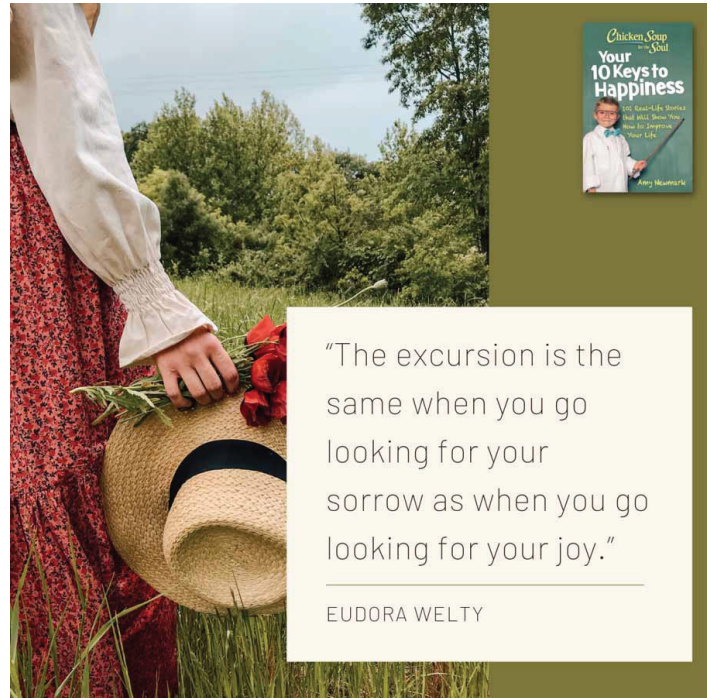


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“The excursion is the same when you go looking for your sorrow as when you go looking for your joy.”

EUDORA WELTY

Groton Community Calendar

Friday, April 21

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, sauerkraut, 3 bean salad, chocolate pudding with bananas.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and jelly.

School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.

Baseball: (Oldham/Ramona/Rutland)/Arlington at Ramona, 6 p.m. (V/JV)

Saturday, April 22 - EARTH DAY

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.

GHS Prom, 8 p.m.

Firemen's Spring Social, 7 p.m.

Sunday, April 23

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m., and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon in worship, 10:30 a.m.

Princess Prom

Monday, April 24

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, boiled potato, mixed vegetables, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Taco salads.

Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center with potluck at noon.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: PEO meeting (outside group), 7 p.m.

Postponed: Girls Golf at Redfield Golf Course, 10 a.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

after a protracted investigation into allegations that he bullied members of his staff.

- Another candidate has entered the race for the White House as conservative talk radio host Larry Elder announced his candidacy for the 2024 Republican nomination. The 70-year-old broke the news on Fox News and later said "America is in decline, but this decline is not inevitable."

- Connor Sturgeon, the shooter who killed five co-workers at a Louisville bank in early April, left notes revealing that he wanted to demonstrate how easily mentally ill people can obtain assault weapons in the U.S., according to police sources.

- Sudan's top military general said he is committed to a transition to civilian rule as fighting continues between his forces and the country's powerful paramilitary.

- North Korea's foreign minister Choe Son Hui called the G-7 a "tool for ensuring the U.S. hegemony" as she blasted the group's recent call for the North's denuclearization.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia's defense ministry has said one of its fighter jets accidentally bombed the city of Belgorod on Thursday evening, injuring at least three people and damaging dozens of buildings.

- President Joe Biden will formally announce his 2024 reelection campaign as early as next week via video announcement, according to multiple sources familiar with the matter. The 80-year-old has previously voiced his intention to run for a second term in the Oval Office.

- Prosecutors have dropped an involuntary manslaughter charge against Alec Baldwin in the "Rust" fatal shooting case. Baldwin's attorneys were "pleased" with the decision, which was announced on the same day that filming resumed in Montana.

- U.K. Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab has resigned



Snow was falling in Groton Thursday afternoon. While there was no accumulation, areas to the east and north did see a couple of inches of snow on the ground.

Stolen Sioux Falls vehicle shows up in Herreid

On Wednesday April 19, 2023 at approximately 3:58 pm, a deputy with the Campbell County Sheriff's Office, attempted to stop a vehicle which was reported stolen out of the Sioux Falls area. The vehicle was a silver 2017 Chevrolet Impala. The vehicle pulled over approximately two miles south of the City of Herreid. The driver, who was later identified as 44 year old Mercedes Klingman of Sioux Falls, SD, failed to comply with the demands of deputies to exit her vehicle. During the course of the stop, Klingman stated that she had dropped a male off at the school, and that he was armed with a gun. Klingman fled the scene and a vehicle pursuit was initiated.

Klingman proceeded southbound on US Highway 83 at speeds exceeding 115 mph. After pursuing for approximately two miles, North Central E911 center in Mobridge, SD, advised area law enforcement officers that they had received a 911 call from a female caller stating that there was a male in the Herreid School with a gun. Our investigation has led us to believe that Klingman had placed the 911 call to the E911 center. Deputies terminated the pursuit and responded to the Herreid School. Klingman continued southbound on US Highway 83.

Campbell County deputies arrived at the Herreid School within minutes, and immediately entered the building. Deputies began clearing classrooms and escorting students and staff from the building. Neighboring law enforcement agencies arrived on scene shortly thereafter and a thorough building search was performed. It was determined that there was never an armed male subject in the school. The building was cleared and deemed safe, and staff was allowed back into the school.

A review of the school's security camera footage showed the female, who was identified as Klingman, attempt to enter the front entrance of the school at approximately 3:50pm, which was approximately eight minutes prior to her being stopped by the deputy. Klingman had made entry through the main door and proceeded to the main office. Klingman retrieved documents from the office and left the building. It is clear that Klingman had entered the school unarmed, and it appears she had no intent to cause harm at that moment.

At approximately 11:18pm, the Campbell County Sheriff's Office received a phone call from a rural Campbell County resident, stating that a female entered his yard and stated her vehicle had broken down. The vehicle was determined to be the stolen 2017 Chevrolet Impala. The resident gave the female a ride to a motel in Mobridge, SD. The female identified herself to the resident as Mercedes.

Shortly after midnight on April 20th, law enforcement personnel from the Campbell County Sheriff's Office, Walworth County Sheriff's Office, and the Mobridge Police Department, were able to take Klingman into custody without incident.

At this time, It appears that the incident at the Herreid School was a ruse to evade pursuing law enforcement. There appears to be no further threat to the public.

Klingman was charged with felony terroristic threats, felony aggravated eluding of law enforcement, felony possession of a stolen vehicle, reckless driving, driving without a valid driver's license, and obstructing law enforcement. Klingman is currently being held in the Hughes County Jail on a \$10,000 cash bond and awaiting an initial court appearance.

Agencies assisting the sheriff's office are the Walworth County Sheriff's Office, McPherson County Sheriff's Office, Potter County Sheriff's Office, Gettysburg Police Department, Mobridge Police Department, South Dakota Highway Patrol, and South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks.

Deputy Kenny Wientjes
Campbell County Sheriff's Office

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LINEMEN vs. LINEMEN

Minnesota Vikings "Purple People Eaters" Defensive Line

Lineworkers in Tyler, Minnesota



High School and/or College Career

TRAINING

Approximately 4 Years or
7,000-8,000 Hours of Training

16-24 Pre-, Regular and Post-Season
Games Plus Practices

WORK

24 Hours a Day, Seven Days a Week,
365 Days a Year

Extreme Physical Activity,
Dangerous and Life-Threatening
Situations

WORK
CONDITIONS

Extreme Weather (high winds, rain,
snow, ice, high temps), Dangerous
and Life-Threatening Situations, High
Heights

Mental and Physical Strength, Athletic
Ability, Durability, Size, Vision, Good
Instincts

TRAITS

Mental and Physical Strength,
Adaptability, Dedication, Vision, Good
Instincts, Focus on the Customer,
Commitment to Safety, Bravery, Math
Skills

Around 20 Pounds of Specialized
Pads and Protective Gear Worn
During Games

EQUIPMENT

30-40 Pounds of Tools, Equipment
and Protective Gear Worn and Carried
While Climbing Poles

Offensive Protection of the Quarterback
and Football, Defensive Control of the
Line of Scrimmage

VITAL ROLE

Install, Maintain and Repair Power
Transmission and Distribution Lines
and Systems that Deliver Electric
Power to Consumers

BOTTOM LINE: IF THERE'S NO LINEMEN, THERE'S NO POWER!



#thankalineman





SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

\$200 million in housing infrastructure funding likely to lie dormant for a second year

Lawmakers blame governor's team for complicating program

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 20, 2023 6:38 PM

A \$200 million pool of housing infrastructure funding will likely go unspent for another construction season, despite efforts by lawmakers to push the money out in 2023.

The interim director of the South Dakota Housing Development Authority broke that news to the Legislature's Executive Board Thursday during its first meeting since the end of the 2023 session last month.

"I imagine our September board meeting will be the first time we'll be able to review applications for funding," Interim Director Chas Olson said.

The new delay is just the latest in a saga that began in 2021, when lawmakers spent the summer looking for ways to address a shortage of workforce housing; the most recent twist, prior to Thursday, was the resignation of the housing authority's executive director last month.

The money is meant to help speed development in communities with more jobs than homes, but squabbles over spending authority and program structure have continued to delay its delivery to developers.

Olson's comments on Thursday came amid a flurry of pointed questioning from Executive Board members, most of whom had signed off on a bill in January they'd hoped would finally get the money out the door.

"It looks to me like we're going to miss most of this construction season in 2023 before any of this money goes out," said Sen. Jim Bolin, R-Canton. "For people in small town economic development, that's the question they're concerned about."

The authority is working as quickly as it can, Olson said.

Staffers finalized the language of administrative rules for the infrastructure program this week. The rules now need approval from the Governor's Office of Economic Development (GOED), Olson said. Time will then be needed for a public comment period and approval from the authority board and the Legislature's Rules Review Committee before another 20-day waiting period and an official filing with the Secretary of State's Office.

The objective, Olson said, is to complete every step in the process by late summer.

"As of yesterday, the rules that have been created have been passed along (to GOED)," Olson said.

Two years of delay

The involvement of GOED sparked some of Thursday's most pointed questions.

For two legislative sessions, lawmakers acted explicitly to cut that office out of the infrastructure funding picture.

The package of state and federal funding initially gained support from the South Dakota Legislature in 2022. The passage of the 2022 version of the infrastructure bill came after a back-and-forth with Gov. Noem, who'd aimed to place the money with GOED.

Lawmakers balked at that framework and rewrote the bill to give the money to the Housing Development Authority, citing concerns about oversight.

"The Legislature specifically considered, several times, whether to send this money to GOED or to the Housing Development Authority," House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Pierre said during Thursday's hearing. "And the Legislature answered that question by saying that they wanted the Housing Development Authority to ride herd on this project."

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Noem signed that first bill in March of 2022, but said she saw potential legal issues. The authority chose not to disburse the funds last year, citing a mismatch between its authority and legislative intent.

