throughout the area and in the nearby Ohio River.

Kurt Kollar, a representative from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, said contaminants from the derailed tanker cars spilled into some waterways and were toxic to fish, but he added that data so far indicates the drinking water was protected.

The fire from the chemical release is no longer burning, and crews have started removing some of the wreckage.

About 50 cars, including 10 carrying hazardous materials, derailed in a fiery crash Friday night on the edge of East Palestine. Federal investigators say a mechanical issue with a rail car axle caused the derailment.

No injuries have been reported from the derailment or from the controlled release of the chemicals, but some people complained about smelling chlorine and smoke in the air and having headaches.

At least one lawsuit has been filed over the derailment. An East Palestine business owner and two other residents sued Norfolk Southern in federal court on Tuesday, alleging negligence by the company and exposure to toxic substances as a result. They're seeking to make it a class-action case for residents and businesses in the evacuated area and people who were physically harmed because of spilled chemicals at the site.

Norfolk Southern declined to comment on the lawsuit.

World shares mixed after Wall St falls on rate hike worries

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Shares advanced in Europe after a mixed session Thursday in Asia as uncertainty persists over interest rates and inflation.

Benchmarks rose in Paris, London, Shanghai and Hong Kong but fell in Tokyo, Seoul and Sydney. U.S. futures gained while oil prices also were higher.

Germany's DAX added 1.4% to 15,621.11 and the CAC 40 in Paris was up 1.4% at 7,220.36. Britain's FTSE 100 gained 0.7% to 7,942.45. The future for the S&P 500 surged 0.8% and that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average was 0.7% higher.

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Wall Street retreated Wednesday following a set of mixed earnings reports. The pullback also followed comments Tuesday by Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell, who signaled that an exceptionally strong U.S. jobs report last Friday would not oblige the central bank to return to a more aggressive stance on raising interest rates to tame inflation.

Another Fed official, John Williams, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, said Wednesday that he still thinks the Fed's main interest rate hitting a target of 5% to 5.5% by the end of the year is "a very reasonable view." The federal funds rate is now at a range of 4.50% to 4.75%. Williams spoke at a CFO Network summit hosted by the Wall Street Journal.

"Traders are keeping a close eye on policymakers' remarks to position accordingly ahead of key upcoming inflation figures and job market data before next month's rate decision," Anderson Alves of ActivTrades said in a commentary.

In Asia, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 fell 0.1% to 27,584.35 and the Kospi in Seoul fell 0.1% to 2,481.52. Australia's S&P/ASX 200 declined 0.5% to 7,490.30. In Mumbai, the Sensex gained 0.2%. Shares fell in Bangkok, Taiwan and Singapore.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng index gained 1.6% to 21,624.36, while the Shanghai Composite index advanced 1.2% to 3,270.38.

On Wednesday, the S&P 500 fell 1.1% and the Nasdaq fell 1.7%. The Dow industrials gave back 0.6%.

The Fed has been saying that it plans to hike interest rates a couple more times and then hold them at a high level at least through the end of the year. Williams warned that interest rates may need to go higher if stock prices rally and bond yields fall too much, among other loosening financial conditions, because that could drive inflation higher.

Companies have so far been reporting relatively lackluster earnings for the last three months of 2022, as rising costs eat into their margins.

Entertainment giant Walt Disney rose 5.5% in afterhours trading after it reported surprisingly good fiscal first-quarter financial results, but it gave up nearly all of that gain after it said it will cut about 7,000 jobs as part of a "significant transformation" announced by CEO Bob Iger. The job cuts amount to about 3% of the entertainment giant's global workforce.

In other trading, U.S. benchmark crude oil gained 10 cents to \$78.57 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It added \$1.33 on Wednesday to \$78.47.

Brent crude, the pricing basis for international trading, advanced 8 cents to \$85.17 per barrel.

The U.S. dollar slipped to 130.91 Japanese yen from 131.42 yen. The euro rose to \$1.0763 from \$1.0714.

Beijing calls US claims over balloons 'information warfare'

BEIJING (AP) — China on Thursday said U.S. accusations that a downed Chinese balloon was part of an extensive surveillance program amount to "information warfare against China."

The Pentagon on Wednesday said the Chinese balloon shot down off the South Carolina coast Saturday was part of a program involving a number of such airships that China has been operating for "several years."

At Thursday's daily briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning repeated China's insistence that the large unmanned balloon was a civilian meteorological airship that had accidentally blown off course and that the U.S. had "overreacted" by shooting it down.

"It is irresponsible," Mao said at a daily briefing. The latest accusations "may be part of the U.S. side's information warfare against China."

China's defense minister refused to take a phone call from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to discuss the balloon issue on Saturday, the Pentagon said, and China has not answered questions as to what government department or company the balloon belonged to, or how it planned to follow up on a pledge to take further action over the matter.

U.S. officials have dismissed China's claims and agents from the FBI and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service are cataloguing debris recovered from the ocean and transporting it for further processing.

When similar balloons passed over U.S. territory on four occasions during the Trump and Biden admin-

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istrations, the U.S. did not immediately identify them as Chinese surveillance balloons, said Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary.

But he said "subsequent intelligence analysis" allowed the U.S. to confirm they were part of a Chinese spying effort and learn "a lot more" about the program.

"I can assure you this was not for civilian purposes ... We are 100% clear about that," Ryder said.

Top administration officials were briefing members of Congress on the Chinese balloon surveillance program in classified sessions on Wednesday and Thursday.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken canceled a visit to Beijing planned for this week in the wake of the incident, dealing a setback to efforts at arresting a further deterioration of bilateral relations that have spiraled to their lowest level in decades.

He said the U.S. has briefed dozens of countries on the program, which officials said has been active over five continents.

"The United States was not the only target," he said at a news conference with visiting NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg.

Blinken said he and Stoltenberg had spoken about the "systemic and tactical challenges" that China poses to the alliance and the importance of combatting them.

With China's tone sharpening over the balloon incident, it wasn't clear when Blinken's visit might be rescheduled.

Despite that, China's Commerce Ministry said Thursday it welcomed a proposed visit by U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, saying, "It's very important for both sides to maintain normal communication."

Reports: Suns get All-Star Kevin Durant in trade with Nets

PHOENIX (AP) — The Phoenix Suns pulled a midnight blockbuster on Wednesday, acquiring 13-time All-Star Kevin Durant from the Brooklyn Nets, according to multiple reports.

The outlets, citing unnamed sources, said the Suns added Durant to a starting lineup that already includes an All-Star backcourt of Chris Paul and Devin Booker, along with center Deandre Ayton.

Phoenix sent Cam Johnson, Mikal Bridges, Jae Crowder, four first-round picks and additional draft compensation to the Nets.

The Suns also receive forward T.J. Warren in the deal.

The 34-year-old Durant is still playing at an elite level, averaging nearly 30 points per game this season. Durant and the Suns were linked to trade rumors over the past summer, but nothing materialized until Wednesday.

The trade comes just hours after new Suns majority owner Mat Ishbia was introduced in Phoenix. The self-described basketball nut, who was a walk-on at Michigan State under Tom Izzo, didn't waste any time shaking up the NBA.

Phoenix has never won an NBA championship. The Suns made the Finals two seasons ago, but lost to the Milwaukee Bucks in six games. They also played in the Finals in 1976 and 1993.

The quartet of Durant, Paul, Booker and Ayton appears to immediately turn the franchise into title contenders again.

The Suns have had several injuries this season, but played better in recent weeks. They jumped to fifth in the Western Conference with a 30-26 record. Booker (groin) and Paul (hip) have both recently returned.

Durant is currently recovering from a ligament strain in his right knee, but is expected to return soon.

When former Nets teammate Kyrie Irving heard the news, he said: "I'm just glad that he got out of there."

The Nets recently traded Irving to the Dallas Mavericks, where he'll pair with Luka Doncic as another top team in the Western Conference. Irving scored 24 points in his Mavs debut against the Clippers on Wednesday.

"We had a lot of conversations throughout the year of what our futures were going to look like," Irving said. "There was still a level of uncertainty but we just cared about seeing each other be places that we can thrive. Whether that be together or whether that be apart, there has never been one moment where

I've felt like he's been angry at me for the decisions I've made or I've been angry at him.

"I just love the competition now that we can be in the same conference."

Sudan's tropical disease spike reflects poor health system

By MOHANED AWAD and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

EL OBEID, Sudan (AP) — The two Sudanese women thought they had malaria and were taking their medication, but things took a dire turn. Both complained of a splitting headache and fever that didn't respond to the anti-malaria treatment.

By the time she was diagnosed with dengue fever, Raqiya Abdsalam was unconscious.

"Soon after they examined me, I fell into a coma," she said, recounting her ordeal some three months ago. Both women have since recovered and are at home in the city of El Obeid in the central province of North Kordofan.

For decades, Sudan's underfunded public health sector has struggled to effectively diagnose or treat patients as significant government spending went to its vast security services. A recent spike in mosquito-borne diseases — such as dengue fever and malaria — has underscored the fragility of the African country's health system, boding ill for future challenges driven by climate change.

Sudan's best-equipped hospitals are concentrated in the capital, Khartoum, leaving those from far-flung provinces reliant on aid projects. But many of those have disappeared.

In October 2021, Sudan's leading military figure, Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, led a coup that derailed the country's short-lived democratic transition. The move spurred a sharp reduction in aid, with the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reporting that funding levels fell to less than 50% of required needs for both 2021 and 2022.

Burhan with his ruling generals and several other political forces pledged in December to install a new civilian government. But political wrangling is impeding a final deal, and it remains unclear when — and if — donor funding will return to previous levels.

In late fall, a young doctor at a North Kordofan hospital thought that what she was seeing was a new malaria outbreak. Patients arriving at her hospital had malaria-like symptoms — high fever, body fatigue and a migraine-like headache.

But after blood samples were sent to a laboratory in Khartoum for testing, a worrisome picture emerged. Some of the patients did have malaria, which is caused by a parasite, but others had dengue fever — similar in symptoms but caused by a virus. If severe and untreated, dengue fever can lead to organ failure and death.

The young physician said the hospital lacked the facilities to deal with the outbreak. "Patients had to either lie on the floor or bring their own beds to the hospital," she said.

While malaria is common across central and southern Sudan, large dengue outbreaks are rare. But last fall and winter, dengue fever spread to 12 of the country's 18 provinces, killing at least 36 people and infecting more than 5,200, according to Sudan's Ministry of Health. However, the actual numbers are likely higher, given the limitations on testing.

"Most hospitals outside of Khartoum are not connected to the Ministry of Health database," said Alaaeldin Awad Mohamed Nogoud, a liver and transplant surgeon who is also a prominent pro-democracy activist.

The World Health Organization says several factors enabled the dengue outbreak, including the absence of disease surveillance infrastructure and heavy flooding in autumn. The stagnant water allowed mosquitoes to breed and fueled the spread of the disease.

Health experts also fear that growing mosquito migration, induced by climate change, could spur new surges in dengue fever, among other tropical diseases typically found beyond Sudan's southern borders. The *Aedes aegypti*, a long-legged mosquito growing in number across Sudan that can carry the dengue virus, is causing particular concern.

According to Anne Wilson, an epidemiologist at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, containing illnesses spread by the *Aedes aegypti* is difficult because it mostly bites during the day, rendering insecticide-

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treated nets, similar to mosquito nets for beds, less effective.

Sudan's public hospitals are state-run, but patients often still pay for drugs and tests. Hospitals in rural areas are the most depleted, stocked with little more than metal-frame beds and doctors.

In North Kordofan — the site of the recent dengue outbreak — some believe the virus went unchecked for months due to a widespread lack of blood testing equipment. Abdsalam and Amany Adris, the two women from El Obeid, said several doctors had told them they had malaria before they were correctly diagnosed.

After the Ministry of Health officially recognized the outbreak in November, officials say free testing and treatment were made available to dengue fever patients. And by January, North Kordofan was declared free of dengue fever.

But even after that announcement, the young doctor from the province said she was treating suspected cases. Few patients can afford to pay for the blood tests themselves, however, she added.

Both Nogoud and the young physician said widespread shortages are forcing physicians to go to black market for basic medicines, such as paracetamol IV drips to treat fever.

For years, Sudan has been in an economic crisis with annual inflation topping 100% on most months. Since 2018, the Sudanese pound has lost over 95% of its value against the dollar, making it difficult to buy pharmaceuticals or medical equipment from abroad.

By the end of last year, Sudan's National Medical Supplies Fund — the body tasked with procuring pharmaceuticals — said the availability of cancer drugs stood at 48% of needed levels, and other emergency medication was at 68%. Doctors, working with little pay and in difficult conditions, have regularly gone on strike.

Critics accuse the country's leaders of not putting more funds towards the health sector. The federal budget for 2021, listed on the government's website, said the country's health ministry would receive less than half of what would be allocated to the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, the country's largest paramilitary group. The military spokesperson did not respond to AP's request for comment.

With few resources, the Health Ministry has turned to short videos on social media, encouraging people in a catchy song to cover standing water sources and install netting on windows.

Few see this as a long-term solution.

"The whole country is in a state of chaos", said Nada Fadul, an infectious diseases physician and associate of the Sudanese non-governmental organization NexGen.

"Health care might not become the priority for survival," Fadul added.

Sen. John Fetterman hospitalized after feeling lightheaded

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Sen. John Fetterman, the Pennsylvania Democrat who suffered a stroke during his campaign last year, was hospitalized Wednesday night after feeling lightheaded while attending a Senate Democratic retreat, his office said.

Initial tests at George Washington University Hospital did not show evidence of a new stroke, Fetterman's communications director, Joe Calvello, said in a statement issued Wednesday night. Doctors were running more tests and the senator remained at the hospital for observation, according to the statement.

"He is in good spirits and talking with his staff and family. We will provide more information when we have it," Calvello said.

Fetterman, 53, succeeded Republican Sen. Pat Toomey after a hard-fought contest against Republican nominee Mehmet Oz. He defeated the celebrity heart surgeon by 5 percentage points and flipped a seat that was key to Democrats holding the Senate majority. More than \$300 million was spent during the campaign, the most expensive for the Senate in 2022.

His campaign was derailed on May 13 when he suffered what he later called a near-fatal stroke. He refused to drop out and spent much of the remaining months of the campaign in recovery, refusing to release his medical records or allow his doctors to answer reporters' questions.

Oz made an issue of whether his opponent was honest about the effects of the stroke and whether Fetterman was fit to serve, but the Democrat insisted his doctors said he could have a full recovery.

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In an Associated Press profile just weeks after his victory, Fetterman was described as still suffering from auditory processing disorder, a stroke's common aftereffect. The disorder can leave a person unable to speak fluidly and quickly process spoken conversation into meaning.

The effects of the stroke were apparent in Fetterman's uneven performance during the fall campaign's only debate. He struggled to complete sentences and jumbled words, causing concern among Democrats that his election was doomed.

On election night, he told cheering supporters he ran for "anyone that ever got knocked down that got back up."

Fetterman, a presence at 6-foot-8 with a clean-shave head and a goatee and known for wearing hoodies and shorts, was the state's lieutenant governor from 2019-2023. He served as mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, from 2006-2019.

US general to aggressors: Allies are battle-ready in Asia

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — American forces and their allies in Asia are ready for battle after years of joint combat exercises, a United States general said Wednesday, adding that Russia's setbacks in Ukraine should serve as a warning to potential Asian aggressors like China and North Korea.

U.S. treaty allies like the Philippines, Japan and Australia, among others, "have shown that they will band together, that they will not stand for aggression from these nations that have decided they want to change the world order out here," Maj. Gen. Joseph Ryan said.

Although Asia has no counterpart to NATO, the 30-nation military alliance whose mostly European members vow to defend each other against external attacks, a network of U.S. treaty alliances and defense partnerships upholding the international order provides a regional safeguard, he said.

"I'm personally very buoyed by what I see by our allies and partners in this region and the way we've come together in response to aggression by the PRC, by North Korea to say, 'We will not let that stand,'" Ryan told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday, using the acronym for China's official name, the People's Republic of China.

Ryan, Commanding General of the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division based in Hawaii, is in Manila partly for talks with Philippine counterparts ahead of two annual largescale combat exercises that would include live-fire exercises and ground, sea and air assault maneuvers involving thousands of U.S. and Filipino troops in March and April.

