

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Groton Community Calendar

### Wednesday, March 15

Senior Menu: Breaded cod, parsley buttered potatoes, green beans, mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Hashbrown pizza.

School Lunch: Chicken Alfredo vegetable blend.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Emmanuel Men serve), League, 6:15 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style."

MAYA ANGELOU

### Thursday, March 16

Senior Menu: Beef stew, biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbert.

School Breakfast: Pancake on a stick.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, smiley fries.

Boys Basketball State Tournament in Sioux Falls  
Emmanuel Lutheran: WELCA (Program-Nigeria, hostess - Sarah).

### Friday, March 17

Senior Menu: St. Patrick's Day Dinner: Corned beef, boiled potatoes, cabbage, Jell-O cake, dinner roll.

Boys Basketball State Tournament in Sioux Falls  
SPRING BREAK - No School

Fruit Fusion Grand Opening, 7:10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 110 N Main St.

### Saturday, March 18

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.

Boys Basketball State Tournament in Sioux Falls  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship at Rosewood Court, 10 a.m.

## Rescheduled to next Tuesday

# GDILIVE.COM

## Middle School Talent Show Tuesday, March 21, 2023, GHS Gym, 7 p.m.

### *"We Love Rock 'n Roll"*

Directors: Desiree Yeigh and Scott Glodt

*I Love Rock 'n Roll- 6-7 Choir Girls*

Addison Hoeft- *You Say*  
Vocal Solo

*Sharp Dressed Man- 6-7 Choir Guys*

Aurora Washenberger- Jessie's Girl  
Flute Solo

*A President's Childhood- Addison Hoeft,*  
Ryelle Gilbert, Makenna Krause, Kyleigh Kroll,  
Libby Cole, Rylie Rose, Journey Zieroth

*We Will Rock You- 6-7 Choir Guys*

Teagan Hanten- Ain't No Mountain High  
Enough

Dr. ROCKenstein- 6-7 Band

*Let Her Go- Arianna Dinger, Tenley Frost,*  
Novalea Warrington, Mrs. Yeigh  
Flute Quartet

*The Invader- Sam Crank and Connor Kroll*  
Drumline Battle

*Junior Drumline- Makenna Krause,*  
Journey Zieroth, Ryelle Gilbert,  
Kyleigh Kroll, TC Schuster,  
Addison Hoeft, Jordan Schwan  
Connor Kroll, Tenley Frost, Sam Crank,  
Novalea Warrington, Aurora Washenberger

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## The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

A major goal is bolstering U.S. deterrence against China.

- National security concerns posed by TikTok outweigh its role in the U.S. economy, according to lawmakers in Congress who are currently pushing to ban the app.
- The state of Ohio is suing railway operator Norfolk Southern over the February 3 derailment of a freight train in East Palestine, alleging the company violated state laws regulating control of hazardous waste.
- Scandal-hit Republican Congressman George Santos has this week filed paperwork to formally declare his candidacy for reelection, despite facing continued calls to resign amid ongoing ethics investigations.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, two more countries have reportedly joined a coalition seeking to establish a special tribunal for Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, bringing the total number of countries supporting the move to 32, according to Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

- Moody's has cut its outlook for the entire U.S. banking sector from "stable" to "negative," warning of "a rapid deterioration in the operating environment" following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank.

- A severe winter storm has caused tens of thousands of power outages across New England, upstate New York, northeastern Pennsylvania, and northern New Jersey.

- President Joe Biden has requested a massive \$886 billion national defense budget, mostly for the Pentagon, including advanced missiles and a 5% pay bump for troops.

### Conde National League

**March 13, 2023 Team Standings:** Tigers 32, Cubs 26, Pirates 25, Braves 24, Mets 19, Giants 18.

**Men's High Games:** Butch Farmen 198, Chad Furney 188, Austin Schuelke 182

**Men's High Series:** Butch Farmen 503, Chad Furney 497, Austin Schuelke 494

**Women's High Games:** Sam Bahr 168, Nancy Radke 142, Michelle Johnson 140

**Women's High Series:** Sam Bahr 450, Michelle Johnson 395, Vickie Kramp 395, Nancy Radke 359



## Observers see improved civility in Capitol in 2023

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

As it winds to a close, the 2023 legislative session in South Dakota will likely be remembered as the year of the great tax cut debate and for the somewhat surprising willingness of the GOP-led Legislature to reject several proposals from a popular Republican governor.

But many observers and participants in the process are noting another significant milestone this year: a noticeable return to civility, decorum and cordiality in the state Capitol.

Tim Rave is a health care lobbyist who served 13 years in the South Dakota Legislature in the early 2000s, including as speaker of the House and Senate majority leader.

Rave said the legislative process in 2023 so far has been "very enjoyable and smooth" due to the new spirit of civility and cordiality, even during heated policy debates.

"It is markedly different than it has been the past four or five years," Rave said. "You've seen the House and Senate come together, and even when they don't come together on issues, there's just a more cordial, respectful debate among the chambers."

The results of the improved civility are hard to pin down, but observers and lawmakers say policy debates are more respectful and reasoned, that the process is running on time, that there's a greater sense of bipartisanship, and that the bills ultimately sent to Gov. Kristi Noem for signing are better vetted and stronger in intent and outcome.

### Improved since poll

The more diplomatic approach this session comes six months after concerning results from a statewide poll conducted by News Watch in July 2022 showing that a wide majority of South Dakotans felt that civility was on the decline in American society and government. In the poll of 500 registered South Dakota voters, 79% said civility had gotten worse in America in the past five years and less than 3% said civility had improved during that time.

In response, longtime South Dakota officeholder Larry Pressler, who served in both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate, said at the time that the poll results proved that "it's the mood of our country, that there's a mean-spiritedness in the country right now."

Pressler said a lack of civility "is very unproductive and it makes life miserable." He said he was concerned that incivility can feed on itself and harm the country in the long term.

"We have to be careful because we're becoming a very coarse nation," Pressler said then. "We have a lot of work to do because we're at a critical point in our nation's history for some reason, and I'm worried about that."

### Setting the tone

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Pierre, is the majority leader in the House of Representatives and as such plays a large role in setting the tone for how House members will caucus and conduct themselves.

Mortenson, a second-term lawmaker, said he has tried to improve civility and decorum in the House by implementing what he calls "the new old-fashioned way" of legislating.



**South Dakota Sens. Helene Duhamel and Jim Mehlhaff, both Republicans, speak with Sen. Reynold Nesiba, a Democrat, on Jan. 10, 2023, at the state Capitol in Pierre.** Photo: Courtesy Erin Bormett, Argus Leader

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**"I care a lot about the history of the place and the traditions. They take decades to build and only a few years to destroy, and I came to keep the good ones going if I can."**

Rep. Will Mortenson, House majority leader

"It might be new compared to the last four years, but I really view my job and my goal as restoring some of the positive traditions of legislating that we've had in South Dakota for decades, and I think we're on path to do that," Mortenson told News Watch. "Being respectful, talking to one another directly and honestly, and solving things the South Dakota way has been a real goal."

Mortenson has spent about 12 years working in different capacities in Pierre, including

in the administration of former Gov. Dennis Daugaard, who is seen by many as a leader of principle and integrity.

"I care a lot about the history of the place and the traditions," Mortenson said. "They take decades to build and only a few years to destroy, and I came to keep the good ones going if I can."

## Lawmaker censured

Nearly 55% of the 2022 poll respondents said political leaders were most responsible for setting the tone of civility in the state and nation.

Their concerns seemed manifest early this session when state Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City, was censured by her colleagues after what was reported as an inappropriate heated conversation about "private paternal matters" with a legislative research staff member. Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck of Watertown, the president pro tempore of the Senate, suspended Frye-Mueller and acted quickly to address the incident. Frye-Mueller was censured, then reinstated to office, and her subsequent legal attempts to strike back at colleagues who supported her suspension have fizzled.

Yet the episode was seen as a personnel matter and not directly related to the lawmaking process, which has generally stuck to debates on policy issues and legislation, according to observers.



**Helene Duhamel**

Without mentioning Mortenson or any other specific legislative leader, state Sen. Helene Duhamel said stronger leadership in Pierre — especially in the House — has led to greater decorum in the lawmaking process this year.

Duhamel, R-Rapid City, who has served since 2019, said she can feel a more positive, collaborative vibe during the 2023 legislative session compared to her prior sessions in office.

"If the House and Senate get along as they should, then we're a strong branch of government," said Duhamel. "You can disagree without being disagreeable, and I just think it's working better and it just feels better this year."

Duhamel said policy debates have not been less vigorous, and in fact are perhaps more spirited this year because the state has significant federal money to allocate. It's also considering building water infrastructure and prisons while at the same time debating tax cut proposals.

## Diminished Trump effect

Duhamel, who works as a spokeswoman for the Pennington County Sheriff's Office in addition to being a lawmaker, said part of the blame for the great division in our country and state, as well as in past legislative sessions, can be traced to the behavior of former President Donald Trump, who laid derision and derogatory nicknames on people who disagreed with him.

"Part of the problem with the Trump presidency was that it became OK to be disagreeable when you disagree. ... It became OK to call people names, and I think that has trickled down and caused us issues in our state," she said.

"We should be statesmen and we should behave as statesmen. ... If you don't treat people well, how in the world do you ever expect to work with them and find a compromise or have them see your point

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of view? We have to stop this because it doesn't work and it's dividing people and I think we can do better."

Rep. Oren Lesmeister, a Democrat from Parade, is in his fourth term in the House of Representatives and said he has noticed a clear shift in how lawmakers of both parties have approached one another and the lawmaking process this session.

"There's a lot more communication, and there's a lot more civility," said Lesmeister, the minority leader in the House. "When we have discussions, they're a lot more in-depth, there's more listening, and that's better this year than in the past."

Lesmeister said leaders in both chambers and in both parties have shown a greater willingness this session to focus more on legislating than grandstanding or trying to draw attention to themselves.

"I would say it comes down to personalities, and in past years we've had some big personalities that have kind of fed off of that," he said. "We've still got people with big personalities. But this year, I would say there's a greater sense that maybe the best way to get to the same place we're all trying to get to anyway, better than barking and hollering, is to sit down and have a conversation."

## Both sides talking

Leaders on the Republican side of the Legislature, who have an iron-clad majority in both chambers, have reached out to Democrats earlier and more frequently this year, Lesmeister said.

"They're talking to the other side, trying to get all parties involved sooner and they've agreed as far as they can by the time these bills get voted on," he said. "When we bring bills to the floor, for darn sure, they've been vetted more, and that has to do with leadership telling the members, that 'Hey, before you bring this, know that it could cause some heartburn on the other side of the aisle, so go talk to them and try to share some things.'"

Additionally, GOP leaders — including Mortenson in the House and Schoenbeck in the Senate — have sought to bridge the gap between the more traditional Republicans and the more conservative members of their party, Lesmeister said.

"It's no secret that the Republican Party that is such a super majority is split, and they're trying to bring their party together as a whole and not have that fracturing," Lesmeister said. "So when they have their caucus, they're trying to keep decorum, where everybody gets a chance to speak."

## South Dakotans benefit

One manifestation of the improved civility, Lesmeister said, is that the committee process is working as it should, in that amendments are mostly made there and not on the House or Senate floors where the process can slow to a halt due to debate or even bickering.

"We're not having those late nights like we had in the past," Lesmeister said.

Ultimately, the improved lawmaking process in Pierre, and improved discussions on hot topics, is benefiting the residents of South Dakota because stronger legislation is being passed, Lesmeister said.

Lesmeister cited the example that county auditors this session have had input into election-related bills where in the past their views may have been discounted.

"When you've got all parties involved, you have better bills, rather than trying to ram something though that opponents totally disagree with," he said.

Rave attributes the new vibe to strong leadership in the chambers but also to a large group of first-year legislators who have engaged in the process with vigor and a greater reverence for the process of respectful debate. The legislative roster includes 11 new senators and 31 new representatives, though some of



**State Rep. Oren Lesmeister, at center, is the minority leader in the South Dakota House of Representatives. Lesmeister is shown with fellow Democrats in 2019.** Photo: Courtesy of Facebook

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**State Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, holds an impromptu interview with Molly McRoberts of the Potter County News during an event in Pierre in January 2023.** Photo:

Jeremy Waltner, Freeman Courier

those lawmakers served in the other chamber in the past. "There's been an influx of some really, really solid new legislators who have brought a whole level of statesmanship," he said. "They're willing to work together, to listen and learn. They're just really strong people who are going to be leaders in these chambers for years to come."

## Nothing personal, governor

Rave added that during his two decades in Pierre as a lawmaker and lobbyist, it hasn't been uncommon for the Legislature to stand against measures supported by a sitting governor, so he is not taken aback by the rejection of some measures supported by Noem this session.

"You saw people disagree with a particular governor, but it was never personal, it was always about the issue," Rave said.

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., said he spent a week in Pierre in February and met with members of both the Republican and Democratic caucuses in the Legislature and noted that he sensed cohesiveness this session

among the opposing parties.

"I'm hoping that that is the way things are beginning to work in South Dakota," he said.

Rounds said the public may have a distorted view of the division within Congress, especially in the Senate where Rounds has served since 2014. While national news tends to cover when "someone is misbehaving or being particularly irritating," the behind-the-scenes sense in the U.S. Senate is that little legislation would get passed unless people from both parties work together, he said.

"The vast majority of people up here really are trying to find common ground because that's the only way we can get anything done," Rounds told News Watch.

He frequently dines with both Republicans and Democrats and also attends weekly Bible study and prayer groups with notably bipartisan attendance.

"We don't make a big deal out of it or anything, but we're actually friends; we may have different points of view on things, but we're friends," Rounds said. "Relationships really do matter up here, and that it's pretty hard to be mad at somebody when you're breaking bread with them."

## Civility doesn't equal effective

Shane Nordyke, a University of South Dakota political science professor who has conducted polls for years on civility and civic engagement, said she has still seen the 2023 South Dakota Legislature focus significantly on social issues rather than substantive policy focused on improving the state and the lives of its residents.

"Certainly the legislation they're bringing



**Republican leaders in the South Dakota Legislature share a light moment during a January 2023 press conference in Pierre. They are, left to right: Rep. Will Mortenson, Sen. Casey Crabtree and Sen. Michael Diedrich.** Photo: Jeremy Waltner, Freeman Courier

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is as divisive as it's ever been," she said. "Getting their job done and focusing on the important issues is separate from being nice to one another, and both are important. Just because they're getting along better doesn't necessarily mean they're passing legislation that is making the lives of South Dakotans better."

Nordyke said there's an important distinction to be made between debate and disagreement and uncivil behavior, and that it's a positive outcome if a feeling of greater civility is permeating state government this session.

"The political process is designed to be inherently contentious and there should be opposing factions on issues that should both have a voice and be represented," she said. "That doesn't mean it has to be uncivil or mean and nasty, and if that is what people are observing, that there are fewer personal attacks, I think that does matter and that is an improvement."

— *This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization found online at [SDNewsWatch.org](http://SDNewsWatch.org).*



## **ABOUT BART PFANKUCH**

Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native, he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.





## Exercise Caution When Driving

by Paul Kosel

The snow piles in Groton are creating problems with visibility at intersections around town. Take this intersection, for example, at West 5th Ave. and Washington Street. The top photo features me stopped at the stop sign on Washington Street, going north. As you can tell, there is no visibility looking to the left (west), especially in a low profile vehicle like mine.

The bottom photo features how far I have to go out into the intersection before I can clearly see any incoming traffic from the west. A vehicle with an even a longer front end will have more exposure to an accident if someone coming from the west does not see the vehicle crossing the intersection.

And think about this - while I am really trying to see if there is anyone coming from the west, someone could be coming from the east as well and I wouldn't know it I am concentrating to see traffic from the west. Unfortunately, we only have eyes on one side of our heads.

This intersection is not the only one with visibility issues. And not everyone has a high profile vehicle who can look over the piles. There already was an accident at the above named intersection (no injuries). Granted, had the stop signs remained in place, it would probably not have happened. But that's a discussion for another day.

And I am sure that Groton is not unique with intersection visibility problems.

Meanwhile, until spring comes and melts the snow piles away, please drive carefully and slowly around town. We don't need any more accidents.



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Bubble Easter basket with sweetart jelly beans, neat rope easter eggs with candy inside them, two bubble machines, tootsie roll piggy bank with tootsie rolls inside it, a bag of tropical skittles, and bubble bottles. \$18



Here is Miss Unicorn Easter basket with some goodies also inside

A chocolate bunny, a container of M&M and Peeps candy, chalk for outside, eggs that has candy inside the eggs and a bottle of bubbles. \$20.00. Call/Text Tina at 605-397-7285.

## Tina's Baskets Call/Text Tina at 605-397-7285



Sloth Easter basket with bubbles, Easter eggs with candy in them , peeps hard candy, mike and Ike's chocolate Easter bunny, and a bag of tootsie rolls. \$20.

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Made with a Sprite can with a foam tip filled the dum dum assorted suckers with a colored ribbon on top \$10.00. Call/Text Tina at 605-397-7285.



Easter basket. It has a Mickey Mouse bubble maker with two bubble containers. Comes with Mike & Ikes, a sack of Jolly Ranchers hard candy, a rainbow nerds rope, a bag of Skittles original flavors and a jumbo Spider-man chalk set. \$18.00 Call/Text Tina at 605-397-7285.

Made up of full size Hershey Candy for the first and second tier with strawberry hard candy on the top and in the middle of the tiers on a brown serving tray that is reusable with two brown ribbon around each tier with mini Hersheys around the tray with also a red ribbon on top. Only \$50 for all of that sweetness! Call/text Tina at 605-397-7285.



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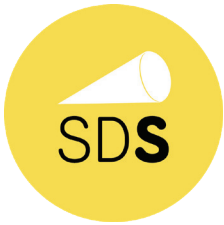
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\*\* Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and PDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer. Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications.

\*\* See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.  
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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### South Dakota congressman advocates expansion of work requirements for federal food aid

**BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - MARCH 14, 2023 2:25 PM**

WASHINGTON — Republican South Dakota Rep. Dusty Johnson introduced a bill Tuesday aimed at expanding work requirements for federal nutrition aid, reigniting a perennial conflict over how Congress navigates both the farm bill and federal spending.

“Work is the best pathway out of poverty,” Johnson, who in his home state has talked about growing up poor, said in a Tuesday statement. “Work requirements have proven to be effective, and people who can work should work. With more than 11 million open jobs, there are plenty of opportunities for SNAP recipients to escape poverty and build a better life.”

The America Works Act of 2023, if passed, would require able-bodied adults without dependents ages 18 through 65 to work or participate in a work training or education program for at least 20 hours per week to receive continuous support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

As of now, that work requirement only applies to able-bodied adults without dependents ages 18 through 49.

If SNAP recipients under current law do not meet these work requirements, they are only eligible to receive nutrition benefits for three months over the course of three years. This SNAP “time limit” was suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, but will return in May when the White House announces the end of the public health emergency.

If passed, Johnson’s bill would affect the roughly 1.36 million able-bodied adults enrolled in SNAP that reported zero dollars in gross income in 2020, according to pre-pandemic data cited by Johnson.

Average monthly SNAP benefits per enrollee in 2022 were roughly \$230, or just over \$7 per day, including emergency pandemic nutrition benefits. The total cost of all SNAP benefits administered in 2022 was roughly \$149 billion.

Johnson’s legislation would also remove states’ ability to request a waiver for the work requirement from the Department of Agriculture if states lack enough available jobs to hire enrollees. In the Tuesday release, Johnson’s team said the change would close this “loophole” that many states “abuse” to get out of SNAP work requirements.

The bill would not affect states that request work requirement waivers because they have a 10% or greater unemployment rate.

The bill’s 23 co-sponsors in the House, all Republicans, include:

Rep. Chuck Edwards of North Carolina

Rep. Warren Davidson of Ohio

Rep. Jake Ellzey of Texas

Rep. Mary Miller of Illinois

Rep. Doug Lamborn of Colorado

Rep. August Pfluger of Texas

Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon

Rep. Josh Brecheen of Oklahoma

Rep. Jen Kiggans of Virginia

Rep. Randy Feenstra of Iowa

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Rep. Troy Nehls of Texas  
Rep. Ryan Zinke of Montana  
Rep. Mark Alford of Missouri  
Rep. Andy Ogles of Tennessee  
Rep. Max Miller of Ohio  
Rep. Pat Fallon of Texas  
Rep. Virginia Foxx of North Carolina  
Rep. Randy Weber of Texas  
Rep. Glen Grothman of Wisconsin  
Rep. Tim Walberg of Michigan  
Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina  
Rep. Scott Franklin of Florida  
Rep. Michael Cloud of Texas

The bill comes after contentious congressional hearings on updates to the Thrifty Food Plan, one of four food plans the USDA develops to estimate the cost of a healthy diet. The plan is directly tied to SNAP benefit allocations.

The USDA updated the plan in 2021, after receiving authorization to do so in the 2018 farm bill. The adjusted Thrifty Food Plan, which went into effect in 2021, boosted SNAP allocations by an average of 40 cents per meal for every enrollee.

Republicans in Congress note that the changes are expected to add \$250 billion in costs to the program between 2023 and 2031.

Congressional Democrats, in contrast, argue that the elevated numbers represent an overdue improvement to the program, especially with pandemic-era food assistance expiring in 32 states and for more than 30 million people this month.

The extra pandemic funding, which has been in place for the last three years, has provided low-income households on SNAP with another roughly \$95 per month, on average. Individual SNAP recipients have received a boost of \$90 per month, on average.

"We remain unified in opposition to any cuts to SNAP or the nutrition title and to any further restrictions on beneficiaries," wrote Democratic Rep. Jahana Hayes of Connecticut in a letter to the House Budget Committee on Tuesday, which was co-signed by all Democratic House Agriculture Committee members.

"We agree that additional resources are necessary to further improve our already strong anti-hunger safety net. A robust nutrition title is key to enacting a bipartisan Farm Bill this year."

Democratic Reps. Barbara Lee of California and Alma Adams of North Carolina introduced a bill on March 10 with 19 co-sponsors which would remove the time limit entirely for able-bodied adults without dependents.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, serves more than 40 million enrollees and is projected to cost roughly \$127 billion in 2023. The program will see a \$22 billion drop in total expenditures this year as pandemic nutrition benefits expire.

*Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.*

## Noem calls Russian invasion of Ukraine 'Europe's fight, not ours'

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 14, 2023 1:25 PM

Governor Kristi Noem, who's viewed as a potential Republican presidential or vice presidential candidate, described America's military aid to Ukraine as a costly strategic mistake.

"It's pushing Russia into an alliance with China — meaning Russia may soon draw from China's large weapon arsenal," Noem told Tucker Carlson of Fox News. Carlson posted Noem's written responses to a Ukraine questionnaire Monday.

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Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, launching a war that has since resulted in thousands of people killed and millions displaced. The New York Times reported at the end of January, citing estimates from Norway's defense chief, "that Russia had suffered 180,000 dead and wounded, while Ukraine had 100,000 killed or wounded in action along with 30,000 civilian deaths."

As of January, the United States had provided about \$25 billion in military aid to Ukraine since the beginning of the Biden administration.

Noem indicated the United States should not have gotten involved in the conflict.

"This should be Europe's fight, not ours," Noem said. "We should not waste taxpayer dollars at the risk of nuclear war."

## Differing from the delegation

Noem's comments do not align with those of South Dakota's all-Republican congressional delegation.

In December, Rep. Dusty Johnson said "we must ensure the dollars are being used wisely and as they were intended by Congress," but added, "assisting Ukraine in their fight against Russia's invasion is a noble cause."

Sen. Mike Rounds shared a similar sentiment in an interview with The Washington Post.

"Anytime you have one country invading another country, and basically putting the entire free world at risk, you have to respond," Rounds said.

Sen. John Thune has made similar statements.

"The Ukrainian people cannot sustain this war without military support from the United States and other free countries," Thune said in prepared remarks on the Senate floor in May. "The weapons and military resources we have supplied are playing a crucial role in enabling Ukraine to continue standing up to Russian aggression. And it's essential that we continue that support for as long as the Ukrainian people need it."

*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.*

## China owns little US farmland, but many lawmakers are worried South Dakota among numerous states with existing or proposed limitations

BY: BARBARA BARRETT - MARCH 14, 2023 12:27 PM

WASHINGTON — Nearly a third of states have laws prohibiting certain foreign businesses and governments from buying agricultural lands within their borders, and more states are looking to join them.

The efforts in at least 11 states are pitched primarily by Republicans as another security front in the nation's ongoing propaganda battles, primarily with China and Russia. Many lawmakers say they worry about control of our food supply or other natural resources. Critics, though, say the federal government best handles national security, and they point out that the real issue isn't who owns the food supply, but to whom that food is sold.

In reality, Canadian investors hold the largest amount of foreign-owned land in the United States — about 12.8 million acres, or nearly a third of the total — and most of that is forest land.

Chinese companies own just 383,935 acres, less than 1% of foreign-held acres, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That's an area less than half the size of Rhode Island. Much of the land was acquired in 2013 when a Chinese company bought Virginia-based Smithfield Foods, the nation's largest pork producer.

Russian investors, according to the USDA, own 73 acres.

Meanwhile, farming advocates have warned that state lawmakers and members of Congress should pay closer attention to massive land purchases by domestic and foreign corporations, pensions, developers and other wealthy interests, which could block young people from getting into the farming business and,

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eventually, could threaten the United States' food independence.

The 14 states that currently restrict foreign ownership of agricultural lands have a patchwork of laws, according to the National Agricultural Law Center at the University of Arkansas. They came into being at various points in history, from the Revolutionary War era to the nation's westward expansion in the late 19th century, through the World War II period and onward to today.

## **Environmentalists Make Long-Shot Attempt to Ban New Factory Farms**

Almost all recent state legislation comes from Republican lawmakers, but some Democrats are on board too. And this winter's cross-country journey of a Chinese spy balloon brought renewed attention to those efforts.

In New Jersey, for example, Republican legislators filed a bill that would ban foreign ownership of agricultural land and require current foreign owners to sell or transfer their ownership within five years.

"Stopping our food supply from falling into hostile hands is something we should all be mindful of," said state Sen. Doug Steinhardt, a Republican and main sponsor of New Jersey's bill, according to NJ.com. The bill has not come up for consideration.

In Missouri, where a law already caps foreign ownership, the House approved a bill that would lower the threshold from 1% to 0.5% of all farmland in the state, and specifically prohibit new investment from China, Iran, North Korea, Russia and Venezuela beginning in late August.

Virginia GOP Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who was elected in 2021 and campaigned in part through tough language on China, has not yet acted on legislation to ban some foreign ownership that the state legislature passed with some bipartisan support last month. He has indicated, however, that he'll sign the bill. Smithfield Foods is headquartered in his state.

In North Dakota, the U.S. Air Force in January warned about the proposed development of a corn mill by an American subsidiary of a Chinese company on land 12 miles from the Grand Forks Air Force Base. Faced with community outrage, Grand Forks City Council members rejected the plan.

Bills also were filed this year in Arizona, California, Montana, Texas, Utah and Washington state.

And yet even in strongly conservative states, efforts to target foreign ownership can face opposition.

Wyoming lawmakers last month considered a bill that would have banned foreign ownership of more than an acre, including by individuals, and required registration with the secretary of state. Wyoming state Rep. Bill Allemand, a Republican, tried to persuade colleagues before a committee vote that his bill would only affect countries hostile to the United States.

"We cannot buy land in China. We cannot buy industry in Russia. We cannot buy — I don't even think we want to get off the plane in Iran. So, this is just limited to people who hate us," Allemand said, according to the Wyoming Tribune Eagle.

## **Pandemic, China Trade Deal Fuel Farmer Doubts**

Still, opposition in Wyoming was bipartisan, with some GOP members concerned about restricting individual opportunity and whether the proposed ban was constitutional. Allemand's bill failed in the Wyoming House; a similar Senate bill never made it out of committee.