Some lawmakers have publicly questioned whether those concerns were legitimate. In May of 2022, months before the board tabled any action on the infrastructure program, the Executive Board signed off on a rule meant to clarify the authority's power to dispense the funding.

Nevertheless, lawmakers returned to Pierre in January and swiftly passed a bill meant to clarify that the authority, the board to which the 2022 Legislature had granted the responsibility to award the funds, was fully authorized to disburse the funds to help speed the construction of workforce housing projects across the state.

On Thursday, Mortenson and his fellow Executive Board members were told that a piece of boilerplate language in the 2023 version of the bill placed oversight back into the hands of GOED.

Administrative rules

The clause in question directs the authority to "promulgate rules, pursuant to chapter 1-26" of South Dakota law.

That law sets forth the process for administrative rules. One step involves the review of any board-generated rules by that board's overseeing administrative authority.

The housing authority, while generally independent in operational matters, "is attached to the Governor's Office of Economic Development for reporting purposes."

The authority typically doesn't promulgate rules, its attorney Dixie Hieb told the Executive Board, so it typically doesn't need to report to GOED.

"We have never had to go through the administrative rules process," Hieb said.

Lawmakers, Executive Board Chair Lee Schoenbeck said, wouldn't have known that in January. Nearly every other agency and state board follows the same rules, and lawmakers include language on the promulgation of administrative rules in several bills every session.

"It's a weird anomaly that the Housing Development Authority doesn't do most of their stuff under the rules of administrative procedure," Schoenbeck said following Thursday's meeting.

Schoenbeck himself said he only learned that GOED served as administrative overseer for the authority after the former director resigned unexpectedly at the end of March.

Olson ascended to the position of interim director eight days before Thursday's hearing. Until then, he'd been director of rental housing.

Lorraine Polak has not commented on her resignation. Schoenbeck has alleged Polak was fired; the Governor's Office has not commented on that allegation. Authority board members publicly bemoaned the loss of a 25-year veteran who Board President Bill Hansen described as "exemplary," particularly with such a large pool of funding to manage.

The Rules Review Committee met earlier this month, but had no rules for the infrastructure program to consider.

On Thursday, Olson said Polak's departure didn't slow down the rulemaking process.

Instead, according to Olson and Tim Engel, the attorney for GOED, it was a matter of addressing comments from GOED and adjusting language to conform to the style and form of administrative rules.

Engel said GOED got a copy of the housing authority's proposed rules in mid-March and went over its comments with Hieb, the HDA attorney, on March 28 – just days before Polak's resignation.

Now, Engel said, the rules are ready to move through the process.

"The latest version addressed the vast majority, if not all of our concerns," Engel said.

Lawmakers question explanation

Steve Westra, who heads the Governor's Office of Economic Development, deferred most Executive Board questions to Olson and Engel.

Mortenson was among the lawmakers to ask why Westra's office was involved.

After the hearing, Schoenbeck told South Dakota Searchlight that he's "puzzled" about the delay. Even accounting for the authority's inexperience with formal rulemaking, he said, the involvement of GOED and

the number of weeks it had to write the rules should have been sufficient.

"All of state government operates under the administrative procedures act," he said. "It doesn't slow anybody else down,"

Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, was not impressed with the housing authority or GOED on Thursday. Karr was among the elected officials who questioned the reasoning behind the 2022 delay. He believes the executive branch pushed the narrative that the money couldn't be spent, and said he suspects that Polak, the former director of the authority, was asked to resign in March by someone on Gov. Noem's team.

Polak's resignation and the news from Thursday's meeting, Karr said, suggest that the executive branch is still working to exert its authority over the funding in spite of legislative efforts to place it in the coffers of a more neutral state board.

"Here we are a year later, and the governor and the executive branch are still pulling the strings," Karr said.

Lawmakers were clear about the importance of getting money out the door during this year's construction season. Their bill had an emergency clause, which was meant to move the money faster than usual.

Olson told the Executive Board that some housing developers may choose to start work this year with the expectation that the funds will be available in early fall.

Karr doubts many developers will take that risk.

"If I were a developer, I wouldn't," Karr said.

Schoenbeck, by contrast, believes at least a few developers will take their chances. The housing authority has been a reliable partner for the private sector for years, he said.

Yet he also suspects the two-year saga of infrastructure funding may call that reputation into question.

As much faith as developers may have in the staff at the housing authority, he said, the messy process of writing guidelines for this particular program could make them wary.

"I would guess, in light of what's happened for the last two years, you wouldn't find a developer to say 'Oh, hell yeah, I bet you this won't have a glitch in it,'" he said.

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

COMMENTARY

Pollution carried by major floods is killing our lakes

BRAD JOHNSON

APRIL 20, 2023 4:07 PM

The state of South Dakota's lackadaisical, careless approach to protecting its lakes and streams from agricultural pollution is glaringly apparent when floods are viewed from an airplane.

Hundreds of acres of plowed fields sent tons of black soil down the Big Sioux River during the week of April 8-15. Significant amounts of mud ended up in Lake Kampeska, one of the state's more economically important lakes.

Similar to staring down the barrel of a shotgun, Lake Kampeska absorbs much of the Big Sioux's flood blast, and big events cause major damage.

It is cheap and easy to load the approximately 4,817-surface-acre lake with sediment and pollutants such as nitrates, phosphorus, pesticides and E. coli.

It is very expensive and virtually impossible to remove that pollution. Unfortunately, the state does not care about either end of the pollution pipeline.

To document the incoming pollution, the Lake Kampeska Water Project District conducted daily sampling of water flowing into the lake during the recent flood. Results will be released when available.

Past studies show big flood events cause major damage. Analysis by district consultant Jack Little, a retired U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist, showed the 1997 flood dumped the equivalent of all sediment contributed by river flows in the prior 50 years.

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That sediment doesn't affect the entire lake, however. A 2002 USGS study titled "Sediment Accumulation and Distribution in Lake Kampeska" reported that in the prior 50 years only 6 inches of sediment had accumulated over much of the lake. That was a different story at the lake's mouth.

In the first 1,600 feet out from where the Big Sioux enters Lake Kampeska at state Highway 20, the study said nearly 4 feet of sediment was dumped by flood events between 1951 and 2000.

Since the study was done, Lake Kampeska experienced major flooding in 2001, 2010, 2019 and again this year.

The source of the sedimentation was clear during an airplane flight that I and former Watertown Public Opinion Publisher Mark Roby took on April 13 to document the flood. We both are Lake Kampeska Water Project District board members.

The flight covered much of the 383-square-mile watershed that feeds Lake Kampeska and Lake Pelican.

The small meandering banks that carry the Big Sioux River during much of the year were faint outlines in the expansive floodwaters. Water rushed over many exposed tilled fields, some of which went to the river's edge. Plumes of black dirt from marginal crop land flowed into the river.

One particular farm headquarters operation had feedlots on both sides of a flooded waterway with livestock trails through the channel. Floodwaters had turned the cattle yards into mud puddles, and undoubtedly manure was headed toward Lake Kampeska and downstream.

The problem is not new, as watershed project reports have fingered the culprit for decades. Here's an excerpt from a March 31, 2005, final report to the state and the Environmental Protection Agency on a segment of the Upper Big Sioux River Watershed Project:

The Big Sioux River meanders through a wide floodplain. Its banks are subject to extensive erosion caused by extended spring runoff and large storm events. These events carry upland and floodplain runoff from croplands and rangeland. High concentrations of nutrients and solids are carried by the Big Sioux River to both lakes [Kampeska and Pelican] from livestock feeding operations, grazing lands and row-crops. Extended livestock access to streambanks and the use of pesticides that remove plants from the river and tributary banks increase the potential for erosion.

The state's answer to this is voluntary cooperation and reliance on federal EPA money, which is woefully inadequate. Essentially, it ignores the problem.

There are some producers in the Upper Big Sioux who have participated in conservation programs and are good stewards. But too many are not.

In recent years, the state has pushed buffer strips, but the incentives are insufficient. It is more lucrative to farm to the river's edge and easier to plow through tributaries.

As long as our legislators and governor continue to condone agricultural pollution, our lakes and streams will continue to die.

Brad Johnson is a Watertown real estate appraiser and journalist whose previous career was as a Colorado newspaper reporter and editor. He has been writing regularly appearing opinion columns for at least 20 years.

Abortion-rights attorneys help patients and providers navigate legal chaos

BY: SOFIA RESNICK - APRIL 20, 2023 2:17 PM

These days Kylee Sunderlin is often the first person people will talk to about needing or wanting to terminate a pregnancy, even though she's not a nurse or doctor or a loved one. She's a lawyer.

This is Sunderlin's third year overseeing a national hotline dedicated to helping people navigate legal questions around abortion in their states. Calls have been at an all-time high, she said, as have callers' fear and confusion.

"It's just all really scary right now – I can hear it in people's voices," said Sunderlin, the legal support director for the nonprofit If/When/How. The organization is part of a nascent network of reproductive rights

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legal-assistance groups and law firms called the Abortion Defense Network, which formed in response to sustained legal uncertainty around abortion rights in the U.S.

"There's a real sense that people are scared that if they share their pregnancy, or any information at all, that they are necessarily going to put someone else at legal risk, not just themselves. And so I'm just seeing and sensing a type of isolation that I hadn't seen previously," Sunderlin said. "People are navigating this alone."

It's been nearly one year since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the federal right to terminate a pregnancy, followed by confusion and fear about contradictory state abortion laws and unresolved legal challenges. In this legal chaos emerged the Abortion Defense Network, which publicly launched in February and is trying to make providers and patients feel less alone. The network is a one-stop shop for patients and loved ones, and providers and practical support groups. Working together, the six reproductive rights groups in the network provide free legal advice, pro bono representation, and help paying legal expenses.

"We believe this is a very robust system with serious legal and practical support that we are trying to get out to the community so that people who provide and support abortion care can continue to perform their vital services," said Cassie Ehrenberg, senior counsel for pro bono initiatives for the Lawyering Project, which manages the intake calls and operations of the network. Its five partners are: the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Reproductive Rights, If/When/How, the National Women's Law Center, and Resources for Abortion Delivery, in addition to seven anchor law firms.

The Supreme Court is once again about to make a consequential decision about medication abortion in the Texas-based Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine v. U.S. Food and Drug Administration case, one of several federal cases related to the abortion drug mifepristone. And though nobody knows whether and in what states the most common form of abortion post-Roe will remain legal and available by the end of this week, abortion rights advocates told States Newsroom they are determined to find ways to help people access safe abortion care and understand their rights.

"These federal rulings, particularly from the judge in Texas, it's creating even more chaos and confusion for people who are seeking abortions," said Sunderlin, who along with a small team of trauma-informed attorneys field calls from people of various ages, races and backgrounds from around the country. "And every time this happens, we see an increase in calls."