The Philippines, America's oldest treaty ally in Asia that used to host the largest U.S. naval and air force bases outside the American mainland, has allowed larger numbers of visiting U.S. forces to stay in rotating batches and preposition weapons and combat equipment in at least nine Philippine military camps under a 2014 defense pact. The Philippine decision to allow a broader American military presence was announced during a visit last week to Manila by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

In the broader Asia-Pacific region, Washington has reinforced an arc of alliances to counter what it says are threats posed by an increasingly belligerent China and North Korea.

China has frowned on combat exercises involving the Americans in coastal areas facing the South China Sea, which Beijing claims virtually in its entirety, and has accused Washington of meddling in Asian disputes and dangerously militarizing the region by regularly deploying U.S. Navy warships and jet fighters.

More recent venues of large-scale exercises by American and Filipino forces included coastal Philippine provinces close to the disputed South China Sea, where China has taken increasingly assertive actions to cement its territorial claims, and in the northern Luzon region, which lies across a narrow sea border from Taiwan.

Combat-readiness exercises hopefully would make potential aggressors think twice, Ryan said.

The U.S. and the Philippines have agreed to hold about 500 small and major combat exercises in 2023 and expand annual military drills following disruptions caused by two years of coronavirus lockdowns, according to Philippine military officials.

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"That does provide some deterrent effect against an adversary in the region, who would look at that and say, 'I don't want to take a step that may cause a government, a politician, to decide to go because I don't know that I can win if I've got to face that trained, ready force,'" Ryan said.

While military commanders say the joint exercises are not directed against any particular country, Ryan said China's increasingly aggressive actions were an alarming reality the region should brace for.

"Does the backdrop of PRC aggression enter our minds when we train? Absolutely," he said, and in the case of the Philippines, U.S. forces needed to be ready to fulfill their obligations under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty.

"We feel duty-bound to ensure that the Philippines can maintain and will maintain their sovereignty," Ryan said. "So aggression from the People's Republic of China that makes our treaty ally uncomfortable makes us uncomfortable."

The Philippines filed nearly 200 diplomatic protests in 2022 alone against China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, a resource-rich and busy waterway where Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei also lay overlapping territorial claims.

Asked if U.S. forces and their Asian allies were ready to respond if a major crisis similar to Russia's invasion of Ukraine breaks out in the region, Ryan said, "Absolutely."

"I'm very comfortable that we're ready but that doesn't mean I'm satisfied. We can always get better," said Ryan, who commands about 12,000 soldiers under his infantry division.

He said experts would be flown in from Hawaii to train American and Filipino army troops in jungle survival and combat tactics during the Salaknib, the first of two major combat-readiness exercises starting next month in the Philippines.

Ryan said America's adversaries should consider political dialogue and diplomacy because "war is complicated ... it's violent, it can go a number of different ways. Russia found that out. They continue to find that out."

"We thought that Ukraine would quickly succumb to Russian military power. That didn't happen," he said. "The most important reason in my view, by far, was the will of the Ukraine people to fight."

It was also crucial that the United States and NATO had helped train Ukrainian troops and enhanced their capabilities to deal with security contingencies for years before Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, he said.

"I think our allies in the region value their sovereignty, value their freedom, value their independence. And no adversary should take that lightly," Ryan said.

The pandemic missing: The kids who didn't go back to school

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS and SHARON LURYE Associated Press

She'd be a senior right now, preparing for graduation in a few months, probably leading her school's modern dance troupe and taking art classes.

Instead, Kailani Taylor-Cribb hasn't taken a single class in what used to be her high school since the height of the coronavirus pandemic. She vanished from Cambridge, Massachusetts' public school roll in 2021 and has been, from an administrative standpoint, unaccounted for since then.

She is among hundreds of thousands of students around the country who disappeared from public schools during the pandemic and didn't resume their studies elsewhere.

An analysis by The Associated Press, Stanford University's Big Local News project and Stanford education professor Thomas Dee found an estimated 240,000 students in 21 states whose absences could not be accounted for. These students didn't move out of state, and they didn't sign up for private school or home-school, according to publicly available data.

In short, they're missing.

"Missing" students received crisis-level attention in 2020 after the pandemic closed schools nationwide. In the years since, they have become largely a budgeting problem. School leaders and some state officials worried aloud about the fiscal challenges their districts faced if these students didn't come back. Each

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student represents money from the city, state and federal governments.

Gone is the urgency to find the students who left — those eligible for free public education but who are not receiving any schooling at all. Early in the pandemic, school staff went door-to-door to reach and reengage kids. Most such efforts have ended.

"Everyone is talking about declining enrollment, but no one is talking about who's leaving the system and why," said Tom Sheppard, a New York City parent and representative on the city's Panel for Educational Policy.

"No one," he said, "is forthcoming."

A PROBLEM NOT DISCUSSED

The missing kids identified by AP and Stanford represent far more than a number. The analysis highlights thousands of students who may have dropped out of school or missed out on the basics of reading and school routines in kindergarten and first grade.

That's thousands of students who matter to someone. Thousands of students who need help re-entering school, work and everyday life.

"That's the stuff that no one wants to talk about," said Sonja Santelises, the chief executive officer of Baltimore's public schools, speaking about her fellow superintendents.

"We want to say it's outside stuff" that's keeping kids from returning to school, she said, such as caring for younger siblings or the need to work. But she worries teens sometimes lack caring adults at school who can discuss their concerns about life.

"That's really scary," Santelises said.

Discussion of children's recovery from the pandemic has focused largely on test scores and performance. But Dee says the data suggests a need to understand more about children who aren't in school and how that will affect their development.

"This is leading evidence that tells us we need to be looking more carefully at the kids who are no longer in public schools," he said.

Over months of reporting, the AP learned of students and families avoiding school for a range of reasons. Some are still afraid of COVID-19, are homeless or have left the country. Some students couldn't study online and found jobs instead. Some slid into depression.

During the prolonged online learning, some students fell so far behind developmentally and academically that they no longer knew how to behave or learn at school. Many of these students, while largely absent from class, are still officially on school rosters. That makes it harder to truly count the number of missing students. The real tally of young people not receiving an education is likely far greater than the 240,000 figure calculated by the AP and Stanford.

In some cases, this wasn't sudden. Many students were struggling well before the pandemic descended.

Kailani, for one, had begun to feel alienated at her school. In ninth grade, a few months before the pandemic hit, she was unhappy at home and had been moved to a different math class because of poor grades.

Kailani has ADHD and says the white teaching assistant assigned to help her focus in her new class targeted her because she was Black, blaming Kailani when classmates acted up. She also didn't allow Kailani to use her headphones while working independently in class, something Kailani says was permitted in her special education plan to help her focus.

After that, Kailani stopped attending math. Instead, she cruised the hallways or read in the library.

Ultimately, the pandemic and at-home education relieved the anxiety Kailani felt from being in the school building. Kailani preferred online school because she could turn off her camera and engage as she chose. Her grades improved.

When the school reopened, she never returned.

A Cambridge schools spokesperson looked into Kailani's complaints. "Several individuals demonstrated great concern and compassion towards her and the challenges she was facing outside of school," Sujata Wycoff said. She said the district has a "reputation of being deeply dedicated to the education and well-

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being of our students.”

LOSING THE PHYSICAL CONNECTION

To assess just how many students have gone missing, AP and Big Local News canvassed every state in the nation to find the most recently available data on both public and non-public schools, as well as census estimates for the school-age population.

Overall, public school enrollment fell by 710,000 students between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school years in the 21 states plus Washington, D.C., that provided the necessary data.

Those states saw private-school enrollment grow by over 100,000 students. Home-schooling grew even more, surging by more than 180,000.

But the data showed 240,000 students who were neither in private school nor registered for home-school. Their absences could not be explained by population loss, either — such as falling birth rates or families who moved out of state.

States where kindergarten is optional were more likely to have larger numbers of unaccounted-for students, suggesting the missing also include many young learners kept home instead of starting school.

California alone showed over 150,000 missing students in the data, and New York had nearly 60,000. Census estimates are imperfect. So AP and Stanford ran a similar analysis for pre-pandemic years in those two states. It found almost no missing students at all, confirming something out of the ordinary occurred during the pandemic.

The true number of missing students is likely much higher. The analysis doesn't include data from 29 states, including Texas and Illinois, or the unknown numbers of ghost students who are technically enrolled but rarely make it to class.

For some students, it was impossible to overcome losing the physical connection with school and teachers during the pandemic's school closures.

José Escobar, an immigrant from El Salvador, had only recently enrolled in the 10th grade in Boston Public Schools when the campus shut down in March 2020. His school-issued laptop didn't work, and because of bureaucratic hurdles, the district didn't issue a new one for several weeks. His father stopped paying their phone bills after losing his restaurant job. Without any working technology for months, he never logged into remote classes.

When instruction resumed online that fall, he decided to walk away and find work as a prep cook. “I can't learn that way,” he said in Spanish. At 21, he's still eligible for school in Boston, but says he's too old for high school and needs to work to help his family.

Another Boston student became severely depressed during online learning and was hospitalized for months. Back home, he refuses to attend school or leave his room despite visits from at least one teacher. When his mother asked him about speaking to a reporter, he cursed her out.

These are all students who have formally left school and have likely been erased from enrollment databases. Many others who are enrolled are not receiving an education.

In Los Angeles last year, nearly half of students were chronically absent, meaning they missed more than 10% of the school year. For students with disabilities, the numbers are even higher: According to district data, 55% missed at least 18 school days. It's not clear how many students were absent more than that. The city's Unified School District did not respond to requests for this data.

WHEN SCHOOLS DON'T COME THROUGH

Los Angeles officials have spoken openly about attempts to find unschooled students and help remove obstacles that are preventing them from coming to school. Laundry services have been offered, as has help with housing. But for some students and their parents, the problem sits within a school system they say has routinely failed their children.

“Parents are bereft,” said Allison Hertog, who represents around three dozen families whose children missed significant learning when California's physical classrooms closed for more than a year during the early pandemic.

Ezekiel West, 10, is in fourth grade but reads at a first grade level. Before the pandemic shutdowns, he

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was shuffled from school to school when educators couldn't address his impulsive behavior.

During online learning, his mother couldn't get home internet and struggled with the WiFi hotspots provided by the school. She worked as a home health aide and couldn't monitor Ezekiel online.

When he returned to school in fall 2021 as a third grader, he was frustrated that his classmates had made more progress as the years passed.

"I did not feel prepared," he said in a recent phone interview. "I couldn't really learn as fast as the other kids, and that kind of made me upset."

An administrative judge ruled Los Angeles' schools had violated Ezekiel's rights and ordered the district to give him a spot at a new school, with a special plan to ease him back into learning and trusting teachers. The school didn't follow the plan, so his mother stopped sending him in October.

"I can't trust them," Miesha Clarke said. Los Angeles school officials did not respond to requests for comment on Ezekiel's case.

Last month, Ezekiel signed up for a public online school for California students. To enroll him, his mother agreed to give up his special education plan. His attorney, Hertog, worries the program won't work for someone with Ezekiel's needs and is looking for yet another option with more flexibility.

At least three of the students Hertog has represented, including Ezekiel, have disappeared from school for long periods since in-person instruction resumed. Their situations were avoidable, she said: "It's pretty disgraceful that the school systems allowed this to go on for so long."

When Kailani stopped logging into her virtual classes during the spring of her sophomore year, she received several emails from the school telling her she'd been truant. Between two to four weeks after she disappeared from Zoom school, her homeroom advisor and Spanish teacher each wrote to her, asking where she was. And the school's dean of students called her great-grandmother, her legal guardian, to inform her about Kailani's disappearance from school.

They didn't communicate further, according to Kailani. She went to work at Chipotle, ringing up orders in Boston's financial district.

In December, Kailani moved to North Carolina to make a new start. She teaches dance to elementary school kids now. Last month, she passed her high school equivalency exams. She wants to take choreography classes.

But she knows, looking back, that things could have been different. While she has no regrets about leaving high school, she says she might have changed her mind if someone at school had shown more interest and attention to her needs and support for her as a Black student.

"All they had to do was take action," Kailani said. "There were so many times they could have done something. And they did nothing."

Focused on 2024, Biden sees opportunity in GOP-held Florida

By JOSH BOAK and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With an eye toward the 2024 campaign, President Joe Biden on Thursday ventures to Florida, a state defined by its growing retiree population and status as the unofficial headquarters of the modern-day Republican Party.

The president sees a chance to use Social Security and Medicare to drive a wedge between GOP lawmakers and their base of older voters who rely on these government programs for income and health insurance. Biden is trying to lay the groundwork for an expected reelection campaign announcement this spring.

After delivering his State of the Union address on Tuesday, Biden on Wednesday went to Wisconsin, another political battleground, where he said he would block any attempts to slash Social Security and Medicare benefits.

"All of you have been paying into the system every single paycheck you've had since you started working," Biden said. "These benefits belong to you, the American worker. You earned it. And I will not allow anyone to cut them. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever, period."

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Leading Republican lawmakers insist that spending cuts to Social Security and Medicare are off the table with regard to reaching a deal to increase the government's legal borrowing authority. But enough prominent Republicans have broached the subject that Biden sees a political opportunity.

During the State of the Union address, GOP lawmakers jeered when Biden referenced a proposal by Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to require that the programs be reauthorized every five years. The president seized on the impromptu moment, urging Republicans and Democrats alike to pledge to avoid cuts to the income and health insurance programs.

"Let's stand up for seniors," Biden said as most of those in the chamber took to their feet to applaud, knowing the dangers of being on the wrong side of an aging electorate that values these programs.

For his part, Scott said the president has misrepresented his policy ideas. He said he only wants programs up for congressional renewal every five years, which he believes is different from spending cuts to Social Security or Medicare. "They lie about it," Scott said in a written statement about how the administration has described his plan.

It's a delicate moment for Social Security and Medicare, programs that economists say will drive the national debt to unprecedented highs over the next few decades. The Social Security trust fund will be unable to pay full benefits starting in 2035, prompting some Republican lawmakers to say changes will have to be made to sustain payments.

But any proposed changes can come across as kryptonite to voters, who want their benefits preserved rather than cut. That's especially true in Republican-held Florida, where Census figures show that nearly a third of adults are older than 62.

Despite its longtime reputation as the nation's premier swing state, Florida trended toward the GOP in recent years before lurching sharply to the right last fall. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis won reelection by a staggering 19 percentage points in November, even carrying the longtime Democratic stronghold of Miami-Dade County.

By this summer, Florida is expected to be the staging ground for at least two top-tier presidential campaigns. Former President Donald Trump launched his 2024 bid nearly three months ago from his Palm Beach estate, and DeSantis is likely to join him in the coming months. Scott, believed to be the wealthiest member of the Senate, also has presidential aspirations.

Republicans have flocked to the state in recent years as well, describing it as "the free state of Florida" in a nod to DeSantis' fierce resistance to pandemic-related mandates and "woke" policies on race and gender.

At a news conference Wednesday, DeSantis talked up Florida's economy and leaned into cultural divisions while flanked by a row of gas stoves. Federal officials recently raised health concerns about the popular appliances.

"They are trying to take away your gas stove," DeSantis said. "It shows they are coming for any little thing in your life."

Multiple administration officials have said they are not banning gas stoves, with White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre saying last month, "The president does not support banning gas stoves."

Biden's oil comments spark debate over energy production

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden sparked a firestorm in energy circles when he said in Tuesday's State of the Union address that the United States will need oil "for at least another decade."

Republicans in the House chamber laughed in derision at Biden's off-the-cuff remark, which was not in his scripted speech. GOP lawmakers accused the Democratic president of refusing to accept reality and "living in a green hallucination," as Montana Sen. Steve Daines put it.

"President Biden implied tonight America would not produce oil beyond the next decade. If you believe that, you have missed a lot and live in a dream world. God help America," Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said in a tweet.

But environmentalists and some Democrats supported Biden, saying the U.S. needs a plan to wean itself

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off oil and other fossil fuels — the sooner, the better.

"I think the president is right," said Collin Rees, a senior campaigner for the green group Oil Change International. "We can't continue to pretend we're reducing (greenhouse gas) emissions without addressing oil production, and that means phasing out fossil fuels."

"If we're going to save our future, we need a transition away from dirty, expensive and deadly fossil fuels, and we need to be speeding up — not slowing down," added Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass.

Biden made the comment as he touted a landmark law to slow climate change. The law he signed last year — supported only by Democrats — authorizes hundreds of billions of dollars to boost renewable energy such as wind and solar power and help consumers buy electric vehicles and energy-efficient appliances.