Rhett Larson, an associate professor of law at Arizona State University, is skeptical of arguments about national security.

"If what we're worried about is the national security issue, why isn't the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States considered? Why do we have state legislatures addressing that when we have an interagency committee designed to do this?" Larson asked in an interview.

"If this is an attempt to address national security issues, you have run afoul of international trade and investment laws," he said. "That's why we have the State Department to manage these agreements."

Congress has taken an interest in foreign ownership, with U.S. Sens. Jon Tester, a Montana Democrat, and Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican, proposing legislation that would prevent China, Iran, North Korea and Russia from buying or leasing farmland.

And the Congressional Research Service, a nonpartisan agency that serves Congress, issued a report in January — at the request of congressional staff — repeating news reports that the U.S. Department of



Agriculture's tracking of foreign ownership is out of date and may have some inaccuracies.

*Stateline staff writer Matt Vasilogambros contributed to this report.*

*— This story was originally published by Stateline, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts.*

*Barbara Barrett is the managing editor of Stateline. Before joining Pew, Barrett was national editor at McClatchy's Washington bureau, where she worked with reporters covering Congress and the federal government for the chain's 30 newsrooms around the country, including the Miami Herald, The Kansas City Star and The Sacramento Bee. She previously was the Washington correspondent and state roving reporter for The News & Observer of Raleigh, North Carolina, and has worked as a reporter or editor for the York (Pennsylvania) Daily Record, the Tampa Bay (Florida) Times and the Battle Creek (Michigan) Enquirer. Her work includes coverage of state and local policy, veterans affairs, rural issues, immigration, occasional sports events and a lot of hurricanes. She covered the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, and was part of the team at The N&O that was a finalist for the Pulitzer for its coverage of Hurricane Floyd. Barrett is a native of North Carolina and a graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism.*

## States to receive \$2.5B from feds for electric vehicle charging infrastructure

**BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 14, 2023 1:47 PM**

The federal government will send \$2.5 billion over the next five years to states, local governments and tribes to build electric vehicle charging infrastructure, Biden administration officials said Tuesday.

The new Charging and Fueling Infrastructure grant program, which was authorized by the 2021 bipartisan infrastructure law, will spend \$2.5 billion over five years to build electric vehicle charging stations and refueling infrastructure for hydrogen, propane or natural-gas vehicles.

Administration officials told reporters in a press call Monday the program would help President Joe Biden meet his goal of 500,000 public charging stations by the end of the decade. Officials briefed reporters on the condition they would not be named.

Biden has also set a goal of reducing national greenhouse gas emissions by at least half by 2030. Gas-powered vehicles account for about one-quarter of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

The grant funding will be evenly split between designated alternative-fuel corridors and public facilities like parking lots, schools and parks.

"With today's announcement, we are taking another big step forward in creating an EV future that is convenient, affordable, reliable, and accessible to all Americans," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a written statement.

Applications for the first two years of funding, which will include \$700 million in grants, opened Tuesday and are due by May 30.

The grant program adds to other recent federal spending on electric vehicle charging stations.

Each state will also receive a share of a separate \$1.5 billion fund the federal government made available for charging stations last year. Each state developed a plan for building an electric vehicle charging network. The Federal Highway Administration, the Transportation Department agency that administers federal highway funding to states, approved each state plan last year.

States will not have to apply for grants to receive funding under that program, instead receiving funding based on a predetermined formula that factors in things like population and miles of road.

Last month, the administration finalized standards for charging stations, including a requirement that components will eventually have to be sourced in the United States. Most material needed for electric vehicle charging stations is not yet available domestically.

*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.*

## Silicon Valley Bank's collapse differs from our last financial crisis

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - MARCH 14, 2023 9:04 AM

After the largest U.S. bank failure in more than a decade, regional bank stocks plunged on Monday as the federal government — with the 2007-2008 financial crisis still a fresh memory for many — rushed to reassure Americans that the U.S. banking system was stable.

President Joe Biden told Americans that the risks taken on by failed banks will not be a burden on taxpayers, that management will be fired and held accountable, and that depositors' money will be safe even above the \$250,000 federally insured limit — but not investors' funds.

Biden and U.S. Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA.) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT.) blamed the bank failures in part on the 2018 law signed by President Donald Trump that rolled back regulations for smaller and medium-sized banks that had been put in place under the 2010 Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

Those rules were put in place after the 2008 financial crisis that saw the failure of investment banks Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns and Washington Mutual Bank, the first of more than 300 banks to close from 2008-2010.

The new crisis started last week when Silicon Valley Bank, the 16th largest bank in the U.S. and a key financial institution for the tech sector, collapsed on Friday after a run on the bank. Federal banking regulators took over the bank and, on Sunday, New York regulators closed Signature Bank, which served cryptocurrency clients. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen announced that the FDIC would cover depositors for both banks.

Ted Rossman, senior industry analyst at Bankrate.com, said there is a big difference between the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank and what happened in 2008.

"I think a big distinction is what caused this issue because back then it was much more exotic, like derivatives and credit default swaps, and exotic mortgages," he explained. "Silicon Valley Bank was more of a true bank run where a lot of depositors wanted their money all at once. And why did they want their money all at once? There were rumors spreading that the bank was in trouble and the bank was in trouble because of higher rates and mismanagement of their risk because all these underlying bonds had lost a lot of money because of higher rates and, rates rise and prices fall."

Aaron Klein, senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution, agreed that the leeway Silicon Valley Bank was given led to its troubles. He told States Newsroom in an email statement that he hopes that Congress pays attention to what he calls the "highly problematic structure" of regional Fed banks.

"SVB was allowed by the Federal Reserve, their primary regulator, to build up a massive position on mortgage-backed securities with little to no hedging for interest rates," he wrote. "At the same time, SVB relied on uninsured bank deposits at a mammoth level far out of line with other banks. SVB is not a Main Street bank and never was. Most banks of that size (\$200B) have 1,000 branches. SVB had 16. SVB's assets quadrupled in 4 years with explosive growth that ought to raise flags," he wrote.

Rossman said there may be more bank failures or rumors of bank failures, but that doesn't mean that the average consumer will be affected right now.

"We see today a lot of community or regional mid-sized banks are under some pressure. It does seem that there's more pain to come here in some corners, a lot of it tracking back to higher interest rates and some of the unintended consequences there, but from a depositor perspective, I wouldn't worry about losing money, especially within that \$250,000 threshold," he said.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation insures bank deposits up to \$250,000.

"The FDIC is funded by member dues, so basically the banks pay into the system, and that's the fund that's being used to make depositors whole at Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank," Rossman added. "And if the fund were to run out, the FDIC could impose additional fees on banks."

One result of the banks' collapse could be a little loosening of the Federal Reserve's position on interest rate increases.

"The odds of a 50-basis-point hike from the Fed at its next meeting have pretty much come off the table,

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said Rossman, senior industry analyst at Bankrate.com. " ... Now, it seems like a quarter point is most likely, although there's actually a decent chance that there may not be a hike at all at the next meeting next week."

Goldman Sachs economists said on Sunday that they don't expect any rate hike when the Fed meets, which was a change from their prediction of a 25-basis-point hike before the bank failures.

Sheila Bair, former chair of the FDIC when Washington Mutual collapsed, said that if the Fed chose to pause its interest rate hikes, the decision would have a "settling effect" on the markets.

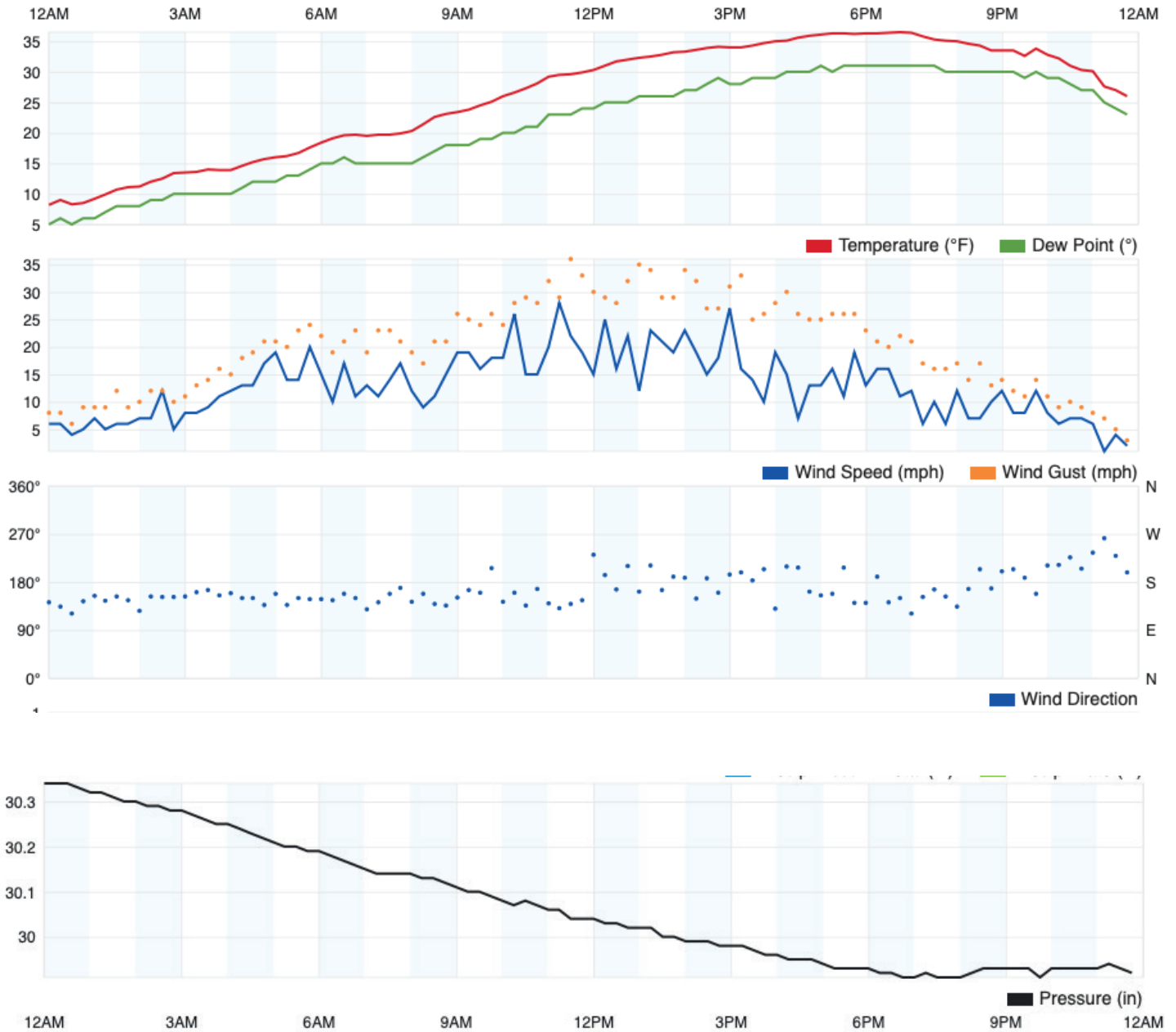
Correction: A previous version of this story misstated the amount of funds that would be covered by the federal government for Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank depositors.

*Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.*

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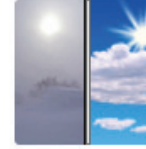
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
						
20%	30%	30%				
Slight Chance Freezing Rain and Areas Dense Fog	Chance Wintry Mix and Windy	Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Patchy Blowing Snow and Windy	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery	Patchy Blowing Snow and Windy	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Sunny
High: 35 °F	Low: 18 °F	High: 23 °F	Low: 5 °F	High: 16 °F	Low: 1 °F	High: 14 °F



## Winter Weather Returns!

March 15, 2023  
4:49 AM

Moisture & winds will make for potential hazardous travel tonight/Thursday

### Key Messages

- Mixed precipitation initially, followed by light snow.
- **Northwest winds** increase this evening and remaining gusty through Friday night.
- **Blowing/drifted snow is likely tonight through Friday.**
- Main impact of system is the potential for hazardous travel due to blowing snow.

### NEW What Has Changed

- Potential snowfall amounts have increased for northeast South Dakota & western Minnesota.
- Increased snowfall potential = increased impact from winds and blowing snow.

	Weather Forecast											
	3/15 Wed				3/16 Thu							
	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen			20%	20%	20%							
Britton						35%	40%	35%	35%			
Eagle Butte				30%	45%	45%	45%					
Eureka			40%	40%	40%	30%	25%					
Gettysburg				20%	40%	45%	40%					
Kennebec					40%	50%	35%	35%				
McIntosh		20%	60%	60%	60%	35%	35%					
Milbank						45%	70%	70%	70%	30%	30%	
Miller					30%	40%	50%	50%	50%			
Mobridge			35%	35%	35%	35%	30%					
Murdo				20%	50%	65%	65%	30%	30%			
Pierre				20%	35%	45%	50%					
Redfield						35%	45%	45%	45%			
Sisseton						35%	50%	50%	50%			
Watertown						35%	60%	60%	60%	25%	25%	
Webster						30%	45%	45%	45%			
Wheaton						25%	50%	50%	50%	20%	20%	

\*Created: 3 am CDT Wed 3/15/2023. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 20%.

- Rain + - Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow + - Fog +



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

We continue to monitor a storm system that will start to bring moisture to the region late today. A mix will change to snow with the potential for some accumulations... however the main feature will be the system's strong northwest winds.

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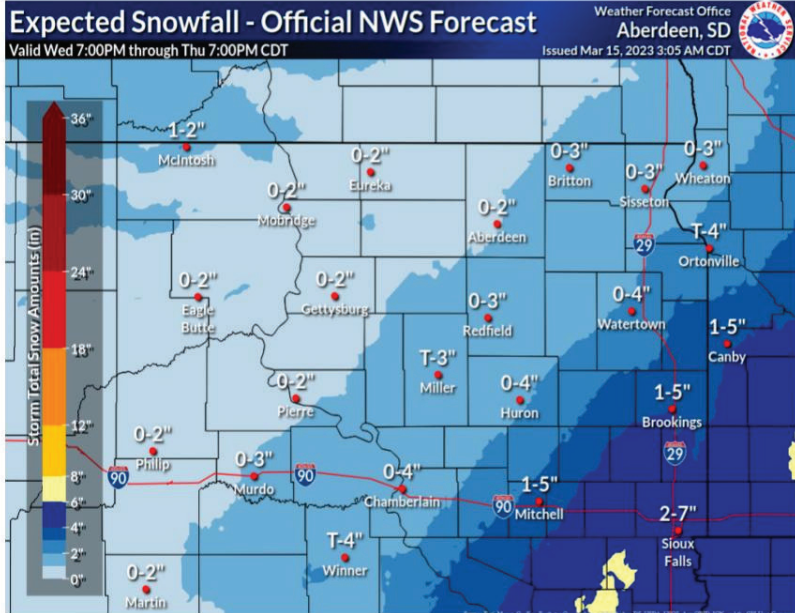
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## Snow Accumulation and Timing

March 15, 2023  
4:50 AM

Accumulating snow potential has shifted westward



	Wed	Thu	Thu	Fri
	Wed 7AM	Wed 1PM	Wed 7PM	Thu 1AM
Aberdeen		T	<1"	
Watertown			1-2"	T
Eagle Butte	T	T		
Milbank			2-3"	<1"
Redfield		T	1-2"	
Pierre		<1"	<1"	
Murdo			<1"	<1"
Sisseton		T	1-2"	
Mobridge		T	<1"	
Wheaton			1-2"	<1"



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Snowfall potential with this system. There is still some uncertainty as models have started to shift the system back to the west a little, resulting in a little more snowfall. Again the main aspect of this system is the winds, however with increasing snowfall we have the potential for seeing increased blowing snow related travel issues.

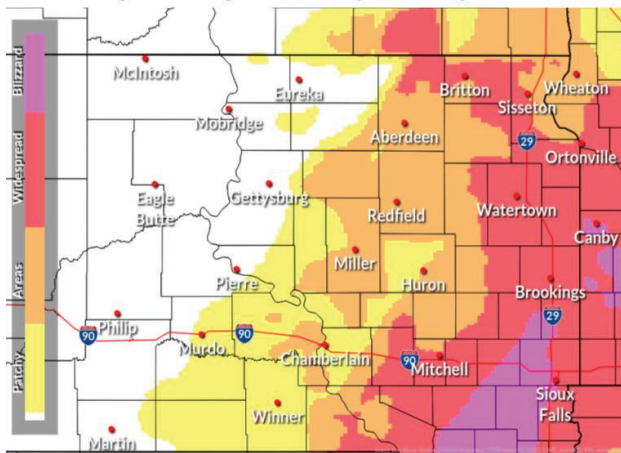


## Blowing Snow Impacts

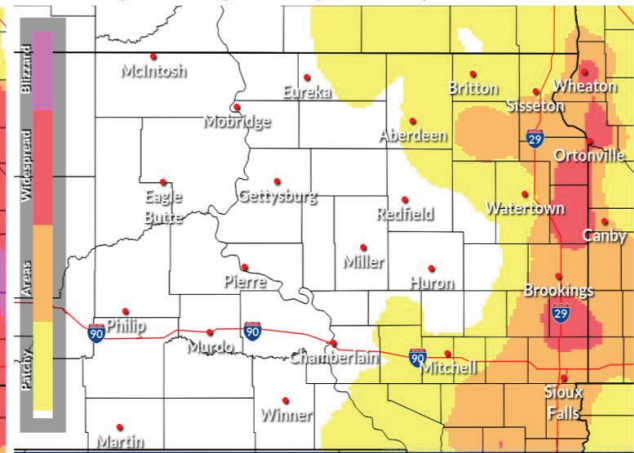
March 15, 2023  
4:54 AM

Focus Areas For Potentially Impacted Travel

Potential Blowing Snow Impacts:  
Thursday Morning - Thursday Evening



Potential Blowing Snow Impacts:  
Thursday Evening - Friday Morning



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

With increased snowfall accumulations, we could see a greater threat for travel related impacts due to winds. If you have travel plans Thursday, start thinking about making alternate arrangements.

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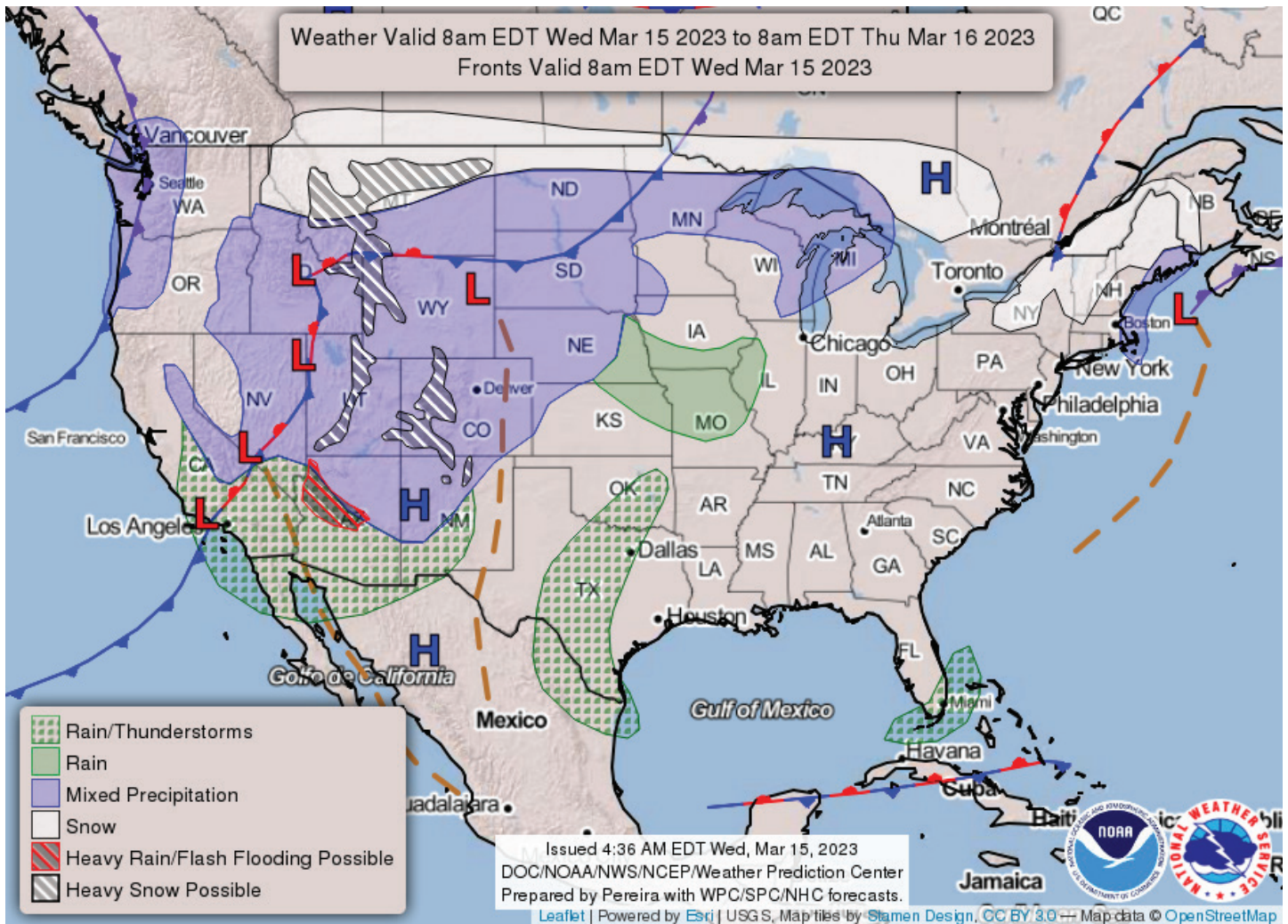
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 36 °F at 6:30 PM**  
**Low Temp: 8 °F at 12:00 AM**  
**Wind: 36 mph at 11:22 AM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 11 hours, 56 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 79 in 2015  
Record Low: -29 in 1897  
Average High: 41  
Average Low: 19  
Average Precip in March.: 0.37  
Precip to date in March.: 1.20  
Average Precip to date: 1.54  
Precip Year to Date: 2.78  
Sunset Tonight: 7:39:22 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:41:19 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 15, 1941: Beware the Ides of March. The most severe blizzard in modern history strikes North Dakota and Minnesota. The blizzard began on a Saturday night while many are traveling, and thus claims 71 lives. Winds gust to 75 mph at Duluth, Minnesota, and reach 85 mph at Grand Forks, North Dakota. Snow drifts twelve feet high were reported in north-central Minnesota. A cold front traveling 30 mph crosses Minnesota in just seven hours.

March 15, 2010: Snowmelt runoff from an extensive snow cover flooded many creeks, roads, along with thousands of acres of pasture and cropland throughout northeast South Dakota. There were numerous road closures. The flooding lasted through the end of the month and for many locations in April. The counties mainly affected were Brown, Marshall, Day, Spink, and Roberts. Numerous communities were affected, including Aberdeen, Claremont, Waubay, Amherst, Kidder, and the Richmond Lake area. The Claremont, Amherst, and Britton areas were the hardest hit with flooded land and roads. Several farms were surrounded by water, with some people stranded. Between Aberdeen and Britton, sixty percent of the area was underwater. Thousands of acres of cropland will not be planted due to too much water, with estimates that 20 to 25 percent of Brown county cropland would not be planted. Many people in northeast South Dakota have had too much water for many years. The road damage was extensive, and repairs will be in the millions of dollars. Many roads across the area will also have to be raised. Many people had extra-long commutes due to flooded streets, with some people having to move out of their homes. Across Day and Marshall Counties, rising lakes threatened many homes and cabins with sandbagging taking place. Most lakes and rivers across northeast South Dakota were at or near record levels.

1938: A tornado hit McPaul, Iowa, while moving from southeast to northwest. Another tornado raced through Batesville, Illinois, at 60 to 65 mph. Another tornado causing F4 damage killed 10 and injured 12 in St. Clair County, Missouri. This tornado was part of an outbreak that produced four different tornadoes and was responsible for 11 deaths and 42 injuries.

1941 - The most severe blizzard in modern history struck North Dakota and Minnesota. The blizzard hit on a Saturday night while many are traveling, and thus claimed 71 lives. Winds gusted to 75 mph at Duluth MN, and reached 85 mph at Grand Forks ND. Snow drifts twelve feet high were reported in north central Minnesota. A cold front traveling 30 mph crossed Minnesota in just seven hours. (15th-16th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1952: On Reunion Island, some 400 miles east of Madagascar 127.56 inches of rain fell in three days in the spring of 1952. This set a world record for the most rainfall in 72 hours. Also, from the 15th to the 16th, 73.62 inches of rain fell in the 24 hours at Cilaos, La Reunion Island in the South Indian Ocean to set a world record.

1987 - A winter storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in central Nevada, with 23 inches reported at Austin. High winds raked the desert areas of southern California and southern Arizona. Winds gusted to 59 mph at Douglas AZ. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - More than one hundred hours of continuous snow finally came to an end at Marquette MI, during which time the city was buried under 43 inches of snow. Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., with forty-one cities reporting record low temperatures for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather from Alabama to the Middle Atlantic Coast. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 at Virginia Beach VA. Low pressure in southeastern Ontario produced high winds in the northeastern U.S. Winds gusted to 70 mph at Saint Albans VT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Low pressure crossing the Upper Mississippi Valley produced high winds from the Northern and Central Plains to the Great Lakes Region and Ohio Valley. Winds gusted to 73 mph at Iowa City IA, and wind gusts reached 79 mph at Waukesha WI. Winds of 75 mph were reported around Rapid City SD, with gusts to 100 mph. Up to a foot of snow was reported in western Iowa, western Minnesota, and extreme eastern North Dakota. Blizzard conditions were reported in northeastern North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### WHERE AM I GOING?

A well-respected theologian was leaving London for a lecture series in another city. As he sat looking out the window, the conductor asked for his ticket.

Searching frantically through his pockets, he discovered that he had lost it.

Wanting to be helpful, the conductor said, "It's alright. Don't worry."

"No, it's not alright," said the theologian. "I don't know where I'm going."

Many have the same problem. They start on life's journey not knowing where they are going or where or when it will end. In fact, a dear friend once said to me, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." He realized I was without a plan.

Not David. He knew where to find directions. In Psalm 25 he said, "Show me the path I should walk, O Lord, point out the right road for me to follow."

With all of his knowledge and wisdom, success and power, David still waited on the Lord for direction. He constantly looked to God for guidance no matter where he was or what he was doing. How wise!

If it was important for David to do this, how much more so for us. When he realized that he needed God's guidance, he would discovered it by meditating on His Word, going to Him in prayer and listening for His voice. Instead of demanding answers, he waited for His directions.

Prayer: We pray, Father, that we will patiently look to You to lead us, guide us, and guard us in paths of righteousness for Your sake and our success! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Psalm 25:1-5



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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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.14.23

1 7 23 38 55 2

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$254,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 32  
DRAW: Mins 23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.13.23

20 23 28 33 51 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,680,000**

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins 23  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.14.23

2 3 14 18 47 4

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 15 Hrs 2 Mins 22  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.11.23

6 15 17 28 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$88,000**

NEXT 15 Hrs 32 Mins 22  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.13.23

5 25 32 38 62 6

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

NEXT 15 Hrs 31 Mins 22  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.13.23

3 10 24 46 63 4

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$63,000,000**

NEXT 15 Hrs 31 Mins 22  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### **Kendricks signs, Pipkins agrees to terms with Chargers**

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Offensive tackle Trey Pipkins agreed to terms Tuesday on a three-year contract to return to the Los Angeles Chargers.

The team also announced the signing of linebacker Eric Kendricks to a multi-year deal. They also placed tenders on kicker Cameron Dicker and tackle Foster Sarell, who were exclusive rights free agents.

Pipkins was drafted in the third round out of Division II Sioux Falls in 2019 and finally came into his own last year. The 6-foot-6, 307-pound lineman started 15 games, including the playoffs, at right tackle last season as the Chargers made the postseason for the first time since 2018.