A more than 2,000% increase in abortion patient calls

Sunderlin said If/When/How transformed its Repro Legal Helpline in June 2020, from an informational helpline to one where people seeking abortions could be promptly connected to legal services. More staff were hired after Roe v. Wade fell in June 2022, when the helpline saw a whopping 2,460% increase in inquiries, Sunderlin said. She noted that the helpline has been consistently receiving hundreds of calls every month since then.

A lot of the questions that helpline navigators are fielding these days are about the legal risks of seeing a health provider at all, Sunderlin said, whether it's just to confirm the pregnancy or to seek care for complications of a self-managed medication abortion or to seek care for a medical emergency in a wanted pregnancy. Her group's legal advice depends on each individual's circumstances, including their geography and relationships.

"You're really responding to people's legal questions, but also responding to their needs as whole humans coming to us in a really chaotic, difficult time," Sunderlin said. "If there's anything we can do to help alleviate people's fear, that's my primary goal and what I'm constantly thinking about."

If/When/How, which has researched abortion-related criminalization in the U.S., published a report last year showing that people who go to jail for having or assisting with an abortion were often reported to law enforcement by health care providers or family members and acquaintances. If/When/How created a legal guide with Physicians for Reproductive Health, which says patients are within their legal rights not to disclose a medication abortion to an emergency room doctor or other health care provider. The guide notes that an abortion via medication presents like a natural pregnancy loss and usually requires the same care if complications arise.

Right now only Nevada and South Carolina have laws on the books criminalizing self-induced abortions,

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Sunderlin said, though that hasn't stopped states from charging pregnant people under various statutes. If/When/How found 61 cases between 2000 and 2020 across 26 states of people investigated or arrested for ending their own pregnancies or helping others to do so. And presently more states are floating policies to charge pregnant women who have abortions.

Anti-abortion efforts to police health information and criminalize out-of-state abortion travel have only perpetuated the difficulty of accessing abortion for many Americans, especially those without the means to travel, Sunderlin said.

"People have taken their healthcare into their own hands throughout the course of history," Sunderlin said. "With all of this chaos and confusion, that is increasingly becoming the reality for people as access becomes more and more scarce. And with this increased need for people to end their own pregnancies, for people that take their medical care into their own hands, there's a very real risk of being criminalized for doing that."

Abortion providers are not going away

Abortion providers, meanwhile, are scrambling to figure out how to provide care, depending on which way the Supreme Court rules on Friday in the Texas federal case, which concerns mifepristone, part of the two-drug medication abortion regimen. The high court could uphold the appeals court's decision that keeps mifepristone on the market while the lawsuit unfolds but also re-implements old, out-of-date restrictions, including shortening the timeline when people could access the drugs from 10 weeks to seven weeks' gestation, and would potentially eliminate access to the generic version of the drug.

Dr. Gabriela Aguilar, the regional medical director for Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, told States Newsroom that Planned Parenthood providers are determined to keep providing patients with abortion care no matter what happens. They have been planning for different scenarios that could come out of the Supreme Court's ruling and are preparing to potentially provide only misoprostol, the other drug in the regimen. Providers say this is safe and effective, but still less effective and generally more pain-inducing than the current FDA two-medication regimen, which has a two-decade-long high safety and efficacy record.

"We're sitting in a holding pattern right now where we're trying to stay optimistic – hope for the best, plan for the worst," Aguilar said. "We're going to continue providing medication abortion no matter what."

Aguilar said patients are very confused right now, especially when they see constant news headlines of mifepristone being banned, even though that has not yet happened. She said she worries how a sudden change to medication abortion law will impact her patients.

"What needs to be recognized is that mifepristone is not just used for abortion," Aguilar said. "It's also used for management and treatment of miscarriages. So this entire community of people who have early pregnancy losses are being left out of the conversation and potentially put in these scenarios where they're not going to have as effective or patient-centered experience."

On a press call organized by reproductive rights groups Tuesday, public health and FDA regulatory experts expressed frustration that the legal questions about mifepristone in this case are medically baseless and will likely lead to public health harm and massive confusion among health providers and public health departments nationwide.

Ushma Upadhyay, a professor and public health scientist at the University of California, San Francisco, said that if mifepristone is even temporarily taken off the market or if old out-of-date restrictions are returned, "that will send the abortion provider field into a little bit of chaos."

"I think that was the intention of this, of these court cases in the first place," Upadhyay said. "Providers will have to figure out what is the best course forward based on the state they're in, based on their patient populations."

But in all of the anxiety over what will happen next in the fight over abortion access, the Lawyering Project's Ehrenberg said she's been heartened to see the determination among providers to continue providing health care in a frightening legal landscape.

"What I wish other people could see is that the resolve and the commitment to continuing to bring this care forward to patients and community members is so steadfast and so strong, that it really is hearten-

ing in the midst of this," Ehrenberg said. "[Providers] are looking to navigate this horrible new landscape, but they are resolved to do that."

Sofia Resnick is a national reproductive rights reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. She has reported on reproductive-health politics and justice issues for more than a decade.

U.S. House approves bill banning transgender student athletes in girls sports

SD's Johnson votes yes, Biden pledges veto

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - APRIL 20, 2023 11:54 AM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans voted Thursday to prohibit transgender student athletes from competing on girls sports teams consistent with their gender identity, at the same time multiple GOP-dominated states are making similar moves.

The bill, H.R. 734, which would apply to K-12 schools as well as colleges that receive federal funding, passed on a party-line vote of 219-203 (including a yes vote from Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota). It has no chance of success in the U.S. Senate, which is narrowly controlled by Democrats.

The measure singles out transgender female athletes by making it a violation of Title IX for schools to allow "a person whose sex is male to participate in an athletic program or activity that is designated for women or girls." Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs.

Its broad language would amend Title IX so that "sex shall be recognized based solely on a person's reproductive biology and genetics at birth."

The White House released a statement saying President Joe Biden would veto the legislation if it ever came to his desk.

"As a national ban that does not account for competitiveness or grade level, H.R. 734 targets people for who they are and therefore is discriminatory," according to the White House.

This is the first time an anti-trans bill dealing with school sports has made it through a chamber of Congress. But in the states, this legislative session alone, 498 bills that would restrict the rights of transgender people in all kinds of policy areas have been introduced in 49 states, according to the Trans Legislation Tracker.

Those 21 states that have passed bans on transgender youth in sports are Montana, Idaho, South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, Utah, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Kansas, West Virginia, Wyoming, Indiana and Mississippi.

Democratic governors in Kansas and Kentucky had their vetoes of bills banning transgender athletes overridden.

House debate

Prior to the Thursday vote, House members spent Wednesday debating the bill, with Democrats calling it harmful to children, and Republicans arguing there is a need to protect women.

The chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, Republican Rep. Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, said the bill "is not about callousness," but about "women athletes being erased."

There are about 30 openly transgender students who have participated in college athletics, which has about 480,000 athletes.

"We are not sensationalizing this problem" she said. "Females are being hurt by it and action must be taken to stop that."

The top Democrat on the House Education and Workforce Committee, Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, said the bill is "mean spirited."

"The bottom line is we should let parents, doctors and sports organizations do their jobs to protect student athletes," Scott said.

Several Democrats questioned how the bill would be enforced. Democratic Rep. Pramila Jayapal of

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Washington asked how schools would verify a young girl's "reproductive anatomy."

"If your daughter doesn't look feminine enough, is she subject to an examination?" Jayapal asked. "This (bill) is absolutely absurd."

Jayapal, who has a transgender daughter, said that "Republicans are cruelly scapegoating children to distract you from the very fact that you don't have actual solutions that answer the American people's problems."

The House Education and Workforce Committee passed the bill in early March along party lines after a 16-hour mark-up.

Biden administration proposed rule

The House legislation is also a rebuke of a newly proposed rule from the U.S. Department of Education that would amend Title IX to codify protections for transgender student athletes in public schools by barring blanket state bans on those athletes. That proposed rule would invalidate the 21 states that have passed laws to ban transgender athletes from competing in sports consistent with their gender identity.

The proposed rule would halt blanket bans on transgender students from K-8 and would set a high bar for restrictions on transgender athletes at the high school and college level.

The House bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Greg Steube of Florida, criticized the Biden administration for infiltrating "every aspect of the federal government with trans speak," calling out the Department of Education's proposed amendment to Title IX.

"Title IX was created for women's sports, and now the left wants to kill it," he said. "In them giving homage to the trans movement, they're abandoning women all across the country."

Democratic Rep. David Cicilline of Rhode Island questioned how the bill would be enforced and called it "creepy" because it's "gonna require genital inspections of kids," though there is nothing in the bill text that would require such inspections.

Democratic Rep. Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon said she was concerned about the "increase in and apparent normalization of attacks against trans students," across the country.

"Trans rights are human rights, and denying trans students the opportunity to play on sports teams that are consistent with their gender identity sends a clear message to those students that they don't matter," Bonamici said.

But two House Republicans, Reps. Pete Stauber of Minnesota and Lisa McClain of Michigan, said they found it outrageous that they even had to pass the bill.

Stauber said Democrats are trying to weaken Title IX rules, which is why the bill is needed.

"I am enraged that we have reached a point in this country where we have to talk about a bill to protect women and women's sports is even necessary," McClain said.

State battles

Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, who is the chair of the Equality Caucus, said the bill was about Republicans building a political brand and fundraising because nothing in the bill would "address the severe inequities between men's and women's sports."

Pocan pointed to Utah, where the governor vetoed a bill that would have barred a total of four transgender athletes in the state from competing in high school sports that include 85,000 athletes.

"Four trans youth, only one girl," Pocan said. "There's your raging national problem."

The Republican-controlled state legislature in Utah overrode the Republican governor's veto, but the law is currently prevented from going into effect due to a court injunction.

The same thing happened in Indiana, where Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb vetoed a bill barring transgender girls from competing in girls sports, but the state legislature overrode his veto.

That's also been the case in other states where bans are on hold due to temporary injunctions, including Idaho, West Virginia and Montana, where that injunction applies only to bans in higher education and not K-12.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently rejected a West Virginia request to put the state's transgender ban in place while litigation continues.

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North Carolina lawmakers are currently working on a state ban of transgender athletes from middle and high schools to college level from competing in girls and women's team sports.

Study approved

The House passed an amendment to the legislation, 216-205, from Republican Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina, who said it would allow for a study on the "adverse effects" on women for allowing transgender women to compete in sports that align with their gender identity. She said the amendment would be dedicated to Riley Gaines.

Gaines has launched campaigns across the U.S. lobbying against letting transgender women compete in sports that align with their gender identity, after she tied with University of Pennsylvania swimmer Lia Thomas, the first openly trans woman to compete in the NCAA women's division.

Mace, who said she is pro-LGBTQ, argued that the amendment is about "following the science," and that the psychological effects of women competing with transgender women need to be studied.