The law is a key part of Biden's ambitious bid to cut planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Most experts say the net-zero goal is unlikely to be fully achieved even under the most optimistic scenarios.

Phasing out oil within a decade is virtually impossible, said energy analyst Kevin Book.

"I think the White House may want to workshop the ad-libs" before Biden speaks, Book joked Wednesday, adding that no serious analyst believes oil can be completely phased out in a matter of years.

"We rely on oil and gas for 85 to 90 percent of transportation energy," he said. Electric vehicles, while growing in popularity, represent less than 6% of new U.S. car sales.

Even the U.S. government agrees that oil and gas will likely be needed for decades to come. The Energy Information Administration, a statistical and research arm of the Energy Department, projects that U.S. energy consumption will increase over the next 30 years as population and economic growth outpace energy efficiency gains.

Petroleum and natural gas are likely to remain the nation's largest energy sources through 2050, the EIA said in a report last year, even as renewable energy such as wind and solar power are the fastest growing.

The White House said Biden's comments were in line with statements he and other administration officials have made previously — namely that the U.S. is in the midst of an energy transition and will continue to need oil.

"Let's be very clear that fossil fuels will remain in the mix of the energy system of the globe for years to come," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a 2022 remark cited by the White House.

Ironically, Biden's comment came as he tried to reassure critics that he recognizes the need for continued oil production. "We're still going to need oil and gas for a while," Biden said, before adding the 10-year time frame in a later, ad-libbed remark.

After GOP lawmakers laughed, Biden quickly responded: "And beyond that. We're going to need it."

Biden's message to the oil industry — "Stay in business, we need you today" — was the right one, "but his units were off," Book said. "He was giving a 10-year life expectancy to 50-year assets."

Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute, said Biden "could have used his #SOTU address to unite America. Instead, he has again criticized American businesses that employ millions of Americans, pay taxes and provide energy for the world. U.S. oil and natural gas producers, transporters and refiners deserve better."

Ben Jealous, executive director of the Sierra Club, said expanding oil and gas production and extending the life-span of fossil fuel infrastructure such as refineries "would only exacerbate the climate crisis while further padding the profits of the very same companies President Biden rightfully decried" in the State of the Union.

"What we need is doubling down on our investments to equitably transition off of the fuels of the past and to clean energy," Jealous said.

Passport rush blamed on US policy stalls adoptions in Haiti

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Dozens of children are stuck in orphanages across Haiti, unable to leave the increasingly volatile country and start new lives with adoptive parents because a U.S. policy change

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has unleashed a rush for passports at Haiti's main immigration office.

U.S. President Joe Biden announced last month that the U.S. will accept 30,000 people a month from Haiti, Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela if they pass a background check and have an eligible sponsor and a passport to travel.

The ensuing demand for Haitian passports has overwhelmed Haiti's passport office in the capital, Port-au-Prince, where people with appointments cannot squeeze through the aggressive crowd or secure new appointments.

Meanwhile, adoptive parents say the U.S. State Department has declined to grant passport waivers as they worry their children will succumb to hunger, cholera or gang violence.

"It's infuriating," said Bryan Hanlon, a postal inspector who lives with his wife in Washington.

They became the legal parents of Peterson, 5, and Gina, 6, last year and fear they won't be able to secure passports for the children and fly them out of Haiti, which has been in a downward spiral since the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

Last year, the number of reported kidnappings in Haiti soared to 1,359, more than double the previous year, and 2,183 killings were reported, up by a third from 2021, according to the United Nations. Gangs also are raping women and children at an alarming rate, including those as young as 10, officials say.

The country also is fighting a deadly cholera outbreak and a spike in starvation.

Last year, 5-year-old Peterson became malnourished and had to be taken to a clinic, where he was treated for a couple of months.

Then in October, the siblings had to flee the orphanage with a caretaker as gangs raided the neighborhood, killing dozens of civilians and setting homes on fire. The violence that erupts as gangs fight over territory has left tens of thousands of Haitians homeless.

"That was the worst day of our lives," Hanlon said. "We didn't know if they were alive or dead."

With their orphanage abandoned because of the violence, the children had been taken by one of their caretakers to her home in southern Haiti, where they have remained, he said.

Hanlon said he and his wife send money to the caretaker, but that "some days, there is just no food to buy or no fuel to cook it." Other times, she cannot leave the house to pick up the money because it's too dangerous, he said.

Brooke Baeth, an elementary school speech therapist in Minnesota, understands the fear and frustration. She and her husband became the legal parents of a 5-year-old girl in Haiti nearly a year ago, but they don't know when they will be able to meet her.

In late January, her daughter and caretakers flew from their orphanage in northern Haiti to Port-au-Prince only to encounter a huge crowd at the immigration office. Despite having an appointment, they could not get inside, nor could some of the office's own employees, Baeth said.

"It's just devastating," she said, adding that like the Hanlons, they haven't been able to obtain a passport waiver from the State Department. "It feels like our voices are not being heard."

A spokesperson for the State Department said intercountry adoption is one of the agency's highest priorities and that it uses all appropriate tools to identify and overcome barriers.

"We understand that it is currently difficult for prospective adoptive parents to obtain a Haitian passport," the spokesperson said. "We remain committed to helping prospective adoptive parents navigate the often-complicated journey of intercountry adoption. We will continue to engage with the Haitian government on this issue."

Hanlon shared email messages with The Associated Press in which the U.S. government denied his request for a waiver by noting that both Haiti's immigration office and the Ministry of the Interior were open for business, and that passport waivers are for use only on a case-by-case basis and as a last resort.

Ryan Hanlon, president and CEO of the U.S. National Council for Adoption who is not related to Bryan Hanlon, said in a phone interview that the State Department's manual calls on officials to prioritize adoption cases.

"Can we even say we prioritize adoption when we have legal options that we choose not to utilize?" he said. "It's the safety of the children that's the concern here."

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Given the ongoing crush at Haiti's main immigration office, government officials recently opened two makeshift offices in a gymnasium and a soccer field elsewhere in Port-au-Prince. They also implemented a schedule setting aside specific days for groups including women and the elderly. Saturdays have been reserved for children.

Officials say they don't know how many Haitian children are in this situation, but two of 11 U.S. agencies that are main providers of adoption services in Haiti say a dozen or more of their children are affected and the number has been rising. From 2016 to 2020, people adopted 827 children from Haiti, according to the most recent statistics from the State Department. Only 96 children were adopted in 2020, down from a high of 227 in 2017.

At one adoption agency, Colorado-based A Love Beyond Borders, at least 13 children in Haiti have been adopted but have been unable to obtain passports amid a processing backlog that is growing every day, said Stephanie Thoet, the agency's Haiti program coordinator.

She noted that even Haiti's Ministry of the Interior has been unable to access the passport office to manually deliver the files of adopted children and worries about officials being killed or kidnapped by gangs as they travel back and forth with paperwork that has taken years to complete.

"I am terrified every time they go," she said.

At another agency, Utah-based Wasatch International Adoption, at least a dozen children who already have been adopted can't obtain a passport, and the number is growing, said Chareyl Moyes, the agency's Haiti program manager.

"The situation is dire," she said, adding that she worries about a child or caretaker being killed. "Do we want to wait until it's at that point?"

Baeth said it's hard for her daughter to understand why it's taking so long to be together. They tell her how much she means to them and send her images of the snow, prompting her to excitedly ask if she could eat it. The girl, who wants to be a unicorn rider when she grows up, has sent them videos of her doing cartwheels and somersaults.

Hanlon said his daughter knows what is going on: "She understands enough to be frustrated."

He recalled how Gina was upset one day and told her caretaker: "I don't want to talk to them in videos anymore. I want to talk to them in person."

His son, however, is younger.

Hanlon said when the boy is told he can't travel to certain parts of Haiti, he tells the other children not to worry, assuring them: "My dad's like Superman. He'll fly down and kill the bad guys."

Hanlon paused as his voice broke.

"Some days, I feel like I'm letting him down."

Pentagon: China's conducted spy balloon program for years

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Chinese balloon shot down off the South Carolina coast was part of a large surveillance program that China has been conducting for "several years," the Pentagon said Wednesday.

When similar balloons passed over U.S. territory on four occasions during the Trump and Biden administrations, the U.S. did not immediately identify them as Chinese surveillance balloons, said Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary. But he said "subsequent intelligence analysis" allowed the U.S. to confirm they were part of a Chinese spying effort and learn "a lot more" about the program.

He refused to provide any new details about those previous balloons. When pressed, Ryder would only say that the balloons flew over "sites that would be of interest to the Chinese."

One of the possible incidents was last February.

Maj. Gen. Kenneth Hara, the adjutant general in Hawaii, tweeted about a balloon over Kauai a year ago. He said U.S. Indo-Pacific Command "detected a high-altitude object floating in air in the vicinity of the Hawaiian Islands" and sent up aircraft to intercept it. He said they visually confirmed it was an unmanned balloon with no identification markings.

Ryder declined to say whether this was one of the four previous incidents that the U.S. had discussed.

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Pacific Air Forces, the Air Force command in the Indo-Pacific, said that balloon was not shot down.

The recent balloon was shot down by a U.S. military fighter jet on Saturday. The Navy and Coast Guard are still working to recover pieces of the downed balloon so they can be analyzed.

China claims it was a civilian balloon used for meteorological research and sharply criticized the U.S. for shooting it down.

In response to questions about China's explanation, Ryder said Wednesday that, "I can assure you this was not for civilian purposes ... we are 100% clear about that."

Ryder said North American Aerospace Defense Command began tracking the balloon as it approached U.S. airspace. It passed north of the Aleutian Islands on Jan. 28 and moved largely over land across Alaska and then into Canadian airspace before crossing back into the U.S. over northern Idaho on Jan. 31, U.S. officials have said.

Top administration officials were briefing members of Congress on the Chinese balloon surveillance program in classified sessions on Wednesday and Thursday. Avril Haines, director of national intelligence; Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman; Gen. Glen VanHerck, head of U.S. Northern Command; and Colin Kahl, the under secretary of defense for policy, were among those expected to brief lawmakers.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. has briefed dozens of countries on the program, which officials said has been active over five continents.

"The United States was not the only target," he said at a news conference with visiting NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg. Blinken said he and Stoltenberg had spoken about the "systemic and tactical challenges" that China poses to the alliance and the importance of combatting them.

The foreign countries would include nations the U.S. believes have been surveilled in the past as well as NATO allies.

Stoltenberg agreed on the nature of the Chinese threat, saying the balloon incident "confirms a pattern of Chinese behavior" and noting that Beijing had "invested heavily in new military capabilities, including different types of surveillance and intelligence platforms."

"We have also seen increased Chinese intelligence activities in Europe," he said. "We just have to be vigilant. We need to be aware of the constant risk of Chinese intelligence and step up what we do to protect ourselves."

Those briefings were continuing Wednesday, and the State Department has sent a cable to all U.S. embassies and consulates outlining the administration's case against China and instructing American diplomats to discuss these points with their host governments. However, the cable is less specific than what has been briefed to allies and partners.

Off the South Carolina coast, meanwhile, Navy divers began pulling pieces of the downed Chinese spy balloon from the depths of the ocean floor on Tuesday, using sophisticated reconnaissance drones dubbed the Kingfish and the Swordfish to locate the debris.

Ryder said agents from the FBI and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service are cataloguing the debris and transporting it for further processing.

UN eyes revival of millets as global grain uncertainty grows

By FARAI MUTSAKA and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

RUSHINGA, Zimbabwe (AP) — While others in her Zimbabwean village agonize over a maize crop seemingly headed for failure, Jestina Nyamukunguvengu picks up a hoe and slices through the soil of her fields that are lush green with a pearl millet crop in the African country's arid Rushinga district.

"These crops don't get affected by drought, they are quick to flower, and that's the only way we can beat the drought," the 59-year old said, smiling broadly. Millets, including sorghum, now take up over two hectares of her land — a patch where maize was once the crop of choice.

Farmers like Nyamukunguvengu in the developing world are on the front lines of a project proposed by India that has led the U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organization to christen 2023 as "The Year of Millets," an effort to revive a hardy and healthy crop that has been cultivated for millennia — but was largely el-

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bowed aside by European colonists who favored corn, wheat and other grains.

The designation is timely: Last year, drought swept across much of eastern Africa; war between Russia and Ukraine upended supplies and raised the prices of foodstuffs and fertilizer from Europe's breadbasket; worries surged about environmental fallout of cross-globe shipments of farm products; many chefs and consumers are looking to diversify diets at a time of excessively standardized fare.

All that has given a new impetus to locally-grown and alternative grains and other staples like millets.

Millets come in multiple varieties, such as finger millet, fonio, sorghum, and teff, which is used in the spongy injera bread familiar to fans of Ethiopian cuisine. Proponents tout millets for their healthiness — they can be rich in proteins, potassium, and vitamin B — and most varieties are gluten-free. And they're versatile: useful in everything from bread, cereal and couscous to pudding and even beer.

Over centuries, millets have been cultivated around the world — in places like Japan, Europe, the Americas and Australia — but their epicenters have traditionally been India, China, and sub-Saharan Africa, said Fen Beed, team leader at FAO for rural and urban crop and mechanization systems.

Many countries realized they "should go back and look at what's indigenous to their agricultural heritage and what could be revisited as a potential substitute for what would otherwise be imported — which is at risk when we had the likes of pandemic, or when we have the likes of conflict," said Beed.

Millets are more tolerant of poor soils, drought and harsh growing conditions, and can easily adapt to different environments without high levels of fertilizer and pesticide. They don't need nearly as much water as other grains, making them ideal for places like Africa's arid Sahel region, and their deep roots of varieties like fonio can help mitigate desertification, the process that transforms fertile soil into desert, often because of drought or deforestation.

"Fonio is nicknamed the Lazy Farmers crop. That's how easy it is to grow," says Pierre Thiam, executive chef and co-founder of New York-based fine-casual food chain Teranga, which features West African cuisine. "When the first rain comes, the farmers only have to go out and just like throw the seeds of fonio ... They barely till the soil."

"And it's a fast growing crop, too: It can mature in two months," he said, acknowledging it's not all easy: "Processing fonio is very difficult. You have to remove the skin before it becomes edible."

Millets account for less than 3% of the global grain trade, according to FAO. But cultivation is growing in some arid zones. In Rushinga district, land under millets almost tripled over the past decade. The U.N.'s World Food Programme deployed dozens of threshing machines and gave seed packs and training to 63,000 small-scale farmers in drought-prone areas in the previous season.

Low rainfall and high temperatures in recent years in part due to climate change, coupled with poor soils, have doused interest in water-guzzling maize.

"You'll find the ones who grew maize are the ones who are seeking food assistance, those who have grown sorghum or pearl millet are still eating their small grains," said Melody Tsoriyo, the district's agronomist, alluding to small grains like millets, whose seeds can be as fine as sand. "We anticipate that in five years to come, small grains will overtake maize."

Government teams in Zimbabwe have fanned out to remote rural regions, inspecting crops and providing expert assistance such as through WhatsApp groups to spread technical knowledge to farmers.

WFP spokesman Tatenda Macheka said millets "are helping us reduce food insecurity" in Zimbabwe, where about a quarter of people in the country of 15 million — long a breadbasket of southern Africa — are now food insecure, meaning that they're not sure where their next meal will come from.

In urban areas of Zimbabwe and well beyond, restaurants and hotels are riding the newfound impression that a millet meal offers a tinge of class, and have made it pricier fare on their menus.

Thiam, the U.S.-based chef, recalled eating fonio as a kid in Senegal's southern Casamance region, but fretted that it wasn't often available in his hometown — the capital — let alone New York. He admitted once "naively" having dreams making what's known in rural Senegal as "the grain of royalty" — served to honor visiting guests — into a "world class crop."

He's pared back those ambitions a bit, but still sees a future for the small grains.

"It's really amazing that you can have a grain like this that's been ignored for so long," Thiam said in an interview from his home in El Cerrito, Calif., where he moved to be close to his wife and her family. "It's about time that we integrate it into our diet."

Tyre Nichols documents: Officer never explained stop to him

By TRAVIS LOLLER, JONATHAN MATTISE and ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tennessee (AP) — The officer who pulled Tyre Nichols from his car before police fatally beat him never explained why he was being stopped, newly released documents show, and emerging reports from Memphis residents suggest that was common.

The Memphis Police Department blasted Demetrius Haley and four other officers as "blatantly unprofessional" and asked that they be stripped of the ability to work as police for their role in the Jan. 7 beating, according to documents released Tuesday by the Tennessee Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission.