By re-signing Pipkins, the Chargers could elect to clear more cap room by releasing left guard Matt Feiler and moving Jamaree Salyer to that spot. Salyer was projected to be a guard when he was drafted in the sixth round last year, but started 15 games at left tackle after Rashawn Slater suffered a season-ending biceps injury in a Week 3 game against Jacksonville.

Pipkins is the second member of the 2019 draft class that Chargers general manager Tom Telesco has retained. They reached an agreement with backup quarterback Easton Stick on Monday, but that deal has not been officially announced.

Coming into this offseason, Telesco only re-signed two of his non-first round picks in six draft classes to second contracts.

Kendricks posted about joining the Chargers on his Instagram account Monday. He spent eight seasons with the Vikings before being released on March 6.

The 31-year old linebacker has started 113 regular-season and six playoff games. He was 14th in the league this past season with 137 total tackles, including 87 solo.

Los Angeles also gave running back Austin Ekeler permission to explore a trade after the two sides were unable to reach agreement on an extension. Ekeler has one year remaining on his contract.

### **Nebraska lawmaker 3 weeks into filibuster over trans bill**

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — It was a mundane, unanimously supported bill on liquor taxation that saw state Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh take to the mic on the Nebraska Legislature floor last week. She offered her support, then spent the next three days discussing everything but the bill, including her favorite Girl Scout cookies, Omaha's best doughnuts and the plot of the animated movie "Madagascar."

She also spent that time railing against an unrelated bill that would outlaw gender-affirming therapies for those 18 and younger. It was the advancement of that bill out of committee that led Cavanaugh to promise three weeks ago to filibuster every bill that comes before the Legislature this year — even the ones she supports.

"If this Legislature collectively decides that legislating hate against children is our priority, then I am going to make it painful — painful for everyone," the Omaha married mother of three said. "I will burn the session to the ground over this bill."

True to her word, Cavanaugh has slowed the business of passing laws to a crawl by introducing amendment after amendment to every bill that makes it to the state Senate floor and taking up all eight debate hours allowed by the rules — even during the week she was suffering from strep throat. Wednesday marks the halfway point of this year's 90-day session, and not a single bill will have passed thanks to Cavanaugh's relentless filibustering.

Clerk of the Legislature Brandon Metzler said a delay like this has happened only a couple of times in the past 10 years.

"But what is really uncommon is the lack of bills that have advanced," Metzler said. "Usually, we're a lot

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further along the line than we're seeing now."

In fact, only 26 bills have advanced from the first of three rounds of debate required to pass a bill in Nebraska. There would normally be two to three times that number by mid-March, Metzler said. In the last three weeks since Cavanaugh began her bill blockade, only three bills have advanced.

The Nebraska bill and another that would ban trans people from using bathrooms and locker rooms or playing on sports teams that don't align with the gender listed on their birth certificates are among roughly 150 bills targeting transgender people that have been introduced in state legislatures this year. Bans on gender-affirming care for minors have already been enacted this year in some Republican-led states, including South Dakota and Utah, and Republican governors in Tennessee and Mississippi are expected to sign similar bans into law. And Arkansas and Alabama have bans that were temporarily blocked by federal judges.

Cavanaugh's effort has drawn the gratitude of the LGBTQ community, said Abbi Swatsworth, executive director of LGBTQ advocacy group OutNebraska. The organization has been encouraging members and others to inundate state lawmakers with calls and emails to support Cavanaugh's effort and oppose bills targeting transgender people.

"We really see it as a heroic effort," Swatsworth said of the filibuster. "It is extremely meaningful when an ally does more than pay lip service to allyship. She really is leading this charge."

Both Cavanaugh and the conservative Omaha lawmaker who introduced the trans bill, state Sen. Kathleen Kauth, said they're seeking to protect children. Cavanaugh cited a 2021 survey by the Trevor Project, a nonprofit focused on suicide prevention efforts among LGBTQ youth, that found that 58% of transgender and nonbinary youth in Nebraska seriously considered suicide in the previous year, and more than 1 in 5 reported that they had attempted it.

"This is a bill that attacks trans children," Cavanaugh said. "It is legislating hate. It is legislating meanness. The children of Nebraska deserve to have somebody stand up and fight for them."

Kauth said she's trying to protect children from undertaking gender-affirming treatments that they might later regret as adults. She has characterized treatments such as hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery as medically unproven and potentially dangerous in the long term — although the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association all support gender-affirming care for youths.

Cavanaugh and other lawmakers who support her filibuster effort "don't want to acknowledge the support I have for this bill," Kauth said.

"We should be allowed to debate this," she said. "What this is doing is taking the ball and going home."

Nebraska's unique single-chamber Legislature is officially nonpartisan, but it is dominated by members who are registered Republicans. Although bills can win approval with a simple majority in the 49-seat body, it takes 33 votes to overcome a filibuster. The Legislature is currently made up of 32 registered Republicans and 17 registered Democrats, but the slim margin means that the defection of a single Democrat could allow Republicans to pass whatever laws they want.

Democrats have had some success in using filibusters, which burn valuable time from the session, delay votes on other issues and force lawmakers to work longer days. Last year, conservative lawmakers were unable to overcome Democratic filibusters to pass an abortion ban or a law that would have allowed people to carry concealed guns without a permit.

Cavanaugh said she has taken a page from the playbook of Ernie Chambers — a left-leaning former legislator from Omaha who was the longest-serving lawmaker in state history. He mastered the use of the filibuster to try to tank bills he opposed and force support for bills he backed.

"But I'm not aware of anyone carrying out a filibuster to this extent," Cavanaugh said. "I know it's frustrating. It's frustrating for me. But there is a way to put an end to — just put a stop to this hateful bill."

Chambers praised Cavanaugh's "perseverance, gumption and stamina to fight as hard as she can using the rules" to stand up for the marginalized, adding, "I would be right there fighting with her if I were still there."

Speaker John Arch has taken steps to try to speed the process, such as sometimes scheduling the Legis-

lature to work through lunch to tick off another hour on the debate clock. And he noted that the Legislature will soon be moving to all-day debate once committee hearings on bills come to an end later this month.

But even with frustration growing over the hobbled process, the Republican speaker defended Cavanaugh's use of the filibuster.

"The rules allow her to do this, and those rules are there to protect the voice of the minority," Arch said. "We may find that we're passing fewer bills, but the bills we do pass will be bigger bills we care about."

Chambers said this is a sign that Cavanaugh's efforts are working. Typically, the speaker will step in and seek to postpone the bill causing the delay to allow more pressing legislation such as tax cuts or budget items to move forward.

"I think you're going to start to see some of that happen," Chambers said. "I think if (Cavanaugh) has the physical stamina, she can do it. I don't think she shoots blanks."

## More clashes in Pakistan as police try to arrest Imran Khan

By BABAR DOGAR and MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — Supporters of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan threw bricks at police who fought back with clubs and tear gas for a second day Wednesday after officers tried to arrest the ousted premier for failing to appear in court on graft charges.

Police besieged the 70-year-old opposition leader's house in the eastern city of Lahore since Tuesday as his supporters hurled rocks and bricks, and swung batons snatched from the officers. Clashes went on into the afternoon Wednesday before subsiding.

Violence was also reported between Khan's supporters and police in other major cities, including Karachi, Islamabad, the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan. The government sent additional police to Lahore's upscale area of Zaman Park, where Khan lives.

Early Wednesday, Khan had emerged from his house to meet with his supporters, who had faced tear gas and police batons through the night to save him from arrest. He said he was ready to travel to Islamabad on March 18 under his arrest warrant, but that police did not accept the offer.

Khan later posed for cameras seated at a long table, showing off piles of spent tear gas shells he said had been collected from around his home.

"What crime did I commit that my house has been attacked like this," he tweeted. Fawad Chaudhry, a senior party leader from Khan's party claimed hundreds of Khan's supporters were injured.

At the Islamabad High Court, Khan's lawyer Khawaja Haris and his team petitioned for the suspension of the arrest warrant for the former premier. The court was expected to issue a ruling about the suspension later Wednesday.

By around 2 p.m., the situation calmed and police stepped back, apparently to ease tensions. This encouraged more Khan supporters to join those outside and inside his home as the situation calmed.

Many chanted Allahu akbar, the Arabic phrase for "God is great." Khan, still wearing a gas mask, greeted them at his home.

Officials said security forces were told to move back from Khan's house while the court in the capital, Islamabad, considered whether to suspend the warrant. Azhar Siddique, another lawyer for Khan, said the Lahore High Court ordered police to halt the operation outside Khan's home until Thursday, though they will remain deployed there.

The Punjab provincial government said Wednesday that more than 100 police officers were injured in clashes with Khan's supporters. They denied Khan's allegation that officers were using live ammunition.

Khan, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament in April, was ordered to appear before a judge in Islamabad on Friday to answer charges of illegally selling state gifts he had received during his term as premier and concealing his assets.

The former premier has avoided appearances before the court since November, when he was wounded in a gun attack at a protest rally in eastern Punjab province, claiming he was not medically fit to travel from Lahore to Islamabad to face indictment.

Last week, he went to Islamabad to appear before three courts, but he failed to appear before the fourth court to face indictment in the graft case, which is a legal process for starting his trial.

Khan has claimed that the string of cases against him, which includes terrorism charges, are a plot by the government of his successor, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, to discredit the former cricket star turned Islamist politician.

From his home, Khan urged his followers on Tuesday to fight on even if he is arrested. "They think this nation will fall asleep when Imran Khan is jailed," he wrote on Twitter. "You need to prove them wrong."

On Wednesday, he tweeted that there was a plot "to abduct & assassinate" him.

Prime Minister Sharif on Wednesday criticized Khan in televised remarks, saying that the ex-premier "considers himself above the law, and he has been defying court orders to avoid arrest." Sharif insisted he had nothing to do with the arrest warrant, which he said was a court order and the police were only complying with it.

In Pakistan's turbulent political history, at least seven former prime minister have been arrested in various cases and tried by courts since this South Asian country was created in 1947 after gaining independence from British colonial rule.

Former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged by the military government in 1979 after his ouster in a coup. His daughter, Benazir Bhutto, served twice as prime minister and was assassinated during an election rally in 2007 in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's longest-serving premier and the brother of current prime minister, was in office from 1990 to 1993 and from 1997 to 1999, when was ousted in a military coup by Gen. Pervez Musharraf. He returned as premier in 2013 but was ousted by the country's Supreme Court in 2017. He was later arrested, tried and convicted in a corruption case, although he has always denied the charges and today lives in exile in Britain.

## Honduras will seek ties with China, spurning Taiwan

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Honduras President Xiomara Castro announced Tuesday that her government will seek to establish diplomatic relations with China, which would imply severing relations with Taiwan. The switch would leave Taiwan recognized by only 13 countries as China spends billions to win recognition for its "One China" policy.

Castro said on her Twitter account that she instructed Honduran Foreign Affairs Minister Eduardo Reina to start negotiations with China and that her intention is to "expand frontiers freely in concert with the nations of the world."

Castro said during her presidential campaign in 2021 that she would look for ties with China if elected, but once in power, her government backtracked on those comments. In January 2022, the foreign affairs minister told The Associated Press that Honduras would continue strengthening ties with Taiwan and that establishing a diplomatic relationship with China was not a priority for Castro.

Reina, the foreign affairs minister, had said the government weighed up the benefits that Honduras had received from a good relationship with Taiwan and decided that there was no reason to change at that moment.

In Taipei, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it had "expressed serious concerns to the Honduran government. Our country has made it clear to Honduras many times that Taiwan is a sincere and reliable cooperative partner to our allies. Honduras is requested to consider carefully and not fall into China's trap or make wrong decisions that damage the long-term friendship between Taiwan and Honduras."

Taiwanese media reported that the Foreign Ministry had summoned Honduras' Ambassador Harold Burgos for discussions. Burgos told reporters he is currently awaiting orders from his government.

At a daily briefing on Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Beijing welcomed the statement from Honduras.

"The fact that 181 countries in the world have established diplomatic relations with China on the basis of the one-China principle fully proves that establishing diplomatic relations with China is a correct choice



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in line with the general trend of historical development and the trend of the times," Wang said.

China claims self-ruled, democratic Taiwan is part of its territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary, and refuses most contacts with countries that maintain formal ties with Taiwan, and threatens retaliation against countries merely for increasing contacts.

China expelled Lithuania's ambassador, downgraded diplomatic ties and blocked trade with the Baltic country of 2.7 million people after it boosted relations with Taipei in October 2021. Lithuania has since closed its embassy in Beijing and opened a trade office in Taiwan.

It's not clear what made Honduras' government change its mind. However, China, which is building a massive dam in Honduras, generally uses trade and investment as incentives for switching ties, as it has done successfully with Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua and, most recently, South Pacific nations including the Solomon Islands.

Taiwan supplies its dwindling number of formal diplomatic partners with agricultural experts, vocational training programs and other forms of economic aid.

However, budgetary restraints imposed by the democratically elected legislature prevent it from splashing out on sports stadiums, conference halls and government buildings as China does.

China's multi-billion dollar "Belt and Road" initiative has also offered developing nations ports, railways, power plants and other infrastructure, funded by loans provided at market rates.

The loss of Honduras would leave Taiwan with formal diplomatic ties just 13 sovereign states, including Vatican City. In Latin America, it also has relations with Belize and Paraguay, with most of its remaining partners being small, poor island nations in the Caribbean and South Pacific.

Taiwan's sole remaining African ally is Eswanti, formerly known as Swaziland, whose Prime Minister Cleopas Siphon Dlamini visited Taiwan this month and expressed support for the island's re-admission to the United Nations and its agencies.

Honduras would become the ninth diplomatic ally that Taipei has lost to Beijing since pro-independence President Tsai Ing-wen first took office in May 2016. She is due to step down next year at the end of her second term.

Despite China's campaign of isolation, Taiwan retains robust informal ties with more than 100 other countries, most importantly the U.S.

Earlier this month, Micronesian President David Panuelo accused China of "political warfare" in a letter to other national leaders and discussed switching diplomatic allegiance from China to Taiwan in exchange for \$50 million to recharge the tiny Pacific island nation's trust fund.

Panuelo said China had been spying on Micronesia, offering bribes and acting in a threatening manner in an effort to ensure that if it goes to war with Taiwan, Micronesia would be aligned with China, or at least abstain from taking sides.

Panuelo said Micronesia would also receive an annual \$15 million assistance package and Taiwan would take over various projects that China had begun, including a national convention center, two state government complexes, and two gymnasiums.

China denied the allegations, calling them a "smear."

China's diplomatic offensive has begun raising concerns in the U.S. as its rivalry with Beijing rivalry sharpens.

China won over former Taiwanese Pacific allies Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019, signing a security pact with the latter that would permit Chinese navy ships and security forces to maintain a presence in the country. The move drew concern from the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, as well as opposition politicians within the country.

Alarmed by such Chinese gains, the Biden administration is proposing to spend billions to keep three Pacific countries in the U.S. orbit.

President Joe Biden's proposed federal budget released on Thursday includes more than \$7.1 billion in funding for the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau. The money is included in the \$63.1 billion request for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The money, to be paid out over 20 years, would extend agreements with the three states under which the U.S. provides them with essential services and economic support in exchange for military basing rights and other preferential treatment. Those deals were due to expire later this year and next, and U.S. officials say China has been trying to exploit extension negotiations for its own advantage.

The White House said the payments are part of its strategy to “out-compete China” and strengthen America’s alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

## Musk internet kits a boon for bad actors in Brazilian Amazon

By FABIANO MAISSONAVE Associated Press

ATALAIA DO NORTE, Brazil (AP) — Brazilian federal agents aboard three helicopters descended on an illegal mining site on Tuesday in the Amazon rainforest. They were met with gunfire, and the shooters escaped, leaving behind an increasingly familiar find for authorities: Starlink internet units.

Starlink, a division of Elon Musk’s SpaceX, has almost 4,000 low-orbit satellites lined up across the skies, connecting people in remote corners of the Amazon and providing a crucial advantage to Ukrainian forces on the battlefield. The lightweight, high-speed internet system has also proved a new and valuable tool for Brazil’s illegal miners, with reliable service for coordinating logistics, receiving advance warning of law enforcement raids and making payments without flying back to the city.

Agents from the Brazilian environment agency’s special inspection group and the federal highway police rapid response group on Tuesday found one Starlink terminal up and running next to a pit, an officer who participated in the raid told The Associated Press. He spoke on condition of anonymity over concerns for his personal safety.

They also seized 600 grams of mercury (21 ounces), 15 grams (0.5 ounces) of gold, 508 cartridges of ammunition of varying calibers, and personal documents. They destroyed 3,250 liters (848 gallons) of fuel, four mining barges, 12 generators, 23 camping and storage units, and seven outboard motors.

The mining area known as Ouro Mil is controlled by Brazil’s most feared criminal organization, known as the First Command of the Capital, according to federal investigations.

Since taking office this year, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has empowered authorities to crack down on environmental violations, particularly illegal mining in Yanomami land, Brazil’s largest Indigenous territory. In recent years, an estimated 20,000 prospectors contaminated vital waterways with mercury used to separate gold. They have disrupted traditional Indigenous life, brought disease and caused widespread famine.

The environment agency, known as Ibama, has seized seven Starlink terminals in Yanomami land over the past five weeks, including the two this Tuesday, the agency’s press office said in an emailed statement. An untold number of the highly portable Starlink terminals could have been taken with miners as they fled sites into the rainforest.

Illegal miners have long used the internet to communicate and coordinate, but until now that entailed sending a technician, usually by plane, to install a heavy, fixed antenna that cannot be carried off whenever mining sites move or are raided. Even so, the connection was slow and unstable, especially on rainy days. Connection in the Amazon’s small- and medium-sized cities has been no better.

Starlink – which first became available in Brazil last year and has spread rapidly – solved these problems. Installation is do-it-yourself, the equipment works even on the move, speed is as fast as in Brazil’s large cities and it even works during storms.

Starlink has long viewed the Amazon as an opportunity. That was underscored by Musk’s visit to Brazil last May. He met with then-President Jair Bolsonaro and the region was at the center of their conversation.

“Super excited to be in Brazil for launch of Starlink for 19,000 unconnected schools in rural areas & environmental monitoring of Amazon,” Musk tweeted at the time.

That project with the Brazilian government, however, hasn’t advanced. SpaceX and the communications ministry haven’t signed any contract, and only three terminals were installed in Amazon schools for a 12-month trial period, the ministry’s press office said in an emailed response to questions.

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Nevertheless, Starlink has taken off in the region and begun ushering in change.

In Atalaia do Norte, on the western reaches of the Brazilian Amazon near the borders with Peru and Colombia, Rubeney de Castro Alves installed Starlink at his hotel in December. Now, he can make bank transfers and conduct video calls. He even started binging Netflix.

"There are so many new things to watch that I'm not even sleeping," Alves said, chuckling.

His son once flew all the way to Manaus, the state capital 1,140 kilometers (708 miles) away, just to negotiate with a group of tourists via conference call. Today, internet at his 11-room hotel in Atalaia do Norte is more reliable than in Manaus, Alves said.

He bought a second terminal for his tour boat. Up until now, passengers even on his 10-day voyages have had to do without any communications. If something were amiss, no one would know until the boat failed to arrive on time.

With high demand for internet, dozens of the riverside town's 21,000 residents flock to Alves' hotel each day. Its balcony is a meeting point for teenagers who spend hours playing online games on their phones.

"It made a revolution in our city," Alves said.

A world away, in Ukraine, Starlink has yielded advantages on the battlefield in its war with Russia.

Ukraine has already received some 24,000 Starlink terminals. Amid ongoing Russian shelling of civilian infrastructure, they allow continued internet connection in the most vulnerable regions in the country's southeast. In all large Ukrainian cities, authorities have set up "points of resilience" that offer free internet along with hot beverages.

The benefits of connectivity were immediately apparent to bad actors in the Amazon, Hugo Loss, operations coordinator for Brazil's environment agency, told the AP in a phone interview. It allows coordination of equipment, miners, food and fuel.

"This technology is extremely fast and really improves the ability to manage an illegal mine," Loss said. "You can manage hundreds of mining sites without ever setting foot in one."

Another official with the environment agency told the AP it is just beginning to expel miners from the Yanomami territory and the spread of Starlink is a fever among illegal miners, complicating that mission. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of concerns about personal safety.

An unauthorized reseller of Starlink in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima state that is the gateway for travel into Yanomami territory, has been marketing the units in a WhatsApp group for illegal miners and promising same-day delivery.

Her price for a terminal is \$1,600, with monthly installments of \$360 — six times what Alves pays for service at his little hotel in Atalaia do Norte.

As lawbreakers have gained access to superior internet service, authorities have started using Starlink themselves. Federal agents installed a terminal at a new checkpoint on the Uraricoera River — an important corridor for miners entering Yanomami territory. The official who informed the AP about the Tuesday raid used Starlink to send photos and even heavy video files of their operation via WeTransfer.

Brazil's environment agency told the AP via email that it, along with other federal bodies, is studying how to block Starlink's signal in illegal mining areas.

"This measure is crucial to dismantling the logistics that sustain illegal mining in Indigenous Territories," its press office said.

The AP emailed James Gleeson, SpaceX's Communications Director, questions about Starlink's presence in Brazil and its use by illegal miners in remote areas, but received no response.

## Abortion pill challenge goes before judge in Texas

By SEAN MURPHY and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

AMARILLO, Texas (AP) — A federal judge will hear arguments Wednesday in a high-stakes court case that could threaten access to medication abortion and blunt the authority of U.S. drug regulators.

Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk of Texas is weighing a lawsuit from Christian conservatives aimed at overturning the Food and Drug Administration's more than 2-decade-old approval of the abortion pill mifepristone.

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The drug, when used with a second pill, has become the most common method of abortion in the U.S. There is essentially no precedent for a lone judge overruling the scientific decisions of the FDA. And legal experts have warned of far-reaching consequences if judges begin second-guessing FDA decisions on drug safety and effectiveness.

Wednesday's hearing is the first in the case, which is being intensely tracked by groups on both sides of the abortion issue after last year's reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. However, there was little advance notice of the high-profile session, which only appeared on the public online docket late Monday after news reports raised concerns about a lack of transparency in the proceedings.

Kacsmark told attorneys in the case Friday that he would delay the filing to minimize threats and possible protests, a development first reported by *The Washington Post*. He also asked the lawyers not to disclose the date of the hearing, according to a transcript of the meeting released Tuesday.

Such actions by a judge are highly unusual because court proceedings are almost always open to the public and transparency is an underlying assumption of the American judicial system.

Kacsmark, appointed by President Donald Trump, formerly worked as an attorney for a Christian legal group and has written critically of laws allowing abortion. Supporters of abortion rights say conservatives are steering cases to his courtroom because they believe he will rule in their favor.

On Wednesday, Kacsmark will hear arguments in Amarillo from the Alliance for Defending Freedom — which filed its lawsuit on behalf of several anti-abortion groups and physicians — as well as federal attorneys representing the FDA. The drug's manufacturer, Danco Laboratories, is also a party in the case and set to argue for keeping its pill available.

The Alliance is seeking an injunction that would force the FDA to revoke its approval of mifepristone. But it's unclear how quickly that could happen or what the process would entail. The FDA has its own procedures for revoking drug approvals that involve public hearings and scientific deliberations, which can take months or years.

If Kacsmark rules against the FDA, federal attorneys are expected to swiftly appeal the decision and seek an emergency stay to stop it from taking effect while the case proceeds.

Mifepristone is part of a two-drug regimen that has been the standard for medication abortion in the U.S. since 2000. If mifepristone is sidelined, clinics and doctors that prescribe the combination say they plan to switch to using only the second drug, misoprostol. That single-drug approach is slightly less effective at ending pregnancies, although it is widely used in countries where mifepristone is illegal or unavailable.

The Texas lawsuit alleges that the FDA's approval of mifepristone in 2000 was flawed for several reasons, including an inadequate review of the pill's safety risks. The suit also challenges several later FDA decisions that loosened restrictions on the pill, including eliminating a requirement that women pick it up in person.

Lawyers for the FDA have pointed out that serious side effects with mifepristone are rare and the agency has repeatedly affirmed the drug's safety by reviewing subsequent studies and data. Pulling the drug more than 20 years after approval would be "extraordinary and unprecedented," the government stated in its legal response.

Typically, the FDA's authority to regulate prescription drugs has gone unchallenged. But more than a dozen states now have laws restricting abortion broadly — and the pills specifically — following last year's Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

Lawsuits challenging state restrictions, including those in North Carolina and West Virginia, are progressing separately and are expected to continue for years.

## Not magic: Opaque AI tool may flag parents with disabilities

By SALLY HO and GARANCE BURKE Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — For the two weeks that the Hackneys' baby girl lay in a Pittsburgh hospital bed weak from dehydration, her parents rarely left her side, sometimes sleeping on the fold-out sofa in the room.

They stayed with their daughter around the clock when she was moved to a rehab center to regain her strength. Finally, the 8-month-old stopped batting away her bottles and started putting on weight again.

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"She was doing well and we started to ask when can she go home," Lauren Hackney said. "And then from that moment on, at the time, they completely stonewalled us and never said anything."

The couple was stunned when child welfare officials showed up, told them they were negligent and took their daughter away.

"They had custody papers and they took her right there and then," Lauren Hackney recalled. "And we started crying."

More than a year later, their daughter, now 2, remains in foster care. The Hackneys, who have developmental disabilities, are struggling to understand how taking their daughter to the hospital when she refused to eat could be seen as so neglectful that she'd need to be taken from her home.

They wonder if an artificial intelligence tool that the Allegheny County Department of Human Services uses to predict which children could be at risk of harm singled them out because of their disabilities.

The U.S. Justice Department is asking the same question. The agency is investigating the county's child welfare system to determine whether its use of the influential algorithm discriminates against people with disabilities or other protected groups, The Associated Press has learned. Later this month, federal civil rights attorneys will interview the Hackneys and Andrew Hackney's mother, Cynde Hackney-Fierro, the grandmother said.

Lauren Hackney has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder that affects her memory, and her husband, Andrew, has a comprehension disorder and nerve damage from a stroke suffered in his 20s. Their baby girl was just 7 months old when she began refusing to drink her bottles. Facing a nationwide shortage of formula, they traveled from Pennsylvania to West Virginia looking for some and were forced to change brands. The baby didn't seem to like it.

Her pediatrician first reassured them that babies sometimes can be fickle with feeding and offered ideas to help her get back her appetite, they said.

When she grew lethargic days later, they said, the same doctor told them to take her to the emergency room. The Hackneys believe medical staff alerted child protective services after they showed up with a baby who was dehydrated and malnourished.

That's when they believe their information was fed into the Allegheny Family Screening Tool, which county officials say is standard procedure for neglect allegations. Soon, a social worker appeared to question them, and their daughter was sent to foster care.

Over the past six years, Allegheny County has served as a real-world laboratory for testing AI-driven child welfare tools that crunch reams of data about local families to try to predict which children are likely to face danger in their homes. Today, child welfare agencies in at least 26 states and Washington, D.C., have considered using algorithmic tools, and jurisdictions in at least 11 have deployed them, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Hackneys' story — based on interviews, internal emails and legal documents — illustrates the opacity surrounding these algorithms. Even as they fight to regain custody of their daughter, they can't question the "risk score" Allegheny County's tool may have assigned to her case because officials won't disclose it to them. And neither the county nor the people who built the tool have ever explained which variables may have been used to measure the Hackneys' abilities as parents.

"It's like you have an issue with someone who has a disability," Andrew Hackney said in an interview from their apartment in suburban Pittsburgh. "In that case ... you probably end up going after everyone who has kids and has a disability."