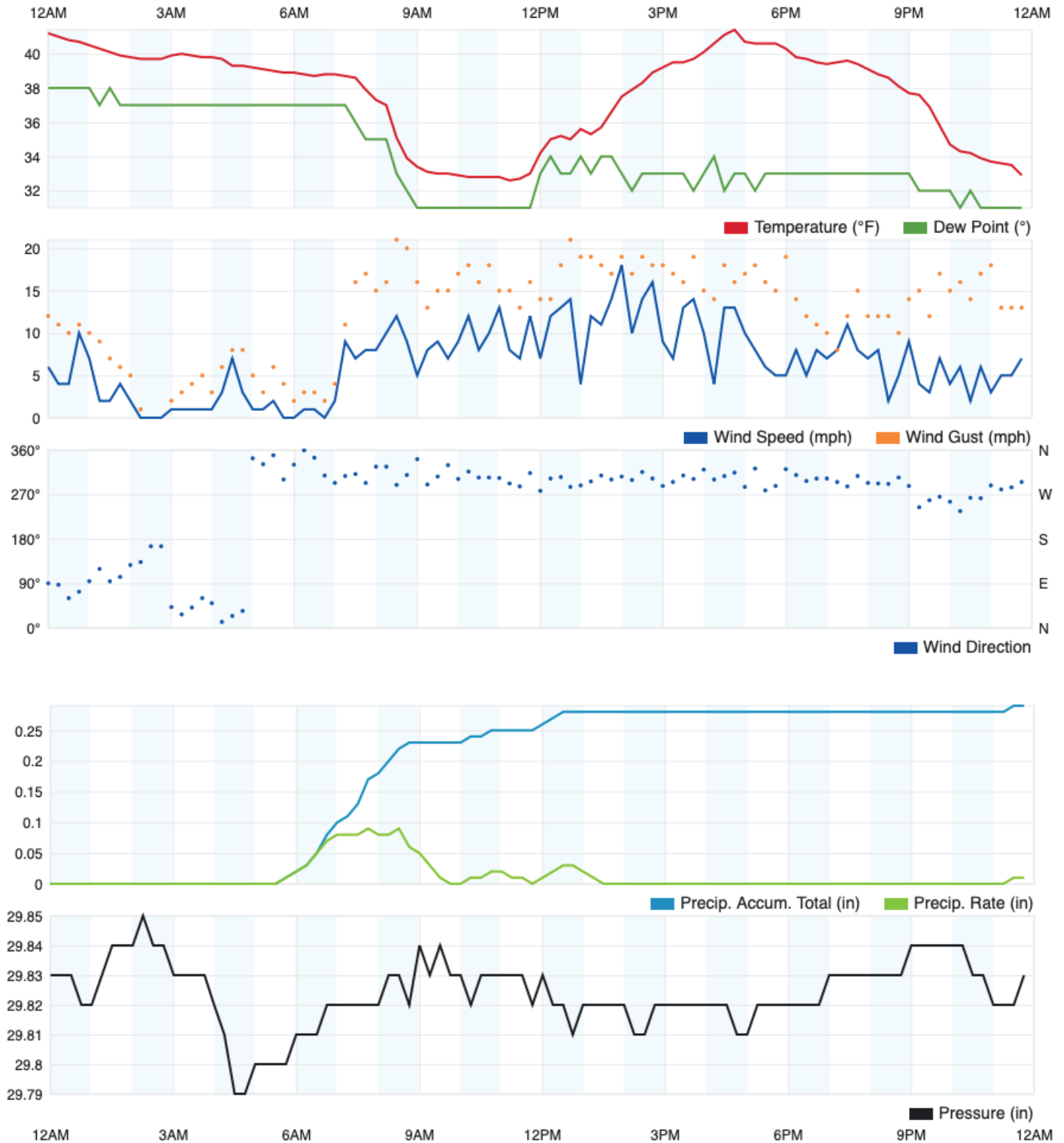
"Women should not be ignored in this situation," she said.

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

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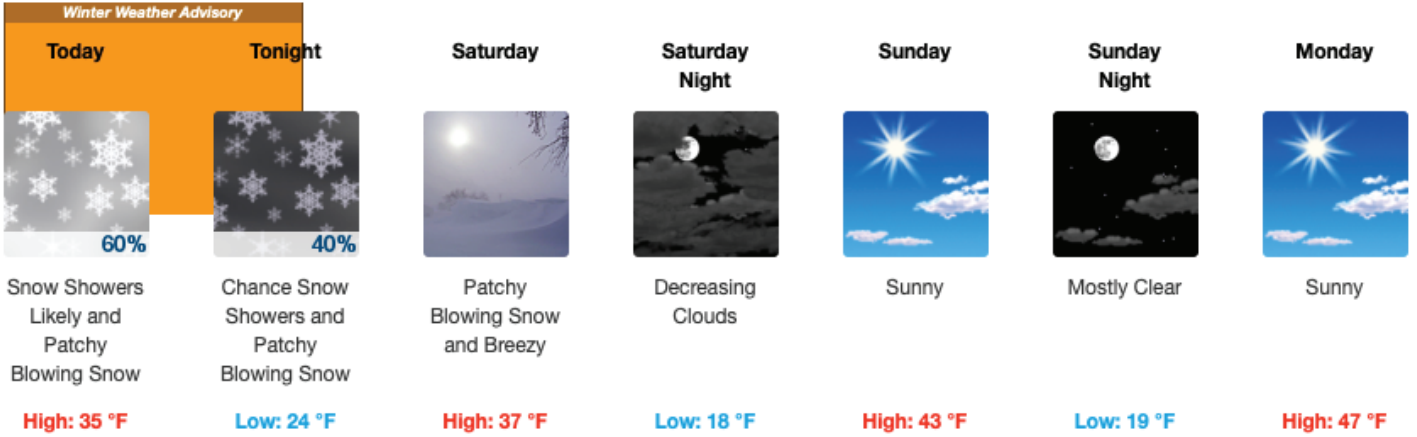
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Yesterdays Groton's Weather Graphs



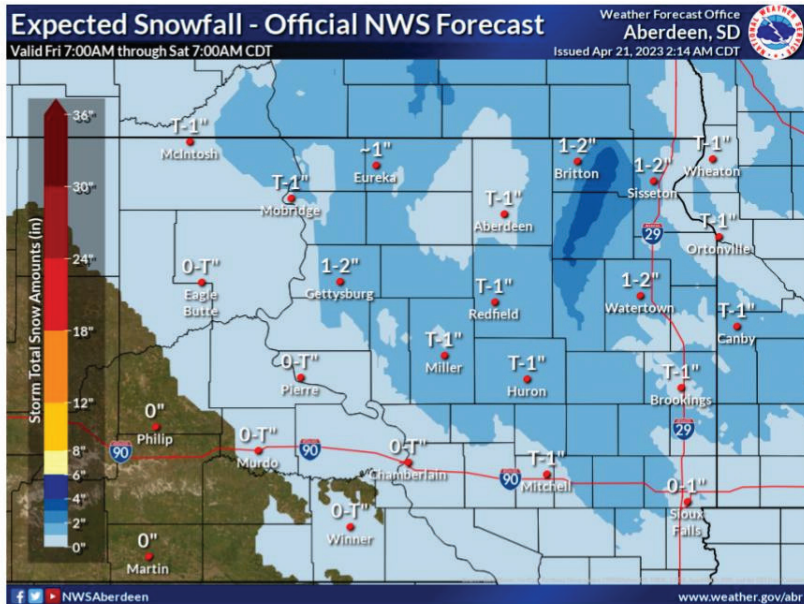
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Expected Snowfall Today/Tonight

April 21, 2023
2:35 AM



Timing

- Mostly snow this morning, mix rain/snow this afternoon
- Snow ending this evening

How Much Snow

- Highest amounts over the Prairie Coteau (Sisseton Hills). Confidence in amounts remains low

Impacts

- Reduced visibility possible during heavier snow showers today due to falling snow and gusty northwest winds

Expected Snowfall Today and Tonight

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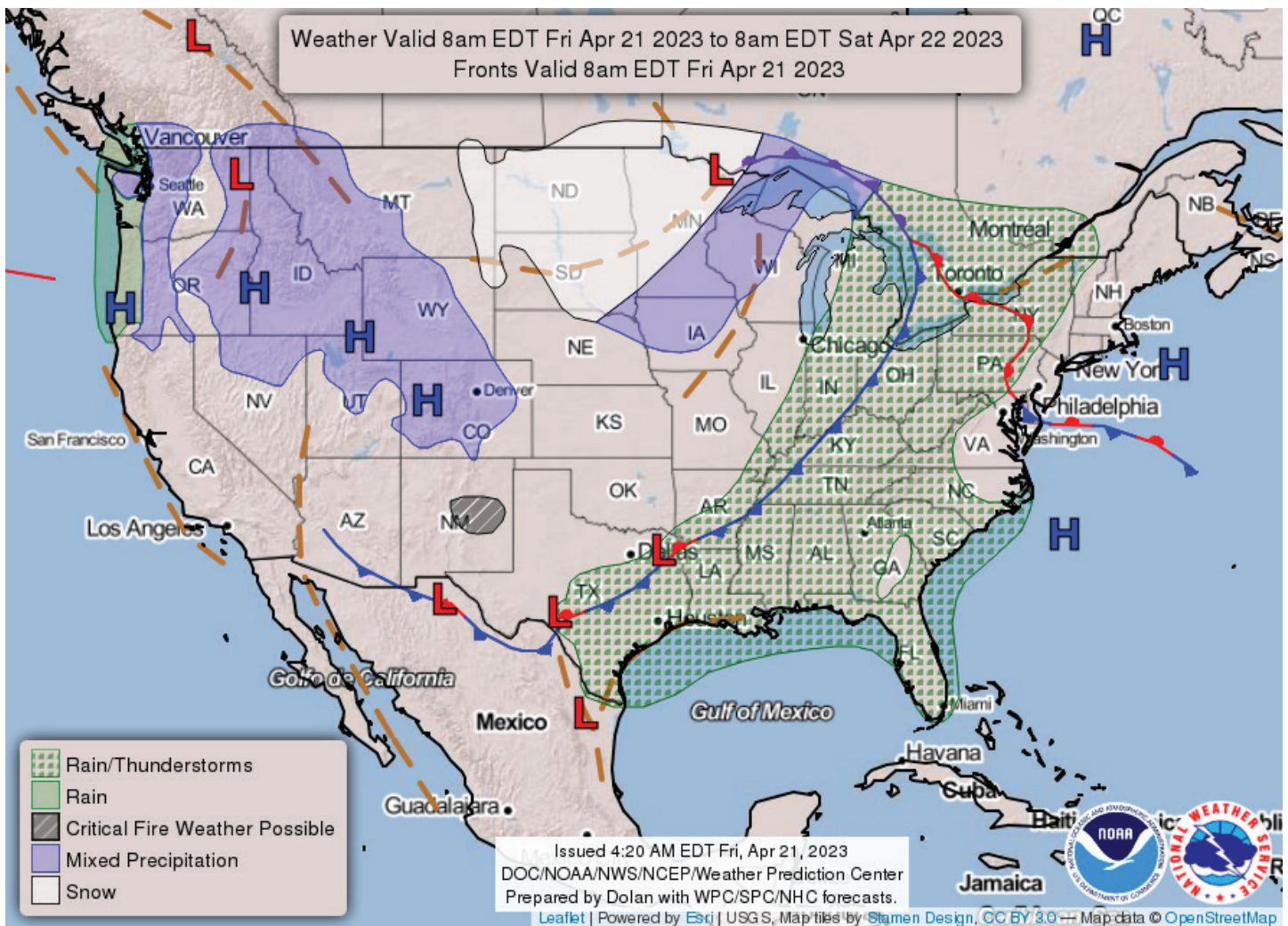
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 4:44 PM
Low Temp: 33 °F at 11:07 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 2:33 PM
Precip: : 0.28

Day length: 13 hours, 52 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 97 in 1980
Record Low: 16 in 1936
Average High: 60
Average Low: 33
Average Precip in April.: 1.12
Precip to date in April.: 1.67
Average Precip to date: 3.18
Precip Year to Date: 5.60
Sunset Tonight: 8:27:23 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:33:08 AM



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Today in Weather History

April 21, 2007: Heavy rains of 2 to 2.50 inches caused flash flooding in and around Watertown. Many streets were flooded in town, along with several roads outside of town. A warm front extending across the region was the focus for heavy rain, along with severe weather, during the evening across far northeast South Dakota. Hail up to the size of quarters, along with heavy rains of over 2 inches, caused some flooding mainly in Codington and Hamlin counties.