They also include revelations that Haley took photographs of Nichols as he lay propped against a police car, then sent the photos to other officers and a female acquaintance.

Nichols died three days later — the latest police killing to prompt nationwide protests and an intense public conversation about how police treat Black residents.

Yet what led to it all remains a mystery.

The five officers — Haley, Desmond Mills Jr., Tadarrius Bean, Justin Smith and Emmitt Martin III — have been fired and charged with second-degree murder. The new documents offer the most detailed account to date of those officers' actions. Their attorneys have not commented to The Associated Press about the documents.

Another officer also has been fired and a seventh suspended of duty. Six others may be disciplined, officials disclosed, without providing any details. That would bring the total involved to 13.

Erica Williams, a spokeswoman for the top prosecutor in Memphis, said more charges could still be filed.

Meanwhile, other residents are coming forward about interactions with Memphis police.

A federal lawsuit filed Tuesday accuses the same officers now charged with murdering Nichols, 29, with also violating the rights of another man from the same neighborhood as Nichols during a similarly violent arrest three days before Nichols' arrest.

According to the lawsuit, Monterrius Harris, 22, was visiting a cousin at an apartment on the evening of Jan. 4 when his car was "suddenly swarmed by a large group of assailants wearing black ski-masks, dressed in black clothing, brandishing guns, other weapons, hurling expletives and making threats to end his life if he did not exit his car."

Harris thought the men were trying to rob him, the lawsuit says, and he tried to back up his car before hitting something. He then reluctantly exited with his hands raised and was "grabbed, punched, kicked and assaulted" for up to two minutes, the complaint states. The beating stopped only after people came out of their apartments to see what was happening, the lawsuit alleges.

Photos of Harris' face taken after his release on bail about nine days later show thick scabs on his forehead and a healing black eye.

The suit accuses officers of fabricating evidence to support charges against Harris, including being a convicted felon in possession of a handgun, criminal trespass and evading arrest.

Also, a woman told WREG-TV that she tried to warn the Memphis Police Department about Haley after a Feb. 21, 2021, encounter. Kadejah Townes said she was returning a movie to a Redbox machine at a Walgreens when police responded to a false shooting call. Police initially told her she could leave, she said, but then officers stopped her when she put her car in reverse. Haley placed handcuffs on Townes so roughly that she feared her arm was dislocated, she said.

Her aunt recorded the encounter. Then police stopped her aunt and brother while they followed a squad car as it took Townes to a hospital. Townes said she was never charged with anything.

Haley's disciplinary file showed that after Townes filed a complaint, he was written up for failing to fill

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out proper paperwork — not for use of force.

"I wasn't surprised," Townes told the TV station.

Police Chief Cerelyn "CJ" Davis signed requests seeking to prohibit the five charged officers from working in law enforcement again. The Tennessee Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission will decide later whether to do that.

Haley, who was driving an unmarked car and wearing a black hoodie, forced Nichols from his car using profanity, then sprayed him in the eyes with a chemical irritant, according to the documents released Tuesday.

"You never told the driver the purpose of the vehicle stop or that he was under arrest," the documents state.

Haley did not have his body camera on when he stopped Nichols but was on a phone call with someone who overheard.

Nichols ran from officers but was caught again a few blocks away. At that point, Haley kicked him in the torso as three other officers were handcuffing him. Other officers kicked Nichols in the face, punched him or struck him with a baton.

Charges against the other officers include that they misled officials about what happened.

Martin, for instance, claimed Nichols tried to snatch the officer's gun from his holster after Haley forced him out of the vehicle, with Martin helping by grabbing Nichols' wrist. However, video doesn't corroborate the gun-grab claim, the documents said.

In a letter from Smith included in his file, he defended his conduct, stating that Nichols was "violent and would not comply."

Audio from a body camera did not capture Nichols using profanity or making violent threats — instead, he appeared calm and polite in his comments to the officers.

The documents also highlight the failure to provide aid afterward, with Bean's indifference to Nichols' distress reported by a civilian who recorded video that has not been released.

All five also were faulted for violating rules on body cameras — either by not having them on the whole time or taking off their vests with cameras attached, the documents said.

Biden warns of GOP plans for Medicare, Social Security cuts

By LISA MASCARO, ZEKE MILLER and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When President Joe Biden suggested that Republicans want to slash Medicare and Social Security, the GOP howls of protest during his State of the Union address showcased a striking apparent turnaround for the party that built a brand for years trying to do just that.

Biden is not about to let Republicans off easily and forget that history.

The record ranges from President George W. Bush's ideas about privatizing Social Security to House Speaker Paul Ryan's sweeping Medicare overhaul plan to current Sen. Rick Scott's idea of allowing those and other federal programs to "sunset."

As budget negotiations move ahead, expect the long history of GOP efforts to slash the popular entitlement programs for seniors to remain a politically powerful weapon the White House intends to wield.

"They sure didn't like me calling them on it," Biden said Wednesday about his address that drew heckling from Republicans the night before.

He headed to political battleground Wisconsin, home of Republican Sen. Ron Johnson, who has proposed forcing Congress to authorize spending for Social Security every year.

Speaking at a union training facility in DeForest, Biden pulled out a copy of Scott's campaign proposals and quoted Johnson as well as Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah to warn that Republicans would target Social Security and Medicare.

Referring to the loud GOP objections at the State of the Union, he said, "When I called them out on it last night, it sounded like they agreed to take these cuts off the table."

"Well, I sure hope that's true," he said. "I'll believe it when I see it."

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The political shift among Republicans is happening in real time, helping set the parameters for the budget negotiations as Biden and Congress try to come up with a plan for raising the nation's debt limit by a summer deadline.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has insisted that cuts to Medicare and Social Security are "off the table" — and many House and Senate Republicans vehemently agreed during Biden's State of the Union address, some shouting "liar!" as he suggested they were proposing reductions.

But it's unclear what Republicans will demand instead of entitlement cuts as they leverage the upcoming negotiations to extract federal spending reductions. They say they want to put the government on a path toward a balanced budget, but that's a daunting if not impossible challenge without painful cuts elsewhere — in defense or other domestic accounts that Washington has been unable to make.

Johnson accused the president of "lying" about the senator's approach. "I want to save these programs," Johnson said in a statement Wednesday. "We need a process to prioritize spending and decrease our deficits."

The White House has insisted that Republicans make their budget plans public for Americans to judge for themselves. That hasn't happened yet.

"No more saying one thing and doing another," said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. "Let's see exactly what they want to do."

Efforts to halt the explosive growth of the federal safety net programs for older Americans have stirred and stalled for years, particularly as the nation's population ages and more and more money is needed to shore up Medicare and Social Security.

Mandatory spending on the programs accounted for about \$2.1 trillion in fiscal 2022, which ended last June 30 — a sizable chunk of the nation's \$5.8 trillion federal budget. Both funds are on track for insolvency, and the nation's debt is climbing, already edging past the \$31 trillion limit.

In 2005, then President Bush floated a proposal to partially privatize Social Security, the retirement income program mostly for seniors. Republicans in 2010 seized control of the House and elevated House Budget Chairman Ryan, the architect of a Medicare proposal to shift toward a private insurance option, to be the party's 2012 vice presidential nominee. More recently, Scott, leader of the Senate GOP's campaign arm, put forward his own plans for overhauling the entitlement systems for older Americans.

Biden quickly zeroed in on Scott's proposal when the senator first introduced it more than a year ago, using it to portray Republicans as extreme. White House officials credit that with helping Democrats hold onto the Senate in last fall's midterm elections. It's a game-plan the president appears to be eager to deploy again as he gears up for a 2024 reelection bid.

"Politically it was genius to tag the party with this idea that this party wants to do away with Social Security," said William Arnone, chief executive of the National Academy of Social Insurance, an advocacy organization for Social Security. "The reaction from Republicans in the room is they want nothing to do with that idea."

Scott's 12-point plan calls for all federal spending legislation to sunset in five years, subject to votes in Congress that could preserve programs.

"If a law is worth keeping, Congress can pass it again," Scott's Rescue America website states.

Scott said in a written response to the president's State of the Union address that for Biden "to suggest that this means I want to cut Social Security or Medicare is a lie, and is a dishonest move."

"Does he think I also intend to get rid of the U.S. Navy? Or the border patrol? Or air traffic control, maybe?" Scott asked in the statement. "This is the kind of fake, gotcha BS that people hate about Washington. I've never advocated cutting Social Security or Medicare and never would."

Scott's sunset ideas have a following among some Republicans in Congress, but at the same time the Republican Party is moving toward what appears to be a public unwillingness to touch the entitlement programs.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has distanced the party from Scott's ideas, and the Florida Republican lost an internal party bid to oust McConnell from leadership after the 2022 midterm elections.

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Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, the party's 2012 presidential nominee who chose Ryan as his running mate is proposing a bipartisan "Trust Act," which would create a "Rescue Commission" for the nation's endangered trust funds with a mandate to come up with legislation that would extend their long-term solvency.

Romney's plan, which is gaining traction among both Republicans and Democrats, is reminiscent of the 2010 bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, otherwise known as the Bowles-Simpson commission. Headed by two former Democratic and Republican lawmakers. It proposed one of the most sweeping overhauls yet of the nation's entitlement and budget programs.

Those recommendations proved politically toxic, and the Obama administration quickly distanced itself, as did many members of Congress.

During the last debt ceiling go-around, in 2011, Biden, as Obama's vice president, helped broker deals to ease the standoff. Among the ideas? A bipartisan "Super Committee" to propose budget cuts.

It, too, was unable to have political staying power, and the cuts were never fully put in place.

Brazil pushes illegal miners out of Yanomami territory

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE and EDMAR BARROS undefined

ALTO ALEGRE, Brazil (AP) — Armed government officials with Brazil's justice, Indigenous and environment ministries pressed illegal gold miners out of Yanomami Indigenous territory Wednesday, citing widespread river contamination, famine and disease they have brought to one of the most isolated groups in the world.

People involved in illegal gold dredging streamed away from the territory on foot. The operation could take months. There are believed to be some 20,000 people engaged in the activity, often using toxic mercury to separate the gold. An estimated 30,000 Yanomami people live in Brazil's largest Indigenous territory, which covers an area roughly the size of Portugal and stretches across Roraima and Amazonas states in the northwest corner of Brazil's Amazon.

The authorities — the Brazilian environmental agency Ibama, with support from the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples and the National Guard — found an airplane, a bulldozer, and makeshift lodges and hangars, and destroyed them — as permitted by law. Two guns and three boats with 5,000 liters (1,320 gallons) of fuel were seized. They also discovered a helicopter hidden in the forest and set it ablaze.

Ibama established a checkpoint next to a Yanomami village on the Uraricoera River to interrupt the miners' supply chain there. Agents seized the 12-meter (39-foot) boats, loaded with a ton of food, freezers, generators, and internet antennas. The cargo will now supply the federal agents. No more boats carrying fuel and equipment will be allowed to proceed past the blockade.

The large amount of supplies bound upriver could indicate some of the gold miners were ignoring President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's promise to expel them after years of neglect under his predecessor, Bolsonaro, who tried to legalize the activity.

Other miners, however, sensed it was better to return to the city. On Tuesday, The Associated Press visited a makeshift port alongside the Uraricoera River, accessible only by three-hour drive on a dirt road. Dozens of gold miners arrived over the course of the day, some of them after walking for days through the forest, en route to state capital Boa Vista.

One of them, João Batista Costa, 61, told reporters the Yanomami are dying of hunger and that recent emergency food shipments have not been enough.

The federal government has declared a public health emergency for the Yanomami people, who are suffering from malnutrition and diseases such as malaria as a consequence of illegal mining.

A report published yesterday by the Health Ministry found that gold miners have invaded four clinics inside Yanomami territory, leaving them inoperational. In the city of Boa Vista, where starving and sick Indigenous people have been medevaced to a temporary medical facility, there are 700 Yanomami, more than three times its capacity.

The gold miners, who come from poor regions, such as Maranhao state in Brazil's Northeast, usually cross the forest wearing flip-flops, carrying only food and personal belongings in their backpacks. They sleep in hammocks in campsites.

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But their mining depends on sophisticated logistics to outfox authorities and is backed by investors outside the forest. Such tactics include: illicit fuel distribution on the outskirts of Indigenous land; airstrips carved from the jungle for transport of miners and supplies; light planes with modified tail numbers, registered to front companies; helicopters operating between mining sites on the reserves, and clandestine communication networks.

"This operation hasn't come a moment too soon," Sarah Shenker, the head of the non-profit Survival International in Brazil, said in a statement. "It's absolutely vital that the authorities get the miners out, and keep them out. They've blighted the Yanomami's lives for far too long, and have caused untold misery and destruction. Even if all of them are removed, and they can be kept out, it will take years for the Yanomami and their rainforest to recover."

Probe into US Olympic failings stunted by red tape in DC

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — More than 27 months since it was greenlighted by Congress, the panel established to investigate the inner workings of the U.S. Olympic structure has yet to conduct a formal interview because of bureaucratic red tape and slow action from the same lawmakers who had expressed a pressing need for better oversight.

Two Olympics — the Summer Games in Tokyo and Winter Games in Beijing — have come and gone since the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics was signed into law and charged with looking into, among other topics, the handling of sex-abuse cases that were mismanaged for decades.

It took 19 months after it was established by the new law in October 2020 for the commission to be able to access the \$2 million Congress budgeted for its use, then four more months for the government to post the job, and four months after that to identify and hire the panel's executive director. Now that the money is available and the leader is in place, budgeting laws dictate that the commission has to decide how to spend the \$2 million by Sept. 30 or risk not being able to use it.

Executive director Kevin Brown — who, to this date, is the panel's only paid employee — says it's an unrealistic timeline. He said emails and phone calls explaining the issue to lawmakers and their staffs have not led to much discussion, let alone an extension. Brown's group plans on conducting dozens of interviews and gathering thousands of pages of documents. It must hold at least one public hearing and write a report to detail its findings. He anticipates the project will take around a year.

"The bottom line is, through no fault of its own, the commission has struggled to get underway, and now that we are moving forward with our work, our ability to do it meaningfully is being taken away from us," Brown told The Associated Press.

The commission was created as part of the bipartisan "Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act of 2020," which itself came out of an 18-month investigation into how the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee and the sports organizations it oversees mishandled sex-abuse cases in gymnastics and other sports.

The law called on the USOPC to more than double funding for the newly created U.S. Center for Safe Sport from \$7.5 million to \$20 million. One of its most extreme measures gives Congress the power to dissolve the USOPC board.

The original draft of the bill did not include plans for a commission, but Rep. Diane DeGette, D-Colo., was among those who pushed to have that included in the final version.

Representatives from DeGette's office did not immediately return an email from the AP requesting comment. Neither did representatives from the offices of Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., or Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., all of whom played key roles in getting the bill passed.

"For the past few years, we have been determined to change (the) pattern of gross institutional failure," Blumenthal and Moran wrote in an op-ed piece, which detailed the pressing need for reform and better oversight when they introduced the bill in 2019.

The bill took 15 months to become law from the date of the op-ed. All 16 members of the commission

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have been in place since April 2021. Included are gymnastics abuse survivor Jordyn Wieber, track great Edwin Moses and University of Oregon athletic director Rob Mullens.

But the commission couldn't access funding until May 2022, as the appropriation was held up while Congress haggled over larger issues in spending bills. Meanwhile, it took the General Services Administration, which oversees the commission, until September 2022 to post the executive director's position. Now that Brown has been on board for about three weeks, he needs to hire five to seven more staffers to help conduct what is expected to be a wide-ranging investigation. They are not expected to be fully on board until the end of April.

USOPC spokesman Jon Mason said the federation supports an extension of the commission's deadlines.

The USOPC has moved forward with its own reforms in the wake of the investigations and the new law, including increasing oversight over its satellite sports organizations and calling for more athlete representation in the dozens of decision-making bodies that dot the Olympic landscape.

There remain issues, however, including how well the SafeSport Center is conducting investigations involving sexual misconduct, even with its increased budget. The recent case involving snowboard coach Peter Foley triggered questions about whether the center, the USOPC and U.S. Ski & Snowboard have handled the case appropriately.

The congressionally mandated commission is likely to look into that case and many others and could suggest more changes to the overall Olympic structure.

Brown says he's not asking lawmakers for more money, only for a longer window in which to use funds that already have been appropriated.