As part of a yearlong investigation, the AP obtained the data points underpinning several algorithms deployed by child welfare agencies, including some marked "CONFIDENTIAL," offering rare insight into the mechanics driving these emerging technologies. Among the factors they have used to calculate a family's risk, whether outright or by proxy: race, poverty rates, disability status and family size. They include whether a mother smoked before she was pregnant and whether a family had previous child abuse or neglect complaints.

What they measure matters. A recent analysis by ACLU researchers found that when Allegheny's algorithm

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flagged people who accessed county services for mental health and other behavioral health programs, that could add up to three points to a child's risk score, a significant increase on a scale of 20.

Allegheny County spokesman Mark Bertolet declined to address the Hackney case and did not answer detailed questions about the status of the federal probe or critiques of the data powering the tool, including by the ACLU.

"As a matter of policy, we do not comment on lawsuits or legal matters," Bertolet said in an email.

Justice Department spokeswoman Aryele Bradford declined to comment.

NOT MAGIC

Child welfare algorithms plug vast amounts of public data about local families into complex statistical models to calculate what they call a risk score. The number that's generated is then used to advise social workers as they decide which families should be investigated, or which families need additional attention — a weighty decision that can sometimes mean life or death.

A number of local leaders have tapped into AI technology while under pressure to make systemic changes, such as in Oregon during a foster care crisis and in Los Angeles County after a series of high-profile child deaths in one of the nation's largest county child welfare systems.

LA County's Department of Children and Family Services Director Brandon Nichols says algorithms can help identify high-risk families and improve outcomes in a deeply strained system. Yet he could not explain how the screening tool his agency uses works.

"We're sort of the social work side of the house, not the IT side of the house," Nichols said in an interview. "How the algorithm functions, in some ways is, I don't want to say is magic to us, but it's beyond our expertise and experience."

Nichols and officials at two other child welfare agencies referred detailed questions about their AI tools to the outside developers who created them.

In Larimer County, Colorado, one official acknowledged she didn't know what variables were used to assess local families.

"The variables and weights used by the Larimer Decision Aide Tool are part of the code developed by Auckland and thus we do not have this level of detail," Jill Maasch, a Larimer County Human Services spokeswoman said in an email, referring to the developers.

In Pennsylvania, California and Colorado, county officials have opened up their data systems to the two academic developers who select data points to build their algorithms. Rhema Vaithianathan, a professor of health economics at New Zealand's Auckland University of Technology, and Emily Putnam-Hornstein, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Social Work, said in an email that their work is transparent and that they make their computer models public.

"In each jurisdiction in which a model has been fully implemented we have released a description of fields that were used to build the tool, along with information as to the methods used," they said by email.

A 241-page report on the Allegheny County website includes pages of coded variables and statistical calculations.

Vaithianathan and Putnam-Hornstein's work has been hailed in reports published by UNICEF and the Biden administration alike for devising computer models that promise to lighten caseworkers' loads by drawing from a set of simple factors. They have described using such tools as a moral imperative, insisting that child welfare officials should draw from all data at their disposal to make sure children aren't maltreated.

Through tracking their work across the country, however, the AP found their tools can set families up for separation by rating their risk based on personal characteristics they cannot change or control, such as race or disability, rather than just their actions as parents.

In Allegheny County, a sprawling county of 1.2 million near the Ohio border, the algorithm has accessed an array of external data, including jail, juvenile probation, Medicaid, welfare, health and birth records, all held in a vast countywide "data warehouse." The tool uses that information to predict the risk that a child will be placed in foster care two years after a family is first investigated.

County officials have told the AP they're proud of their cutting-edge approach, and even expanded their work to build another algorithm focused on newborns. They have said they monitor their risk scoring tool

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closely and update it over time, including removing variables such as welfare benefits and birth records. Vaithianathan and Putnam-Hornstein declined the AP's repeated interview requests to discuss how they choose the specific data that powers their models. But in a 2017 report, they detailed the methods used to build the first version of Allegheny's tool, including a footnote that described a statistical cutoff as "rather arbitrary but based on trial and error."

"This footnote refers to our exploration of more than 800 features from Allegheny's data warehouse more than five years ago," the developers said by email.

That approach is borne out in their design choices, which differ from county to county.

In the same 2017 report, the developers acknowledged that using race data didn't substantively improve the model's accuracy, but they continued to study it in Douglas County, Colorado, though they ultimately opted against including it in that model. To address community concerns that a tool could harden racial bias in Los Angeles County, the developers excluded people's criminal history, ZIP code and geographic indicators, but have continued to use those data points in the Pittsburgh area.

When asked about the inconsistencies, the developers pointed to their published methodology documents.

"We detail various metrics used to assess accuracy — while also detailing 'external validations,'" the developers said via email.

When Oregon's Department of Human Services built an algorithm inspired by Allegheny's, it factored in a child's race as it predicted a family's risk, and also applied a "fairness correction" to mitigate racial bias. Last June, the tool was dropped entirely due to equity concerns after an AP investigation in April revealed potential racial bias in such tools.

Justice Department attorneys cited the same AP story last fall when federal civil rights attorneys started inquiring about additional discrimination concerns in Allegheny's tool, three sources told the AP. They spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying the Justice Department asked them not to discuss the confidential conversations. Two said they also feared professional retaliation.

## IQ TESTS, PARENTING CLASS

With no answers on when they could get their daughter home, the Hackneys' lawyer in October filed a federal civil rights complaint on their behalf that questioned how the screening tool was used in their case.

Over time, Allegheny's tool has tracked if members of the family have diagnoses for schizophrenia or mood disorders. It's also measured if parents or other children in the household have disabilities, by noting whether any family members received Supplemental Security Income, a federal benefit for people with disabilities. The county said that it factors in SSI payments in part because children with disabilities are more likely to be abused or neglected.

The county also said disabilities-aligned data can be "predictive of the outcomes" and it "should come as no surprise that parents with disabilities ... may also have a need for additional supports and services." In an emailed statement, the county added that elsewhere in the country, social workers also draw on data about mental health and other conditions that may affect a parent's ability to safely care for a child.

The Hackneys have been ordered to take parenting classes and say they have been taxed by all of the child welfare system's demands, including IQ tests and downtown court hearings.

People with disabilities are overrepresented in the child welfare system, yet there's no evidence that they harm their children at higher rates, said Traci LaLiberte, a University of Minnesota expert on child welfare and disabilities.

Including data points related to disabilities in an algorithm is problematic because it perpetuates historic biases in the system and it focuses on people's physiological traits rather than behavior that social workers are brought in to address, LaLiberte said.

The Los Angeles tool weighs if any children in the family have ever gotten special education services, have had prior developmental or mental health referrals or used drugs to treat mental health.

"This is not unique to caseworkers who use this tool; it is common for caseworkers to consider these factors when determining possible supports and services," the developers said by email.

Before algorithms were in use, the child welfare system had long distrusted parents with disabilities. Into

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the 1970s, they were regularly sterilized and institutionalized, LaLiberte said. A landmark federal report in 2012 noted parents with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities lost custody of their children as much as 80 percent of the time.

Across the U.S., it's extremely rare for any child welfare agencies to require disabilities training for social workers, LaLiberte's research has found. The result: Parents with disabilities are often judged by a system that doesn't understand how to assess their capacity as caregivers, she said.

The Hackneys experienced this firsthand. When a social worker asked Andrew Hackney how often he fed the baby, he answered literally: two times a day. The worker seemed appalled, he said, and scolded him, saying babies must eat more frequently. He struggled to explain that the girl's mother, grandmother and aunt also took turns feeding her each day.

## FOREVER FLAGGED

Officials in Allegheny County have said that building AI into their processes helps them "make decisions based on as much information as possible," and noted that the algorithm merely harnesses data social workers can already access.

That can include decades-old records. The Pittsburgh-area tool has tracked whether parents were ever on public benefits or had a history with the criminal justice system — even if they were minors at the time, or if it never resulted in charges or convictions.

The AP found those design choices can stack the deck against people who grew up in poverty, hardening historical inequities that persist in the data, or against people with records in the juvenile or criminal justice systems, long after society has granted redemption. And critics say that algorithms can create a self-fulfilling prophecy by influencing which families are targeted in the first place.

"These predictors have the effect of casting permanent suspicion and offer no means of recourse for families marked by these indicators," according to the analysis from researchers at the ACLU and the nonprofit Human Rights Data Analysis Group. "They are forever seen as riskier to their children."

As child welfare algorithms become more common, parents who have experienced social workers' scrutiny fear the models won't let them escape their pasts, no matter how old or irrelevant their previous scrapes with the system may have been.

Charity Chandler-Cole, who serves on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families, is one of them. She landed in foster care as a teen after being arrested for shoplifting underwear for her younger sister. Then as an adult, she said, social workers once showed up at her apartment after someone spuriously reported that a grand piano was thrown at her nephew who was living at her home — even though they didn't own such an instrument.

The local algorithm could tag her for her prior experiences in foster care and juvenile probation, as well as the unfounded child abuse allegation, Chandler-Cole says. She wonders if AI could also properly assess that she was quickly cleared of any maltreatment concerns, or that her nonviolent offense as a teen was legally expunged.

"A lot of these reports lack common sense," said Chandler-Cole, now the mother of four and CEO of an organization that works with the court system to help children in foster care. "You are automatically putting us in these spaces to be judged with these labels. It just perpetuates additional harm."

Chandler-Cole's fellow commissioner Wendy Garen, by contrast, argues "more is better" and that by drawing on all available data, risk scoring tools can help make the agency's work more thorough and effective.

## GLOBAL INFLUENCE

Even as their models have come under scrutiny for their accuracy and fairness, the developers have started new projects with child welfare agencies in Northampton County, Pennsylvania, and Arapahoe County, Colorado. The states of California and Pennsylvania, as well as New Zealand and Chile, have also asked them to do preliminary work.

And as word of their methods has spread in recent years, Vaithianathan has given lectures highlighting screening tools in Colombia and Australia. She also recently advised researchers in Denmark and officials in the United Arab Emirates on how to use technology to target child services.



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"Rhema is one of the world leaders and her research can help to shape the debate in Denmark," a Danish researcher said on LinkedIn last year, regarding Vaithianathan's advisory role related to a local child welfare tool that was being piloted.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded a national study, co-authored by Vaithianathan and Putnam-Hornstein, that concluded that their overall approach in Allegheny could be a model for other places.

HHS' Administration for Children and Families spokeswoman Debra Johnson declined to say whether the Justice Department's probe would influence her agency's future support for an AI-driven approach to child welfare.

Especially as budgets tighten, cash-strapped agencies are desperate to find more efficient ways for social workers to focus on children who truly need protection. At a 2021 panel, Putnam-Hornstein acknowledged that "the overall screen-in rate remained totally flat" in Allegheny since their tool had been implemented.

Meanwhile, foster care and the separation of families can have lifelong developmental consequences for the child.

A 2012 HHS study found 95% of babies who are reported to child welfare agencies go through more than one caregiver and household change during their time in foster care, instability that researchers noted can itself be a form of trauma.

The Hackneys' daughter already has been placed in two foster homes and has now spent more than half of her short life away from her parents as they try to convince social workers they are worthy.

Meanwhile, they say they're running out of money in the fight for their daughter. With barely enough left for food from Andrew Hackney's wages at a local grocery store, he had to shut off his monthly cell phone service. They're struggling to pay for the legal fees and gas money needed to attend appointments required of them.

In February, their daughter was diagnosed with a disorder that can disrupt her sense of taste, according to Andrew Hackney's lawyer, Robin Frank, who added that the girl has continued to struggle to eat, even in foster care.

All they have for now are twice-weekly visits that last a few hours before she's taken away again. Lauren Hackney's voice breaks as she worries her daughter may be adopted and soon forget her own family. They say they yearn to do what many parents take for granted — put their child to sleep at night in her own bed.

"I really want to get my kid back. I miss her, and especially holding her. And of course, I miss that little giggly laugh," Andrew Hackney said, as his daughter sprang toward him with excitement during a recent visit. "It hurts a lot. You have no idea how bad."

## Cat Stevens to return this summer with a new album

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Legendary British singer-songwriter Cat Stevens will release a new album of original songs this summer that took the "Peace Train" hitmaker over a decade to make and revisits familiar themes of togetherness.

The 12-song collection is called "King of a Land" and comes out in June on George Harrison-founded Dark Horse Records. The album cover illustration shows a boy playing guitar on top of the Earth, as a cat stretches and a train puffs along a track.

The first single is the cheerful, family friendly "Take the World Apart," with the lyrics "I'll take the world apart/to find a place for a peaceful heart."

"The source of musical inspiration for this song came from the 50s. The smoochy harmonies and chords have an enchanting effect on the ear. Life was simpler then: lonely hearts yearning for love," he said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The album reunites Stevens with producer Paul Samwell-Smith, who produced three Stevens albums between 1970-72 — "Tea for the Tillerman," "Teaser and the Firecat" and "Catch Bull at Four."

Rock & Roll Hall of Fame member Stevens, who also goes by Yusuf, the name he took when he con-

verted to Islam, has been a respected writer since releasing his debut in 1967. He's had a string of Top 40 hits, from "Peace Train" and "Wild World" to "Morning Has Broken." He was just named to Glastonbury's coveted Legends slot this summer.

## **Analysis: Syria rebuilding hopes dim as war enters year 13**

By BASSEM MROUE and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The recent deadly earthquake in Turkey and Syria which caused billions of dollars in damage has boosted the prospects of Syria's once widely shunned president return to the Arab fold, but appears unlikely to jump-start large-scale reconstruction in the war-ravaged country.

As Syria's conflict enters its 13th year Wednesday, President Bashar Assad's government still refuses to make concessions to his domestic opponents, rejecting long-standing demands by the United States and its allies as a political solution remains elusive.

Oil-rich Gulf Arab countries have been stepping up efforts to normalize ties with the Assad government, but analysts say the ongoing political paralysis is likely holding them back from pumping billions of dollars for reconstruction into Syria.

The Feb. 6, earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria, killing more than 50,000 people, including about 6,000 in Syria, exacerbated the destruction caused by Syria's 12-year conflict which has killed nearly half a million people.

The World Bank estimated in an initial post-earthquake assessment that the disaster had caused \$5.1 billion worth of physical damage across both government- and rebel-held Syria. It estimated some \$226 billion in losses — including economic and physical damage — during the first four years of the war in 2016, about four times Syria's 2010 gross domestic product.

Since the balance of power shifted in Assad's favor over the past few years, the government has rebuilt small parts of the country with the help of its allies. These include a section of the centuries-old market in the northern city of Aleppo and some historic mosques in Aleppo and the central city of Homs. However, entire cities, towns and villages remain in ruins, while the conflict has caused lasting damage to the country's electric, transportation and health systems.

The quake worsened the situation.

International medical and humanitarian agencies fear dangerous outbreaks of diseases because the country's battered water and sanitation systems were further damaged by the quake. The Red Cross' global chief recently said that rebuilding infrastructure ought to be a priority.

Still, the quake and recent rapprochement between regional powerhouses Iran and Saudi Arabia, who since 2011 have supported rival groups in Syria's conflict, may be a turning point in Damascus' political fortunes.

Assad appears poised to make a political comeback in the Arab world, more than a decade after the 22-member Arab League suspended Syria's membership over his brutal crackdown on protesters and later on civilians during the war.

International sympathy following the quake appears to have sped up the regional rapprochement that had been brewing for years. Before the tragedy, the United Arab Emirates had already reestablished ties with Damascus, while Syria had been increasing its contacts with Turkey, a main backer of the opposition.

After the disaster, formerly hostile Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia delivered aid to government-held Syria, along with Assad's traditional backers Russia and Iran. Washington's key allies began restoring or bolstering diplomatic ties with the Syrian government.

Tunisia's president recently said he hopes to reestablish ties with Syria, while the foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt met with Assad in Damascus for the first time since 2011. The region's top parliamentarians agreed in a Baghdad summit last month to work toward ending Syria's political isolation.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister acknowledged that there is a growing consensus among Arab countries that dialogue with Damascus is necessary. Riyadh is hosting the next Arab League summit in May, where most states hope to restore Syria's membership after it was suspended in 2011, the Arab League's

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Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said Tuesday.

Syria hopes that such reconciliation will unlock long-awaited funds to rebuild the battered country. However, analysts said it is unlikely to happen at any large scale for now.

"Reconstruction and its funding are thorny issues and are not currently on the table," said prominent Istanbul-based Syrian economist Samir Seifan.

One reason is the sheer size of the challenge. Seifan estimated that Syria suffered about \$150 billion in physical damage, and said reconstruction could ultimately cost over \$400 billion as it includes lost opportunities such as development projects that would otherwise have been carried out.

Some Arab nations, such as key Syria opposition backer Qatar, want Assad to make concessions to the opposition in order to reconcile, he said.

But perhaps the largest barrier to ending Syria's international isolation is that Washington has not had a change of heart about Assad.

"We have been clear when it comes to our policy on the Assad regime," a U.S. State Department spokesperson told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity under regulations. "Absent enduring progress toward a political solution to the Syrian conflict, we will not normalize relations with the regime, nor will we support other countries normalizing relations."

Syria has not implemented U.N. Security Council resolution 2254 adopted in December 2015 as a road map to peace in Syria. Acceptance of the road map is a key demand of the U.S and the European Union for normalizing relations with Damascus.

The resolution calls for a Syrian-led political process, starting with forming a transitional governing body, followed by the drafting of a new constitution and ending with U.N.-supervised elections.

In recent years, as government forces have taken control of most of the country, internationally mediated negotiations between Damascus and the opposition have stalled.

And while Washington and key European states remain hostile towards Assad, they don't have a strong ally in the opposition, analysts say. Control of northwest Syria is split between the al-Qaida-affiliated rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Turkish-backed militias that have fought against U.S.-backed Kurdish forces.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham "will not be acknowledged as an opposition you can talk to, especially by the U.S. or the Europeans," Joseph Daher, a Swiss-Syrian researcher and professor at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, adding that they are still "portrayed as an extremist group."

U.N. officials hope the earthquake will now push the parties to the conflict back to the table, after its damage compounded the devastation left by the war.

"The support provided in the aftermath of these earthquakes must be channeled into renewed energy on the political track, to address the fundamental issues underpinning the Syria conflict," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement marking the 12-year anniversary of the conflict.

## German arms industry seeks clarity on Ukraine weapons orders

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's defense industry says it stands ready to ramp up its output, including the kinds of arms and ammunition needed by Ukraine, but needs clarity about what governments want before investing in further production capacity.

Ukraine became the world's third largest importer of arms in 2022 after Russia's invasion triggered a big flow of military aid to Kyiv from the United States and Europe, according to Swedish think tank SIPRI.

Some of those arms were transferred from Western military stocks to Ukraine, while in other cases Kyiv has purchased equipment with its own money or funds provided by allies. But there are concerns particularly over the rate at which Ukraine is using ammunition, straining the capacity of Western defense companies to keep both the Ukrainian military and their own resupplied.

"What's important for us as an industry is to get predictability," the head of Germany's arms manufacturing association said in an interview this week with The Associated Press.

"That means we have to be clearly told which products are needed within which time," said Hans Chris-

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toph Atzpodien, managing director of the Federation of German Security and Defense Industries.

"And we are prepared," he added. "The industry is much more flexible than it is given credit for."

The association's members, which include major arms manufacturers such as Rheinmetall, can further boost production, such as by reactivating mothballed facilities and machines, and hiring more staff, he said.

"Of course we also need a firm basis in the form of orders, so that the investments can be carried out," said Atzpodien, adding that proposals to bundle purchases at the European rather than the national level could help — provided this doesn't slow down the procurement process.

Likewise, German arms manufacturers are keen to see European countries harmonize their export rules to avoid being disadvantaged compared with competitors in some neighboring countries, he said.

After initially hesitating to send lethal weapons to Ukraine, Germany has become one of Kyiv's biggest arms suppliers. The shift has already seen Berlin provide Ukraine with dozens of self-propelled Gepard anti-aircraft guns, Iris-T missile systems, howitzers and millions of rounds of ammunition, but left some Germans deeply uneasy about the possibility of being dragged into a conflict with nuclear-armed Russia.

Still, Atzpodien said the final decision on where German-made arms can go should remain a matter for the government.

"As companies we agree that German weapons must never fall into the wrong hands," he said.

The German government declined to comment Monday on reports that Rheinmetall is in talks with Ukraine about building a tank factory in the country. The company's Leopard 2 tanks are urgently sought by Ukraine, which was recently promised several dozen from Western stocks, but officials wouldn't say whether this requires government approval.

Germany's own arms procurement has come under scrutiny after Chancellor Olaf Scholz pledged last year to increase defense spending to NATO's target of 2% of GDP and create a 100-billion-euro (\$107 billion) special fund.

On Tuesday, parliament's commissioner for the military lamented the slow pace of Germany's drive to modernize its armed forces. She noted that none of the 100 billion-euro special fund was actually spent last year, though some major orders were placed.

"It is also important to quickly replace equipment that was given to Ukraine" and to speed up maintenance of existing equipment, Eva Hoegl said as she presented her annual report.

"The Bundeswehr has too little of everything, and even less since Feb. 24 (2022)," she said. "We have too few tanks to be able to train sufficiently, to exercise ... boats and ships are lacking, aircraft are lacking."

Along with the cash coming its way because of the war in Ukraine — Germany's defense minister is also seeking to raise his budget by 10 billion euros a year — the German arms industry is hoping the conflict will mark a turning point in the way military spending is classified in Europe.

Some banks and investors in the European Union won't do business with the defense sector because of concerns that it is engaged in unsustainable activity that does more harm than good in the long run, much like fossil fuel producers.

Russia's attack on Ukraine had shown the value of military security, said Atzpodien.

"Our demand is that products we deliver to the German military or other NATO armed forces, for example, are recognized in such a way by the EU that they support sustainability," he said. "A signal like that would be important so that actors on the financial markets can adjust to it accordingly."

German arms manufacturers have already come up with a slogan to push their case, he added: "Security is the key to sustainability."

## Pitt gets past Mississippi St 60-59 in NCAA First Four

By The Associated Press undefined

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — Jamarius Burton made a go-ahead jumper with 10 seconds left and Pitt edged Mississippi State 60-59 in a back-and-forth First Four game Tuesday night that featured 21 lead changes — most in the NCAA Tournament in five years.

Mississippi State had a great chance to win at the end, but Shakeel Moore missed a wide-open 3-pointer

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from the corner with two seconds remaining off an inbounds play. D.J. Jeffries' tip-in attempt was off target just before the buzzer.

Nelly Cummings led Pitt with 15 points. Greg Elliott scored 13 and Blake Hinson added 12 as the Panthers (23-11) won an NCAA Tournament game for the first time since 2014.

They slotted into the Midwest Region bracket as the 11th seed and advanced to face No. 6 seed Iowa State on Friday in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Dashawn Davis had 15 points for the Bulldogs (21-13).

TEXAS A&M-CORPUS CHRISTI 75, SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE 71

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — Isaac Mushila had 15 points and 12 rebounds as Texas A&M-Corpus Christi held off Southeast Missouri State to earn the first NCAA Tournament win in program history.

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi went 3 of 4 at the free-throw line in the final 15 seconds to ice the game and advance to play top-seeded Alabama in the South Region on Thursday in Birmingham, Alabama.

The 16th-seeded Islanders (24-10), winners of the Southland Conference, returned to the First Four for a second straight season and led for all but 23 seconds in the opening game of this NCAA Tournament.

Southeast Missouri State (19-17) erased a 10-point deficit and tied it at 64 with 3:07 left.

Jalen Jackson led the Islanders with 22 points. Trevian Tennyson scooped in a slick layup off the glass to give Texas A&M-Corpus Christi a 72-69 lead with 22 seconds remaining.

Chris Harris scored 23 points before fouling out for the Redhawks, the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament champions. Phillip Russell came up short on a good look at a potential tying 3-pointer with 1.5 seconds to go.

Southeast Missouri State went 9 of 20 at the free-throw line.

## 'Nazi' references: BBC sportscaster's tweet revives debate

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The references seem endless, and they can come from anywhere. In recent days, Pope Francis compared Nicaragua's repression of Catholics to Hitler's rule in Germany. In Britain, a BBC sportscaster likened the nation's asylum policy to 1930s Germany, resulting in his brief suspension and a national uproar.

For Holocaust and anti-Nazi scholars and organizations, the two sentiments were understandable — but concerning. Invoking Hitler and Nazi Germany, they warn, often serves to revive a familiar and unwelcome line of argument.

"We have to be aware of, and confront, contemporary instances of discrimination, hate speech and human rights abuses across the world," says Rafal Pankowski, a Polish sociologist who heads the anti-Nazi NEVER AGAIN Association. But he added: "Of course, the historical analogies must not be overused and devalued. The label 'Nazi' should not be trivialized and reduced to a term of abuse against anybody we don't like."

Last week, Pope Francis was quoted as criticizing the government in Nicaragua, where religious leaders have been arrested or fled, for acting as "if it were a communist dictatorship in 1917 or a Hitlerian one in 1935." Nicaragua responded by proposing to suspend Vatican ties.

Around the same time, the BBC's Gary Lineker tweeted that a plan announced by Britain's Conservative government was "immeasurably cruel" and included language "not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s."

The bill, intended to stop tens of thousands of migrants a year from reaching the country in small boats across the English Channel, would bar asylum claims by anyone who reaches the United Kingdom by unauthorized means and compel the government to detain and deport them "to their home country or a safe third country."

At first, the broadcaster suspended Lineker, its highest paid TV commentator. But it reversed itself on Monday and praised Lineker as a "valued part of the BBC."

ALTERNATIVE WORDING

Peter Fritzsche, author of "An Iron Wind: Europe Under Hitler," among other books, calls Lineker's com-

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ments poorly expressed and misguided, given that "Nazi Germany had no immigration policy." Rather than comparisons to the Nazis, Fritzsche believes Lineker would have been better off describing the policy with the words "racist" or "inhumane."

"Great Britain, in its rhetoric about immigrants and its policies regarding asylum-seekers ... generates quite rightly enormous outrage, because we believe Great Britain is in the family of democratic humane nations," says Fritzsche, a history professor at the University of Illinois. "The sportscaster's sentence is inaccurate. The spirit is laudable."

Sometimes, scholars and activists say, events do call for Nazi comparisons, whether it's the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 or the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw, Poland organized by extreme-right groups. But Nazi references have also been used to criticize fiscal policy (anti-tax activist Grover Nordquist once invoked the Holocaust when criticizing estate taxes) or insult rival heads of state (Saudi Arabia and Iran recently re-established diplomatic ties, six years after Prince Mohammed bin Salman referred to Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the "new Hitler").

On the Internet, Nazis have been mentioned so often, and for so long, that in 1990 author-attorney Mike Godwin formulated "Godwin's Law" for them: "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1." They come up so often that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has crafted a standard response, which it cited when contacted this week by The Associated Press.

"Nazism represented a singular evil that resulted in the murder of 6 million Jews and the persecution and deaths of millions of others for racial and political reasons," the statement reads.

"Comparing contemporary situations to Nazism is not only offensive to its victims, but it is also inaccurate and misrepresents both Holocaust history and the present," the statement says. "The Holocaust should be remembered, studied, and understood so that we can learn its lessons; it should not be exploited for opportunistic purposes."

## A RANGE OF REFERENCES

Nazi references can be outlandish (actress Megan Fox once compared "Transformers" director Michael Bay to Hitler); self-evident (Kanye West, who years ago complained of being looked at like "he was Hitler," declared in 2022 that there were "good things about Hitler"); and strategic (Russian President Vladimir Putin listed "denazification" of Ukraine as one of the main goals of his "special military operation," falsely alleging that there are Nazis in Ukraine's leadership).

The Putin accusation isn't new. It has been part of the Kremlin's propaganda effort for years, used to justify a Moscow-backed insurgency in Ukraine's east and bash Kyiv's pro-Western government, which took over after a popular uprising ousted a pro-Russian president in 2014.

Analysts say the narrative appears to play well in Russia, where the Soviet army's defense against Nazi Germany forces in World War II is still a fundamental part of the national identity. Officials and state media routinely use the term "Nazi" to describe the Ukrainian government and its army.