1885: A tornado struck the town of Denison, Texas in 1883 that destroyed a church. The congregation rebuilt the church. On this date, a second tornado destroyed the newly rebuilt church.

1958 - Portions of Montana were in the midst of a spring snowburst. Snowfall amounts ranged up to 55 inches at Red Lodge, 61 inches at Nye Mine, and 72 inches at Mystic Lake. (David Ludlum)

1967 - Severe thunderstorms spawned 48 tornadoes in the Upper Midwest. Hardest hit was northern Illinois where sixteen tornadoes touched down during the afternoon and evening hours causing fifty million dollars damage. On that Friday afternoon tornadoes struck Belvidere IL, and the Chicago suburb of Oak Lawn, killing 57 persons. (David Ludlum)

1980 - The temperature at International Falls MN hit 90 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed from the Gulf of Mexico to New England and the Great Lakes Region, with twenty-nine cities reporting record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 82 degrees at Caribou ME, 94 degrees at Mobile AL, 95 degrees at Monroe LA, and 93 degrees at New Orleans LA, were records for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - After having had just twelve rainouts in the previous twenty-six years at Dodger Stadium, a third day of heavy rain in southern California rained out a double-header at Dodger Stadium which had been scheduled due to rainouts the previous two days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - The temperature at Las Animas, CO, soared to 100 degrees to establish a state record for April. Twenty-two cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Eight cities equalled or exceeded previous April records. (The Weather Channel) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced golf ball size hail in Oklahoma, and also caused some flash flooding in the state. Thunderstorms over the Southern High Plains produced golf ball size hail at Roswell NM and El Paso TX. Easterly winds and temperatures near zero produced wind chill readings as cold as 50 degrees below zero for the spring festival (Piuraagiaqta) outdoor events at Barrow AK. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2007 - The South Plains and Panhandle of West Texas were hit by an outbreak of severe thunderstorms. Between the hours of 5 and 6 pm, several thunderstorms developed across the western South Plains. Around 7 pm, a supercell produced a tornado which touched down around Fieldton (southwest of Olton) and then moved just south and east of Olton, doing damage to several structures and equipment. The thunderstorm continued to move northeast across northeast Lamb, northwest Hale, southeast Castro and southwest Swisher Counties, producing a long-lived tornado (along with hail up to the size of tennis balls). By 7:45 pm, the storm approached the town of Tulia in Swisher County. A tornado touchdown was reported in the town, causing major damage. The tornadic thunderstorm continued to move northeast across Swisher County over open country through about 8:30 pm. (NWS Lubbock, TX)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

ANYTHING FOR YOU, GOD?

As he was saying his morning prayers, little Ben surprised his parents by praying, "Good morning, God. What can I do for You today?"

Often our prayers are focused on what we want God to do for us rather than us asking God what He wants us to do for Him.

Could it be that we have shaped God into the image of a bellhop that we would find in a hotel? We dial a number, place an order, and then wait at the door for someone to appear with our requests on a tray. Do we see prayer as the ultimate in heavenly room service?

One day Paul heard a voice saying, "Get up and go and you will be told what to do!"

Our Lord sees a world full of people who need His love and salvation, grace and hope. And He has given us, His disciples, the responsibility to bring those who need Him, to Him. When we pray, we must first be willing to "get up and go" to serve Him before we "dial and want" for what we want. Remember: God's will comes before our wants.

Prayer: Lord, when we pray, let us first hear what You want from us and then make our requests known to You. May we always put Your priorities first. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. Acts 9:6



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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 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
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.18.23

7 9 15 19 25 4

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 50 Mins
DRAW: 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

19 40 41 48 49 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,400,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 50
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.20.23

1 5 18 33 48 9

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 20 Mins
DRAW: 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

6 10 11 17 26

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$32,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 50
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

9 17 22 24 31 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 49
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.19.23

4 11 21 38 64 11

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 49
DRAW: Mins 56 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Veto stands: Transgender pronouns OK in North Dakota schools

By TRISHA AHMED Associated Press/Report for America

Teachers in North Dakota can still refer to transgender students by the personal pronouns they use, after lawmakers on Monday failed to override the governor's veto of a controversial bill to place restrictions on educators.

House lawmakers fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to block the veto, days after Republican Gov. Doug Burgum's office announced the veto and the Senate overrode it.

The bill would have prohibited public school teachers and employees from acknowledging the personal pronouns a transgender student uses, unless they received permission from the student's parents as well as a school administrator. It would have also prohibited government agencies from requiring employees to acknowledge the pronouns a transgender colleagues uses.

Republican lawmakers across the U.S. have drafted hundreds of laws this year to push back on LGBTQ+ freedoms, particularly seeking to regulate aspects of transgender people's lives including gender-affirming health care, bathroom use, athletics and drag performances.

"Ask yourself, does Senate Bill 2231 treat others the way you would want to be treated?" Republican Rep. Emily O'Brien of Grand Forks said on the House floor, adding that overriding the veto would perpetuate "discrimination, hatred or prejudice."

Republican Rep. SuAnn Olson of Baldwin said the bill protects freedom of speech for teachers and keeps "inappropriate" topics out of the classroom.

North Dakota will consider other bills this session about transgender students, she said.

Olson said that if lawmakers "are firm on this bill, on girls' athletics, on separate bathrooms, we will strengthen public schools." But allowing what she called an "emphasis on sexuality" in schools would cause students and teachers to abandon the public education system.

State representatives voted 56-36 to override the governor's veto, but 63 votes were required.

All 12 Democrats in the House voted against the bill, as did 24 Republicans. One was Rep. Eric Murphy, of Grand Forks, an associate professor of biomedical sciences at the University of North Dakota.

"I'm tired of these bills. I'm tired of both sides," Murphy said on the House floor. "If a student wants to be called a different pronoun, does that really matter? Is this earth-shattering?"

In a letter to state lawmakers announcing his veto, the governor said, "The teaching profession is challenging enough without the heavy hand of state government forcing teachers to take on the role of pronoun police." The First Amendment already protects teachers from speaking contrary to their beliefs, and existing law protects the free speech rights of state employees, Burgum added.

Lawmakers who supported the bill have said in debates that it would free teachers from worrying about how to address each student and create a better learning environment.

Opponents said the bill targets transgender students who already have disproportionately high risks of suicide.

In 2021, Burgum vetoed a bill that would have barred transgender girls from playing on girls' teams in public schools. Lawmakers didn't override that veto, but they're considering new legislation this session to replicate and expand that bill — including at the college level.

Last week, President Joe Biden denounced what he called hundreds of hateful and extreme state laws that target transgender kids and their families.

"The bullying, discrimination, and political attacks that trans kids face have exacerbated our national mental health crisis," Biden said. "These attacks are un-American and must end."

This story was first published on April 3, 2023. It was updated on April 20, 2023, to correct the political party of North Dakota legislative Rep. Emily O'Brien. She is a Republican, not a Democrat.

Trisha Ahmed 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. Follow Trisha Ahmed on Twitter: @TrishaAhmed15

Supreme Court set to decide on abortion pill access

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is facing a self-imposed Friday night deadline to decide whether women's access to a widely used abortion pill will stay unchanged or be restricted while a legal challenge to its Food and Drug Administration approval goes on.

The justices are weighing arguments that allowing restrictions contained in lower-court rulings to take effect would severely disrupt the availability of the drug, mifepristone, which is used in the most common abortion method in the United States.

It has repeatedly been found to be safe and effective, and has been used by more than 5 million women in the U.S. since the FDA approved it in 2000.

The Supreme Court had initially said it would decide by Wednesday whether the restrictions could take effect while the case continues. A one-sentence order signed by Justice Samuel Alito on Wednesday gave the justices two additional days, without explanation.

The justices are scheduled to meet for a private conference Friday, where they could talk about the issue. The additional time could be part of an effort to craft an order that has broad support among the justices. Or one or more justices might be writing a separate opinion, and asked for a couple of extra days.

The challenge to mifepristone, brought by abortion foes, is the first abortion controversy to reach the nation's highest court since its conservative majority overturned *Roe v. Wade* 10 months ago and allowed more than a dozen states to effectively ban abortion outright.

In his majority opinion, Alito said one reason for overturning *Roe* was to remove federal courts from the abortion fight. "It is time to heed the Constitution and return the issue of abortion to the people's elected representatives," he wrote.

But even with their court victory, abortion opponents returned to federal court with a new target: medication abortions, which make up more than half of all abortions in the United States.

Women seeking to end their pregnancies in the first 10 weeks without more invasive surgical abortion can take mifepristone, along with misoprostol. The FDA has eased the terms of mifepristone's use over the years, including allowing it to be sent through the mail in states that allow access.

The abortion opponents filed suit in Texas in November, asserting that FDA's original approval of mifepristone 23 years ago and subsequent changes were flawed.

They won a ruling on April 7 by U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, an appointee of former President Donald Trump, revoking FDA approval of mifepristone. The judge gave the Biden administration and New York-based Danco Laboratories, mifepristone's maker, a week to appeal and seek to keep his ruling on hold.

Responding to a quick appeal, two more Trump appointees on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the FDA's original approval would stand for now. But Judges Andrew Oldham and Kurt Englehardt said most of the rest of Kacsmaryk's ruling could take effect while the case winds through federal courts.

Their ruling would effectively nullify changes made by the FDA starting in 2016, including extending from seven to 10 weeks of pregnancy when mifepristone can be safely used. The court also said that the drug can't be mailed or dispensed as a generic and that patients who seek it need to make three in-person visits with a doctor. Women also might be required to take a higher dosage of the drug than the FDA says is necessary.

The administration and Danco have said that chaos will result if those restrictions take effect while the case proceeds. Potentially adding to the confusion, a federal judge in Washington has ordered the FDA to preserve access to mifepristone under the current rules in 17 Democratic-led states and the District of Columbia that filed a separate lawsuit.