"The community as a whole is serious about making sure the American public understands the modern Olympic and Paralympic movement, and that, if necessary, we can drive positive change," Brown said. "But the commission has to be fair and credible to all involved, and to do so, we have to get the complete picture, and that takes time that we aren't being given."

Scenes of devastation as Turkey, Syria quake kills thousands

By The Associated Press undefined

With the death toll climbing after the deadliest earthquake in over a decade brought massive destruction to parts of Turkey and Syria, rescue crews are holding fast to an increasingly slim hope of finding survivors.

This gallery shows the most compelling scenes from a devastating earthquake that hit southeast Turkey and northern Syria on Monday. The confirmed death toll from the magnitude 7.8 quake was approaching 12,000 by Wednesday.

Search teams from around the world are joining tens of thousands of local emergency personnel, but the scale of the destruction has been so immense and spread over such a wide area — including a region isolated by Syria's ongoing civil war — that many people were still awaiting help.

With unstable piles of metal and concrete, the searches are perilous. Adding to the worries are growing concerns about the amount of time trapped people could survive in the cold.

Stories of rescues, though, have continued to provide hope. A crying newborn still connected by the umbilical cord to her deceased mother was rescued Monday in Syria.

Meanwhile, countless families have already begun burying their loved ones.

The gallery was curated by Dusan Vranic, Deputy News Director for Photography for the Middle East, Afghanistan & Pakistan

Zelenskyy seeks weaponry in surprise trips to London, Paris

By JILL LAWLESS and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sought Western support for his country in surprise visits to Britain and France on Wednesday, pushing for fighter jets to battle Russian invaders in a dramatic speech to the U.K. Parliament, and then flying to Paris to meet the French and German leaders over dinner at the Elysee Palace.

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On Thursday, Zelenskyy will join EU leaders at a summit in Brussels, which German Chancellor Olaf Scholz described as a "signal of European solidarity and community."

Zelenskyy's European tour and pleas for more advanced weapons came as Ukraine braces for an expected Russian offensive and hatches its own plans to retake land held by Moscow's forces. Western support has been key to Kyiv's surprisingly stiff defense, and the two sides are engaged in grinding battles.

Zelenskyy thanked the British people for their support since "Day One" of Moscow's invasion nearly a year ago, as Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said fighter jets were "part of the conversation" about aid to Ukraine.

"Nothing is off the table," he said at an evening news conference at a British army base. "We must arm Ukraine in the short term, but we must bolster Ukraine for the long term."

Zelenskyy said Ukraine needs all kinds of supplies, not just planes, but also ammunition and long-range missiles

"Without this, there would be stagnation which will not bring to anything good," he said, calling his visit to Britain "very fruitful."

Then it was off to Paris for dinner with French President Emmanuel Macron and Scholz, the German chancellor.

Zelenskyy was greeted Wednesday night on the steps of the Elysee Palace with a friendly embrace by Macron, and then all three leaders headed inside. The visit marks a turnaround in Zelenskyy's relations toward France and Germany, which earlier in the war were viewed by many in Ukraine as not doing enough to help.

"Ukraine can count on France, its European partners and allies to win the war. Russia cannot and must not win," Macron said before their working dinner. Macron's office put out a statement confirming that Zelenskyy would attend Thursday's summit in Brussels, where EU leaders will pledge their support for the Ukrainian people.

Zelenskyy's travel to European capitals on Wednesday was just his second foreign trip since Russia invaded on Feb. 24, 2022. In December, he traveled to Washington to meet with President Joe Biden and address the U.S. Congress.

His day began when he arrived on a Royal Air Force plane in London and was greeted on the tarmac with an embrace from Sunak. They held talks at the prime minister's 10 Downing St. residence before Zelenskyy's speech to lawmakers in the 900-year-old Westminster Hall, the oldest — and, on a cold winter day, unheated — part of Parliament.

"London has stood with Kyiv since Day One," he said, repeatedly thanking Britons for their aid. The U.K. has sent Ukraine more than 2 billion pounds (\$2.5 billion) in weapons and equipment,

Wearing his trademark olive drab sweatshirt, he urged allies to deliver jets to Ukraine, saying combat aircraft would be "wings for freedom."

In a dramatic gesture, Zelenskyy presented the speaker of the House of Commons with a Ukrainian air force helmet, inscribed by a Ukrainian pilot: "We have freedom. Give us wings to protect it."

The president was trying to soften allies' reluctance to send advanced fighter jets, both because they are complex to fly and for fear of escalating the war.

The U.K. has repeatedly said it's not practical to provide Ukraine with British warplanes. But in a shift, the government said Wednesday it was "actively looking" at whether Ukraine could be sent Western jets, and was "in discussion with our allies" about it.

Britain also said it would train Ukrainian pilots in Britain on "NATO-standard fighter jets" within weeks.

Sunak spokesman Max Blain said the government was exploring "what jets we may be able to give" over the coming years, but had not made a decision on whether to send its F-35 or Typhoons.

"We think it is right to provide both short-term equipment ... that can help win the war now, but also look to the medium to long term to make sure Ukraine has every possible capacity it requires," he said.

Ukraine has sought Western fighter jets since early in the war to bolster its force of Soviet-made MiG-29 and Su fighters. The success of its air force in defending its skies and territory despite Russia's bigger numbers helped push back Moscow's initial assault.

The Russian Embassy in London strongly warned the U.K. against supplying the warplanes, saying Britain

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would bear responsibility “for another twist of escalation and the ensuing military-political consequences for the European continent and the entire world.”

Macron has said France hasn’t ruled out sending fighter jets but set conditions, including not leading to an escalation of tensions or using the aircraft “to touch Russian soil,” and not resulting in weakening “the capacities of the French army.”

Sunak and Zelenskyy flew by helicopter to Lulworth Camp, a base in southwest England, where they met Ukrainian troops being trained on the Challenger 2 tanks the U.K. is sending as part of the hundreds that Kyiv says it needs. More than 10,000 Ukrainian troops have been trained in the U.K., and Britain says it will train 20,000 more in 2023.

“I am proud that today we will expand that training from soldiers to marines and fighter jet pilots, ensuring Ukraine has a military able to defend its interests well into the future,” Sunak said.

Zelenskyy also went to Buckingham Palace, where he met with King Charles III, who greeted him with a broad smile and a warm handshake before they had tea. The king told the president that “we’ve all been worried about you and thinking about your country for so long.”

In his Parliament speech, Zelenskyy noted that Charles was a qualified military pilot.

“The king is an air force pilot,” Zelenskyy said, and “in Ukraine today, every air force pilot is a king.”

Zelenskyy was greeted with applause, cheers and cries of “Slava Ukraini” — “Glory to Ukraine” — as he arrived in Parliament, where his cause has wide support.

He had addressed the U.K. Parliament remotely in March, two weeks after the start of the invasion. He echoed World War II leader Winston Churchill’s famous “never surrender” speech, vowing that Ukrainians “will fight till the end at sea, in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost.”

On Wednesday, he recalled how on a prewar visit to London, he sat in Churchill’s chair in his subterranean wartime headquarters, and had a feeling that only now he understands: “It was the feeling of how bravery takes you through the most unimaginable hardships to finally reward you with victory.”

In past wars, “evil lost,” he told U.K. lawmakers. “We know Russia will lose and we we know victory will change the world.”

He also urged stronger sanctions against Moscow until “Russia is deprived of any possibility to finance this war.”

Coinciding with the visit, the U.K. government announced new sanctions against six entities that Britain said supplied equipment to the Russian military. CST, a manufacturer of Russian drones and parts for helicopters used against Ukraine, were among them.

The London visit came as Russian forces shelled areas of eastern Ukraine in what Kyiv authorities believe is part of a thrust by the Kremlin’s forces before the invasion anniversary. Moscow, meanwhile, believes Ukraine is preparing its own battlefield push.

Will Ferrell, Alicia Silverstone star in Super Bowl ads

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Super Bowl is advertising’s biggest, glitziest stage.

Big name advertisers from Netflix to Google are paying as much as \$7 million for a 30-second spot during the big game on Sunday, in order to capture the attention of the roughly 100 million viewers who tune in each year.

In order to get as much of a return on investment for those millions, most advertisers release their ads in the days ahead of the big game to get the most publicity for their spots. In the ads released so far, actor Miles Teller dances to customer-service hold music for Bud Light, Will Ferrell crashes popular Netflix shows like “Bridgerton” in a joint ad for GM and Netflix; and Alicia Silverstone reprises her “Clueless” character for online shopping site Rakuten.

AVOCADOS FROM MEXICO

Anna Faris stars as Eve, who eats an avocado in the garden of Eden. Flash forward to the present day, when no one is ashamed of nudity and everyone is naked, including the Statue of Liberty.

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BOOKING.COM

Actress Melissa McCarthy stars in a musical number for the travel site about her desire to go on a trip "somewhere, anywhere."

BUD LIGHT

Actor Miles Teller ("Top Gun: Maverick") and his wife Keleigh Sperry Teller dance to customer service hold music while drinking a Bud Light.

BUDWEISER

In a regional ad, a diverse group of people share a six-pack of Budweiser — a voiceover by Kevin Bacon showcases the "six degrees of Bud." Although he's not shown, the ad is a nod to the "Six degrees of Kevin Bacon" meme — the idea that anyone in the entertainment business can be linked to Kevin Bacon in six connections.

BUSCH LIGHT

A mountain man talk talks about surviving the outdoors in an ad that stars singer Sarah McLachlan spoofing her well-known and oft mocked animal-advocacy ad that uses her song "Angel."

DEXCOM

Singer Nick Jonas returns for the second year in an ad that highlight's Dexcom's glucose monitoring system.

DORITOS

Music stars Jack Harlow, Missy Elliott and Elton John team up in an ad for Doritos Sweet & Tangy BBQ that shows Harlow abandoning his rap career to focus on the triangle — a Doritos-shaped musical instrument.

DOWNY UNSTOPABLES

Super Bowl regular Procter & Gamble promotes its Downy Unstopables brand in an ad showing actor Danny McBride — who wants to go by "Downy McBride."

DRAFTKINGS

The online betting site shows stars including skateboard mogul Tony Hawk and singer Ludacris discussing DraftKings free bet offer at a party at actor Kevin Hart's house.

GENERAL MOTORS AND NETFLIX

Actor and comedian Will Ferrell drives different GM electric vehicles through different Netflix shows, including "Bridgerton" and "Stranger Things," to announce that Netflix will feature electric vehicles in its original shows.

GOOGLE

Google promotes its Pixel photo editing tools "Magic Eraser" and "Photo Unblur" with a 90 second spot featuring Amy Schumer, Doja Cat and NBA star Giannis Antetokoumpo.

HELLMANN'S

The mayo brand shows actors Jon Hamm and Brie Larson in a fridge with a jar of Hellmann's mayo — to drive home the point that Hellmann's would go well with a "ham and brie" sandwich.

MICHELOB ULTRA

Michelob Ultra's two ads are set at Bushwood Country Club, the fictional country club in "Caddyshack," and star a bevy of stars and athletes: tennis great Serena Williams, actor Brian Cox, Dallas Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo, soccer player Alex Morgan and boxer Canelo Alvarez.

PEPSI ZEROSUGAR

Pepsi is running two ads starring Ben Stiller and Steve Martin that ask "Great acting or great taste?" and ask viewers to taste Pepsi Zero Sugar for themselves.

PLANTERS

Jeff Ross, Natasha Leggero and other comedians hold a "roast" for the Planters spokescharacter Mr. Peanut.

POPCORNERS

The Frito-Lay brand recreates "Breaking Bad" with Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul — but this time the duo are cooking up the PopCorners snack in their RV instead of anything illicit.

PRINGLES

Anyone can get their hand stuck in a Pringles can, according to Pringles' latest Super Bowl ad effort,

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including singer Meghan Trainor.

RAKUTEN

The online shopping site tapped "Clueless" stars Alicia Silverstone and Elisa Donovan to recreate a scene from the 1995 hit and convey that Rakuten gives shoppers cash back on purchases. Designer Christian Siriano also appears as a student.

UBER ONE

Uber's ad for its membership program Uber One shows hip hop mogul P. Diddy working to create a hit song for Uber One. The ad features singers of famous hits, including Montell Jordan ("This is How We Do It"), Kelis ("Milkshake"), Donna Lewis ("I Love You Always Forever"), Haddaway ("What is Love") and Ylvis ("What Does the Fox Say").

WORKDAY

In the first Super Bowl ad from the enterprise software company, actual rock stars Ozzy Osbourne, Billy Idol, Joan Jett and others complain that office workers shouldn't call each other "rock stars."

In earthquake rescues, noisy gear and digging, then silence

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

ADANA, Turkey (AP) — They lifted slabs of cement with enormous cranes and smashed rubble with jackhammers. Then, they stopped.

Silence.

Key to detecting the faintest noise, which could be the sign of a survivor buried beneath rubble from Monday's quake in Turkey and Syria.

Among the wreckage of a collapsed 14-story building in the Turkish city of Adana, the shriek of a whistle pierced the noise every few minutes on Wednesday. Rescue workers hollered for quiet, and listened for any hint of voices from the debris. Hundreds of people watching hushed.

During one moment of digging, Volunteer Bekir Bicer uncovered a crushed birdcage, he said. Inside was a blue-and-yellow bird, alive after nearly 60 hours.

"I was very happy. I nearly cried," Bicer said. "The cage was broken, but the bird was still inside."

Friends and family of the trapped sat beside fires, waiting for a miracle even as the survival window for those trapped under the rubble was closing.

Suat Yarkan, 50, said his aunt and her two daughters lived in an apartment on the building's fourth floor. They would have been home asleep when the quake struck. He was desperate for hope that they could be rescued alive.

"Look at the bird. Sixty hours," he said. "It makes me feel like maybe God is helping us ... I have to believe that they will recover everyone."

Regular moments of silence are essential to such operations, said David Alexander, professor of emergency planning and management at University College London.

"We often find helicopters chattering overhead, making a huge noise and sometimes also blowing up dust whilst the teams are desperately trying to listen for any kind of noise that might indicate someone alive and moving under the rubble," he said.

Sophisticated rescue teams will use microphones to pick up faint noises, while specially trained dogs and fiber-optic cameras pick up heat inside mounds of debris. But given the need to move quickly, and the limited number of rescue teams deployed across a huge area, cries for help are key.

"If a person can attract attention under the rubble, their chance of being saved is about three times higher than it would be if they're in a coma, statistically speaking," Alexander said.

As the sun set Wednesday for the third time on devastated cities and towns in Turkey and Syria, the push to recover survivors became more urgent as the lack of food and water, bitterly cold weather and potential injuries grew even more acute.

Prospects for finding survivors almost three days after the quake are narrow, experts say.

"The first 72 hours are considered to be critical as the condition of people trapped and injured can deteriorate quickly and become fatal if they are not rescued and given medical attention in time," said Steven

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Godby, an expert in natural hazards at Nottingham Trent University in England.

In Adana on Wednesday, rescue workers at another collapsed building draped a white sheet across a recess in the mound of debris, obscuring the view of what they'd discovered there.

The digging machines came to a stop, and a stretcher was pulled behind the sheet as the workers looked on in silence.

An ancient city of more than 2 million inhabitants just 20 miles (32 km) from the Mediterranean Sea, Adana has experienced earthquakes before. A 6.3 magnitude tremor in 1998 killed nearly 150 people in the city and its surroundings, and left thousands homeless.

This week's stronger quake left a large number of Adana's buildings, many of them modern, seemingly untouched. Many high-rise apartment buildings appeared entirely undamaged. On the city's northern fringe, however, several 14-story buildings collapsed.

As of Tuesday night, Turkey's government reported that 167 people had been killed by the earthquake in Adana, with others still trapped beneath the rubble. That was only a tenth of the deaths reported in the devastated Hatay province, miles away.

Ex-Twitter execs deny pressure to block Hunter Biden story

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and BARBARA ORTUTAY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Twitter executives conceded Wednesday they made a mistake by blocking a story about Hunter Biden, the president's son, from the social media platform in the run-up to the 2020 election, but adamantly denied Republican assertions they were pressured by Democrats and law enforcement to suppress the story.

"The decisions here aren't straightforward, and hindsight is 20/20," Yoel Roth, Twitter's former head of trust and safety, testified to Congress. "It isn't obvious what the right response is to a suspected, but not confirmed, cyberattack by another government on a presidential election."

He added, "Twitter erred in this case because we wanted to avoid repeating the mistakes of 2016."