Moscow's rhetoric has prompted some international backlash. Asked in an interview with an Italian news channel about Russian claims that it invaded Ukraine to "denazify" the country, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Ukraine could still have Nazi elements even if some figures, including the country's president, were Jewish.

"So when they say, 'How can Nazification exist if we're Jewish?' In my opinion, Hitler also had Jewish origins, so it doesn't mean absolutely anything. For some time we have heard from the Jewish people that the biggest antisemites were Jewish," Lavrov said, speaking to the station in Russian, dubbed over by an Italian translation.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid called Lavrov's statement "unforgivable and scandalous and a horrible historical error," adding that "the government of Russia needs to apologize."

In Israel, the Holocaust is seen as unique, and comparisons to the Nazis or Nazi Germany in the modern context are typically dismissed as cheapening the victims' memory. But comparisons do happen. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has likened Iran to Nazi Germany, and ultra-Orthodox protesters call the police in Israel "Nazis" when they arrest people.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, says Lineker's comparison is flawed. The Conservatives' proposal, he says, is more like the British policy toward Holocaust survivors who tried to enter British Mandate-era Palestine after 1945 on boats such as the Exodus — and were turned back.

The larger issue, Zuroff says, is that people like Lineker cite the Holocaust to draw attention to their own issues. Perhaps, Zuroff says, the BBC figure "should be punished by being put in a library and forced to read 10 accurate history books."

## US says Russian warplane hits American drone over Black Sea

By KARL RITTER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian fighter jet struck the propeller of a U.S. surveillance drone over the Black Sea on Tuesday in a "brazen violation of international law," causing American forces to bring down the unmanned aerial vehicle, the U.S. said.

But Russia insisted its warplanes didn't hit the MQ-9 Reaper drone. Instead, it said the drone maneuvered sharply and crashed into the water following an encounter with Russian fighter jets that had been scrambled to intercept it near Crimea.

The incident, which added to Russia-U.S. tensions over Moscow's war in Ukraine, appeared to be the first time since the height of the Cold War that a U.S. aircraft was brought down after an encounter with a Russian warplane.

U.S. President Joe Biden was briefed on the incident by national security adviser Jake Sullivan, according to White House national security spokesman John Kirby. He added that U.S. State Department officials would be speaking directly with their Russian counterparts and "expressing our concerns over this unsafe and unprofessional intercept."

State Department spokesman Ned Price called it a "brazen violation of international law." He said the U.S. summoned the Russian ambassador to lodge a protest and the U.S. ambassador to Russia, Lynne Tracy, has made similar representations in Moscow.

The U.S. European Command said two Russian Su-27 fighter jets intercepted the drone while it was operating within international airspace. It said one of the Russian fighters struck the propeller of the MQ-9, causing U.S. forces to bring it down in international waters.

Prior to that, the Su-27s dumped fuel on the MQ-9 and flew in front of it several times in "a reckless, environmentally unsound and unprofessional manner," the U.S. European Command said in a statement from Stuttgart, Germany.

"This incident demonstrates a lack of competence in addition to being unsafe and unprofessional," it added.

U.S. Air Force Gen. James B. Hecker, commander of U.S. Air Forces Europe and Air Forces Africa, said the MQ-9 aircraft was "conducting routine operations in international airspace when it was intercepted and hit by a Russian aircraft, resulting in a crash and complete loss of the MQ-9." He added that "in fact, this unsafe and unprofessional act by the Russians nearly caused both aircraft to crash."

Pentagon spokesman Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said the incident occurred at 7:03 a.m. Central European time (0603 GMT; 2:03 a.m. EST) over international waters, and well clear of Ukraine, after the Russian jets had flown in the vicinity of the drone for 30 to 40 minutes. There did not appear to be any communications between the aircraft before the collision, Ryder added.

The MQ-9 includes a ground control station and satellite equipment and has a 66-foot (20-meter) wingspan. It is capable of carrying munitions, but Ryder would not say whether it was armed. The U.S. had not recovered the crashed drone, U.S. Air Forces-Europe said in a statement, and neither had Russia, Ryder said.

He said it appeared the Russian aircraft also was damaged in the collision, but the U.S. has confirmed that it did land, although Ryder would not say where.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the U.S. drone was flying over the Black Sea near Crimea and intruded in an area that was declared off limits by Russia as part of what it calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine, causing the military to scramble fighters to intercept it.

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"As a result of a sharp maneuver, the MQ-9 drone went into unguided flight with a loss of altitude and crashed into the water," it said. "The Russian fighters didn't use their weapons, didn't come into contact with the unmanned aerial vehicle, and they safely returned to their base."

The Russian ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Antonov, described the U.S. drone flight as a "provocation" and argued that there was no reason for U.S. military aircraft and warships to be near Russia's borders.

Speaking after meeting with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Karen Donfried, Antonov insisted that the Russian warplanes didn't hit the American drone or fire their weapons. He added that Moscow wants "pragmatic" ties with Washington, adding that "we don't want any confrontation between the U.S. and Russia."

Moscow has repeatedly voiced concern about U.S. intelligence flights close to the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia seized from Ukraine in 2014 and illegally annexed. The Kremlin has charged that by providing weapons to Ukraine and sharing intelligence information with Kyiv, the U.S. and its allies have effectively become engaged in the conflict.

Kirby emphasized that the incident wouldn't deter the U.S. from continuing its missions in the area.

"If the message is that they want to deter or dissuade us from flying, and operating in international airspace, over the Black Sea, then that message will fail," Kirby said. "We're going to continue to fly and operate in international airspace over international waters. The Black Sea belongs to no one nation."

The U.S. European Command said the incident followed a pattern of dangerous actions by Russian pilots while interacting with U.S. and allied aircraft over international airspace, including over the Black Sea.

"These aggressive actions by Russian aircrew are dangerous and could lead to miscalculation and unintended escalation," it warned.

Gen. David Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, said this type of collision is his greatest concern, both in that part of Europe as well as in the Pacific.

"Probably my biggest worry both there and in the Pacific is an aggressive Russia or China pilot or vessel captain, or something gets too close, doesn't realize where they are, and causes a collision," Berger said, in response to a question at a National Press Club event Tuesday.

As fighting continued in Ukraine, a Russian missile struck an apartment building Tuesday in the eastern city of Kramatorsk, killing at least one person and wounding nine others in one of the major urban strongholds the Donetsk region.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy posted a video showing gaping holes in the façade of the low-rise building, which bore the brunt of the strike that damaged nine apartment blocks, a kindergarten, a bank branch and two cars, said regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking with workers at a helicopter factory in southern Siberia, again cast the conflict in Ukraine as an existential one for Russia.

"For us, it's not a geopolitical task," Putin said, "it's the task of survival of Russian statehood and the creation of conditions for the future development of our country."

Russia had welcomed a Chinese peace proposal, but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Kyiv's refusal to talk leaves Moscow with only military options.

"We must achieve our goals," Peskov told reporters. "Given the current stance of the Kyiv regime, now it's only possible by military means."

The Russian onslaught has focused on the devastated eastern city of Bakhmut, where Kyiv's troops have been fending off attacks for seven months and which has become a symbol of resistance, as well as a focal point of the war.

Zelenskyy discussed Bakhmut with the military brass and they were unanimous in their determination to face down the Russian onslaught, according to the presidential office.

"The defensive operation in (Bakhmut) is of paramount strategic importance to deterring the enemy. It is key for the stability of the defense of the entire front line," said Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the commander in chief of Ukraine's armed forces.



## Clashes erupt in Pakistan as police try to arrest Imran Khan

By BABAR DOGAR and MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — Clashes between Pakistan's police and supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan persisted outside his home in the eastern city of Lahore on Wednesday, a day after officers went to arrest him for failing to appear in court on graft charges.

The police operation triggered clashes between Khan's supporters and police in the country's major cities, including Karachi, Islamabad, the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan.

For the past 18 hours, police were firing tear gas at the house as the 70-year-old opposition leader's supporters hurled rocks and bricks at the officers. The upscale area of Zaman Park where Khan lives was under siege since Tuesday. The government was sending additional police to tackle the situation after hundreds of Khan's supporters showed unexpected perseverance.

Early Wednesday, Khan emerged from his house to meet with his supporters, who faced tear gas and police batons the whole night to save him from arrest. He said he was ready to travel to Islamabad on March 18 under his arrest warrant, but police did not accept the offer.

The confrontation outside Khan's house continued.

About a dozen police and some 35 of Khan's supporters were reported injured. Tear gas shells and pieces of bricks littered the pavement as Khan's followers fought back with batons they had brought to resist police, who were preparing for a final effort to arrest Khan.

Khan, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament in April, was ordered to appear before a judge in Islamabad on Friday to answer charges of illegally selling state gifts he had received during his term as premier and concealing his assets.

The former premier has avoided appearances before the court since November, when he was wounded in a gun attack at a protest rally in the eastern Punjab province, claiming he was not medically fit to travel from Lahore to Islamabad to face indictment.

Last week, he went to Islamabad to appear before three courts, but he failed to appear before the fourth court to face indictment in the graft case, which is a legal process for starting his trial.

Khan has claimed that the string of cases against him, which includes terrorism charges, are a plot by the government of his successor, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, to discredit the former cricket star turned Islamist politician.

On Tuesday, Sharif told Pakistan's Geo television that Khan's arrest was ordered by a court, and it was not political victimization.

"We will arrest him, and will do it on a court order," Shahzad Bukhari, deputy-inspector general of Islamabad police, told reporters earlier in Lahore. Later, Bukhari was also lightly injured in the violence and received first aid from police medics at the scene.

However, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, a top leader from Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, said the government was trying to disrupt law and order by sending police to Khan's house.

"We are ready to find a middle way through talks with police, but we should know what the purpose of today's police raid is," he said. "Don't worsen the situation. Let us sit and discuss what you want," Qureshi asked the police.

He said Khan could consider voluntarily offering his arrest, "but let us talk first."

Fawad Chaudhry, another senior party leader, said Khan's legal team was in the process of submitting a request to the Islamabad High Court to have warrants against Khan suspended. Khan's lawyers were also legally challenging the warrants before another Islamabad court Tuesday.

From inside his home, Khan urged his followers to fight on even if he is arrested. "They think this nation will fall asleep when Imran Khan is jailed," he wrote on Twitter. "You need to prove them wrong."

Police said reinforcements were on their way to Khan's house to bring the situation under control.

TV footage showed tear gas shells falling inside Khan's house.

Angered over the expected arrest of Khan, his supporters took to the streets across Pakistan, blocking

some key roads near Islamabad while asking the government to refrain from arresting Khan.

"We will arrest this man on the court order and he ran away to avoid arrest," said Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah Khan, who is not related to the former premier. He said Khan will be produced before the court.

## Why US troops remain in Iraq 20 years after 'shock and awe'

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Twenty years after the U.S. invaded Iraq — in blinding explosions of shock and awe — American forces remain in the country in what has become a small but consistent presence to ensure an ongoing relationship with a key military and diplomatic partner in the Middle East.

The roughly 2,500 U.S. troops are scattered around the country, largely in military installations in Baghdad and in the north. And while it is a far cry from the more than 170,000 U.S. forces in Iraq at the peak of the war in 2007, U.S. officials say the limited — but continued — troop level is critical as a show of commitment to the region and a hedge against Iranian influence and weapons trafficking.

A look at America's evolving role in Iraq:

### HOW DID IT START?

The U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003 in what it called a massive "shock and awe" bombing campaign that lit up the skies, laid waste to large sections of the country and paved the way for American ground troops to converge on Baghdad. The invasion was based on what turned out to be faulty claims that Saddam Hussein had secretly stashed weapons of mass destruction. Such weapons never materialized.

Saddam was toppled from power, and America's war shifted the country's governing base from minority Arab Sunnis to majority Shiites, with Kurds gaining their own autonomous region. While many Iraqis welcomed Saddam's ouster, they were disappointed when the government failed to restore basic services and the ongoing battles instead brought vast humanitarian suffering.

Resentment and power struggles between the Shiites and the Sunnis fueled civil war, leading ultimately to America's complete withdrawal in December 2011. The divide was a key factor in the collapse of the nation's police and military forces when faced with the Islamic State insurgency that swept across Iraq and Syria in 2014.

### THE U.S. RETURNS

The rise of the Islamic State group — its roots were in al-Qaida affiliates — and its expanding threat to the U.S. and allies across Europe sent the U.S. back into Iraq at the invitation of the Baghdad government in 2014. Over that summer and fall, the U.S.-led coalition launched airstrike campaigns in Iraq and then Syria, and restarted a broad effort to train and advise Iraq's military.

The coalition's train and advise mission has continued, bolstered by a NATO contingent, even after the Islamic State group's campaign to create a caliphate was ended in March 2019.

The roughly 2,500 troops deployed to Iraq live on joint bases with Iraqi troops, where they provide training and equipment. That troop total, however, fluctuates a bit, and the Pentagon does not reveal the number of U.S. special operations forces that routinely move in and out of the country to assist Iraqi forces or travel into Syria for counterterrorism operations.

"Iraq is still under pressure from ISIS," said retired Marine Corps Gen. Frank McKenzie, who led U.S. Central Command and served as the top U.S. commander for the Middle East from 2019 to 2022. "We still help them continue that fight. We've done a lot of things to help them improve the control of their own sovereignty, which is of very high importance to the Iraqis."

### WHY THE U.S. PRESENCE CONTINUES

The much-stated reason for the continued U.S. troop presence is to help Iraq battle the remnants of the Islamic State insurgency and prevent any resurgence.

But a key reason is Iran.

Iran's political influence and militia strength in Iraq and throughout the region has been a recurring security concern for the U.S. over the years. And the presence of American forces in Iraq makes it more difficult for Iran to move weapons across Iraq and Syria into Lebanon, for use by its proxies, including the

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Lebanese Hezbollah, against Israel.

The same is true for the U.S. troop presence around the al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria, which is located on a vital road that can link Iranian-backed forces from Tehran all the way to southern Lebanon — and Israel's doorstep. In both Iraq and Syria, U.S. troops disrupt what could be an uncontested land bridge for Iran to the eastern Mediterranean.

U.S. troops in Iraq also provide critical logistical and other support for American forces in Syria, who partner with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces battling the Islamic State group. The U.S. conducts airstrikes and other missions targeting IS leaders, and also supports the SDF in guarding thousands of captured IS fighters and family members imprisoned in Syria.

Military leaders successfully beat back efforts by then-President Donald Trump to pull all troops out of both Syria and Iraq. They argued that if anything were to happen in Syria that endangered U.S. forces, they would need to be able to quickly send troops, equipment and other support from Iraq.

In a recent visit to Baghdad to meet with Iraqi leaders, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said U.S. forces are ready to remain in Iraq, in a noncombat role, at the invitation of the government.

"We're deeply committed to ensuring that the Iraqi people can live in peace and dignity, with safety and security and with economic opportunity for all," he said.

## IRAQ BY THE NUMBERS

By the time Washington withdrew its last combat troops in December 2011, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians were dead, along with 4,487 American troops.

More than 3,500 troops were killed in hostile action and nearly 1,000 died in noncombat deaths from 2003 to 2011. More than 32,000 troops were wounded in action; tens of thousands more have also reported illnesses to the Department of Veterans Affairs that are believed to be linked to toxic exposure from the burn pits in Iraq. Legislation signed into law by the Biden administration has expanded the number of those veterans who will qualify for lifetime care or benefits due to that exposure.

From 2003 through 2012, the United States provided \$60.64 billion to fund Iraq's security forces and civilian reconstruction, according to the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. Of that total, \$20 billion went to funding, equipping, providing uniforms for and training Iraq's security forces.

There were roughly 100,000 contractors each year in Iraq supporting U.S. forces and the U.S. mission from 2007 until 2010, according to the Congressional Research Service. As of late last year, there were about 6,500 contractors supporting U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria, according to U.S. Central Command.

## Warnock's campaign chief sees lessons from Dems in Georgia

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — When Quentin Fulks went back home to Ellaville, Georgia, last year, people kept telling him how proud they were to watch a native son lead Sen. Raphael Warnock's reelection bid. Then came the caveat: They still weren't going to vote for his boss.

"I didn't take it personally," Fulks recalled with a laugh.

If anything, growing up Black in a majority white county where Donald Trump won 79% of the vote helped Fulks understand what Democrats had to do to win in a historically conservative state.

As a campaign manager, that meant framing Warnock as the deal-making, results-driven incumbent and building an operation that went beyond the Democratic strongholds of Atlanta and other cities to connect with Republican-leaning voters throughout the state — even before Republicans nominated Herschel Walker and gambled on his complicated personal history.

"In a tough environment, we chose to communicate with those voters," Fulks told The Associated Press. "And it set us apart, quite frankly, from the Democratic slate and even from President Biden."

The approach worked — Warnock, Georgia's first Black senator, won reelection by nearly 3 percentage points in a state that Biden carried by a quarter percentage point about two years earlier. The victory helped Democrats win an outright majority in the Senate and established the 33-year-old Fulks as a rising star in the party.

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Now he's being considered for a top post in Biden's 2024 campaign, which the president is expected to launch in the coming weeks.

Fulks, who has also worked for Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and is now on a politics fellowship at the Harvard Kennedy School, deflected questions about a possible Biden gig. But allies tout him as more than ready for a national campaign.

Anne Caprara, Pritzker's chief of staff and former campaign manager who hired Fulks as her 2018 deputy, described him as a "soft-spoken" but skilled operative who understands Democrats' uneasy coalitions, which span from progressive activists and labor unions to establishment billionaires like Pritzker.

"He's a Black man from rural Georgia who's also helped run J.B.'s politics in a place like Chicago," she said. "At this point, there are no uncomfortable spaces for Quentin."

Fulks said he's learned to be unapologetic and thick-skinned about forging narrow majorities.

"You don't compromise what it means to be a Democrat, but there's a way you do it," he said.

He pointed to Warnock's support for abortion rights without emphasizing the issue himself, except to call attention to Walkers' statements of support for an outright national ban. Warnock, in turn, avoided questions about any restrictions Democrats might consider.

"When you have an opponent like Walker, there are plenty of people who'd look at all his liabilities and go as far left as possible," Fulks said. "We never did that."

Warnock, who doubles as senior pastor at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, didn't know Fulks before interviewing and hiring him. But, Warnock told the AP, his campaign manager proved to be a "serious" and "brilliant" person who had no problem challenging those around him, including the senator.

"There's no point in having people around you who are afraid to tell you the truth," Warnock said.

Fulks decided in high school he wanted to work in politics. He had no obvious path but saw a model from nearby Plains: former President Jimmy Carter. Encouragement from a high school teacher who is Carter's niece helped, too.

"I have always told students that Uncle Jimmy was just like them at one point," Kim Fuller said.

After graduating from Georgia Southwestern State University, Fulks looked beyond Georgia, which was then dominated by Republicans at all levels. "I didn't necessarily see what Georgia would become," Fulks confessed, adding that campaign aides often must leave their home states anyway to prove their mettle.

He landed an internship in Maryland Rep. Steny Hoyer's Capitol Hill leadership office and earned a master's degree focused on campaigns. He met Caprara at Emily's List, which backs Democratic female candidates. They continued together at Priorities USA, a leading Democratic super PAC.

Fulks points to those early years in Washington as inspiration for his recent decision to join the Institute for Ethical Campaigning, a fledgling nonprofit whose efforts include a paid internship program that places high school and college students with campaign and advocacy organizations.

The goal, Fulks said, is to give aspiring campaign leaders — Democrats or Republicans — the opportunities he got from people like Hoyer and Caprara.

After Pritzker's 2018 win, Fulks took over the new governor's outside political operation. Fulks led the campaign in favor of a state tax referendum to allow graduated rates on income — meaning increases on wealthier individuals and households. The measure flopped on the November 2020 ballot.

Economic uncertainty amid the pandemic didn't help, Fulks said. More important, he recalled, was opponents spending aggressively early to convince middle-income voters their taxes would rise despite the aim at wealthier individuals.

"I own all my losses," Fulks said.

That lesson in framing a campaign from the outset remained top of mind as Warnock's team built a sprawling digital, fundraising and field operation early in the 2022 cycle.

Brad Kennedy, Warnock's national finance director, said Fulks understood a modern campaign's required parts — fundraising, digital, media relations, field organizing, policy research — and had the confidence to empower his lieutenants.

"He set the priorities and let us do our jobs," Kennedy said, while "making sure we operated as a team."

Fulks required that senior staff move to Georgia and work in-person. He also held weekly meetings with

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the full headquarters staff, standing before 60 or so employees explaining strategy and taking questions.

"I've never seen that level of openness and accountability" from a manager, Kennedy said, adding that it yielded a group that trusted Fulks, Warnock and each other.

Teamwork across divisions may sound routine, Kennedy said, but it can be elusive in the high-pressure, large-ego world of major campaigns. "We set fundraising records because of it, and we won a competitive race because of it," Kennedy said, noting that Warnock's nearly \$185 million haul was more than any U.S. Senate campaign in history.

Fulks filled another key role: candidate whisperer.

That meant corralling Warnock into "call time" with larger donors, explaining the schedule and keeping the senator focused on balancing his left flank with the middle. It also meant tough conversations with the "pastor in the Senate," who was sometimes wary about how directly to attack Walker, another Black man and a first-time candidate with a history of mental health struggles and accusations of violent threats against women.

"He would tell me, 'I need you to run this campaign in a way that I can go back into my pulpit every Sunday and look my congregation in the eyes,'" Fulks recalled. "Ultimately, I think he showed he's very competitive and understands the nature of politics."

Fulks rounded out the role by playing Walker's stand-in during fall debate preparations, a job that involved confronting Warnock on his own liabilities.

Certainly, Fulks said, Walker's weaknesses ultimately helped Warnock. But Fulks cautioned against discounting Warnock's victory and, by extension, his own work that he believes offers Democrats a road map for how to widen their reach in upcoming elections.

"Some of these moderates are going to be looking for a place to go," Fulks said. "These aren't extreme individuals. We can't just look at someone and say, 'Oh, you're a Republican, so we can't talk to you.' We have a record we can sell them."

## How Washington came to rescue US banks

By LISA MASCARO, CHRIS MEGERIAN and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After the sudden collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, California Democratic Rep. Maxine Waters started furiously working the phones to find out what was going on with the failed lender — and what would happen to its panicked depositors.

Waters, former chair of the House Financial Services Committee, had her doubts that another bank would step up as a savior and buy the defunct institution.

"Banks don't just wake up and say: 'Oh, there's a problem with another significant bank and they've collapsed. Let's just take it over,'" she said.

So began a frenetic weekend of nonstop briefings with regulators, lawmakers, administration officials and President Joe Biden himself about how to handle the demise of the nation's 16th-biggest bank and a go-to financial institution for tech entrepreneurs. At the core of the problem was tens of billions of dollars — including money companies needed to meet payrolls — sitting in Silicon Valley Bank accounts that were not protected by federal deposit insurance that only goes up to \$250,000.

Something needed to be done, federal officials agreed, before Asian stock markets opened Sunday evening and other banks faced the potential for waves of panicked withdrawals Monday morning.

"We were racing against the clock," said Bharat Ramamurti, deputy director of the National Economic Council.

Waters was right to be skeptical about a sale being closed on the fly. The bank's size — \$210 billion in assets — and complexity made it difficult to quickly wrap up a deal.

Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. officials told Republican senators Monday that they received offers for the bank over the weekend but didn't have time to close; they said they could put Silicon Valley Bank up for auction again, according to a person familiar with the conversation who requested anonymity to discuss a private call.

But another plan was coming together. On Sunday, Waters was on the phone with Federal Reserve Chair

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Jerome Powell, who briefed her on how it would work. The Fed was creating a new emergency program that allowed it to lend directly to banks so they could cover withdrawals without having to sell off assets to raise cash. The idea was to reassure depositors and prevent bank runs at other institutions.

By Sunday night, the Treasury Department, the Fed and the FDIC said the federal government would protect all deposits — even those that exceeded the FDIC's \$250,000 limit.

"It's miraculous, really," Waters said, calling it "an example of what working together and what government can do with the right people in charge."

The praise was not unanimous.

In the call Monday with officials from the FDIC and the Treasury Department, Republican senators expressed concern that millionaire Silicon Valley depositors were being rescued — and the cost might be passed onto community banks in their home states in the form of higher assessments for federal deposit insurance, according to the person familiar with the discussion.

The trouble started last Wednesday when Silicon Valley Bank said it needed to raise \$2.25 billion to shore up its finances after suffering big losses on its bond portfolio, which had plunged in value as the Federal Reserve raised interest rates. On Thursday, depositors rushed to pull their money out. An old-fashioned bank run was underway.

At a House Ways and Means committee hearing on Friday morning, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said her agency was "monitoring very carefully" developments related to the bank. "When banks experience financial losses, it is and should be a matter of concern," she told lawmakers.

Biden was briefed about the situation on Friday morning, according to a White House official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. Then he celebrated an unexpectedly strong February jobs report, met with the leader of the European Union and jetted off to Wilmington, Delaware, to mark his grandson's 17th birthday.

His weekend would soon be consumed with phone and video calls focused on preventing a nationwide banking crisis. Regulators were so concerned, they didn't even wait until the close of business on Friday — the usual practice — to shut the bank down; they closed the doors during working hours.

It was the second-biggest bank failure in U.S. history and trickier than most: An astonishing 94% of Silicon Valley Bank's deposits — including large cash holdings by tech startups — were uninsured by the FDIC.

As administration officials and regulators worked through the weekend, Biden expressed concern about small businesses and their employees who relied on accounts that were now in jeopardy, the White House official said.

There were also fears, the official said, that if Silicon Valley Bank depositors lost money, others would lose faith in the banking system and rush to withdraw money on Monday, causing a cascading crisis.

Massachusetts Democratic Rep. Jake Auchincloss' phone had started lighting up even before the weekend. Silicon Valley Bank had eight branches and offices in his home state, and word of its failure was traveling fast on social media.

"The panic within Massachusetts industry and nonprofit sectors became acute within a matter of hours," Auchincloss said. "My phone started just exploding."

Silicon Valley Bank wouldn't be the only bank to collapse. By Sunday evening, federal officials announced that New York-based Signature Bank, a major lender to New York landlords, had also failed and was being seized.

The government's plan to cover deposits over \$250,000 ended up applying to Signature's customers as well.

In a statement Sunday, Biden said, "The American people and American businesses can have confidence that their bank deposits will be there when they need them."

On Monday, Powell announced that the Fed would review its supervision of Silicon Valley Bank to understand what went wrong. The review will be conducted by Michael Barr, the Fed vice chair who oversees bank oversight, and be released May 1.

Now Biden and lawmakers are calling for legislative changes to tighten financial rules on regional banks,

perhaps restoring parts of the Dodd-Frank law that tightened bank regulation after the 2008-2009 financial crisis but were rolled back five years ago.

Waters said it might be time to raise deposit insurance thresholds. "We can't just say this is an emergency and forget about it," she said.

## San Francisco board open to reparations with \$5M payouts

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Payments of \$5 million to every eligible Black adult, the elimination of personal debt and tax burdens, guaranteed annual incomes of at least \$97,000 for 250 years and homes in San Francisco for just \$1 a family.

These were some of the more than 100 recommendations made by a city-appointed reparations committee tasked with the thorny question of how to atone for centuries of slavery and systemic racism. And the San Francisco Board of Supervisors hearing the report for the first time Tuesday voiced enthusiastic support for the ideas listed, with some saying money should not stop the city from doing the right thing.

Several supervisors said they were surprised to hear pushback from politically liberal San Franciscans apparently unaware that the legacy of slavery and racist policies continues to keep Black Americans on the bottom rungs of health, education and economic prosperity, and overrepresented in prisons and homeless populations.

"Those of my constituents who lost their minds about this proposal, it's not something we're doing or we would do for other people. It's something we would do for our future, for everybody's collective future," said Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, whose district includes the heavily LGBTQ Castro neighborhood.