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The Biden administration has said the rulings conflict and create an untenable situation for the FDA. And a new legal wrinkle threatens even more complications. GenBioPro, which makes the generic version of mifepristone, filed a lawsuit Wednesday to preemptively block the FDA from removing its drug from the market, in the event that the Supreme Court doesn't intervene.

For now, the Supreme Court is only being asked to block the lower-court rulings through the end of the legal case. But the administration and Danco have a fallback argument if the court doesn't agree. They are asking the court to take up the challenge to mifepristone, hear arguments and decide the case by early summer.

The court only rarely takes such a step before at least one appeals court has thoroughly examined the legal issues involved.

The New Orleans-based 5th circuit already has ordered an accelerated schedule for hearing the case, with arguments set for May 17.

UN's weather agency: 2022 was nasty, deadly, costly and hot

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Looking back at 2022's weather with months of analysis, the World Meteorological Organization said last year really was as bad as it seemed when people were muddling through it.

And about as bad as it gets — until more warming kicks in.

Killer floods, droughts and heat waves hit around the world, costing many billions of dollars. Global ocean heat and acidity levels hit record highs and Antarctic sea ice and European Alps glaciers reached record low amounts, according to the United Nations' climate agency's State of Global Climate 2022 report released Friday.

While levels have been higher before human civilization, global sea height and the amount of heat-trapping carbon dioxide and methane in the air reached highest modern recorded amounts. The key glaciers that scientists use as a health check for the world shrank by more than 1.3 meters (51 inches) in just one year and for the first time in history no snow survived the summer melt season on Switzerland's glaciers, the report said.

Global heat and other weather records go back to 1850.

Last year was close to but not quite the hottest year on record, ranking fifth or sixth hottest depending on measuring techniques. But the past eight years are the hottest eight years on record globally. The world kept that warm despite the rare third year of a La Nina, a natural temporary cooling of parts of the Pacific Ocean that changes weather worldwide.

The United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and New Zealand had their hottest years on record.

"In 2022, continuous drought in East Africa, record breaking rainfall in Pakistan and record-breaking heat waves in China and Europe affected tens of millions, drove food insecurity, boosted mass migration, and cost billions of dollars in loss and damage," said WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas said in a statement.

China's heat wave was its longest and most extensive in that country's record with its summer not just hottest on record but smashing the old record by more than 0.5 degrees Celsius (0.9 degrees Fahrenheit), the 55-page report said.

Africa's drought displaced more than 1.7 million people in Somalia and Ethiopia, while Pakistan's devastating flooding — which put one-third of the nation under water at one point — displaced about 8 million people, the report said.

Follow AP's climate and environment coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate-and-environment>

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears

Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations.

See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Elon Musk's Twitter drops government-funded media labels

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Twitter has removed labels describing global media organizations as government-funded or state-affiliated, a move that comes after the Elon Musk-owned platform started stripping blue verification checkmarks from accounts that don't pay a monthly fee.

Among those no longer labeled was National Public Radio in the U.S., which announced last week that it would stop using Twitter after its main account was designated state-affiliated media, a term also used to identify media outlets controlled or heavily influenced by authoritarian governments, such as Russia and China.

Twitter later changed the label to "government-funded media," but NPR — which relies on the government for a tiny fraction of its funding — said it was still misleading.

Canadian Broadcasting Corp. and Swedish public radio made similar decisions to quit tweeting. CBC's government-funded label vanished Friday, along with the state-affiliated tags on media accounts including Sputnik and RT in Russia and Xinhua in China.

Many of Twitter's high-profile users on Thursday lost the blue checks that helped verify their identity and distinguish them from impostors.

Twitter had about 300,000 verified users under the original blue-check system — many of them journalists, athletes and public figures. The checks used to mean the account was verified by Twitter to be who it says it is.

High-profile users who lost their blue checks Thursday included Beyoncé, Pope Francis, Oprah Winfrey and former President Donald Trump.

The costs of keeping the marks range from \$8 a month for individual web users to a starting price of \$1,000 monthly to verify an organization, plus \$50 monthly for each affiliate or employee account. Twitter does not verify the individual accounts, as was the case with the previous blue check doled out during the platform's pre-Musk administration.

Celebrity users, from basketball star LeBron James to author Stephen King and Star Trek's William Shatner, have balked at joining — although on Thursday, all three had blue checks indicating that the account paid for verification.

King, for one, said he hadn't paid.

"My Twitter account says I've subscribed to Twitter Blue. I haven't. My Twitter account says I've given a phone number. I haven't," King tweeted Thursday. "Just so you know."

In a reply to King's tweet, Musk said "You're welcome namaste" and in another tweet he said he's "paying for a few personally." He later tweeted he was just paying for King, Shatner and James.

Singer Dionne Warwick tweeted earlier in the week that the site's verification system "is an absolute mess."

"The way Twitter is going anyone could be me now," Warwick said. She had earlier vowed not to pay for Twitter Blue, saying the monthly fee "could (and will) be going toward my extra hot lattes."

On Thursday, Warwick lost her blue check (which is actually a white check mark in a blue background).

For users who still had a blue check Thursday, a popup message indicated that the account "is verified because they are subscribed to Twitter Blue and verified their phone number." Verifying a phone number simply means that the person has a phone number and they verified that they have access to it — it does not confirm the person's identity.

It wasn't just celebrities and journalists who lost their blue checks Thursday. Many government agencies, nonprofits and public-service accounts around the world found themselves no longer verified, raising concerns that Twitter could lose its status as a platform for getting accurate, up-to-date information from authentic sources, including in emergencies.

While Twitter offers gold checks for "verified organizations" and gray checks for government organizations and their affiliates, it's not clear how the platform does these out.

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The official Twitter account of the New York City government, which earlier had a blue check, tweeted on Thursday that "This is an authentic Twitter account representing the New York City Government This is the only account for @NYCGov run by New York City government" in an attempt to clear up confusion.

A newly created spoof account with 36 followers (also without a blue check), disagreed: "No, you're not. THIS account is the only authentic Twitter account representing and run by the New York City Government."

Soon, another spoof account — purporting to be Pope Francis — weighed in too: "By the authority vested in me, Pope Francis, I declare @NYC_GOVERNMENT the official New York City Government. Peace be with you."

Fewer than 5% of legacy verified accounts appear to have paid to join Twitter Blue as of Thursday, according to an analysis by Travis Brown, a Berlin-based developer of software for tracking social media.

Musk's move has riled up some high-profile users and pleased some right-wing figures and Musk fans who thought the marks were unfair. But it is not an obvious money-maker for the social media platform that has long relied on advertising for most of its revenue.

Digital intelligence platform Similarweb analyzed how many people signed up for Twitter Blue on their desktop computers and only detected 116,000 confirmed sign-ups last month, which at \$8 or \$11 per month does not represent a major revenue stream. The analysis did not count accounts bought via mobile apps.

After buying San Francisco-based Twitter for \$44 billion in October, Musk has been trying to boost the struggling platform's revenue by pushing more people to pay for a premium subscription. But his move also reflects his assertion that the blue verification marks have become an undeserved or "corrupt" status symbol for elite personalities, news reporters and others granted verification for free by Twitter's previous leadership.

Twitter began tagging profiles with a blue check mark starting about 14 years ago. Along with shielding celebrities from impersonators, one of the main reasons was to provide an extra tool to curb misinformation coming from accounts impersonating people. Most "legacy blue checks," including the accounts of politicians, activists and people who suddenly find themselves in the news, as well as little-known journalists at small publications around the globe, are not household names.

One of Musk's first product moves after taking over Twitter was to launch a service granting blue checks to anyone willing to pay \$8 a month. But it was quickly inundated by impostor accounts, including those impersonating Nintendo, pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and Musk's businesses Tesla and SpaceX, so Twitter had to temporarily suspend the service days after its launch.

The relaunched service costs \$8 a month for web users and \$11 a month for users of its iPhone or Android apps. Subscribers are supposed to see fewer ads, be able to post longer videos and have their tweets featured more prominently.

AP Technology Writer Matt O'Brien contributed to this report.

Biden 2024 splits Dems but most would back him: AP-NORC poll

By SEUNG MIN KIM and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Only about half of Democrats think President Joe Biden should run again in 2024, a poll shows, but a large majority say they'd be likely to support him if he became the nominee.

The poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that 26% of Americans overall want to see Biden run again — a slight recovery from the 22% who said that in January. Forty-seven percent of Democrats say they want him to run, also up slightly from only 37% who said that in January.

The ambivalence among Democratic voters comes as Biden is preparing to formally announce his 2024 reelection campaign as soon as next week, according to people briefed on the discussions. The president has been eyeing Tuesday, April 25 — four years to the day since he entered the 2020 race — although no final decisions have been made.

Despite the reluctance of many Democrats to see Biden run for another term, 78% of them say they approve of the job he's doing as president. And a total of 81% of Democrats say they would at least prob-

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ably support Biden in a general election if he is the nominee — 41% say they definitely would and 40% say they probably would.

Interviews with poll respondents suggest that the gap reflects concerns about Biden's age, as well as a clamoring from a younger generation of Democrats who say they want leadership that reflects their demographic and their values. Biden, now 80, would be 82 on Election Day 2024 and 86 years old at the end of a second presidential term. He is the oldest president in history.

Jenipher Lagana, 59, said she likes Biden, calling him an "interesting man" who has had an "incredible political career." She praised Biden for providing a "breath of fresh air" and said she approves of how he's been doing his job as president.

But "my problem with him running in 2024 is that he's just so old," said Lagana, who is retired and lives in California. "I would love to see somebody younger, like (Transportation Secretary Pete) Buttigieg or (California Gov. Gavin) Newsom be able to get in there and handle things maybe a little differently just because they're a younger person."

Donna Stewart, 48, a program director for a nonprofit in New York, also pointed to Biden's age as a concern.

"I voted for him. I like him as a person. I like him as a leader for the country," she said. "However, I just feel that he's still lacking the up-to-date knowledge of what needs to be done."

During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden appeared to hint that he would limit himself to just one term in the White House, framing his candidacy as a bridge to a new generation of Democratic leaders. But while in office, Biden has made his intentions clearer that he would run again for a second term, saying as recently as last week in Ireland that he's "already made that calculus" and that the announcement will happen "relatively soon."

With only nominal primary challengers and a chaotic Republican field, the president and his senior aides have felt little pressure to formalize a reelection campaign. Instead, Biden has focused on governing, holding events at the White House and traveling across the country to sell his top legislative achievements such as a bipartisan infrastructure law and a sweeping climate, health care and tax package.

The president and his senior political advisers are meeting with Democratic donors in Washington next week in an event meant to energize the party's top contributors ahead of Biden's expected reelection campaign.

Biden has also batted away questions about his age, saying that voters simply need to "watch me" to determine whether he's up to the job as president.

And while many Democrats remain tepid on Biden because of his age, others said it was actually an asset.