The three former executives appeared before the House Oversight and Accountability Committee to testify for the first time about the company's decision to initially block from Twitter a New York Post article in October 2020 about the contents of a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden.

Emboldened by Twitter's new leadership in billionaire Elon Musk — whom they see as more sympathetic to conservatives than the company's previous administration — Republicans used the hearing to push a long-standing and unproven theory that social media companies including Twitter are biased against them.

Committee Chairman Rep. James Comer said the hearing is the panel's "first step in examining the coordination between the federal government and Big Tech to restrict protected speech and interfere in the democratic process."

The hearing continues a years-long trend of GOP leaders calling tech company leaders to testify about alleged political bias. Democrats, meanwhile, have pressed the companies on the spread of hate speech and misinformation on their platforms.

The witnesses Republicans subpoenaed were Roth, Vijaya Gadde, Twitter's former chief legal officer, and James Baker, the company's former deputy general counsel.

Democrats brought a witness of their own, Anika Collier Navaroli, a former employee with Twitter's content moderation team. She testified last year to the House committee that investigated the Jan. 6 Capitol riot about Twitter's preferential treatment of Donald Trump until it banned the then-president from the site two years ago.

The White House criticized congressional Republicans for staging "a bizarre political stunt," hours after Biden's State of the Union address where he detailed bipartisan progress in his first two years in office.

"This appears to be the latest effort by the House Republican majority's most extreme MAGA members to question and relitigate the outcome of the 2020 election," White House spokesperson Ian Sams said in a statement Wednesday. "This is not what the American people want their leaders to work on."

The New York Post reported weeks before the 2020 presidential election that it had received from Trump's

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personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, a copy of a hard drive from a laptop that Hunter Biden had dropped off 18 months earlier at a Delaware computer repair shop and never retrieved. Twitter blocked people from sharing links to the story for several days.

"You exercised an amazing amount of clout and power over the entire American electorate by even holding (this story) hostage for 24 hours and then reversing your policy," Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., said to the panel of witnesses.

Months later, Twitter's then-CEO, Jack Dorsey, called the company's communications around the Post article "not great." He added that blocking the article's URL with "zero context" around why it was blocked was "unacceptable."

The newspaper story was greeted at the time with skepticism due to questions about the laptop's origins, including Giuliani's involvement, and because top officials in the Trump administration had already warned that Russia was working to denigrate Joe Biden before the White House election.

The Kremlin interfered in the 2016 race by hacking Democratic emails that were subsequently leaked, and fears that Russia would meddle again in the 2020 race were widespread across Washington.

Just last week, lawyers for the younger Biden asked the Justice Department to investigate people who say they accessed his personal data. But they did not acknowledge that the data came from a laptop Hunter Biden is purported to have dropped off at a computer repair shop.

The issue was also reignited recently after Musk took over Twitter as CEO and began to release a slew of company information to independent journalists, what he has called the "Twitter Files."

The documents and data largely show internal debates among employees over the decision to temporarily censor links to the Hunter Biden story. The tweet threads lacked substantial evidence of a targeted influence campaign from Democrats or the FBI, which has denied any involvement in Twitter's decision-making.

Rep. Dan Goldman, D-N.Y., called the hearing a "fishing expedition" seeking to reheat bogus allegations claiming Biden somehow influenced his son's business dealings in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, Republicans including Comer, R-Ky., have used the Post story, which has not been independently verified by The Associated Press, as the basis for what they claim is another example of the Biden family's "influence peddling."

One of Wednesday's witnesses, Baker, has been a frequent target of Republican scrutiny.

Baker was the FBI's general counsel during the opening of two of the bureau's most consequential investigations in history: the Hillary Clinton investigation and a separate inquiry into potential coordination between Russia and Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Republicans have long criticized the FBI's handling of both investigations.

Baker denied any wrongdoing during his two years at Twitter and said that despite disagreeing with the decision to block links to the Post story, "I believe that the public record reveals that my client acted in a manner that was fully consistent with the First Amendment."

There has been no evidence that Twitter's platform is biased against conservatives; studies have found the opposite when it comes to conservative media in particular. But the issue continues to preoccupy GOP members of congress.

And some experts said questions around government influence on Big Tech's content moderation are legitimate.

"Despite how I would change how some of the members ask their questions, there should be more insight into this stuff. There should be more transparency," said Katie Harbath, a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center who served as Facebook's former public policy director.

She added, "There's still a lot more hearings and sides to the story that we need to hear from, particularly the government and the FBI."

Stella Jean quits Milan Fashion Week over lack of inclusion

By COLLEEN BARRY AP Fashion Writer

MILAN (AP) — The only Black designer belonging to Italy's fashion chamber withdrew Wednesday from

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this month's Milan Fashion Week, alleging a lack of support for diversity and inclusion after the chamber "abandoned" a project to promote young designers of color working in Italy.

Stella Jean interrupted a press conference by the Italian National Fashion Chamber to announce that neither she nor five members of the We Are Made in Italy collective of designers of color would participate in fashion week.

She also said she had started a hunger strike Wednesday out of concern members of WAMI, an initiative launched in 2020 on the heels of the Black Lives Matter movement, could suffer a professional backlash for her activism.

The moves signaled a dramatic denouement of a nearly three-year-collaboration with the chamber to promote designers of color.

"The chamber told us, 'We didn't know there were Italian designers who weren't white.' We brought them to the runway. They supported us for two years. Then we were abandoned," Jean told the press conference.

Italian Fashion Chamber President Carlo Capasa assured her from the dais that the chamber had no intention of retaliating in any way. He expressed regret that neither she nor the WAMI members would participate in Fashion Week.

"Stella's contribution has always been appreciated. We Italians need to have our conscience stimulated," he said. "As for WAMI, we are not people who retaliate. For us it is important to promote new brands."

He noted that two WAMI designers from previous seasons were presenting collections during Milan Fashion Week, which runs from Feb. 21-27.

In addition, the chamber has included on the fashion week calendar the inaugural edition of the Black Carpet Awards recognizing the achievements of minorities in Italian society, and was hosting another diversity initiative by the owner and editor of U.S.-based Blanc Magazine, Teneshia Carr.

Jean charged that the chamber had significantly cut back support for WAMI after she made an impassioned speech about the personal price she had paid for highlighting racial injustice in Italy during a runway show last September.

She also said it backtracked on a promise to create a Black board within the chamber to promote diversity and inclusion. Capasa told AP that he decided against the board after WAMI made social media posts that cast a negative light on some Italian fashion brands.

"We wrote a nice letter, saying we want to give them the liberty to express themselves," Capasa said, adding that the chamber could not host any board that appeared to take public swipes at other members.

Italian-Haitian Jean, who made her Milan runway premiere in 2013 on the Armani runway, said she and her family have been subjected to retaliation for her activism for racial justice in Italy. She said that included death threats against her daughter by other minors, and the termination of professional relationships for her.

"When you speak of retaliations, of death threats, people, I work in fashion. I don't traffic arms, I don't traffic drugs or make money from trafficking women," Jean said. "It is absurd, vile, shameful and inhuman that I must speak for people who feel their lives are in danger, who feel they will suffer the same retaliation."

WAMI was launched by Jean, African-American designer Edward Buchanan and the head of Afro Fashion Week Milano, Michelle Ngonmo, to draw attention to the lack of minority representation in the Italian fashion world. It followed some racial gaffes by major fashion houses that made global headlines.

Ngonmo told the AP that financial support for the project from the chamber had dwindled over the three years it has run so far, and that Afro Fashion Week Milano wasn't able to come up with 20,000 euros (\$21,000) to support the five young designers in making solid looks to present, plus a video.

The Italian fashion chamber fully supported the collections for the two WAMI classes, each with five designers, but hasn't funded the third generation, Ngonmo and Jean said.

A September show featuring Jean, Buchanan and WAMI was financed through other allies and their own contributions. The latest WAMI collections were to be presented by video on Feb. 22.

"Maybe the message is the whole industry needs to open their eyes and say, 'What can we do to make that happen?'" Ngonmo told the AP.

Capasa emphasized that the project by Blanc Magazine's Carr is receiving the same support he offered WAMI: a slot on the calendar and a physical space in the Fashion Hub where journalists and buyers can view the collections.

But Jean insists that Italy's designers of color deserve special promotion by the chamber, whose role is the promotion of Italian fashion.

Jean said progress in recent seasons — including opening fashion week with WAMI designer Joy Meribe's runway show, and Jean's own return to the runway in September — had turned out to be "performative."

"They used WAMI as a free pass of safe conduct for diversity," Jean told the AP. She said she was withdrawing out of fatigue with the "continual fight" for recognition for designers of color in Italy.

"I am a fighter by nature, but I cannot be this way all the time," she said.

Primary care a hot target; CVS spends \$10.6B on Oak Street

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

Big money is pouring into primary care clinics as the nation's health care giants hunt for ways to cut costs by keeping people healthy.

CVS Health said Wednesday that it will spend about \$10.6 billion to buy Oak Street Health, which runs clinics that specialize in treating Medicare Advantage patients.

The acquisition comes just three months after a nearly \$9-billion investment by rival Walgreens in VillageMD's acquisition of the urgent and primary care chain Summit Health-CityMD. And that deal was announced two months after CVS said it would spend \$8 billion to acquire home health care provider Signify Health.

The money being spent tells of a rapid expansion in value-based care, an approach to medicine that is growing popular with bill payers like the federal government's Medicare program.

It essentially rewards doctors for keeping patients healthy instead of paying them for every service they perform. The idea is to help people stay on their regular medications, control chronic health problems such as diabetes, and avoid hospital stays and other expensive medical treatments.

"It is clear that value-based-care is becoming a dominant model in healthcare," BTIG analyst David Larsen said in a recent research note.

Oak Street specializes in this care. Its centers use doctors, social workers and other care providers to help people manage their health.

Oak Street CEO Michael Pykosz has said that a lot of costs stem from patients with chronic health issues who receive poor care and wind up with big medical problems.

"Solving that problem creates a massive, massive market opportunity for Oak Street Health," Pykosz said in January at an annual conference hosted by JPMorgan.

CVS Health CEO Karen Lynch told analysts Wednesday that she sees primary care as a key to improving patient health. She noted that although it represents only about 10% of health care spending nationally, the specialty holds "significant influence" over health care use.

Oak Street runs care centers mostly for lower-to-middle income people with Medicare Advantage plans. Those are privately run versions of the federal government's program for people aged 65 and older.

Founded in 2012, Oak Street operates 169 locations in 21 states. It expects to have more than 300 locations by 2026.

Oak Street's revenue grew to \$1.43 billion in 2021, and analysts expect that it topped \$2 billion last year. But the company is spending heavily to open new clinics, and its losses have grown every year.

CVS Health Corp. leaders have been talking for well over a year about adding more primary care as rivals that also include UnitedHealth Group beef up their medical staffs.

In addition to running drugstores, CVS Health also covers more than 3 million people with Medicare Advantage plans. Big insurers like that need a major presence in primary care to help control costs, Larsen said.

He added in a note Wednesday that the price CVS Health was willing to pay for Oak Street probably climbed due to a potential tightening of Medicare reimbursement and a competitive market that includes

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Amazon.com.

Two months before CVS's Signify deal, Amazon said it would spend roughly \$3.9 billion to buy care provider One Medical. Regulators are still reviewing that deal.

CVS Health said Wednesday it would pay \$39 per share in cash for each share of Oak Street in a deal expected to close this year.

CVS Health also announced on Wednesday better-than-expected results from the final quarter of 2022. The Woonsocket, Rhode Island, company's profit surged 76% in the quarter to \$2.3 billion. Adjusted earnings totaled \$1.99 per share.

Total revenue climbed 9% to \$83.85 billion.

Analysts expected earnings of \$1.92 per share on \$76.32 billion in revenue, according to FactSet.

The company also said it still expects 2023 adjusted earnings to range between \$8.70 and \$8.90 per share. CVS Health leaders first laid out that forecast last November.

Analysts forecast earnings of \$8.84 per share.

Shares of both CVS Health and Chicago-based Oak Street Health Inc. climbed more than 4% Wednesday while broader indexes slipped.

Super Bowl has rare matchup of top 2 regular-season teams

By JOSH DUBOW AP Pro Football Writer

This year's Super Bowl features a rare matchup of the NFL's top two teams from the regular season.

The Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas City Chiefs were the league's only 14-game winners, marking just the sixth time since the 1970 merger that the squads with sole possession of the two best records in the regular season met for the championship.

The last time it happened came after the 2013 season when Seattle beat Denver 43-8 in a matchup of 13-win teams.

That blowout was relatively typical of these meetings, with the average margin of victory in the previous five powerhouse matchups being 21 points.

The closest game was Washington's 37-24 win over Buffalo following the 1991 season. The three others featured San Francisco beating Miami 38-16 after the 1984 season, Dallas topping Denver 27-10 to cap the 1977 season and Oakland beating Minnesota 32-14 the previous year.

Since seeding began in 1975, this is the 15th time the top team in each conference made it to the Super Bowl. The previous time came after the 2017 season when the Eagles won their first Super Bowl championship by beating New England 41-33.

This is also the third time both Super Bowl teams won at least 14 games in the regular season, although both Kansas City and Philadelphia needed wins in the added 17th game to get there. Atlanta and Denver did it in 16-game seasons in 1998, and Miami and San Francisco in 1984.

The Chiefs and Eagles also have been in control all postseason, with neither team trailing in the playoffs. The only other times both Super Bowl teams did that came in the 2004 season (Patriots vs. Eagles), 1991 season (Bills vs. Washington) and 1966 season (Packers vs. Chiefs).

AIR IT OUT

Patrick Mahomes will try to do something that has never been done before in the NFL by following up a regular season when he led the league in yards passing with a Super Bowl title.

Mahomes threw for 5,250 yards during the regular season — 511 more than second-place Justin Herbert for the largest gap between first and second place since Kurt Warner beat out Peyton Manning by 699 yards in 2001.

The only player to reach the Super Bowl after throwing for more yards in the regular season than Mahomes was Manning, with a record 5,477 in 2013. His Broncos lost 43-8 to Seattle in the Super Bowl.

That was one of six times before Mahomes that the player who led the league in yards passing made it to the Super Bowl, with all of them losing. The others were Tom Brady (2017 season), Brady (2007), Rich Gannon (2002), Warner (2001) and Dan Marino (1984).

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COACHING REUNION

Chiefs coach Andy Reid joins Dan Reeves as the only coaches to face a franchise in the Super Bowl that they previously took to the big game.

Reid coached the Eagles to their second Super Bowl following the 2004 season before getting fired after the 2012 season. He quickly built Kansas City into a power and now is ready for his fourth Super Bowl appearance as a head coach — the ninth coach to reach that mark.

Reid will hope for better luck in his rematch than Reeves had after the 1998 season against a Denver organization he had guided to the Super Bowl in the 1986, '87 and '89 seasons before losing all three. The Broncos beat Reeves and the Atlanta Falcons 34-19 in the Super Bowl.

Two other coaches faced their former teams in the Super Bowl and ended up on the winning side: Jon Gruden led Tampa Bay past the Raiders after the 2002 season and Weeb Ewbank coached the Jets to a huge upset over the Colts following the 1968 season.

The Eagles will be the sixth franchise to reach the Super Bowl under four coaches, with Nick Sirianni joining Doug Pederson, Reid and Dick Vermeil.

The Raiders, 49ers, Colts and Rams all got there with four coaches, and the Broncos did it with a record five.

TERRIFIC TIGHT END

Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce has put together a playoff career topped perhaps only by the greatest receiver ever in Jerry Rice.

Kelce has 127 catches in 17 career playoff games for 1,467 yards and 15 touchdowns. The only player to top any of those numbers was Rice, with 151 catches for 2,245 yards and 22 TDs in 29 playoff games.

The Mahomes-Kelce connection also is one of the best, with their 13 TD passes in the playoffs trailing only the 15 Tom Brady threw to Rob Gronkowski.

Microsoft's Activision deal hurts gamers, UK watchdog says

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Microsoft's stalled \$68.7 billion deal to buy video game company Activision Blizzard has hit a fresh hurdle in the United Kingdom, where the antitrust watchdog said Wednesday that it will stifle competition and hurt gamers.

Britain's Competition and Markets Authority said its in-depth investigation found that the deal could strengthen Microsoft's position in the growing cloud gaming market, "harming U.K. gamers who cannot afford expensive consoles." In cloud gaming, players stream games on mobile phones and handheld devices they already own.