The draft reparations plan, released in December, is unmatched nationwide in its specificity and breadth. The committee hasn't done an analysis of the cost of the proposals, but critics have slammed the plan as financially and politically impossible. An estimate from Stanford University's Hoover Institution, which leans conservative, has said it would cost each non-Black family in the city at least \$600,000.

Tuesday's unanimous expressions of support for reparations by the board do not mean all the recommendations will ultimately be adopted, as the body can vote to approve, reject or change any or all of them. A final committee report is due in June.

Some supervisors have said previously that the city can't afford any major reparations payments right now given its deep deficit amid a tech industry downturn.

Tinisch Hollins, vice-chair of the African American Reparations Advisory Committee, alluded to those comments, and several people who lined up to speak reminded the board they would be watching closely what the supervisors do next.

"I don't need to impress upon you the fact that we are setting a national precedent here in San Francisco," Hollins said. "What we are asking for and what we're demanding for is a real commitment to what we need to move things forward."

The idea of paying compensation for slavery has gained traction across cities and universities. In 2020, California became the first state to form a reparations task force and is still struggling to put a price tag on what is owed.

The idea has not been taken up at the federal level.

In San Francisco, Black residents once made up more than 13% of the city's population, but more than 50 years later, they account for less than 6% of the city's residents — and 38% of its homeless population. The Fillmore District once thrived with Black-owned night clubs and shops until government redevelopment in the 1960s forced out residents.

Fewer than 50,000 Black people still live in the city, and it's not clear how many would be eligible. Possible criteria include having lived in the city during certain time periods and descending from someone "incarcerated for the failed War on Drugs."

Critics say the payouts make no sense in a state and city that never enslaved Black people. Opponents generally say taxpayers who were never slave owners should not have to pay money to people who were

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not enslaved.

Advocates say that view ignores a wealth of data and historical evidence showing that long after U.S. slavery officially ended in 1865, government policies and practices worked to imprison Black people at higher rates, deny access to home and business loans and restrict where they could work and live.

Justin Hansford, a professor at Howard University School of Law, says no municipal reparations plan will have enough money to right the wrongs of slavery, but he appreciates any attempts to "genuinely, legitimately, authentically" make things right. And that includes cash, he said.

"If you're going to try to say you're sorry, you have to speak in the language that people understand, and money is that language," he said.

John Dennis, chair of the San Francisco Republican Party, does not support reparations although he says he'd support a serious conversation on the topic. He doesn't consider the board's discussion of \$5 million payments to be one.

"This conversation we're having in San Francisco is completely unserious. They just threw a number up, there's no analysis," Dennis said. "It seems ridiculous, and it also seems that this is the one city where it could possibly pass."

The board created the 15-member reparations committee in late 2020, months after California Gov. Gavin Newsom approved a statewide task force amid national turmoil after a white Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, a Black man.

The committee continues to deliberate recommendations, including monetary compensation, and its report is due to the Legislature on July 1. At that point it will be up to lawmakers to draft and pass legislation.

The state panel made the controversial decision in March to limit reparations to descendants of Black people who were in the country in the 19th century. Some reparations advocates said that approach does take into account the harms that Black immigrants suffer.

Under San Francisco's draft recommendation, a person would have to be at least 18 years old and have identified as "Black/African American" in public documents for at least 10 years. Eligible people must also meet two of eight other criteria, though the list may change.

Those criteria include being born in or migrating to San Francisco between 1940 and 1996 and living in the city for least 13 years; being displaced from the city by urban renewal between 1954 and 1973, or the descendant of someone who was; attending the city's public schools before they were fully desegregated; or being a descendant of an enslaved person.

The Chicago suburb of Evanston became the first U.S. city to fund reparations. The city gave money to qualifying people for home repairs, down payments and interest or late penalties due on property. In December, the Boston City Council approved of a reparations study task force.

## Special prosecutor steps down in case against Alec Baldwin

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A special prosecutor who doubles as a state legislator is stepping down from her role in the manslaughter case against actor Alec Baldwin in the death of a cinematographer on a New Mexico film set.

Baldwin's legal team in February sought to disqualify special prosecutor and Republican state Rep. Andrea Reeb of Clovis based on constitutional provisions that safeguard the separation of powers between distinct branches of government.

Reeb said in a statement Tuesday that she "will not allow questions about my serving as a legislator and prosecutor to cloud the real issue at hand."

"It has become clear that the best way I can ensure justice is served in this case is to step down so that the prosecution can focus on the evidence and the facts," Reeb said.

District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies filed a notification in state district court and declined further comment.

Baldwin and weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed have pleaded not guilty to charges of involuntary



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manslaughter in the shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 18 months in prison and fines.

Hutchins died shortly after being wounded Oct. 21, 2021, during rehearsals for the Western film "Rust" at a ranch on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Baldwin was pointing a pistol at Hutchins when the gun went off, killing her and wounding the director, Joel Souza.

A preliminary hearing is scheduled in May to decide whether the evidence is sufficient to proceed to a trial.

Prosecutors say assistant director David Halls, who oversaw safety on set, has signed an agreement to plead guilty in the negligent use of a deadly weapon.

In her role as legislator, Reeb has sponsored several criminal justice initiatives, including enhanced punishments for firearms violations.

The Republican from Clovis steered clear of voting on public spending to prosecute Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed.

She was excused from a House floor vote in February on a proposed state budget that includes \$360,000 for special prosecution expenses in the fatal film-set shooting.

## Another atmospheric river pounds California, 27K to evacuate

By HAVEN DALEY and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

WATSONVILLE, Calif. (AP) — The latest powerful atmospheric river to drench California put nearly 27,000 people under evacuation orders Tuesday due to flooding and landslide risks. On the central coast, workers hauled truckloads of rocks to plug a broken river levee amid steady rain and wind.

Damaging winds with gusts topping 70 mph (113 kph) blew out windows, and there were numerous reports of falling trees. Power outages hit more than 330,000 utility customers in northern and central areas, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks outages nationwide.

Crews raced to stabilize the Pajaro River's ruptured levee Tuesday, placing rocks and boulders to finish filling the gap that opened late Friday, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) south of San Francisco. Workers will then raise that portion's elevation to match the rest of the levee over the next few weeks to make it impermeable, officials said.

Tuesday's storm initially spread light to moderate rain over the state's north and center. But the National Weather Service said the storm was moving faster than expected and that most of the precipitation would shift southward.

"Even a small amount of rain could potentially have larger impacts," Shaunna Murray of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency said Tuesday during a news conference.

Powerful winds damaged windows in a San Francisco high-rise, causing glass to rain down and forcing evacuations from the building in the financial district. No injuries were immediately reported. A gust of 74 mph (119 kph) was recorded at the city's airport, the weather service said.

So far this winter, California has been battered by 10 previous atmospheric rivers — long plumes of moisture from the Pacific Ocean — as well as powerful storms fueled by arctic air that produced blizzard conditions. On the East Coast, the start of a winter storm with heavy, wet snow caused a plane to slide off a runway and led to hundreds of school closings, canceled flights and thousands of power outages Tuesday.

Along the Southern California coast, evacuation orders began at 8 a.m. in Santa Barbara County for several areas burned by wildfires in recent years, creating increased risk of flash floods and debris flows.

The storm caused emergency declarations for 40 counties.

In addition to evacuation orders, more than 71,600 people were under evacuation warnings and 546 people were in shelters by Tuesday morning, said Brian Ferguson, spokesperson for the California Office of Emergency Services. Updated figures were not immediately available.

More flooding was expected on the central coast, where the Pajaro River swelled with runoff from last week's atmospheric river. Authorities had not received reports of any deaths or missing persons related to the storm as of Monday.

The levee breach grew to at least 400 feet (120 meters) since the failure late Friday, officials said. A

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roughly 20-foot (6.10-meter) gap remained Tuesday afternoon.

Pajaro, an unincorporated community known for its strawberry crops, was largely flooded. More than 8,500 people were told to evacuate, and nearly 250 people have been rescued by first responders since Friday.

Some residents of the largely Latino farmworker community stayed. One shelter was already full by midday Tuesday, and officials were forced to open two more to accommodate the evacuees.

"We live seven houses away from the river and the water level was six feet high, seven probably," said evacuee Andres Garcia. "So we probably lost everything."

A second 100-foot (30-meter) breach in the levee opened closer to the Pacific coast, providing a "relief valve" for floodwaters to recede near the mouth of the river, officials said at a news conference Monday.

Built in the late 1940s to provide flood protection, the levee was a known risk for decades and had several breaches in the 1990s. Emergency repairs to a section of the berm were undertaken in January. A \$400 million rebuild is set to begin in the next few years.

"We had so many years of drought and they could've fixed the levee way back and they didn't," said Garcia, the Pajaro evacuee. "This is the second time it happened. Back in 1995, same thing. We lost everything."

The river separates Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. Highway 1, a main link between the two counties, was closed along with several other roads.

## Biden says Jimmy Carter has asked him to deliver his eulogy

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Joe Biden says he plans to deliver the eulogy at the funeral of former President Jimmy Carter, who remains under hospice care at his home in south Georgia.

Biden told donors at a California fundraiser Monday evening about his "recent" visit to see the 39th president, whom he has known since he was a young Delaware senator supporting Carter's 1976 presidential campaign.

"He asked me to do his eulogy," Biden said, before stopping himself from saying more. "Excuse me, I shouldn't say that."

Carter, who at 98 is the longest-lived U.S. president, announced Feb. 18 that he would spend his remaining days at home receiving end-of-life care, forgoing further medical intervention after a series of short hospital stays. The Carter Center in Atlanta and the former president's family members have not disclosed details of his condition, though Biden alluded to Carter's 2015 cancer diagnosis and subsequent recovery.

"I spent time with Jimmy Carter and it's finally caught up with him, but they found a way to keep him going for a lot longer than they anticipated because they found a breakthrough," Biden said in Rancho Santa Fe, California.

Biden, 80, and first lady Jill Biden visited Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, who is now 95, at their home in Plains, Georgia, a few months after Biden took office in 2021. Biden was the first U.S. senator to endorse Carter's 1976 presidential bid, breaking from the Washington establishment that Carter — then a former one-time Georgia governor — shocked by winning the Democratic nomination.

Biden's presidency represents a turnabout, of sorts, for Carter's political standing. He served just one term and lost in a landslide to Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980, prompting top Democrats to keep their distance, at least publicly, for decades after he left the White House.

Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama did not have close relationships with Carter. And the longshot presidential candidates who sometimes ventured to Plains over the years typically did so privately.

But as the Carters' global humanitarian work and advocacy of democracy via The Carter Center garnered new respect, Democratic politicians began publicly circulating back to south Georgia ahead of the 2020 election cycle. And with Biden's election, Carter again found a genuine friend and ally in the Oval Office.

Some Carter family members have confirmed that the former president will have a state funeral in Washington, D.C., along with a private funeral and burial in Plains. Former and sitting presidents often speak at the state funerals of their predecessors, sometimes even crossing the political aisle.

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Clinton spoke at Republican Richard Nixon's funeral in 1994. Carter in 2007 eulogized Republican Gerald Ford, the man he defeated to win the presidency. The erstwhile rivals had become close friends after their presidencies and had agreed that the surviving president would pay tribute at the other's funeral. When George H.W. Bush died in 2018, fellow Republican Donald Trump attended as sitting president but the only former president to speak at Washington National Cathedral was the elder Bush's son, George W. Bush.

## Is my money safe? What you need to know about bank failures

By ADRIANA MORGA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The recent failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, which catered mostly to the tech industry, may have you worried about your money. They were the second- and third-biggest bank failures in U.S. history.

It all started last week when too many depositors tried to withdraw their money from Silicon Valley Bank in Santa Clara, California. That's known as a bank run.

The bank had to sell treasury bonds and other securities at a steep loss and more people kept trying to withdraw money as word of the situation spread, causing the bank to fail. Regulators took control of New York-based Signature Bank soon after, saying it was necessary to protect depositors after too many people withdrew money.

In response, regulators guaranteed all deposits at the two banks and created a program to help shield other banks to shield them from a run on deposits.

Here's what you need to know:

### IS MY MONEY SAFE?

Yes, if your money is in a bank insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. and you have less than \$250,000 there. If the bank fails, you'll get your money back.

Nearly all banks are FDIC insured. You can look for the FDIC logo at bank teller windows or on the entrance to your bank branch.

Credit unions are insured by the National Credit Union Administration.

If you have over \$250,000 in an individual account, which most people don't, the amount over \$250,000 is considered uninsured and experts recommend that you move the remainder of your money to a different financial institution, said Caleb Silver, editor in chief of Investopedia, a financial media website. Joint accounts are insured up to \$500,000.

Federal officials have been taking steps to make sure other banks aren't impacted.

"You shouldn't be too concerned about your money if it's in one of the bigger banks, and even in some of the regional banks and the credit unions," Silver said.

### CAN I TELL IF MY BANK WILL FAIL?

If you are worried about your bank closing in the near future, there are some things you can watch out for, according to Silver:

- Watch the stock price of your bank.
- Keep an eye on the quarterly and annual reports from your bank.
- Start a Google alert for your bank in case there are news stories about it.

You want to make sure you pay close attention to the way your bank is behaving, Silver said.

"If they're trying to raise money through a share offering or if they're trying to sell more stock, they might have trouble on their balance sheet," said Silver.

### SHOULD I LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVES?

If you have more than \$250,000 in your bank, there are a few things you can do:

- Open a joint account

You can protect up to \$500,000 by opening a joint account with someone else, such as your spouse, said Greg McBride, chief financial analyst at Bankrate, a financial services company.

"A married couple can easily protect a million dollars at the same bank by each having an individual account and together having a joint account," McBride said.

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— Move to another financial institution

Moving your money to other financial institutions and having up to \$250,000 in each account will ensure that your money is insured by the FDIC, McBride said.

— Do not withdraw cash

Despite the recent uncertainty, experts don't recommend withdrawing cash from your account. Keeping your money in financial institutions rather than in your home is safer, especially when the amount is insured.

"It's not a time to pull your money out of the bank," Silver said.

Even people with uninsured deposits usually get nearly all of their money back.

"It takes time, but generally all depositors — both insured and uninsured — get their money back," said Todd Phillips, a consultant and former attorney at the FDIC. "Uninsured depositors may have to wait some time, and may have to take haircut where they lose 10 to 15% of their savings, but it's never zero."

## What's known — and not — about US drone and Russia jet crash

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When a Russian fighter jet collided with a large U.S. surveillance drone over the Black Sea on Tuesday, it was a rare but serious incident that triggered a U.S. diplomatic protest and raised concerns about the possibility Russia could recover sensitive technology.

U.S. and Russian officials had conflicting accounts of the collision between the MQ-9 Reaper drone and the Russian Su-27 fighter jet — each blaming the other. But a Pentagon spokesman raised the possibility that the Defense Department could eventually declassify and release video it has of the collision.

Defense officials said the drone has not been recovered. But the Pentagon declined to say whether any effort was underway to gather debris or pieces of the Reaper.

Here's what's known — and uncertain — about the crash.

### WHAT THE US SAYS HAPPENED

The Pentagon and U.S. European Command said that two Russian Su-27 aircraft dumped fuel on the MQ-9, which was conducting a routine surveillance mission over the Black Sea in international airspace. They said the Russian jets flew around and in front of the drone several times for 30 to 40 minutes, and then one of the Russian aircraft "struck the propeller of the MQ-9, causing U.S. forces to have to bring the MQ-9 down in international waters."

Air Force Gen. James Hecker, commander of U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa, said that the Russian jet's actions "nearly caused both aircraft to crash." Pentagon spokesman Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said the collision likely also damaged the Russian fighter jet, but the Su-27 was able to land. He would not say where it landed.

The Pentagon said the drone was "well clear" of any Ukrainian territory, but did not provide details. A U.S. defense official said it was operating west of Crimea over the Black Sea. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to provide mission details.

It's not clear if the collision was an accident or intentional, but both sides agree the Russian aircraft were trying to intercept the drone.

### WHAT RUSSIA SAYS HAPPENED

The Russian Defense Ministry said the U.S. drone was flying near the Russian border and intruded in an area that was declared off limits by Russian authorities. It said that the Russian military scrambled fighters to intercept the U.S. drone. It claimed that "as a result of sharp maneuver, the U.S. drone went into uncontrollable flight with a loss of altitude and collided with water surface."

Russia has declared broad areas near Crimea off limits to flights. Ever since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and long before Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Moscow has charged that U.S. surveillance planes were flying too close to its borders while ignoring the notices issued by Russia.

Nations routinely operate in international airspace and waters, and no country can claim limits on territory outside of its own border.

The ministry said the Russian aircraft were scrambled to intercept the drone but didn't use their weapons

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and “didn’t come into contact” with it.

## WHAT IS AN MQ-9 REAPER?

The MQ-9 Reaper is a large unmanned Air Force aircraft that is remotely operated by a two-person team. It includes a ground control station and satellite equipment and has a 66-foot (20-meter) wingspan. The team includes a rated pilot who is responsible for flying the aircraft and an enlisted aircrew member who is charged with operating the sensors and guiding weapons.

Used routinely during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars for surveillance and airstrikes, the Reaper can be either armed or unarmed. It can carry up to eight laser-guided missiles, including Hellfire missiles and other sophisticated munitions, and can loiter over targets for about 24 hours. It is about 36 feet long, 12 feet high, and weighs about 4,900 pounds (11 meters long, 4 meters high, and 2,200 kilograms). It can fly at an altitude of up to 50,000 feet (15 kilometers) and has a range of about 1,400 nautical miles (2,500 kilometers).

The Reaper, which first began operating in 2007, replaced the Air Force’s smaller Predator drones. Each Reaper costs about \$32 million.

## DIPLOMATIC DUST-UP

The collision triggered a diplomatic protest.

The U.S. State Department summoned Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov to a meeting Tuesday with Karen Donfried, the assistant secretary of state for Europe.

“We are engaging directly with the Russians, again at senior levels, to convey our strong objections to this unsafe, unprofessional intercept, which caused the downing of the unmanned U.S. aircraft,” said State Department spokesman Ned Price.

And White House National Security spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. will be “expressing our concerns over this unsafe and unprofessional intercept.”

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had not talked to his Russian counterpart regarding the incident, Ryder said.

## HAS IT HAPPENED BEFORE?

This is not the first time Russian aircraft have flown so close to U.S. aircraft in the Black Sea that it’s prompted the Pentagon to publicly condemn the incident for putting the crews at risk. In 2020, Russian jets crossed in front of a B-52 bomber that was flying over the Black Sea, and flew as close as 100 feet (30 meters) in front of the bomber’s nose, causing turbulence.

Russian jets have also buzzed U.S. warships during exercises in the Black Sea. In 2021, Russian warplanes buzzed the USS Donald Cook, a Navy destroyer, which had been taking part in a major exercise. Until Russia’s invasion last year of Ukraine, U.S. warships more frequently deployed to the Black Sea in response to Russia’s 2014 attack on Crimea.

For the most part, however, military intercepts — either in the air or at sea — are routine and have happened a number of times with Russian aircraft in the Pacific, particularly in the north. Just last month, U.S. fighter jets intercepted two Russian TU-95 bombers in international airspace off Alaska’s coast, and “escorted them” for 12 minutes, according to the Pentagon.

And Russian aircraft have done similar missions, and also buzzed U.S. Navy ships in the Pacific. In most of the cases, the intercepts are deemed safe and professional.

It’s not clear if the Russian pilots were willing to get closer to the Reaper or dump fuel on it because they knew it was unmanned — and therefore there was no risk to an American pilot or crew. The deliberate downing of a manned aircraft — injuring or killing crew members — could be considered an act of war.

## Michigan Senate votes to repeal 2012 law restricting unions

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Hundreds of union supporters filled the halls of the Michigan Capitol on Tuesday as Senate Democrats voted along party lines in support of repealing the decade-old “right-to-work” law in a state long considered a pillar of organized labor.

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Democrats have listed the repeal as one of their top legislative goals this session. The law, enacted in 2012 when Republicans fully controlled Michigan government, prohibits public and private unions from requiring that nonunion employees pay union dues even if the union bargains on their behalf.

Senators approved the repeal on a 20-17 vote, sending it back to the House, which passed its own version last week but must approve the final language. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has said she'll sign it. The Senate also followed the House's actions last week in voting to restore the state's prevailing wage law, which requires contractors hired for state projects to pay union-level wages.

"It's a new day here in Lansing," Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks said. "And today we are taking action to empower workers by restoring the rights that they always relied on."

Union supporters, many of whom had waited nearly nine hours for the Senate to vote, cheered loudly from the gallery and outside the Senate chamber as Democrats voted to approve the repeal. A repeal in Michigan would deliver a much needed victory in the region for unions after Wisconsin and Indiana passed their own "right-to-work" laws over the past decade.

A bill seeking to reimburse some union members the cost of their dues has also been cosponsored by 33 House Democrats, further signifying the direction of the party after they took full control of the state government this year.

Supporters and opponents of the "right-to-work" law clashed during a Tuesday morning Senate Labor committee meeting where the legislation was first considered. Union supporters said workers' wages and rights have suffered over the past decade while business advocates said the law has made the state competitive once again.

"Being a right-to-work law state makes us more competitive nationally, and especially with our neighboring states who also have these laws," said Wendy Block of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce.

State Sen. Thomas Albert, the lone Republican on the committee, said during the meeting that the repeal would allow "forced union membership."

Spending appropriations were attached to both bills, a move that Republicans say is to ensure they are "referendum-proof." The Michigan Constitution states that bills with appropriations attached to them are not subject to a public referendum in which voters could reject the law.

Whitmer promised in her 2019 State of the State speech to "veto bills designed to cut out the public's right of referendum." Her office has said that while she didn't ask for the appropriation to be added, "the governor is going to sign a bill that puts Michigan's working families first."

Opponents could still protect the policy by putting a constitutional amendment on the ballot, which would require close to 450,000 voter signatures. A ballot measure barring "right-to-work" laws was defeated by nearly 14 percentage points in 2012.

Michigan had the nation's seventh-highest percentage of unionized workers when the "right-to-work" law was enacted in 2012, but that dropped to 11th in 2022. Over the past decade, union membership in Michigan has fallen by 2.6 percentage points as overall U.S. union membership has been falling steadily for decades, reaching an all-time low last year of 10.1%.

In total, 27 states have "right-to-work" laws in place. Republicans in Michigan, Indiana and Wisconsin all passed legislation over the past decade curbing union rights, sparking massive protests.

Thousands of union supporters descended on Michigan's Capitol to protest in 2012 when the Republican controlled Statehouse pushed the "right-to-work" legislation through without hearings.

The year before, neighboring Wisconsin under Republican Gov. Scott Walker proposed all-but ending collective bargaining for most public workers. It sent off weeks of protests that grew to as large as 100,000 people and led Democratic state senators to leave the state in a failed attempt to stop the bill's passage.

Four years later, after he had said he wouldn't go after union rights of private sector workers, Walker signed a right-to-work law for Wisconsin.

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## March Madness 2023: Set your brackets! Tide the No. 1 seed

By The Associated Press undefined

March Madness is here! Here is what to know, including the favorites and underdogs as well as key games and how to watch the NCAA Tournament. Oh, and how to fill out your brackets!

### TOP SEEDS

The top four seeds in the tournament are Alabama, Houston, Kansas, and Purdue. Each is in a region, some tougher than others (on paper), and each has had its share of headaches to set up what could be a chaotic tournament. We break them down for you:

**EAST REGION:** The Boilermakers got a No. 1 seed for the fourth time after edging Penn State 67-65 in the Big Ten championship game, but they face potential hurdles in Memphis and surging Duke. Memphis (26-8) is fresh from a big upset of top-ranked Houston and led by Kendric Davis. Duke (26-8) shut down Virginia in a 59-49 ACC title game win.

**SOUTH REGION:** Alabama, led by coach Nate Oats in a challenging season, is a No. 1 seed for the first time after sweeping the Southeastern Conference regular season and tournament titles behind league player of the year Brandon Miller, capped by an 82-63 romp over Texas A&M. They will open the tourney not far from home, in Birmingham, Alabama. Potential hurdles for the Crimson Tide could include Baylor, Arizona. There's an intriguing early matchup between No. 5 seed San Diego State and No. 12 Charleston, which has 31 wins. Furman is making its first tourney appearance since 1980.

**MIDWEST REGION:** Houston (31-3) got a top seed despite stumbling 75-65 against unranked Memphis in the American Athletic Conference title game, minus league player of the year Marcus Sasser (strained groin). They will open against Northern Kentucky (22-12). Potential hurdles could include Penn State, which took Purdue down to the wire in the Big Ten, and SEC Tournament runner-up Texas A&M.

**WEST REGION:** The Jayhawks fell 76-56 to Texas in the Big 12 championship game and they wound up with the top seed in a stacked region. They will open against Howard (22-12), making its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 1992. Potential hurdles include No. 6 TCU (21-12), which beat Kansas at Allen Field House 83-60 on Jan. 21, and Arkansas (20-13).

### GAMES TO WATCH

No. 7 Texas A&M (25-9) vs. No. 10 Penn State (22-13), Thursday, 9:55 p.m. ET (TBS) The Aggies, who felt snubbed last season, are making their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2018, and the Nittany Lions' drought dated to 2011. Both flirted with league tournament titles and have been hot. Texas A&M went 19-4 after a loss to Wofford and Penn State has won eight of 10.

No. 8 Arkansas (20-13) vs. No. 9 Illinois (20-12), Thursday, 4:30 p.m. ET (TBS). The Razorbacks have made back-to-back trips to the Elite Eight. Top prospect and potential top NBA draft pick Nick Smith Jr. has only played in 14 games because of knee issues, but has scored 20-plus in half of the team's last six. Illinois won the Big Ten season title before being ousted by Penn State in the first round of the league tournament. Illinois is led by transfers Terrence Shannon Jr. (Texas Tech) and Matthew Mayer, who helped lead Baylor to the 2021 national championship.

No. 5 Miami (25-7) vs. Drake (27-7), Friday, 7:35 p.m. ET (TBS). The game features two conference players of the year, Miami's Isaiah Wong in the ACC for the regular-season co-champions, and Drake's Tucker DeVries from the Missouri Valley Conference tournament champs. DeVries is averaging 19 points while Wong leads the team in scoring (16.2 points per game), assists and steals. Drake made the Elite Eight three years running, though it has been a while (1969-71).

No. 6 Kentucky (21-11) vs. No. 11 Providence (21-11), Friday, 7:10 p.m. ET. (CBS). Led by last year's AP player of the year Oscar Tshiebwe, the Wildcats are trying to avoid back-to-back first-round exits after that infamous defeat to Saint Peter's. The Friars, meanwhile, went to the Sweet 16 before losing to eventual champion Kansas. They're led by Kentucky transfer Bryce Hopkins.

### GO FIGURE

Texas Southern and Kennesaw State are in. North Carolina is not.

The Tar Heels are the first team since the bracket expanded to 64 teams in 1985 to start the season

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ranked No. 1 in The Associated Press Top 25 poll and finish it with an NCAA tourney airball.

Kennessaw State, three years removed from a 1-28 season, made the field. So did Southwestern Athletic Conference Tournament champion Texas Southern, which is 14-20. Southern Conference champ Furman is dancing for the first time since 1980 and MEAC winner Howard makes its first appearance since 1992.

## GO DEEPER

Gun violence has cost lives and disrupted college sports all season, touching some of the top programs in college basketball, including Alabama. Coaches have been thrust into uncertain and unwelcome roles in trying to navigate the topic — as well as the fallout from the Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe vs. Wade.

## PLAYERS TO WATCH

The NCAA Tournament is filled with great players and the AP All-America team is a good place to get familiar with the names. It's also an event where guys you've never heard of — no offense, Drake — can take a star turn. Guard play is always going to be important (see: Baylor, 2021 title winner).