Stephen Foery, 47, said Biden's decades in Washington — first in the Senate and then as vice president — proved to be valuable in the first two years of his presidency "because he's done a lot to fix the country in a very short amount of time."

"I think that one of the benefits of living a long life is that you have a lot of wisdom to impart," said Foery, a creative services manager in Pennsylvania. "If you gain as much experience as Biden has throughout his life, it would be a shame to simply disregard him because of his age."

Biden's job approval rating stands at 42%, a slight improvement from 38% in March. The March poll came after a pair of bank failures rattled an already shaky confidence in the nation's financial systems, and Biden's approval rating then was near the lowest point of his presidency. Thirty percent of Americans call the national economy good, a slight improvement from 25% a month ago.

Younger Democrats remain a reluctant part of Biden's coalition — just 25% of those under age 45 say they would definitely support Biden in a general election, compared with 56% of older Democrats. Still, an additional 51% of younger Democrats say they would probably vote for Biden in a 2024 general election.

"It's really hard to support somebody who is such a career politician, who has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo when the status quo doesn't work for me," said Otis Phillips, 20, who lives in Washington state.

Phillips, a student, said he has been pleased with some of Biden's initiatives, including his student loan forgiveness program and his focus on climate policy. But he emphasized: "I don't like maintaining the

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status quo. And so I want things to change, and I don't think Biden's how we're going to get that in the next four years."

Both the current and former president could face resistance from the public as a whole in a general election. A total of 65% of U.S. adults say they would definitely or probably not support former President Donald Trump if he is nominated in a general election, including 53% who say they definitely would not. Biden's obstacles are smaller by comparison but still substantial: 56% of Americans say they would be unlikely to support Biden in a general election, including 41% who say they would definitely not.

Biden has long bet that once voters are presented with a binary choice — either him or a Republican candidate, particularly if it is Trump — that a majority of the electorate will side with Democrats. He often quotes his father, Joseph R. Biden Sr., in his public remarks: "Joey, don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative."

"The only reason why I would not want him to run is because of his age. Like, that's the only thing," said Shakeen Magee, 45, a self-employed Georgia resident.

But she said that if Biden does officially become the Democratic nominee in 2024, she would definitely support him "because we can't take another Trump." Magee added that "if we were to get another Republican in that office, it would just undo the little progress that Biden has been able to make."

AP White House correspondent Zeke Miller and AP writer Hannah Fingerhut contributed to this report.

The poll of 1,230 adults was conducted April 13-17 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

UK deputy prime minister quits after bullying investigation

By BRIAN MELLEY and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab resigned Friday after an independent investigation found he bullied civil servants, though he criticized the report as "flawed."

Raab's announcement came the day after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak received findings into eight formal complaints that Raab, who is also justice secretary, had been abusive toward staff members during a previous stint in that office and while serving as Britain's foreign secretary and Brexit secretary.

Raab, 49, denied claims he belittled and demeaned his staff and said he "behaved professionally at all times," but said he was resigning because he had promised to do so if the bullying complaints were upheld.

The investigation made two findings of bullying against him and dismissed the others, Raab said in his resignation letter. He called the findings "flawed" and said the inquiry "set a dangerous precedent" by "setting the threshold for bullying so low."

Raab said he quit because he was "duty bound" to resign since he had promised to.

The resignation spares Sunak the difficult task of deciding the fate of his top deputy.

If he fired Raab, he would open himself to criticism for hiring him in the first place; if he kept him in the job, he would be criticized for failing to follow through on his promise to restore integrity to the Conservative government.

Sunak received the investigation report Thursday morning and didn't immediately make a decision. Spokesperson Max Blain, speaking before Raab's resignation, said Sunak still had "full confidence" in Raab while he reviewed the report.

The ministerial code of conduct requires ministers to treat people with respect and have proper and appropriate relationships with colleagues, civil servants and staff. It says harassment, discrimination and bullying will not be tolerated.

Raab was elected to Parliament in 2010 and unsuccessfully sought to become Conservative Party leader in 2019 before throwing his support behind Boris Johnson. Appointed deputy prime minister under Johnson, he briefly took charge of the government when Johnson was hospitalized with COVID-19 in April 2020.

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Raab said in his letter that he had "not intentionally belittled anyone" and "genuinely sorry for any unintended stress or offense that any officials felt."

He noted the inquiry concluded he had not "sworn or shouted at anyone, let alone thrown anything or otherwise physically intimidated anyone."

The bullying inquiry is the latest ethics headache for Sunak, who vowed to restore order and integrity to government after three years of instability under predecessors Johnson and Liz Truss. Multiple scandals brought Johnson down in summer 2022, and Truss quit in October after six weeks in office when her tax-cutting economic plans sparked mayhem on the financial markets.

But Sunak has struggled to shake off opposition allegations that the Conservative government remains mired in scandal and sleaze.

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Music to Trump's ears: Whitewashing Jan. 6 riot with song

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The song is simple and tinny, but that hasn't stopped it from being embraced by former President Donald Trump and his allies in their campaign to rewrite the history of the deadly Capitol riot.

The tune, "Justice for All," is the Star-Spangled Banner, and it was sung by a group of defendants jailed over their alleged roles in the January 2021 insurrection. Recorded over a prison phone line, the national anthem sounds more like a dirge than celebration and is overlaid with Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Despite its low fidelity, "Justice for All" has garnered a lot of fans. Trump, a Republican, played it at a recent rally in Waco, Texas, as images of Capitol rioters flashed behind him on a big screen, and the \$1.29 song last month briefly vaulted to No. 1 on iTunes, supplanting such recording artists as Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift.

Experts on extremism and propaganda say the song is another example of how Trump and his most ardent allies are trying to gloss over an avalanche of evidence proving the Capitol riot was anything but an act of patriotic resistance.

And it shows how such revisionists have dug deep into authoritarian playbooks that rely heavily on the use of national identity to sway public opinion. In this case, Trump and his allies are ironically relying on America's most patriotic song in their efforts to whitewash an insurrection that contributed to five deaths and left more than 120 police officers injured, experts said.

"We should not be surprised that this propaganda is effective, but it is shocking to see this in this country," said Federico Finchelstein, chair of the history department at the New School for Social Research in New York, an expert in authoritarian disinformation. "What they are demanding is that reality be put aside for the loyalty of the leader. And that leader in this case is Donald Trump."

Law enforcement officials who battled rioters are aghast, calling the song a cynical effort to mislead Americans about the truth of what transpired during the Jan. 6 attack.

"Some of these people are trying to get a rise out of people, and some of these people are just using it to make a buck," said Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn, who received the Presidential Citizens Medal for his actions on Jan. 6. "People can believe whatever they want to believe, but this is real life."

Polls show Americans remain divided by ideology when it comes to their views of Jan. 6. A survey last year from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that about half believe Trump's involvement warranted criminal charges. A second poll revealed that only about 4 in 10 Republicans recall the attack as very violent or extremely violent.

Those doubts have been fueled by cable television hosts and far-right podcasters who have spent two years pushing outlandish theories to mitigate the horror of that deadly day.

Jan. 6 defendants, who issued tearful apologies and expressions of remorse in court, are now boasting

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of their participation or seeking to profit from it. Groups have sprung up to sell T-shirts emblazoned with "Free the Jan. 6 Protesters" and other merchandise that seeks to portray the rioters as principled demonstrators. Many say they are trying to raise money for the Jan. 6 defendants and their families.

That is the case with the groups behind "Justice for All," or at least what they claim. Just as in other commercial ventures involving diehard Trump supporters and conspiracy theorists, it is difficult to pin down even basic facts about the song's production and profits.

The song's producers won't say how much the song has raised, say how the proceeds will be split among Jan. 6 defendants or identify the vast majority of 20 or so participants on the recording. They have, however, been eager to tout the song's success.

"Buh Bye Miley, Taylor, Rihanna, and all the rest who spent Millions trying for the coveted Number 1 spot," one of the producers, Kash Patel, wrote on Trump's social media platform, Truth Social, on March 21. "Hello new Music Mogul @realDonaldTrump. We just took a flame thrower to the music industry."

Claiming the top spot may provide bragging points, but conquering the iTunes chart isn't the achievement it once was, as the number of people downloading music has plummeted given the popularity of streaming services like Spotify.

Aside from the \$1.29 download, vinyl records of the song are sold online in different color schemes — prices range from \$99.99 to \$199.99.

Released in early March, the song is associated with The Justice for All Project, Inc., a nonprofit registered the same month with an address in Sarasota, Florida. Ed Henry, a former Fox News personality, is listed as a director of the organization and is credited with Patel as being a producer of "Justice for All."

Another director of the nonprofit is Tom Homan, former head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement under Trump. He is also the CEO of The America Project, a Florida group that has spent millions of dollars on efforts to undermine faith in U.S. elections. The group has sponsored conferences for election deniers, helped bankroll the partisan and flawed review of Arizona ballots following the 2020 election. It now has chapters in several states.

The America Project was founded in 2021 by Michael Flynn, a former Army general who briefly served as Trump's national security advisor, and Patrick Byrne, the founder of the online retailer Overstock.com. In a series of text messages, Byrne confirmed to The Associated Press that The America Project helped create the song.

Further obscuring the song's genesis: Its record label is listed as Mailman Media, a for-profit company that was only registered in Florida in February. It's unclear which organization receives proceeds from the song. Mailman Media's involvement was first reported by Forbes.

A spokeswoman for Patel and Henry declined to respond to questions about the song or the irony in using it in such a way. The Star-Spangled Banner was penned by Francis Scott Key after the bombardment of Ft. McHenry by the British in the War of 1812. Just weeks earlier, redcoats had burned the U.S. Capitol to the ground; that was the last time the building had been the scene of such a violent attack.

Others who are working to assist Capitol riot defendants and their families said they also have few insights into how the song will help their cause.

"None of the organizations that are working on this are aware" of how the money will be spent, or how it will help Jan. 6 defendants, said Trennis Evans, a Jan. 6 participant who operates a legal advocacy group for other defendants known as Condemned USA. Evans pleaded guilty last year to a federal misdemeanor for illegally entering the Capitol.

The 20 inmates singing in the J6 Prison choir make up a tiny fraction of the 1,000 people who have been charged with federal crimes related to the riot. More than 600 have pleaded guilty or been convicted, and more than 450 have been sentenced, with over half receiving prison terms ranging from seven days to 10 years.

Just one choir member has been identified: Timothy Hale-Cusanelli, now serving four years in prison for his actions during Jan. 6. Hale-Cusanelli is a family friend of Cynthia Hughes, a New Jersey woman who leads a separate organization raising money for Jan. 6 defendants. A spokeswoman for Hughes confirmed

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Hale-Cusanelli's participation on the song but said Hughes was too busy to respond to questions.

Before he joined the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol, Hale-Cusanelli was an Army reservist who sometimes styled his mustache like Hitler and who alarmed coworkers with his comments about women and Jews.

Prosecutors alleged the 33-year-old New Jersey man urged other rioters to "advance"; video footage captured him yelling profanities at police and screaming "the revolution will be televised!"