The blockbuster deal also could hurt British gamers by "weakening the important rivalry" between Microsoft's Xbox console and Sony's rival PlayStation machines, the watchdog said in a provisional report.

The all-cash deal, which is set to be the largest in the history of the tech industry, is facing opposition from Sony and pushback from regulators in the U.S. and Europe because it would give Microsoft control of popular game franchises such as Call of Duty, World of Warcraft and Candy Crush.

"Our job is to make sure that U.K. gamers are not caught in the crossfire of global deals that, over time, could damage competition and result in higher prices, fewer choices, or less innovation," Martin Coleman, chair of the independent expert panel that carried out the investigation, said in a press release. "We have provisionally found that this may be the case here."

Microsoft's deputy general counsel, Rima Alaily, said the company is "committed to offering effective and easily enforceable solutions that address the CMA's concerns."

Activision also said it hopes to "be able to help the CMA better understand our industry." In an internal email to employees, CEO Bobby Kotick said Activision looks forward to continuing constructive talks with regulators in Britain and the European Union, where a separate investigation is underway.

"We are also confident that the law — and the facts — are on our side," he said.

The U.K. antitrust investigation is now set to drag on for a few more months, dashing Microsoft's hopes

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that a speedy favorable outcome could help it resolve a lawsuit brought by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission.

But the fact that the U.K. didn't move to prohibit the deal leaves an opening to Microsoft for further negotiation, said William Kovacic, a former FTC chairman

"The key thing in the decision is it invites further discussion about solutions," said Kovacic, now a law professor at George Washington University.

The British regulator said it will seek feedback, including possible options to address its competition concerns, from interested parties for its final report due April 26.

The FTC has sought to block the deal, arguing that the merger could violate antitrust laws by suppressing competitors to Xbox and its growing game subscription business.

Microsoft told the FTC's administrative judge in January that it was working to resolve the U.K. investigation, as well as the EU probe, and hoped to bring back proposed remedies to U.S. regulators. But emboldened by President Joe Biden to take a tougher look at big mergers, the Democratic-led commission has shown little appetite for talks.

"It helps the FTC enormously if another major competition authority in the world moves to ban the transaction and not accept a settlement," Kovacic said.

The Activision Blizzard deal is one of several regulatory hassles for Microsoft in Europe amid expanded scrutiny for Big Tech companies on both sides of the Atlantic over worries that they have become too dominant.

One of the deal's flashpoints is Activision's hit video game Call of Duty. Sony has raised concerns about losing access to what it calls a "must-have" game title, while Microsoft has promised to make it available on all platforms.

"Our commitment to grant long-term 100% equal access to Call of Duty to Sony, Nintendo, Steam and others preserves the deal's benefits to gamers and developers and increases competition in the market," Alaily said.

The U.K. watchdog said options to ease its concerns include blocking the deal, selling off part of Activision's business or a so-called behavioral remedy such as an agreement to make popular games like Call of Duty available on other platforms, which it said would be less effective.

It's not the first time the British watchdog has flexed its antitrust enforcement muscles over a Big Tech agreement. Last year, it blocked Facebook parent Meta's acquisition of GIF-sharing platform Giphy over competition concerns, forcing the social media company to unwind the deal.

Toxic gases connected to Ohio train derailment cause concern

By BRITTANY PETERSON and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

Days after crews released and burned toxic chemicals transported by a wrecked train in Ohio, residents remain concerned about the toxic substances that could be lingering in their evacuated neighborhoods.

About 50 cars, including 10 carrying hazardous materials, derailed in a fiery crash Friday in East Palestine, according to rail operator Norfolk Southern and the National Transportation Safety Board. Vinyl chloride was slowly released into the air Monday from five of those cars before crews ignited it to get rid of the highly flammable, toxic chemicals in a controlled environment, creating a dark plume of smoke.

Residents in the immediate area there and nearby in Pennsylvania were evacuated beforehand because of health risks from the fumes and can't yet return Wednesday, as the impact of burning vinyl chloride is a concern.

WHAT IS VINYL CHLORIDE?

The gas is used to make the polyvinyl chloride hard plastic resin in plastic products. It is found in products such as credit cards, furniture and car parts, but is most notably used in PVC plastic piping, a common material for plumbing.

IS IT DANGEROUS?

Vinyl chloride is associated with increased risk of liver cancer and other cancers, according to the federal

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government's National Cancer Institute.

The effect was studied in PVC pipe makers, who breathed in vinyl chloride and developed rare liver cancers, said Ruth Lunn, who studies carcinogens at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

"If you worked longer, you had a higher risk, and if your exposure levels were high, you had a higher risk," Lunn said.

Vinyl chloride is dozens of times less toxic per molecule than the U.S.-banned insecticide DDT but more dangerous per part than ammonia and natural gas, according to federal regulations that dictate acceptable levels in the air.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT BURNS?

Officials warned the controlled burn would send phosgene and hydrogen chloride into the air. Phosgene is a highly toxic, colorless gas with a strong odor that can cause vomiting and breathing trouble and was used as a weapon in World War I.

Phosgene is considered safe at 0.1 parts per million during an eight-hour exposure, or 0.2 ppm for a 15-minute exposure. The eight-hour exposure threshold would have to be even lower when measuring inside people's homes, where residents often spend more than eight consecutive hours.

Hydrogen chloride is a colorless to yellowish gas with a strong odor and its primary effect on humans is skin, eye, nose and throat irritation. It is considered safe at 5 ppm for an eight-hour exposure.

Neil Donahue, a professor chemistry at Carnegie Mellon University in nearby Pittsburgh, said he worries that the burning could have formed dioxins, which are created from burning chlorinated carbon materials.

"Vinyl chloride is bad, dioxins are worse as carcinogens and that comes from burning," Donahue said.

Dioxins are a group of persistent environmental pollutants that last in the ground and body for years and have been one of the major environmental problems and controversies in the United States.

Dr. Lynn Goldman, dean of George Washington University's School of Public Health, agrees this is a possible risk, but is more concerned about uncombusted vinyl chloride vapors that could be lurking in the immediate vicinity.

"Until there has been a thorough assessment, the soot as well as any other materials should in my opinion be treated as contaminated by vinyl chloride and/or dioxins or other contaminants until proven otherwise," she said.

WHAT IS BEING MONITORED?

James Justice of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said a network of air station monitors inside and outside the evacuation zone was collecting samples and that none of their readings found anything to be concerned about. "We want to make sure that's not going to change," he said.

Justice said the agency is still working with experts to determine safe levels for various gases before reopening the evacuation zone. The incident response team did not specify what substances they are monitoring.

The gases that experts suspect are in the area are heavier than air, which means they could be sitting in low-lying areas if not completely dissipated.

National Guard members wearing protective gear are taking readings inside homes, basements and businesses, Major General John Harris Jr. said.

The EPA also sampled nearby rivers to determine whether there has been any water contamination and is awaiting results.

WHEN WILL THE RISK BE OVER?

Whatever chemicals are in the air, gases largely dissipate fairly rapidly when out in the open, said George Gray, a public health professor at George Washington University. "Sunlight can change that, the movement of air can change that, temperature can change that," Gray said.

Residents are concerned about long-term effects of low-grade exposure.

"There's all that smoke and all those chemicals in there," said Mason Shields, who lives in East Palestine and visited an aid center outside the evacuation zone. "I'm wondering if it's even going to be safe for people to return within the next week or month or however long."

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LeBron James makes NBA history on a star-filled night in LA

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bronny James stepped over to his dad's locker and played the phone video he had taken of Tuesday night's biggest moment. The NBA's new scoring king tipped his head back in a rich, full-throated laugh when the audio revealed Bronny had anticipated that the historic basket would come on a fadeaway jumper.

"That's tough, that's tough," LeBron James said. "That's funny."

For James, the greatest cost of nearly two decades in the NBA is the family time he misses. When he reached arguably the greatest individual basketball milestone of all by passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's career scoring record, James' mother, wife and three children all witnessed the coronation.

They were right at courtside in a building packed with stars and roaring fans who rose in waves of anticipation every time he touched the ball.

James has been thriving under formidable pressure his entire adult life, and this was nothing the King couldn't handle — although the man who says he almost never cries had tears in his eyes after he made history with that nimble step-back shot in the third quarter.

"I had a moment when it happened, and I embraced that moment," James said afterward. "Seeing my family and friends, the people that's been around me since I started this journey to the NBA, definitely very emotional right there. Just a kid from a small town in Ohio. I had a moment there, but I don't think it's really hit me, what just transpired."

When James surpassed Abdul-Jabbar's record 38,387 points, a crowd that had roared for his every basket went the craziest of all.

"A lot of people wanted me to go to the skyhook to break the record, or one of the signature dunks," James said with a grin. "But the fadeaway is a signature play as well."

The Los Angeles crowd screamed and stomped with every point while James steadily surged toward the mark held since April 1984 by Abdul-Jabbar, who watched the game from a baseline seat near the Los Angeles bench.

With four championship rings and nearly every other honor available to a basketball player, the 38-year-old James closed in on this next moment in history with the confidence of a player who has been even better than anyone could have expected two decades ago when the kid from Akron, Ohio, reached the NBA.

"The expectations were all the way out to Pluto, and he went ahead and created his own galaxy," Lakers coach Darvin Ham said before his team's 133-130 loss to the Oklahoma City Thunder.

The crowd was in its seats far earlier than normal in Los Angeles, and James got numerous ovations before the Lakers and Thunder got rolling. Lakers fans turned out in droves for the chance to see a once-in-a-generation achievement, with tickets going for thousands on the secondary market.

The moment was irresistible to fans like Aaron Sanchez, one of the hundreds of jersey-clad Lakers faithful patiently taking turns posing in front of the statue of Abdul-Jabbar that stands on the plaza in front of the Lakers' downtown arena.

Sanchez shares a set of two season tickets with a few friends and family, and he already had the seats for Tuesday's game months before anyone could predict the magic day. He turned down a friend's offer of \$200 to swap the Thunder seats, but he knew he would be out of luck if James waited until Thursday to break the record, since those tickets belong to a different friend.

"It's basketball history, and that's what the Lakers are all about," Sanchez said. "LeBron is already one of the greatest Lakers ever, and getting this record in a Lakers uniform just makes it more certain. He was our leader after Kobe (Bryant) died, and he's our leader now."

Indeed, James has already earned a special place in Lakers fans' hearts over his five seasons in purple and gold. Several months before he won the franchise's 17th championship in the Florida pandemic bubble, he became a part of Lakers lore with his inspirational words and steady leadership in the wake of Bryant's death in a helicopter crash.

Inside the building, dozens of celebrities gathered to witness history: Denzel Washington, Jay-Z, Bad Bunny, LL Cool J, Usher, Andy Garcia and countless others. Dozens of basketball greats also turned out,

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including Lakers heroes James Worthy and Bob McAdoo along with Dwyane Wade.

The biggest star in the crowd was Abdul-Jabbar, who has verbally sparred with James in public over issues not directly related to basketball. The Lakers legend known to all as Cap wasn't about to miss history, and he shared a warm hug with James before ceremonially exchanging a basketball in a simple, touching gesture.

Although the final score chafed him, James said he'll never forget this stop on his two-decade journey. "This ride has been fantastic," James said.

Scoring King: James passes Abdul-Jabbar for NBA points mark

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

LeBron James got the first official statistic of his NBA career on a rebound. His next entry on the stat sheet was an assist.

Even then, points weren't the priority. They never were.

Somehow, he became the most prolific scorer in NBA history anyway. It finally happened Tuesday night, the kid from Akron, Ohio, connecting on a step-back jumper to push his career total to 38,388 points and break the record that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar held for nearly 39 years.

James outstretched his arms after his 36th point of the night for the Los Angeles Lakers, threw both hands in the air, then smiled. Abdul-Jabbar rose from his seat and clapped. The game was stopped as members of James' family, including his mother, his wife and their three children, took the floor for a ceremony recognizing the moment.

"It's never gotten my juices flowing," James told The Associated Press, when asked what the scoring record means to him. "I'm there now because I never, ever thought about it. The only thing I ever thought about was winning championships, maybe a couple MVPs, maybe defensive player of the year. But scoring championships and records, I'm telling you, that was never on my mind."

Abdul-Jabbar — a longtime Laker and one of many celebrities and sports stars who made sure they were there to see history — became the league's all-time leading scorer on April 5, 1984 and wound up retiring in 1989 with 38,387 points. It was a record that some thought would last forever, with very few even coming close. Karl Malone retired 1,459 points behind Abdul-Jabbar, Kobe Bryant was 4,744 points shy, and Michael Jordan was 6,095 points away.

James passed them all, then caught Abdul-Jabbar, too. The 38-year-old — who finished with 38 points in the Lakers' 133-130 loss — did it in his 20th season. Abdul-Jabbar also played 20 NBA seasons.

"You've got to give him credit for just the way that he planned to last and to dominate," Abdul-Jabbar told TNT.

And now, King James — a moniker he's had since high school, when he was just a kid from Akron — is the NBA's scoring king, with 38,390 points and counting.

"A record that has stood for nearly 40 years, which many people thought would never be broken," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said.

Abdul-Jabbar held the ball aloft, then handed it to James, the ceremonial passing of the torch. They posed for photos with Silver, then with one another. James wiped away tears from his eyes, then addressed the crowd.

"I just want to say, thank you to the Laker faithful. You guys are one of a kind," James said. "To be able to be in the presence of such a legend as great as Kareem, it's very humbling. Please give a standing ovation to the Captain, please."

James then thanked his family and those who have supported him, including Silver and the late NBA Commissioner David Stern.

"I thank you guys so much for allowing me to be a part of something I've always dreamed about," James said.

At least 16 different players have, technically, been the all-time leading scorer in league history — most of those coming in the opening month of the league's existence in 1946, when everybody was starting from zero and nine different players were atop the scoring list in the first 16 days.

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But only six have ended a season officially as the all-time leader: Joe Fulks, George Mikan, Dolph Schayes, Bob Pettit, Wilt Chamberlain and Abdul-Jabbar.

James will be the seventh name on that list, and he's likely to stay there for a long time. No active player is within 10,000 points of James, who is under contract for two more years and is on pace to become the league's first 40,000-point scorer sometime next season.

"Nobody will ever, ever touch it," said Cleveland forward Kevin Love, a teammate of James on the 2016 title team. "The scoring record now will never be eclipsed. I don't care. It will never, ever be touched. It will never happen again."

James could have had the scoring record long ago, if so inclined. But he always preferred passing. James is behind only John Stockton, Jason Kidd and Chris Paul on the all-time assists list. None of them were, or are, close to the scorer that James is. Of that group, Paul comes closest, ranking 38th in NBA history.

And Paul is 17,000 points behind the new scoring king.

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but that is very true," Silver told AP in advance of the record-setting night. "I think it even adds — right? — to this this accomplishment for a guy who became a scorer because he determined that's what was necessary to win. And you're right, he probably doesn't get enough credit for his selfless play, because there's so much focus and attention on him. ... I think it makes it that much more special, that he'd rather be known for his assists than his baskets."

James is the only member of the NBA's triple-quintuple club: at least 10,000 points, 10,000 rebounds and 10,000 assists. There are 44 players to reach five digits in two of those categories.

He'll almost certainly be the NBA's all-time leader in earnings whenever he retires; when adding in the \$97 million he'll make over the next two seasons, he'll be past \$500 million in on-court salary alone. He's a 19-time All-Star selection, tying an Abdul-Jabbar record. If he plays in the game on Feb. 19 in Salt Lake City, he'll set a record for appearances.

Others, maybe, have been this good. That's always a debate. But no one has ever been this good, for this long. James — a two-time champion in Miami, a champion in Cleveland in 2016 and a champion with the Lakers in 2020 — is averaging 30 points per game in his 20th season; only three other players have averaged more than 10 points per game this deep into their careers, none of those averaging more than Bryant's 17.6 in his 20th and final season.

"I never did the, 'OK, if I play this amount of time and I average this' thing," James said. "I've never done that with anything in my career. I always said, 'If it happens, it happens.'"

It happened.

Analysis: LeBron has defied odds, with no drop-off in sight

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

LeBron James is 38 years old. He is in Season 20 of his NBA career. He is, by conventional basketball-playing standards, ancient.

History says his decline should have started already.

Except it hasn't. Not even close. And count that as just another example of what sets James apart from so many other greats, so many other superstars of their sport who were good enough for long enough to climb atop some lists in the record books.