## HOW TO WATCH

Every game of the men's tournament will be aired somewhere, either on CBS, TBS, TNT or TruTV and their digital platforms. CBS will have the Final Four semifinals and national title game this year.

There are multiple sites listing game times, channel and announcing team, including the NCAA and CBS. The NCAA will again stream games via its March Madness Live option and CBS games will be streamed on Paramount+.

## BETTING GUIDE

Who's going to win the national championship? The betting favorites this week to reach the Final Four are Houston, Alabama, Purdue and either Kansas or UCLA, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

## MARCH MADNESS CALENDAR

Selection Sunday set the bracket matchups for the First Four and first- and second-round games that stretch from Florida to California. Sweet 16 weekend will see games in New York City (East Region), Las Vegas (West), Kansas City, Missouri (Midwest), and Louisville, Kentucky (South).

Where is the Final Four? In Houston, on April 1, with the championship game on April 3. Basketball aficionados, take note: The women's NCAA Tournament will hold its Final Four in Dallas, a four-hour drive up the road from Houston.

Can't get enough March Madness? Well, there is talk about expanding the tournament despite a host of challenges. Enjoy the 68-team version for now! \_\_\_ AP March Madness coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket> and <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-top-25-college-basketball-poll> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

## Biden on gun control: 'Do something, do something big'

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. (AP) — The grief is still suffocating, the anger still visceral, President Joe Biden said Tuesday, in this suburban Los Angeles community where a gunman stormed a dance hall and killed 11 in January. He announced fresh federal measures to curb gun violence but emotionally declared there must be more.

"Do something. Do something big," he implored.

"I'm determined to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines," Biden told the families of some of the victims who were in the audience for his remarks, along with the 26-year-old who wrestled the semiautomatic pistol away from the gunman.

Biden's rhetoric has grown ever stronger about guns — he routinely calls for banning assault weapons — in pushing a gun-control platform even tougher than during the Obama administration when he was vice president. He has been emboldened by the midterm elections when his regular talk of gun control didn't result in massive Democratic losses, and he's expected to continue to argue for strong changes as he moves toward a 2024 reelection run, his aides say.



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"We remember and mourn today," Biden said in Monterey Park. "But I'm here with you today to act."

The president told the crowd he'd signed an executive order aimed at stiffening background checks to buy guns, promoting more secure firearms storage and ensuring law enforcement agencies get more out of a bipartisan gun control law enacted last summer.

But Biden has only limited power to go beyond that legislation that was passed after the killings of 10 shoppers at a Buffalo, New York, grocery store and 19 students and two teachers at a Uvalde, Texas, elementary school.

His action on Tuesday does not change government policy. Rather, it directs federal agencies to ensure compliance with existing laws and procedures — a typical feature of executive orders issued by presidents when they confront the limits of their own power to act without cooperation from Congress.

"Let's be clear, none of this absolves Congress from the responsibility of acting to pass universal background checks, to eliminate gun manufacturers immunity to liability," Biden said.

Using emotion to press Congress to act, he detailed the lives of Monterey Park victims: A dancehall manager who walked patrons to their cars after lessons. An adventurer ready for the next trip abroad. A devoted grandparent.

Biden, whose own familiarity with grief is well known — his small daughter and wife were killed in a car crash in the 1970s and later his adult son died of cancer — touched on the everyday things he said hurt so much after the initial shock is gone; the way a closet still smells like a loved one, the sound of a laugh, the bend of a smile.

The victims in Monterey Park, where 20 were shot after Lunar New Year celebrations, were older Asian Americans, mostly in their 60s and 70s. Biden said they represented a powerful vision of America: "Our diversity is the strength of this nation."

His order on Tuesday directs the Cabinet to complete a plan to better structure the government to support communities suffering from gun violence. If the Federal Emergency Management Agency can respond to natural disasters to provide on-the-ground support, the government should be able to do the same for a mass shooting, he said. More mental health support for grief and trauma, financial aid for victims and for businesses forced to close during a lengthy police investigations.

He is directing Attorney General Merrick Garland to shore up rules for federally licensed gun dealers so they know they are required to do background checks as part of their licenses.

He is also mandating better reporting of ballistics data from federal law enforcement for a clearinghouse that allows federal, state and local law enforcement to match shell casings to guns. But local and state law enforcement agencies are not required to report ballistics data, and many do not, making the clearinghouse less effective.

And the president is asking the Federal Trade Commission to issue a public report analyzing how gun manufacturers market to minors and use military images to market to the general public.

"President Biden's executive order today is a home run for public safety," said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety. "This is the latest example of President Biden's leadership on gun safety, and we're proud to stand with him as he takes robust action to help close the gun-seller loophole — which will significantly expand background checks on gun sales, keep weapons out of the hands of dangerous people and save lives."

The bill passed last year, known as the Safer Communities Act, is viewed by gun control advocates as a good start but one that doesn't go far enough. After the law was signed, there were 11 other mass shootings, according to a database of mass killings since 2006 maintained by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University. Those killings don't include shootings in which fewer than four people were killed — and gun violence is also rising nationwide.

Pro-gun groups said the order would do little to stop growing gun violence.

"The reality is that nothing in the president's executive order today would have done anything to prevent the recent mass shootings in California, Michigan or elsewhere," said Katie Pointer Baney who is the Managing Director of Government Affairs for the U.S. Concealed Carry Association. "It's time for the president and political leaders across the country to have an honest conversation with the American people and acknowledge there is no legislative fix that will permanently solve the issue of gun violence."

Biden said he'd direct his Cabinet to make sure law enforcement agencies and citizens, too, understand the benefits of red-flag laws, which are intended to temporarily remove guns from people with potentially violent behavior and prevent them from hurting themselves or others.

"So more parents, teachers and counselors know how to flag for the court that someone is exhibiting violent tendencies, or experiencing suicidal thoughts that make them a danger to themselves and others," he said.

Last month, the Justice Department sent out more than \$200 million to help states and the District of Columbia administer red-flag laws and other crisis-intervention programs.

## **Mandatory paid time off: 'a strain' for Illinois business**

By CLAIRE SAVAGE and KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press/Report for America

CHICAGO (AP) — Doug Knight's family has owned Springfield amusement park Knight's Action Park since 1930, himself for 43 of those years.

The pandemic was a bear — Knight fought to keep his doors open, and when they closed for COVID-19, he pushed to reopen as soon as possible. Inflation, too, has been an obstacle. From inflatable inner tubes to chlorine for the pools, prices have risen for "everything we buy," and now a new Illinois law represents "another bump on the road" for business owners, he says.

On Monday, Illinois became one of three U.S. states to mandate paid time off "for any reason," up to 40 hours per year for full-time employees. Small business owners in Illinois say they know the importance of taking care of their workers, but some view the paid leave requirement as a government-imposed burden.

"When you hit the big bump and go off the cliff, what does that do for ya?" Knight said.

The legislation takes effect on Jan. 1, 2024. Employees will accrue one hour of paid leave for every 40 hours worked up to 40 hours total, and can start using the time once they've worked for 90 days.

Knight and his brother, a co-owner, mainly employ seasonal employees not covered by the measure, but they will have to provide paid leave for 10 year-round workers. The veteran business owner said he isn't worried and will juggle whatever comes next, though consumers will ultimately pay the difference.

But proponents argue the policy supports both business owners and workers, and that guaranteeing paid leave will foster a healthier, more productive workforce.

"When folks have the kind of paid time off they need, they're able to stay home when they're sick," said Molly Weston Williamson, who tracks paid leave policy at the research and advocacy group Center for American Progress.

For business owners concerned that the law will cause added strain amid difficult economic conditions, Williamson pointed out that Chicago and Cook County have had similar ordinances in place since 2017, and fears of devastating economic consequences never panned out.

In fact, "our economy can't afford not to provide these benefits," Williamson said. "We can't afford to pay for folks who are losing their job. We can't afford to pay for folks who are getting sicker because they're not getting the care they need. We can't afford the impacts on our health care system."

Rep. Jehan Gordon-Booth, a Peoria Democrat who sponsored the legislation, said at Monday's bill signing that the law in particular will help low-wage workers, who are those less likely to have paid time off and who are disproportionately Black, Latino, and women.

"Thanks to this measure, workers have the peace of mind that they can take care of themselves today without worrying about the consequences tomorrow," Gordon-Booth said.

Christell Frausto, a co-owner of TequilaRia Wine and Spirits in Peoria, said she sees paid leave as "an investment" and hopes other business owners will too.

Frausto, 38, said she already accommodates employees needing flexibility for emergencies, illness or personal events. She opened the boutique-style store focused on specialty products including women-owned brands and organic, gluten-free or low-calorie options two years ago.

The pandemic was a clear sign that prioritizing workers is a necessary strategy for business owners, said Frausto, who hopes the lead-up to the law taking effect will give them time to budget and prepare.

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"They're part of my team," she said of her employees. "My interest is to take care of them just as much as my customers. I have to make sure they have a balance in life and work."

For Sandy and Dave Schoenborn, a couple who own the Lincoln Theatre in Belleville, Illinois, the state mandate is a major concern. "I'm pretty worried," Sandy Schoenborn said. "Unless business gets better, it's gonna be a strain."

Paid leave is something employees should earn, not be entitled to, she said. "I can't say no. If if I have a big event coming up and everybody decides to take off, I'm in a world of hurt."

Knight, the Springfield amusement park owner, said he does his best to take care of his employees. "If they have a reason, they can take off a day" without pay, he said.

"Car broke down, mom's sick, gotta take the dog to the vet... they're all important to the staff. But you can't close your business because everybody wants to take off cause there's a concert," he said.

The pandemic, inflation, utility prices — "it just all seems to be piling up," and mandatory paid leave is now another hurdle for business owners.

"It just drives the cost up, drives the prices up, and the consumer pays the bill," Knight said. \_\_\_\_\_

Savage is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

## Ohio sues Norfolk Southern over toxic train derailment

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

Ohio filed a lawsuit against railroad Norfolk Southern to make sure it pays for the cleanup and environmental damage caused by a fiery train derailment on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border last month, the state's attorney general said Tuesday.

The federal lawsuit also seeks to force the company to pay for groundwater and soil monitoring in the years ahead and economic losses in the village of East Palestine and surrounding areas, said Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost.

"The fallout from this highly preventable accident is going to reverberate throughout Ohio for many years to come," Yost said.

No one was hurt in the Feb. 3 derailment, but half of the roughly 5,000 residents of East Palestine had to evacuate for days when responders intentionally burned toxic chemicals in some of the derailed cars to prevent an uncontrolled explosion, leaving residents with lingering health concerns. Government officials say tests over the past month haven't found dangerous levels of chemicals in the air or water in the area.

Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw apologized before Congress last week for the impact the derailment has had on the area, but he didn't make specific commitments to pay for long-term health and economic harm.

The railroad has promised more than \$20 million so far to help the Ohio community recover while also announcing several voluntary safety upgrades.

Norfolk Southern said Tuesday in a response to the lawsuit that it was listening to concerns from the community and planning to take additional steps to deal with some of those.

The railroad is working on creating a long-term medical compensation fund, a way to provide protection for home sellers if their property loses value because of the derailment, and improving drinking water protections, it said in a statement.

The lawsuit also asks for the railroad to reimburse first responders and state agencies for the costs of dealing with the disaster.

How much money the state is seeking isn't known yet because the response is ongoing, but Yost made it clear the cost will be enormous. "This was an epic disaster. The cleanup is going to be expense," he said.

Ohio officials met with Norfolk Southern representatives on Monday and talked about several possible ways to help the people in East Palestine, including enhancing the village's water treatment operations, Yost said.

The state attorney general said he was pleased that the railroad has indicated it wants to do the right

thing and that the lawsuit will make sure it keeps its promise.

Many in East Palestine remain outraged at the railroad and worried about what will become of the village.

Those fears include concerns about their long-term health, their house values and the economic future for local businesses.

## Nebraska lawmaker 3 weeks into filibuster over trans bill

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — It was a mundane, unanimously supported bill on liquor taxation that saw state Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh take to the mic on the Nebraska Legislature floor last week. She offered her support, then spent the next three days discussing everything but the bill, including her favorite Girl Scout cookies, Omaha's best doughnuts and the plot of the animated movie "Madagascar."

She also spent that time railing against an unrelated bill that would outlaw gender-affirming therapies for those 18 and younger. It was the advancement of that bill out of committee that led Cavanaugh to promise three weeks ago to filibuster every bill that comes before the Legislature this year — even the ones she supports.

"If this Legislature collectively decides that legislating hate against children is our priority, then I am going to make it painful — painful for everyone," the Omaha married mother of three said. "I will burn the session to the ground over this bill."

True to her word, Cavanaugh has slowed the business of passing laws to a crawl by introducing amendment after amendment to every bill that makes it to the state Senate floor and taking up all eight debate hours allowed by the rules — even during the week she was suffering from strep throat. Wednesday marks the halfway point of this year's 90-day session, and not a single bill will have passed thanks to Cavanaugh's relentless filibustering.

Clerk of the Legislature Brandon Metzler said a delay like this has happened only a couple of times in the past 10 years.

"But what is really uncommon is the lack of bills that have advanced," Metzler said. "Usually, we're a lot further along the line than we're seeing now."

In fact, only 26 bills have advanced from the first of three rounds of debate required to pass a bill in Nebraska. There would normally be two to three times that number by mid-March, Metzler said. In the last three weeks since Cavanaugh began her bill blockade, only three bills have advanced.

The Nebraska bill and another that would ban trans people from using bathrooms and locker rooms or playing on sports teams that don't align with the gender listed on their birth certificates are among roughly 150 bills targeting transgender people that have been introduced in state legislatures this year. Bans on gender-affirming care for minors have already been enacted this year in some Republican-led states, including South Dakota and Utah, and Republican governors in Tennessee and Mississippi are expected to sign similar bans into law. And Arkansas and Alabama have bans that were temporarily blocked by federal judges.

Cavanaugh's effort has drawn the gratitude of the LGBTQ community, said Abbi Swatsworth, executive director of LGBTQ advocacy group OutNebraska. The organization has been encouraging members and others to inundate state lawmakers with calls and emails to support Cavanaugh's effort and oppose bills targeting transgender people.

"We really see it as a heroic effort," Swatsworth said of the filibuster. "It is extremely meaningful when an ally does more than pay lip service to allyship. She really is leading this charge."

Both Cavanaugh and the conservative Omaha lawmaker who introduced the trans bill, state Sen. Kathleen Kauth, said they're seeking to protect children. Cavanaugh cited a 2021 survey by the Trevor Project, a nonprofit focused on suicide prevention efforts among LGBTQ youth, that found that 58% of transgender and nonbinary youth in Nebraska seriously considered suicide in the previous year, and more than 1 in 5 reported that they had attempted it.

"This is a bill that attacks trans children," Cavanaugh said. "It is legislating hate. It is legislating mean-

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ness. The children of Nebraska deserve to have somebody stand up and fight for them.”

Kauth said she’s trying to protect children from undertaking gender-affirming treatments that they might later regret as adults. She has characterized treatments such as hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery as medically unproven and potentially dangerous in the long term — although the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association all support gender-affirming care for youths.

Cavanaugh and other lawmakers who support her filibuster effort “don’t want to acknowledge the support I have for this bill,” Kauth said.

“We should be allowed to debate this,” she said. “What this is doing is taking the ball and going home.”

Nebraska’s unique single-chamber Legislature is officially nonpartisan, but it is dominated by members who are registered Republicans. Although bills can win approval with a simple majority in the 49-seat body, it takes 33 votes to overcome a filibuster. The Legislature is currently made up of 32 registered Republicans and 17 registered Democrats, but the slim margin means that the defection of a single Democrat could allow Republicans to pass whatever laws they want.

Democrats have had some success in using filibusters, which burn valuable time from the session, delay votes on other issues and force lawmakers to work longer days. Last year, conservative lawmakers were unable to overcome Democratic filibusters to pass an abortion ban or a law that would have allowed people to carry concealed guns without a permit.

Cavanaugh said she has taken a page from the playbook of Ernie Chambers — a left-leaning former legislator from Omaha who was the longest-serving lawmaker in state history. He mastered the use of the filibuster to try to tank bills he opposed and force support for bills he backed.

“But I’m not aware of anyone carrying out a filibuster to this extent,” Cavanaugh said. “I know it’s frustrating. It’s frustrating for me. But there is a way to put an end to — just put a stop to this hateful bill.”

Chambers praised Cavanaugh’s “perseverance, gumption and stamina to fight as hard as she can using the rules” to stand up for the marginalized, adding, “I would be right there fighting with her if I were still there.”

Speaker John Arch has taken steps to try to speed the process, such as sometimes scheduling the Legislature to work through lunch to tick off another hour on the debate clock. And he noted that the Legislature will soon be moving to all-day debate once committee hearings on bills come to an end later this month.

But even with frustration growing over the hobbled process, the Republican speaker defended Cavanaugh’s use of the filibuster.

“The rules allow her to do this, and those rules are there to protect the voice of the minority,” Arch said. “We may find that we’re passing fewer bills, but the bills we do pass will be bigger bills we care about.”

Chambers said this is a sign that Cavanaugh’s efforts are working. Typically, the speaker will step in and seek to postpone the bill causing the delay to allow more pressing legislation such as tax cuts or budget items to move forward.

“I think you’re going to start to see some of that happen,” Chambers said. “I think if (Cavanaugh) has the physical stamina, she can do it. I don’t think she shoots blanks.”

## NASA Webb telescope captures star on cusp of death

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The Webb Space Telescope has captured the rare and fleeting phase of a star on the cusp of death.

NASA released the picture Tuesday at the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas.

The observation was among the first made by Webb following its launch in late 2021. Its infrared eyes observed all the gas and dust flung into space by a huge, hot star 15,000 light-years away. A light-year is about 5.8 trillion miles.

Shimmering in purple like a cherry blossom, the cast-off material once comprised the star’s outer layer. The Hubble Space Telescope snapped a shot of the same transitioning star a few decades ago, but it ap-

peared more like a fireball without the delicate details.

Such a transformation occurs only with some stars and normally is the last step before they explode, going supernova, according to scientists.

"We've never seen it like that before. It's really exciting," said Macarena Garcia Marin, a European Space Agency scientist who is part of the project.

This star in the constellation Sagittarius, officially known as WR 124, is 30 times as massive as our sun and already has shed enough material to account for 10 suns, according to NASA.

\_\_\_\_ The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Lindsay Lohan announces pregnancy in Instagram post

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lindsay Lohan is expecting her first child.

The "Mean Girls" star announced her pregnancy in an Instagram post on Tuesday, sharing an image of a baby onesie with "Coming soon..." written on it. The post was captioned "We are blessed and excited!" Lohan married financier Bader Shammass in 2022, People magazine reported.

A message sent to Lohan's representative was not immediately returned.

The 36-year-old actor, who was once a tabloid mainstay, has lived overseas for several years and kept a lower public profile.

She recently returned to acting, starring in Netflix's "Falling for Christmas" last year, and stars in the streaming service's upcoming romantic comedy "Irish Wish."

## EPA to limit toxic 'forever chemicals' in drinking water

By MICHAEL PHILLIS and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday proposed the first federal limits on harmful "forever chemicals" in drinking water, a long-awaited protection the agency said will save thousands of lives and prevent serious illnesses, including cancer.

The plan would limit toxic PFAS chemicals to the lowest level that tests can detect. PFAS, or per- and polyfluorinated substances, are a group of compounds that are widespread, dangerous and expensive to remove from water. They don't degrade in the environment and are linked to a broad range of health issues, including low birthweight and kidney cancer.

"The science is clear that long-term exposure to PFAS is linked to significant health risks," Radhika Fox, assistant EPA administrator for water, said in an interview.

Fox called the federal proposal a "transformational change" for improving the safety of drinking water in the United States. The agency estimates the rule could reduce PFAS exposure for nearly 100 million Americans, decreasing rates of cancer, heart attacks and birth complications.

The chemicals had been used since the 1940s in consumer products and industry, including in nonstick pans, food packaging and firefighting foam. Their use is now mostly phased out in the U.S., but some still remain.

The proposal would set strict limits of 4 parts per trillion, the lowest level that can be reliably measured, for two common types of PFAS compounds called PFOA and PFOS. In addition, the EPA wants to regulate the combined amount of four other types of PFAS. Water providers will have to monitor for PFAS.

The public will have a chance to comment, and the agency can make changes before issuing a final rule, expected by the end of the year.

The Association of State Drinking Water Administrators called the proposal "a step in the right direction" but said compliance will be challenging. Despite available federal money, "significant rate increases will be required for most of the systems" that must remove PFAS, the group said Tuesday.

Environmental and public health advocates have called for federal regulation of PFAS chemicals for years. Over the last decade, the EPA has repeatedly strengthened its protective, voluntary health thresholds for the chemicals but has not imposed mandatory limits on water providers.

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Public concern has increased in recent years as testing reveals PFAS chemicals in a growing list of communities that are often near manufacturing plants or Air Force bases.

Until now, only a handful of states have issued PFAS regulations, and none has set limits as strict as what the EPA is proposing. By regulating PFOA and PFOS at the minimum amounts that tests can detect, the EPA is proposing the tightest possible standards that are technically feasible, experts said.

"This is a really historic moment," said Melanie Benesh, vice president of government affairs at the Environmental Working Group. "There are many communities that have had PFAS in their water for decades who have been waiting for a long time for this announcement to come out."

The agency said its proposal will protect everyone, including vulnerable communities, and reduce illness on a massive scale. The EPA wants water providers to do testing, notify the public when PFAS are found and remove the compounds when levels are too high.

Utilities that have high levels of a contaminant are typically given time to fix problems, but they could face fines or loss of federal grants if problems persist.

The American Chemistry Council, which represents large chemical companies, slammed EPA's "misguided approach" and said, "these low limits will likely result in billions of dollars in compliance costs."

In a statement Tuesday, the group said it has "serious concerns with the underlying science used to develop" the proposed rule, adding: "It's critical that EPA gets the science right."

The proposal would also regulate other types of PFAS like GenX Chemicals, which manufacturers used as a substitute when PFOA and PFOS were phased out of consumer products. The proposal would regulate the cumulative health threat of those compounds and mandate treatment if that threat is too high.

"Communities across this country have suffered far too long from the ever-present threat of PFAS pollution," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said. The EPA's proposal could prevent tens of thousands of PFAS-related illnesses, he said, and stands as a "major step toward safeguarding all our communities from these dangerous contaminants."

Emily Donovan, co-founder of Clean Cape Fear, which advocates for cleaning up a PFAS-contaminated stretch of North Carolina, said it was important to make those who released the compounds into the environment pay cleanup costs.

The EPA recently made \$2 billion available to states to get rid of contaminants such as PFAS and will release billions more in coming years. The agency also is providing technical support to smaller communities that will soon be forced to install treatments systems, and there's funding in the 2021 infrastructure law for water system upgrades.

Still, it will be expensive for utilities to install new equipment, and the burden will be especially tough for small towns with fewer resources.

"This is a problem that has been handed over to utilities through no fault of their own," said Sri Vedachalam, director of water equity and climate resilience at Environmental Consulting & Technology Inc.

Many communities will need to balance the new PFAS requirements with removing poisonous lead pipes and replacing aged water mains prone to rupturing, Vedachalam said.

Fox said there "isn't a one-size answer" to how communities will prioritize their needs but said billions of dollars in federal resources are available for water improvements.

With federal help, water providers that serve metropolitan areas should be able to spread out costs in a way "no one will notice," said Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs at the Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization that works to get toxic chemicals out of food, water, clothing and other items.

Several states have already imposed PFAS drinking water limits. Officials in Michigan, which has the tightest standards of any state, said costs to remove PFAS in communities where it was found were reasonable.

Erik Olson of the Natural Resources Defense Council called the EPA proposal crucial to protect public health. "Setting strong standards will help ensure the fundamental right of every family to have safe water flowing from their kitchen tap," he said.

## FIFA expands 2026 World Cup again to create 104-game program

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

The expanded World Cup in North America got even more supersized on Tuesday.

The governing body of soccer increased the size of the 2026 tournament for the second time — six years after the first — by approving a bigger group stage for the inaugural 48-team event.

By retaining groups of four teams instead of moving to three, FIFA has created a 104-game schedule that will last nearly six weeks in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The final is scheduled for July 19.

The 16 host cities — 11 in the United States, three in Mexico and two in Canada — now have 24 extra games to stage on top of the 80 they already had for the inaugural 48-team tournament.

Adding about 1.5 million more tickets will also further fuel FIFA's expected record revenue of at least \$11 billion through 2026 from a tournament that will rely on using high-revenue NFL stadiums.

FIFA said the decision followed a "thorough review that considered sporting integrity, player welfare, team travel, commercial and sporting attractiveness, as well as team and fan experience."

The latest push by FIFA president Gianni Infantino for more games and bigger events in a congested calendar will likely provoke more concern among stakeholders such as domestic leagues and players' union FIFPRO. They have long felt isolated from talks on soccer's future.

The six-week World Cup will start one year after FIFA launches a 32-team Club World Cup, which could also be staged in North America to test tournament logistics. The Champions League in Europe also has a new format with more teams and games in the 2024-25 season.

The new World Cup format will have 12 groups of four teams instead of 16 groups of three, the plan chosen in 2017. Both options were to go to a 32-team knockout round.

The format guarantees every World Cup team will play a minimum of three times instead of two, adding up to a stacked group stage totaling 72 games before arriving at the knockout rounds. The four semifinalists will play eight matches, one more than last year in Qatar.

The entire 2022 World Cup in Qatar amounted to 64 games in the seventh and last edition of the 32-team format. The 1998 World Cup in France was the first with 32 teams.

Increasing the World Cup's lineup was first floated in 2015. It was proposed then as a way to sweeten FIFA's 200-plus member federations into accepting much-needed governance reforms in the wake of American and Swiss investigations of corruption.

After Infantino was elected FIFA president to succeed Sepp Blatter, one of his first big strategic wins was adding 16 teams to the World Cup. Infantino persuaded FIFA colleagues that a 48-team tournament — with Africa and Asia getting more of the extra places than Europe — would fuel interest and drive development in countries that rarely or never qualified to play on the biggest stage.

That was despite FIFA's own research in 2016 suggesting that the highest quality soccer was achieved by the 32-team format.

In Qatar, the split-screen drama created by decisive group games played simultaneously helped convince FIFA that four-team groups are better.

There was also concern that scheduling groups of three could lead to match-fixing in a final game between two teams who could both advance to the round of 32.

FIFA has now found an option it said "mitigates the risk of collusion" and also gifts itself more games to sell.

The extra 24 games should drive up the price of sponsor deals and broadcasting deals not yet signed. However, some key broadcast markets are already signed, including in the United States, Brazil and the Middle East.

The 2026 World Cup was already set to earn up to \$3 billion in ticket and hospitality sales for FIFA, and massively increase the tournament attendance record. That record was set in the United States in 1994 when 3.6 million spectators attended 52 games in a 24-team event.

One downside of the 48-team format is the unbalanced nature of the 32 teams that will advance.

Eight of the 12 third-place teams will move on, creating uncertainty for some teams placing third in a



group not knowing if they will advance until matches are completed days later.

FIFA also explained how teams will enter the 2025 Club World Cup, including continental champions in each season from 2021-24. That means Chelsea, Real Madrid, Palmeiras, Flamengo and Seattle Sounders already secured their places.

Europe's 12 entries can also be decided by a ranking system based on the same four-year period, with a cap of two teams per country advancing with exemptions for continental champions.

FIFA also plans to create another new competition starting annually in 2024 for continental champions. The Champions League winner in Europe will play the winner of playoffs featuring the other continental champions.

## **A 2nd wave of layoffs at Meta; 10,000 jobs are cut**

Associated Press undefined

Facebook parent Meta is slashing 10,000 jobs, about as many as the social media company announced late last year in its first round of cuts, as uncertainty about the global economy hits the technology sector particularly hard.