The NBA's new scoring leader — he caught Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on Tuesday night, one Los Angeles Lakers great taking the record from another — is still one of the very best in the game. He is talking about playing two more years, three more years, maybe more. He could raise the scoring-record bar so high by the time he retires that it would be, at best, highly unrealistic for anyone to catch him.

"I know I'm still playing at a high level. ... I've been able to do some incredible things in this league," James said after he scored 38 points on the record-setting night to lift his career total to 38,390 — three more than Abdul-Jabbar, whose reign atop the NBA scoring list ended after almost 39 years. "And hopefully I can do some more incredible things before I'm done."

The unfortunate part about most longevity records is this: Young athletes don't set them. By design,

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they're usually broken by athletes who are at or near the end of their career.

Take Pete Rose, for example. Rose got his 4,192nd career hit — a record-breaker, the one where he passed Ty Cobb's official total (some say Rose actually had the record a few hits earlier, but the recognized number for Cobb by Major League Baseball remains 4,191 hits) — on Sept. 11, 1985.

At that moment, when Rose lined that hit off Eric Show, he was a .304 career hitter. But after the record-setter, he batted .225 for the remainder of his career. In fairness, he was 44 and 45 years old during that stint of batting .225.

He slowed down. It happens to everyone. Well, almost everyone.

"I think about the wear and tear on LeBron's body and the lack of sleep and the 3 1/2 games a week, season after season, how he takes care of himself," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said. "I hope the young players pay attention to that. Anyone who's ever been around LeBron, he's always working on his body."

Tiger Woods got 79 wins in 295 PGA Tour starts between 1996 and 2013, a ridiculously high-for-golf 27% winning rate. Since then, after off-the-course issues and a slew of injuries, Woods has won three times in 62 starts. He has tied Sam Snead for the all-time wins record on tour with 82. No one would dare doubt that Woods can find a way to get one more win and claim the record outright, but few would also say that it should be considered likely.

Wayne Gretzky caught Gordie Howe for the all-time NHL goals record and was still every bit The Great One — his moniker for decades now. But over his last five seasons after setting the record, Gretzky's production predictably dipped a bit. He averaged 0.25 goals and 1.1 points per game over those last five seasons, at the ages of 34 through 38. Before that, he averaged 0.71 goals and 2.2 points per game.

Even Abdul-Jabbar, after catching Wilt Chamberlain in 1984, saw his numbers decrease. Before the record, Abdul-Jabbar averaged 27.0 points. Afterward, 17.7 points.

"Kareem was a great player his entire career, even after setting the record," said Pat Riley, his coach with the Lakers and now the president of the Miami Heat. "The record didn't change anything for him."

There are two notable exceptions to the notion that says player production almost always must drop off after setting records.

James is the first one. Kobe Bryant averaged 17.6 points in his 20th season, a record for anyone who played that deep into their NBA career. It won't be a record much longer. James is averaging 30 per game in his 20th season.

The other exception is Tom Brady.

The recently retired seven-time Super Bowl champion never slowed down after catching Drew Brees for three of the biggest records a quarterback can have — most completions, most touchdowns and most yards.

Consider what Brady did this season, his 23rd, at 45 years old: 4,694 yards, 25 touchdown passes, a career-best and league-high 490 completions, a career-best and league-high 733 attempts. It might not have been his best year, but it was still incredibly prolific.

"There's always going to be a part that wants to play and a part of me that feels like I can play," Brady said on his "Let's Go!" podcast when explaining his retirement decision. "I think there's just a decision to know that it's the right time. I think for me, it's going to end at some point and now's the time."

Brady never dropped off. Ever.

So far, we can say the same about James. He continues to defy Father Time.

And now, sit back and watch how many more points he adds to this total. Barring injury, 40,000 points will happen. If he plays two or three more full seasons, 42,000 or 43,000 isn't unthinkable.

"He's going to extend this record even further," Abdul-Jabbar told TNT after the game Tuesday night. "And it'll be interesting to see how far it goes."

As jets closed in on China balloon, hobbyists were listening

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The extraordinary scene of U.S. fighter jets getting ready to strike a Chinese balloon had many people along the Carolina coast straining their necks and pointing their smartphones

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to the sky to capture the moment of impact.

But a group of aviation enthusiasts was, instead, intently scanning radio frequencies for the exchanges between the pilots who would follow as Huntress, NORAD's eastern air defense sector controller, tracked the exact distance as two Air Force F-22 fighter jets closed in on the target.

The pilots had to balance striking the balloon when it was at least six miles (10 kilometers) offshore — the distance NASA had advised the military allow to keep debris from falling on land — with ensuring it was still in U.S. territorial airspace.

"Five miles offshore," Huntress advises in a transmission that was captured by aviation hobbyist Ken Harrell, in a recording that was authenticated by NORAD.

"Frank One is switches hot," the first F-22 reports. The call sign "Frank" was given to both aircraft to honor 2nd Lt. Frank Luke, who earned the Medal of Honor in World War I for downing multiple balloons and aircraft.

"Frank Two is switches hot," the second F-22 radios in.

When Huntress calls out that the balloon is exactly six nautical miles out, Frank One takes the shot.

"The balloon is completely destroyed!" radios an F-15 fighter jet that also took part in the mission, advising quickly that "there appears to be metal chaff clouds. ... It's definitely metal breaking apart."

This audio, which was first reported by The War Zone, wasn't on the civilian radio frequencies that commercial pilots use. The Air Force pilots were communicating on an unencrypted military frequency that the North American Aerospace Defense Command uses to conduct missions to secure the eastern United States, under the control center named Huntress.

Aviation enthusiasts with the right radios scan for Huntress missions and other military flights as a hobby, calling out exercises.

Ken Harrell, a 68-year-old retiree from Summerville, South Carolina, is one of those enthusiasts. On Saturday, he recorded the exchange of the balloon shutdown.

NORAD confirmed the authenticity of the recording to The Associated Press in a statement.

When Harrell got started a few years ago, he said he "bought the right kind of scanner, put up, you know, a decent antenna and a lot of software to connect to the scanner and just started listening." He said the scanner only cost about \$160 to get started.

On Saturday, he got a call from a fellow enthusiast who said Huntress was guiding F-22s in to hit what the Pentagon has said was a spy balloon and China has insisted was a civilian weather balloon.

"He says, get on the scanner, man! Huntress has been controlling the F-22 Raptors, you know for the balloon, they're gonna do it," Harrell said. "So I jump up, crank up everything, and started listening in."

When Harrell heard the pilots' and controller's voices, "I was excited," he said. "I've listened to a lot of other stuff — fighters practicing, intercept exercises, and that's cool, but when I first turned the scanner on and it went to my local Huntress frequency, it was pretty apparent: This was a mission. Boom."

North Korean leader Kim brings daughter to visit troops

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un brought his daughter to visit troops to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the country's army as he lauded the "irresistible might" of his nuclear-armed military, state media said Wednesday.

The visit preceded a massive military parade that apparently began Wednesday night in the capital, Pyongyang, where Kim was expected to showcase the latest hardware of his fast-growing nuclear weapons program that stokes the concern of its neighbors and the United States.

Two South Korean officials said the parade likely kicked off around 9 p.m. They didn't provide further details and it wasn't immediately clear whether Kim was attending. North Korean military parades are closely watched by outside governments and experts as they often feature newly developed weapons systems the North intends to eventually test and deploy.

In her fourth known public appearance, Kim's daughter, Kim Ju Ae, believed to be 9 or 10 years old,

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stood close to her father as he shook the hands of senior officials and then sat next to him at a table. Analysts say Kim's decision to bring his daughter to public events tied to his military is to remind the world he has no intention to voluntarily surrender his nuclear weapons, which he apparently sees as the strongest guarantee of his survival and the extension of his family's dynastic rule.

State media's lofty description of Kim Ju Ae, who has been called "respected" and "beloved," has also inspired debate on whether she's being primed as her father's successor. She attended a flight test of an intercontinental ballistic missile in November and has accompanied her father to a meeting with military scientists and an inspection of ballistic missiles.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said Wednesday that Kim visited the lodging quarters of the Korean People's Army's general officers with his daughter. He later gave an encouraging speech to troops at a banquet, praising them for maintaining the "strongest army in the world" despite external difficulties.

The visit came a day after Kim presided over a meeting with his top military brass and called for an expansion of combat exercises aimed at sharpening war readiness, as he looks to escalate an already provocative run in weapons demonstrations in the face of deepening tensions with his neighbors and Washington.

State media photos showed military officials applauding at the banquet, which appeared to be held at Pyongyang's Yanggakdo Hotel. Kim and his daughter dressed alike in black suits and white dress shirts and held hands as they walked down a red carpet alongside Kim's wife, Ri Sol Ju.

Kim during his speech said it was his "greatest honor" and delight to be the supreme commander of an army that is "fulfilling (the) call of the times and history as the strongest army in the world."

State media reports on Kim's visit to troops didn't mention any comments made toward Washington or Seoul. But Pyongyang's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper said in an editorial Wednesday that the North's military is prepared to unleash a "super strong strike of unimaginable might to wipe out the origins of provocations without a trace" when facing enemy threats.

The newspaper said North Korea's ramped up weapons tests and combat exercises last year were successful demonstrations of "overwhelming military might" that supports the government's escalatory nuclear doctrine and its principle of "power-to-power, all-out confrontation" against enemies.

Residents in Pyongyang marked the anniversary by visiting the city's Mansu Hill to lay flowers and pay respect to the statues of their late leaders, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, respectively the grandfather and father of their ruler, as soldiers lined up to salute.

North Korean state media haven't confirmed plans for a parade. But commercial satellite images have shown weeks of apparent preparations involving huge numbers of troops and civilians for the event typically intended to glorify Kim Jong Un's rule and his relentless push to cement the North's status as a nuclear power.

North Korea is also facing deepening economic isolation and food shortages, showing the costs of Kim's nuclear ambitions are piling up.

North Korea is coming off a record-breaking year in weapons testing, and the dozens of missiles it fired in 2022 included potentially nuclear-capable systems designed to strike targets in South Korea and the U.S. mainland.

The intensified testing activity was punctuated by fiery statements threatening preemptive nuclear attacks against its neighbors and the United States in a broad range of scenarios where it may perceive its leadership as under threat.

Animosity could rise in coming months with Kim doubling down on his nuclear push entering 2023.

During a major political conference in December, Kim called for an "exponential increase" of the country's nuclear warheads, mass production of battlefield tactical nukes targeting "enemy" South Korea and the development of more powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the continental United States.

Aside of developmental tests, North Korea could also dial up its military demonstrations in response the United States' expanding combined military exercises with South Korea, which the allies say are aimed at

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countering the North's evolving threat.

North Korea's Foreign Ministry last week warned that the country is prepared to counter U.S. military moves with the "most overwhelming nuclear force" as it condemned U.S. plans to expand its joint exercise with South Korea and deploy more advanced military assets like bombers and aircraft carriers to the region.

Disney cuts Simpsons 'forced labor' episode in Hong Kong

HONG KONG (AP) — Walt Disney Co. has removed an episode from cartoon series The Simpsons that included a reference to "forced labor camps" in China from its streaming service in Hong Kong.

The company declined to comment on why the episode, "One Angry Lisa" from The Simpsons' 34th season, was not available to stream on the Disney Plus streaming service in the semi-autonomous Chinese territory, according to checks by The Associated Press.

The episode first aired on television in October and it was not clear when the episode was removed from the Hong Kong streaming service.

In the episode, Simpsons character Marge Simpson takes a virtual spin class whose instructor is in front of a virtual background of the Great Wall of China and says: "Behold the wonders of China. Bitcoin mines, forced labor camps where children make smartphones."

The issue of forced labor is sensitive in China. Communist-ruled Beijing has increasingly imposed its controls over Hong Kong, a former British colony, after taking control of the territory in 1997.

China promised that Hong Kong would retain its Western-style freedoms for 50 years after the handover from British rule. But Beijing has been tightening controls after imposing a National Security Law following massive pro-democracy protests in 2019, raising concerns over a weakening of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and the press.

Under the national security law, those found guilty of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign or external forces could face a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

In 2021, Hong Kong implemented a film censorship law would allow authorities to ban films deemed contrary to national security interests. At the time, officials said that regulating films shown online would be outside the scope of the bill.

Western governments and activists have for years accused China of imprisoning hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities — mainly Uyghurs — in the western region of Xinjiang in detention camps. China has rejected accusations it uses forced labor in those camps.

China says the camps are education centers designed to teach Mandarin Chinese and vocational skills.

Censorship of Western television series or films is common in mainland China, with censors deleting scenes or banning content seen as going against values deemed appropriate by the Chinese Communist Party.

The Simpsons has been screened at times in China. According to checks by The AP, clips of the Simpsons can still be found on Chinese video sites, but not the scene from "One Angry Lisa."

Today in History: FEB 9, Beatles appear on "Sullivan" show

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 9, the 40th day of 2023. There are 331 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 9, 1971, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake in California's San Fernando Valley claimed 65 lives. The crew of Apollo 14 returned to Earth after man's third landing on the moon.

On this date:

In 1825, the House of Representatives elected John Quincy Adams president after no candidate received a majority of electoral votes.

In 1942, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff held its first formal meeting to coordinate military strategy during World War II.

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In 1943, the World War II battle of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific ended with an Allied victory over Japanese forces.

In 1950, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin charged that the State Department was riddled with Communists.

In 1962, an agreement was signed to make Jamaica an independent nation within the British Commonwealth later in the year.

In 1963, the Boeing 727 went on its first-ever flight as it took off from Renton, Washington.

In 1964, the Beatles made their first live American television appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," broadcast from New York on CBS. The G.I. Joe action figure was introduced at the American International Toy Fair in New York.

In 1984, Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov, 69, died 15 months after succeeding Leonid Brezhnev; he was followed by Konstantin U. Chernenko (chehr-NYEN'-koh).

In 1986, during its latest visit to the solar system, Halley's Comet came closest to the sun (its next return will be in 2061).

In 2002, Britain's Princess Margaret, sister of Queen Elizabeth II, died in London at age 71.

In 2009, New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez admitted to taking performance-enhancing drugs, telling ESPN he'd used banned substances while with the Texas Rangers for three years.

In 2020, "Parasite," from South Korea, won the best picture Oscar, becoming the first foreign-language film to take home the biggest honor in film.

Ten years ago: Hundreds of mourners and dignitaries, including first lady Michelle Obama, packed the funeral service for Hadiya Pendleton, a 15-year-old honor student who was shot and killed Jan. 29 as she stood with friends at a neighborhood park about a mile from President Barack Obama's Chicago home in the Kenwood neighborhood.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump signed a \$400 billion budget deal that sharply boosted spending, swelling the federal deficit; the measure ended a brief overnight federal government shutdown. At the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in South Korea, North and South Korean athletes entered Olympic Stadium together, waving flags showing a unified Korea; it was their first joint Olympic march in more than a decade.

One year ago: It was revealed that Kamila Valieva, the 15-year-old Russian figure skating superstar who had just led her team to an Olympic gold medal, tested positive for a banned heart medication before the Beijing Games. Actor Bob Saget's family revealed that it was an accidental blow to the head that led to his death in a Florida hotel room a month earlier.

Today's birthdays:

Actor Janet Suzman is 84. Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee is 83. Actor-politician Sheila James Kuehl (TV: "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis") is 82. Singer-songwriter Carole King is 81. Actor Joe Pesci is 80. Singer Barbara Lewis is 80. Author Alice Walker is 79. Actor Mia Farrow is 78. Former Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., is 77. Singer Joe Ely is 76. Actor Judith Light is 74. Actor Charles Shaughnessy is 68. Actor Ed Amatrudo is 67. Former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe is 66. Jazz musician Steve Wilson is 62. Country singer Travis Tritt is 60. Actor Julie Warner is 58. Country singer Danni Leigh is 53. Actor Sharon Case is 52. Actor Jason George is 51. Actor Amber Valletta is 49. Actor-producer Charlie Day is 47. Rock singer Chad Wolf (Carolina Liar) is 47. Actor A.J. Buckley is 46. Rock musician Richard On (O.A.R.) is 44. Actor Ziyi (zee yee) Zhang is 44. Olympic silver and bronze medal figure skater Irina Slutskaya is 44. Actor Tom Hiddleston is 42. Actor David Gallagher is 38. Actor Michael B. Jordan is 36. Actor Rose Leslie is 36. Actor Camille Winbush is 33. Actor Jimmy Bennett is 27. Actor Evan Roe (TV: "Madam Secretary") is 23.