The company announced 11,000 job cuts in November, about 13% of its workforce at the time. In addition to the layoffs, Meta said Tuesday that it would not fill 5,000 open positions.

"This will be tough and there's no way around that," said CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

Meta and other tech companies have been hiring aggressively for at least two years and in recent months have begun to let some of those workers go. Hiring in the U.S. is still strong, but layoffs have hit hard in some sectors.

Early last month, Meta posted falling profits and its third consecutive quarter of declining revenue. On the same day, the company said that it would buy back as much as \$40 billion of its own stock.

The Menlo Park, company said Tuesday it will reduce the size of its recruiting team and make further cuts in its tech groups in late April, and then its business groups in late May.

Zuckerberg has invested tens of billions of dollars building out its metaverse, its virtual reality concept, and renamed the company Meta, signaling a new focus for Facebook.

"As I've talked about efficiency this year, I've said that part of our work will involve removing jobs -- and that will be in service of both building a leaner, more technical company and improving our business performance to enable our long term vision," said Zuckerberg.

The biggest tech companies in the U.S. are cutting costs elsewhere, too.

This month, Amazon paused construction on its second headquarters in Virginia following the biggest round of layoffs in the company's history and its shifting plans around remote work.

Global inflation has remained stubborn and its made for more difficult decisions for both households and businesses in the U.S.

Fast growth companies, including many in the technology sector, are hunkering down for what may be an extended period of adverse economic conditions.

"At this point, I think we should prepare ourselves for the possibility that this new economic reality will continue for many years," Zuckerberg said in a message to employees.

Meta shares rose nearly 7% Tuesday.

## **Sanders signs Arkansas trans care malpractice bill into law**

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders has signed legislation making it easier to sue providers of gender-affirming care for children, a move that could effectively reinstate a blocked ban on such care.

Sanders on Monday signed the new law, which won't take effect until this summer. It would allow anyone who received gender-affirming care as a minor to file a malpractice lawsuit against their doctor for up to 15 years after they turn 18. Under current Arkansas law, medical malpractice claims must be filed

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within two years of an injury.

Legal experts have said the change could close access to gender-affirming care for children by making it nearly impossible for providers to get malpractice insurance.

"Arkansas infamously passed the first law in the nation to try to ban gender affirming care for trans youth and after hearing extensive evidence, the courts have blocked that ban," Holly Dickson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, said in a statement. "This bill is an effort to achieve indirectly what the Constitution prohibits the state from doing directly."

The new law is among a growing number of bills targeting transgender people, who have faced increasingly hostile rhetoric at statehouses. At least 175 bills targeting trans people have been introduced in statehouses so far this year, the most in a single year, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

The bill was signed as a federal judge is considering whether to strike down a 2021 Arkansas law that would prohibit doctors from providing gender-affirming hormone therapy or puberty blockers to anyone under 18 — or referring them to other doctors who can provide that care. No gender-affirming surgery is performed on minors in the state.

Republican Sen. Gary Stubblefield, who sponsored the malpractice law, said he didn't know if the measure would face a similar court challenge.

"Anything can create a court challenge in the world we live in today," Stubblefield said. "I know we did what we thought was best for our children."

U.S. District Judge Jay Moody temporarily blocked the state's ban on gender-affirming care for minors in 2021. Arkansas was the first state to enact such a ban, and several states have approved similar restrictions. A ban in Alabama has also been blocked by a federal judge.

Opponents of such treatments argue that minors are too young to make decisions about their futures. But every major medical group, including the American Medical Association, supports gender-affirming care for youths and has opposed the bans.

The malpractice legislation includes a "safe harbor" provision that would give doctors a defense against malpractice lawsuits over providing gender-affirming care for children, but only if they follow restrictions that experts have said are inconsistent with the standard of care for the treatments.

The new law won't take effect until 90 days after the Legislature adjourns this year's session, which isn't expected to happen until next month at the earliest.

The bill is among several targeting transgender youth that have been proposed in Arkansas this year.

Others include legislation that would criminalize transgender adults using the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. The bill goes even further than a bathroom bill North Carolina repealed following widespread boycotts.

Dickson urged Sanders to hear from trans youth and those who care from them before signing any more bills affecting the LGBTQ community.

## Conn. woman 1st non-Vermonter granted assisted suicide right

By LISA RATHKE Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — Lynda Bluestein has terminal cancer and knows she'll likely die soon, but until Tuesday, she didn't know if she'd be able to choose how or when and whether her family, friends and dog would be with her when the time comes.

The 75-year-old from Bridgeport, Connecticut, reached a settlement with the state of Vermont that will allow her to be the first non-resident to take advantage of its decade-old law that allows people who are terminally ill to end their own lives, provided she complies with other aspects of the law.

"I was so relieved to hear of the settlement of my case that will allow me to decide when cancer has taken all from me that I can bear," said Bluestein, 75, who has fallopian tube cancer. "The importance of the peace of mind knowing that I will now face fewer obstacles in accessing the autonomy, control, and choice in this private, sacred and very personal decision about the end of my life is enormous."

Vermont is one of 10 states that allow medically assisted suicide, but only one, Oregon, allows non-

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residents to do it. Bluestein's settlement and pending legislation that would remove Vermont's residency requirement offer a ray of hope to other terminally ill patients who want to control how and when they die but might not be able to cross the country to do so.

Bluestein and Diana Barnard, a physician from Middlebury, sued Vermont last summer, claiming its residency requirement violates the Constitution's commerce, equal protection, and privileges and immunities clauses.

Barnard, who specializes in hospice and palliative care and who has patients from neighboring New York state, which, like Connecticut, doesn't allow medically assisted suicide, lauded the settlement and called on the Vermont Legislature to repeal the residency requirement.

"I am grateful that Lynda will be able to now access medical aid in dying without completely upending her final months. ... There is no good reason that non-residents should not be able to use Vermont's medical aid-in-dying law that has eased the suffering of numerous terminally ill Vermonters since it took effect a decade ago," Barnard said in a news release issued by Compassion & Choices, which filed the suit on behalf of Bluestein and Barnard and describes itself as a group that "expands options and empowers everyone to chart their end-of-life journey."

The Vermont attorney general's office said it was pleased to have reached an agreement.

"We hope that this settlement will help those involved as they navigate important decisions around end-of-life care," said chief of staff Lauren Jandl.

Bluestein, who has had three different cancer diagnoses in a short time, said she knew she had to do something so that her death wouldn't be like that of her mother, who died in a hospital bed after a prolonged illness. She decided she wanted to die surrounded by her husband, children, grandchildren, wonderful neighbors, friends and dog.

"I wanted to have a death that was meaningful, but that it didn't take forever ... for me to die," she said.

Vermont's law, which has been in place since 2013, allows physicians to prescribe lethal medication to state residents with an incurable illness that is expected to kill them within six months. If the Democratic-led state Senate approves the current legislation and it is signed by Republican Gov. Phil Scott, who supports the concept, Vermont would become the second state to allow non-residents who are terminally ill to end their own lives.

A year ago, Oregon agreed to stop enforcing its residency requirement and to ask the Legislature to remove it from the law as part of a settlement. Legislation is also under consideration there.

Although proponents of the Vermont legislation are optimistic it will pass, medically assisted suicide does have its opponents. Among them is Mary Hahn Beerworth, executive director of the Vermont Right to Life Committee, who said the practice "was, and remains, a matter of contention."

"To be clear, Vermont Right to Life opposed the underlying concept behind assisted suicide and opposes the move to remove the residency requirement as there are still no safeguards that protect vulnerable patients from coercion," Beerworth testified before a Vermont legislative committee. She said if the legislation moves forward, she has a number of concerns including what liability Vermont could incur if the drugs fail to end a patient's life.

David Englander, the state Health Department's senior policy and legal advisor, said no complaints have been reported to the department or the attorney general's office regarding the use of Vermont's law.

Supporters of Vermont's medically assisted suicide law also say it has stringent safeguards, including a requirement that those who seek to use it be capable of making and communicating their health care decision to a physician. Patients are required to make two requests orally to the physician over a certain timeframe and then submit a written request that they signed in the presence of two or more witnesses who aren't interested parties. Witnesses must sign and affirm that patients appeared to understand the nature of the document and were free from duress or undue influence at the time.

Bluestein, a lifelong activist, has pushed for aid-in-dying legislation to be passed in New York and her home state of Connecticut, where the Legislature is considering such a bill. She decided to look into Vermont as an option when a friend who had cancer moved there to establish residency so she could take advantage of its aid-in-dying law. That friend died last year, surrounded by her husband, son and daughter,

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Bluestein said.

"One thing that surprised me about getting this latest terminal diagnosis is just how hard it is to die the way you want to die," Bluestein said. "It seems like everybody has an opinion on what should be allowed and what shouldn't be allowed in my one personal, private and very sacred moment of death."

"There are people who say, no, you have to suffer. It's very important for you to wait until God decides that it's time for you to die. But that's not my faith. That's not what I want and that's not what I believe," she said.

Bluestein, who previously battled breast cancer and melanoma, is undergoing chemotherapy for her late-stage fallopian tube cancer. Over Thanksgiving, she told their children and grandchildren that she'll likely die this year.

"I want to live the way I always have, and I want my death to be in keeping with the way I wanted my life to be always," she said. "I wanted to have agency over when cancer had taken so much for me that I could no longer bear it. That's my choice."

## In unusual step, U2 reinterprets 40 of its best-known songs

By DAVID BAUDER AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In reimagining 40 of their best-known songs, U2 recognized that many fans would experience them through earphones connected to a device in their pockets — rather than being belted out onstage.

That was one thought behind "Songs of Surrender," coming out this week. The four men of U2, now either 61 or 62 years old, revisit material written in some cases when they were little more than kids out of Dublin.

Particularly in those days, U2 songs were written primarily with concerts in mind. The Edge told The Associated Press in an interview that U2 wanted to catch the attention of people seeing the band for the first time, perhaps in a festival or as an opening act.

"There's a sort of gladiatorial aspect to live performances when you're in that situation," he said. "The material has got to be pretty bold and even strident at times. With this reimagining, we thought it would be fun to see intimacy as a new approach, that intimacy would be the new punk rock, as it were."

The Edge was the driving force behind "Songs of Surrender," using pandemic down time to record much of the music at home.

Given that his electric guitar and Bono's voice are the musical signature of U2, there's a certain irony in the absence of that guitar being the most immediately noticeable feature of the new versions. He sticks primarily to keyboards, acoustic guitar and dulcimer.

The process began without a roadmap or commitment to see it through if it wasn't working.

"As we got into it and got into a groove, we really started to enjoy what was happening," he said. "There was a lot of freedom in the process, it was joyful and fun to take these songs and sort of reimagine them and I think that comes across. It doesn't sound like there was a lot of hard work involved because it wasn't."

Much of the intimacy comes through Bono's voice. There's no need to shout, so he sometimes uses lower registers or slips into falsetto.

Lyrics are often rewritten, sometimes extensively in even a recent song like "The Miracle of Joey Ramone." Some changes are more subtle but still noticeable: replacing the line "one man betrayed with a kiss" with "one boy never will be kissed" takes Jesus out of "Pride (In the Name of Love)."

At the same time, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" is rearranged to end with a question: "where is the victory Jesus won?"

Cellos replace the driving guitar of "Vertigo." Keyboards give "Where the Streets Have No Name" an ambient sound. "Two Hearts Beat as One," the original a high-octane rock dance song, now has a slinkier, sexy vibe and is one of four songs where The Edge takes lead vocal.

The band is fairly democratic in taking songs from throughout its catalog, although 1981's "October" album and 2009's "No Line on the Horizon" are not represented. "New Year's Day," "Angel of Harlem" and

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"Even Better Than the Real Thing" are among the songs left alone.

"We're one of the only acts that has this body of work where a project like this would be possible, with the distance of time and experience where it would be interesting to revisit early songs," The Edge said.

Throughout music history, bands have occasionally re-recorded material for contractual reasons. Taylor Swift is the most famous example, putting out new versions of her older songs in order to control their use. Squeeze's "Spot the Difference" makes sport of how they tried to make new recordings indistinguishable from the originals.

Live recordings and archive-cleaning projects like Bob Dylan's "bootleg" series gives fans the chance to hear familiar songs differently.

Many older artists don't see the point of making new music, since there's little opportunity to be heard and fans are partial to the familiar stuff, anyway, said Anthony DeCurtis, Rolling Stone contributing editor.

"Revisiting your body of work in a creative way is a means of sustaining interest in your career," DeCurtis said. "Older fans might not be interested in another collection of your hits, but reworking them in a meaningful way could prove enticing. Younger fans don't have the same investment in your classics, so these new versions offer a route into your catalog."

The Edge encourages fans to give the new versions a try, suggesting they may even grow to prefer some of them.

"I don't think there's a competition between these and the original versions," he said. "It's more of an additive thing than a substitution. If you like the new arrangements, great. If you prefer the originals, keep listening.

"It's no problem either way," he said. "They're both valid."

The Edge said he's working on new music for U2, "and we've got some great stuff in the pipeline."

The quartet that met in drummer Larry Mullen Jr.'s kitchen when they answered an ad placed on a high school bulletin board is a remarkable story in longevity. A passage toward the end of Bono's book "Surrender," where he talked about looking around onstage at the end of their most recent tour in 2019 and wondering if it was the end, raised natural questions about how long U2 would continue.

"There are many reasons why U2 has stayed together for so long, but one of the main reasons is that it works so well for us as individuals," The Edge said. "I think we all shine the brightest as part of this collective. I certainly would not like to hang up the guitar."

This year will provide a test for a band that can count on one hand the number of times it has performed without all four members. U2 has committed to a run of shows in Las Vegas without Mullen, who is recuperating from surgery.

Would U2 continue if one of the original quartet decides it's time to hang it up?

"I wouldn't rule out the possibility that we could go forward with different members," The Edge said. "But also, equally, I could imagine us deciding not to. It would be a big challenge. But I think at the time we would know what felt right."

## Class action suit filed against Silicon Valley Bank parent

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

A class action lawsuit is being filed against the parent company of Silicon Valley Bank, its CEO and its chief financial officer, saying that company didn't disclose the risks that future interest rate increases would have on its business.

The lawsuit against SVB Financial Group, CEO Greg Becker and CFO Daniel Beck was filed in the U.S. district court for the Northern district of California. It is looking for unspecified damages to be awarded to those who invested in SVB between June 16, 2021 and March 10, 2023.

The lawsuit from shareholders led by Chandra Vanipenta says some quarterly and annual financial reports from SVB didn't fully account for warnings from the Federal Reserve about interest rate hikes.

In particular, the lawsuit said that annual reports for 2020 through 2022, "understated the risks posed to the company by not disclosing that likely interest rate hikes, as outlined by the Fed, had the potential

to cause irrevocable damage to the company," the lawsuit stated.

It also claims that the company "failed to disclose that, if its investments were negatively affected by rising interest rates, it was particularly susceptible to a bank run."

The collapse of Silicon Valley Bank has shaken the technology industry and worried small businesses and individuals with deposits at the financial institution. The Biden administration's move guaranteeing all Silicon Valley Bank's deposits above the insured limit of \$250,000 per account has brought relief to some.

Silicon Valley quickly established itself as the "go-to" spot for venture capitalists looking for financial partners more open to unconventional business proposals than its bigger, more established peers who still didn't have a good grasp of technology.

Venture capitalists set up their accounts at Silicon Valley Bank just as the tech industry started its boom and then advised the entrepreneurs that they funded to do the same.

That cozy relationship came to an end when the bank disclosed a \$1.8 billion loss on low-yielding bonds that were purchased before interest rates began to spike last year, raising alarms among its financially savvy customer base who used the fruits of technology to spread warnings that turned into a calamitous run on deposits.

## US inflation eases but stays high, putting Fed in tough spot

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumer price increases eased slightly from January to February but still pointed to an elevated inflation rate that is posing a challenge for the Federal Reserve at a delicate moment for the financial system.

The government said Tuesday that prices increased 0.4% last month, just below January's 0.5% rise. Yet excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called core prices rose 0.5% in February, slightly above January's 0.4% gain. The Fed pays particular attention to the core measure as a gauge of underlying inflation pressures.

Even though prices are rising much faster than the Fed wants, some economists expect the central bank to suspend its year-long streak of interest rate hikes when it meets next week. With the collapse of two large banks since Friday fueling anxiety about other regional banks, the Fed, for now, may focus more on boosting confidence in the financial system than on its long-term drive to tame inflation.

That is a sharp shift from just a week ago, when Chair Jerome Powell suggested to a Senate committee that if inflation didn't cool, the Fed could raise its benchmark interest rate by a substantial half-point at its meeting March 21-22. When the Fed raises its key rate, it typically leads to higher rates on mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and many business loans.

When measured against prices a year ago, inflation has been easing for eight months. In February, consumer prices climbed 6% from 12 months earlier, down from January's 6.4% year-over-year increase and well below a recent peak of 9.1% in June. Yet it remains far above the Fed's 2% annual inflation target. Core prices in February rose 5.5% from 12 months ago, down slightly from 5.6% in January.

Nearly three-quarters of last month's price increase was driven by housing costs. But most economists expect rental cost increases to slow in the coming months as more apartment buildings are constructed and new leases are signed at lower price levels. Such a decline could further slow inflation.

Prices in the economy's sprawling service sector continued to accelerate last month. Restaurant prices rose 0.6% from January to February. Auto insurance jumped 0.9%, hotel costs a dramatic 2.3%.

Air fares, after easing for several months, soared 6.4% just in February and are up 27% from a year ago. The Fed is heavily focused on services, which are labor-intensive and whose price increases are driven in large part by higher wages. Labor shortages in many services industries have led to sharp wage increases.

Clothing costs rose 0.8% last month. New car prices ticked up just 0.2% for a second straight month. Used car prices fell 2.8%, the eighth straight monthly decline.

Consumers are getting a bit of relief at the grocery store. Food prices rose 0.3% in February, the smallest monthly gain in nearly two years, though they're still up more than 10% from a year ago.

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The price of eggs, which have soared 55% from a year earlier, actually dropped 6.7% just in February. "These data support a quarter-point rate hike" at the Fed's meeting next week," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, said in a research note. "The decision ultimately will depend not only on the economic data but also financial stability concerns, which could keep the Fed on the sidelines next week."

Across the country, persistently high inflation is still pressuring many consumers.

Mani Bhushan, who owns four Taco Ocho restaurants in the Dallas area, has struggled to keep up with sharply higher prices for eggs, chicken, flour and black beans. He has also had to raise wages by about 30% to attract and keep the workers he needs.

"You get hit from every side," he said. "We don't make much profit anymore."

To cover his higher costs, Bhushan raised some of his prices last week after having done so four months ago. He plans to raise prices again in May unless food prices ease further.

For the Fed, it's not yet clear whether it will keep raising rates at its next meeting to combat inflation.

Jan Hatzius, chief economist at Goldman Sachs, said Goldman now thinks the Fed's policymakers will pause their rate increases next week. Goldman had previously predicted a quarter-point hike. In a note to clients, Hatzius noted that the Fed, for now, appears even more focused on calming the banking sector and the financial markets than on fighting inflation.

"We would be surprised if, just one week after going to great lengths to support financial stability, policymakers risked undermining their efforts by raising interest rates again," Hatzius wrote in a separate note Monday.

If the Fed does pause its rate hikes this month, Hatzius predicted, it will likely resume them when it next meets in May. Ultimately, he still expects the Fed to raise its key rate, which affects many consumer and business loans, to about 5.4% this year, up from the current 4.6%.

The Fed may get some unintentional help in its inflation fight from the aftereffects of the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and New York-based Signature Bank. In response, many small and medium-size banks may pull back on lending to shore up their finances. A lower pace of lending could help cool the economy and slow inflation.

The next day, testifying to a House committee, Powell cautioned that no final decision had been made about what the Fed would do at the March meeting. Still, on Friday, the government reported that employers added a robust 311,000 jobs last month. It was a potential sign of continued high inflation, and it led to predictions of a half-point hike at the Fed's meeting next week.

Later that day, though, Silicon Valley Bank failed, thrusting an entirely new set of concerns onto the Fed.

## HBO's 'The Last of Us' season finale draws in a series high

By KARENA PHAN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "The Last of Us" fans set another rating record for the season one finale of the apocalyptic, mushroom-infected zombie video game adaptation. Despite airing against the Oscars Sunday night, HBO said the season finale drew in 8.2 million viewers.

Viewership for "The Last of Us" has consistently grown throughout the season. The series has not only won over gamers with high expectations but also critics and people who aren't familiar with the game.

The series premiere drew 4.7 million viewers in the U.S., based on Nielsen and HBO data, making for HBO's second-largest debut, behind "House of the Dragon." Outside of the U.S., "The Last of Us" is now the most-watched show in the history of HBO Max in both Europe and Latin America, HBO said.

As viewers watch episodes on the streaming platforms days after the episodes air, the numbers for the series will continue to increase. The series is now averaging 30.4 million viewers across its first six episodes, with the first episode approaching 40 million viewers in the U.S., HBO said.

HBO did concede to the ratings behemoth that is the Super Bowl, dropping the fifth episode of "The Last of Us" on HBO Max and HBO On Demand early last month on the Friday before the big game on Feb. 12. But the ratings for episode five were still strong, with 11.6 million viewers from Friday through Sunday.

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The series finale ended with Joel making some difficult and controversial decisions that left viewers wondering what was next for protagonists Ellie (Bella Ramsey) and Joel (Pedro Pascal). While not much has been officially announced about the second season, fans of the video game know about "The Last of Us Part II" and are eagerly anticipating how the game will be adapted for season two.

## China to reopen to tourists, resume all visas Wednesday

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — China will reopen its borders to tourists and resume issuing all visas Wednesday as it tries to revive tourism and its economy following a three-year halt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

China is one of the last major countries to reopen its borders to tourists. The announcement Tuesday came after it declared a "decisive victory" over COVID-19 in February.

All types of visas will resume from Wednesday. Visa-free entry also will resume at destinations such as Hainan island as well as for cruise ships entering Shanghai that had no visa requirement before COVID-19.

Foreigners holding visas issued before March 28, 2020, that are still valid will be allowed to enter China. Visa-free entry will resume for foreigners entering Guangdong in southern China from Hong Kong and Macao. The notice didn't specify whether vaccination certificates or negative COVID-19 tests would be required, but Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told reporters Tuesday that China had "optimized measures for remote testing of people coming to China from relevant countries," allowing pre-boarding antigen testing instead of nucleic acid testing.

"All these have been well implemented, and the epidemic risk is generally controllable," Wang said at a daily briefing.

The move would "further facilitate the exchange of Chinese and foreign personnel," according to the notice posted on the websites of numerous Chinese missions and embassies.

China had stuck to a harsh "zero-COVID" strategy involving sudden lockdowns and daily COVID-19 testing to try to stop the virus before abandoning most aspects of the policy in December amid growing opposition.

The relaxation of visa rules follows China's approval of outbound group tours for Chinese citizens, the results of which have been positive, and the overall improvement in pandemic conditions, Wang said.

"China will continue to make better arrangements for the safe, healthy and orderly movement of Chinese and foreign personnel on the basis of scientific assessments and in light of the situation," he said. "We also hope that all parties will join China in creating favorable conditions for cross-border exchanges."

## Today in History: March 15, Julius Caesar assassinated

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 15, the 74th day of 2023. There are 291 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 15, 44 B.C., Roman dictator Julius Caesar was assassinated by a group of nobles that included Brutus and Cassius.

On this date:

In 1493, Italian explorer Christopher Columbus arrived back in the Spanish harbor of Palos de la Frontera, two months after concluding his first voyage to the Western Hemisphere.

In 1820, Maine became the 23rd state.

In 1917, Czar Nicholas II abdicated in favor of his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, who declined the crown, marking the end of imperial rule in Russia.

In 1919, members of the American Expeditionary Force from World War I convened in Paris for a three-day meeting to found the American Legion.

In 1944, during World War II, Allied bombers again raided German-held Monte Cassino.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, addressing a joint session of Congress, called for new legislation



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to guarantee every American's right to vote; the result was passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In 1972, "The Godfather," Francis Ford Coppola's epic gangster movie based on the Mario Puzo novel and starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino, premiered in New York.

In 1977, the situation comedy "Three's Company," starring John Ritter, Joyce DeWitt and Suzanne Somers, premiered on ABC-TV.

In 2005, former WorldCom chief Bernard Ebbers was convicted in New York of engineering the largest corporate fraud in U.S. history. (He was later sentenced to 25 years in prison.)

In 2011, the Syrian civil war had its beginnings with Arab Spring protests across the region that turned into an armed insurgency and eventually became a full-blown conflict.

In 2019, a gunman killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, streaming the massacre live on Facebook. (Brenton Tarrant, an Australian white supremacist, was sentenced to life in prison without parole after pleading guilty to 51 counts of murder and other charges.)

In 2020, the Federal Reserve took massive emergency action to help the economy withstand the coronavirus by slashing its benchmark interest rate to near zero and saying it would buy \$700 billion in treasury and mortgage bonds. After initially trying to keep schools open, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said the nation's largest public school system would close in hopes of curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

Ten years ago: The Pentagon announced it would spend \$1 billion to add 14 interceptors to an Alaska-based missile defense system, responding to what it called faster-than-anticipated North Korean progress on nuclear weapons and missiles. The chief of Syria's main, Western-backed rebel group marked the second anniversary of the start of the uprising against President Bashar Assad by pledging to fight until the "criminal" regime was gone. Canadian Patrick Chan won his third title at the World Figure Skating Championships in London, Ontario.

Five years ago: A pedestrian bridge that was under construction collapsed onto a busy Miami highway, crushing vehicles beneath massive slabs of concrete and steel; six people died and 10 were injured. The Trump administration accused Moscow of an elaborate plot to hack into America's electric grid, factories, water supply and even air travel; the U.S. also targeted Russians with sanctions for alleged election meddling for the first time since President Donald Trump took office. Federal health officials took the first step to slash levels of addictive nicotine in cigarettes, a move designed to help smokers quit and prevent future generations from getting hooked. All seven service members aboard a U.S. helicopter were killed when the aircraft crashed in Iraq; officials said there were no indications that the crash had been caused by hostile fire.

One year ago: Russia stepped up its bombardment of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, while an estimated 20,000 civilians fled the desperately encircled port city of Mariupol by way of a humanitarian corridor. A man suspected of stalking and shooting homeless people asleep on the streets of New York City and Washington was arrested. The AP All-America college basketball team was announced, with first-team players Keegan Murray of Iowa, Kofi Cockburn of Illinois, Johnny Davis of Wisconsin, Oscar Tshiebwe of Kentucky and Ochai Agbaji of Kansas.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Judd Hirsch is 88. Jazz musician Charles Lloyd is 85. Rock musician Phil Lesh is 83. Singer Mike Love (The Beach Boys) is 82. Rock singer-musician Sly Stone is 80. Rock singer-musician Howard Scott (War; Lowrider Band) is 77. Rock singer Ry Cooder is 76. Actor Frances Conroy is 70. Actor Craig Wasson is 69. Rock singer Dee Snider (Twisted Sister) is 68. Actor Joaquim de Almeida is 66. Actor Park Overall is 66. Movie director Renny Harlin is 64. Model Fabio is 62. Singer Terence Trent D'Arby (AKA Sananda Maitreya) is 61. Rock singer Bret Michaels (Poison) is 60. R&B singer Rockwell is 59. Actor Chris Bruno is 57. Actor Kim Raver is 56. Rock singer Mark McGrath (Sugar Ray) is 55. Rock musician Mark Hoppus is 51. Country singer-musician Matt Thomas (Parmalee) is 49. Actor Eva Longoria is 48. Rapper-musician will.i.am (Black Eyed Peas) is 48. Rock DJ Joseph Hahn (Linkin Park) is 46. Rapper Young Buck is 42. Actor Sean Biggerstaff is 40. Actor Kellan Lutz is 38. Actor Caitlin Wachs is 34.