On the witness stand during his trial, Hale-Cusanelli testified he didn't realize that Congress met in the Capitol or that it was in session that day, to certify Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

"I know this sounds idiotic, but I'm from New Jersey," Hale-Cusanelli said. "In all my studies, I didn't know there was an actual building that was called the 'Capitol.' It's embarrassing and idiotic."

The judge said Hale-Cusanelli's claim was "highly dubious." Prosecutors called it a lie. A jury convicted him of felony obstruction of an official proceeding and four related misdemeanors. An attorney for Hale-Cusanelli did not return messages seeking comment.

At his sentencing in September, like many Jan. 6 defendants, Hale-Cusanelli expressed regret for his role in the attack.

"My behavior that day was unacceptable, and I disgraced my uniform and I disgraced the country," he told the judge before being sentenced to four years in federal prison.

"If there's any kind of service that I can provide to rectify the damage done to the Capitol building or to injuries or anything done to the Capitol or Metro Police," he told the judge, "I stand by to perform whatever that duty might be."

He has become a performer, of sorts — on a song that seeks to recast himself as a patriot, not a rioter.

Associated Press writer Michelle R. Smith contributed to this report.

Russia's air force accidentally bombs its own city

MOSCOW (AP) — When a powerful blast shook a Russian city near the border of Ukraine residents thought it was an Ukrainian attack. But the Russian military quickly acknowledged that it was a bomb accidentally dropped by one of its own warplanes.

Belgorod, a city of 340,000 about 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of the border, has faced regular drone attacks that Russian authorities blame on the Ukrainian military, but the explosion late Thursday was far more powerful than anything its residents had heard before.

Witnesses reported a low hissing sound followed by a blast that made nearby apartment buildings tremble and threw a car on a store roof. It left a 20-meter (66-foot) -wide crater in the middle of a tree-lined boulevard flanked by apartment buildings, shattering their windows, damaging several cars and injuring two residents. A third person was later hospitalized with hypertension.

Immediately after the explosion, Russian commentators and military bloggers were abuzz with theories about what weapon Ukraine had used for the attack. Many called for a powerful retribution.

But about an hour later, the Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged that the explosion was caused by a weapon accidentally dropped by one of its own Su-34 bombers. It didn't offer any further details, but military experts said the weapon likely was a powerful 500-kilogram (1,100-pound) bomb.

In Thursday's blast, the weapon was apparently set to explode with a small delay after impact, to hit underground facilities.

Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said that local authorities decided to temporarily resettle residents of a nine-story apartment building near the blast while it was inspected to make sure it hadn't suffered irreparable structural damage.

The explosion in Belgorod followed the crash of a Russian warplane next to a residential building in the port city of Yeysk on the Sea of Azov that killed 15 people. Yeysk hosts a big Russian air base with warplanes flying missions over Ukraine.

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Military experts have noted that as the number of Russian military flights have increased sharply during the fighting, so have the crashes and accidents.

Amid joy and tragedy, Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr holiday

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The holiday of Eid al-Fitr ushered in a day of prayers and joy for Muslims around the world on Friday. The celebration was marred by tragedy amid the explosion of conflict in Sudan, while in other countries it came against the backdrop of hopes for a better future.

After the Ramadan month of fasting, Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr with feasts and family visits. The start of the holiday is traditionally based on sightings of the new moon, which vary according to geographic location.

In Sudan's capital, Khartoum, staccato blasts of gunfire marked the early hours of the feast day. A deadly conflict in the vast African country that erupted in the past week has forced many people to shelter indoors ahead of the holiday, even as water and food for civilians runs low.

In Jerusalem, thousands of faithful gathered at Islam's third holiest shrine, the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, where tensions with Israeli authorities have seethed in the past month. The compound also hosts Judaism's holiest site.

Following holiday prayers, a clown entertained children and a woman painted the cheek of a girl with the green, red, black and white Palestinian flag. Some attendees trampled on an Israeli flag and unfurled banners in support of Palestinian militant groups.

The streets of Arab capitals Damascus, Baghdad and Beirut were crowded with worshippers heading to mosques and cemeteries. Many Muslims visit the graves of their loved ones after the early morning prayer on the first day of Eid al-Fitr. Visitors toiled bouquets of flowers, jugs of water for plants, and brooms to clean gravestones.

"After the Eid prayer we always visit our dead ... to pray and pay our respects, may God have mercy and forgive them on this blessed day," said Atheer Mohamed in Baghdad's Azamiya cemetery.

Islam's holidays follow a lunar calendar. But some countries rely on astronomical calculations rather than physical sightings. This frequently leads to disagreements between religious authorities in different countries – and sometimes in the same country – over the start date of Eid al-Fitr.

This year, Saudi Arabia and many other Arab countries began their Eid celebrations on Friday, while Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia, among others, set the first day of the holiday for Saturday.

In Sudan, the holiday was eclipsed by a week of raging battles between the army and its rival paramilitary force, which are locked in a violent struggle to control the country. The fighting has killed hundreds of people and wounded thousands.

In a video message released early Friday, his first speech since the fighting broke out, Sudan's top general Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan marked the somber tone of the holiday. "Ruin and destruction and the sound of bullets have left no place for the happiness everyone in our beloved country deserves," he said.

The day before, Sudan's military ruled out negotiations with the rival paramilitary force, known as the Rapid Support Forces, saying it would only accept its surrender as the two sides continued to battle in central Khartoum and other parts of the country, threatening to wreck international attempts to broker a sustainable cease-fire.

Yet in other parts of the region, the recent rapprochement between arch-rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran has kindled hopes for peace.

In Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement raised the possibility for an end to the civil war that had turned into a proxy conflict and torn the impoverished country apart since 2014.

Saudi officials and Iran-backed Houthi rebels recently began talks in Yemen's capital of Sanaa. During the last days of Ramadan, the warring sides exchanged hundreds of prisoners captured during the conflict.

However, the moment of hopes was marred by a stampede late Wednesday at a charitable event in the rebel-held capital that killed at least 78 people and injured 77.

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This year's Eid al-Fitr also came on the heels of intensified violence in Israel and Palestine.

Alaa Abu Hatab and his only remaining daughter started the holiday in the Palestinian Gaza Strip by visiting the graves of his wife and four children who were killed in an Israeli airstrike on the day of Eid al-Fitr in 2021. That strike also killed Abu Hatab's sister and her children.

"Because they were killed in the Eid, I miss them especially during Eid al-Fitr. I miss their laughter," Abu Hatab said, standing by his family's grave with his six-year-old daughter, Maria. The holiday has become a "scene of pain and loss," he said.

In Afghanistan's Kabul, where worshippers gathered under the watchful eyes of its Taliban rulers, 35-year-old Abdul Matin said, "I wish that besides security we had good income and good jobs. Unfortunately people can't afford to buy all their necessities at this difficult time."

In Turkey and Syria, many are still mourning loved ones lost in the devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck the two countries on Feb. 6, killing more than 50,000 people.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday performed morning Eid prayers at Hagia Sophia, the 6th century Byzantine church in Istanbul that was reconverted into a mosque three years ago.

Erdogan, who is facing elections next month amid an economic crisis and the fallout of the earthquake, handed out chocolate and pastries to journalists outside the mosque, renamed Holy Ayasofya Grand Mosque after 85 years as a museum.

Associated Press journalists Ali Abdul-Hassan in Baghdad, Tia Goldenburg in Jerusalem, Fares Akram in Gaza City, Gaza Strip, Rahim Faiez in Kabul and Andrew Wilks in Istanbul contributed to this report.

Manslaughter charge against Alec Baldwin will be dismissed

By ANDREW DALTON and MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Prosecutors will dismiss an involuntary manslaughter charge against Alec Baldwin in the fatal 2021 shooting of a cinematographer on the set of the Western film "Rust," alluding to new revelations in the investigation while cautioning that Baldwin has not been absolved.

A follow-up investigation will remain active and an involuntary manslaughter charge against Hannah Gutierrez Reed, weapons supervisor on the film, remains unchanged, special prosecutors Kari Morrissey and Jason Lewis said. An online status hearing was scheduled Friday in state District Court for both defendants.

"New facts were revealed that demand further investigation and forensic analysis," the prosecutors said Thursday in a news release, without elaborating on those facts. "This decision does not absolve Mr. Baldwin of criminal culpability and charges may be refiled. Our follow-up investigation will remain active and on-going."

Lawyers for Baldwin were first to announce that prosecutors were changing course, in a sharp turnaround for the Hollywood luminary who just a few months ago was confronting the possibility of a yearslong prison sentence.

"We are pleased with the decision to dismiss the case against Alec Baldwin and we encourage a proper investigation into the facts and circumstances of this tragic accident," defense attorneys Luke Nikas and Alex Spiro said in a statement.

Baldwin was pointing a pistol at cinematographer Halyna Hutchins during a rehearsal when it went off, killing her and wounding director Joel Souza.

Baldwin has said the gun fired accidentally and he did not pull the trigger. An FBI forensic report found the weapon could not have fired unless the trigger was pulled, however.

In March, "Rust" safety coordinator and assistant director David Halls pleaded no contest to a conviction for unsafe handling of a firearm and a suspended sentence of six months of probation. He agreed to cooperate in further inquiries into the fatal shooting.

When the manslaughter charges were announced in January, Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies said the case was about equal justice under the law and accountability in Hutchins' death, regardless of the fame or fortune of those involved. She said the Ukrainian-born cinematographer's death was

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tragic — and preventable.

A new legal team took over prosecution of Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed in late March, after the original special prosecutor appointed in the case resigned.

The dismissal of the charge against Baldwin, also a coproducer on "Rust," abruptly changes the tenor of the investigation, said John Day, a Santa Fe-based criminal defense attorney who is not involved with the case.

"It does give the impression that the people left holding the bag are the lowest people on that chain," Day said. "This is very different from what the original prosecutor said."

When word of the dismissal came, Baldwin was at Yellowstone Film Ranch on the set of a rebooted "Rust" production. Preparations for filming were underway Thursday at its new location in Montana, 18 months after the shooting shut it down, a representative for Rust Movie Productions said.

Gutierrez-Reed's attorneys said they fully expect her to be exonerated in the judicial process.

"The truth about what happened will come out and the questions that we have long sought answers for will be answered," the lawyers, Jason Bowles and Todd Bullion, said in a statement.

The case against Baldwin had already been diminishing. A weapons charge that could have meant a much longer sentence was dismissed.

The A-list actor's 40-year career has included the early blockbuster "The Hunt for Red October" and a starring role in the sitcom "30 Rock," as well as iconic appearances in Martin Scorsese's "The Departed" and a film adaptation of David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross." In recent years he was known for his impression of former President Donald Trump on "Saturday Night Live."

The 65-year-old has worked little since the shooting but hardly went into hiding. He stayed active on social media, making Instagram videos, posting podcast interviews and pictures of his wife and seven children.

Plans to resume filming were outlined last year by the cinematographer's widower, Matthew Hutchins, in a proposed settlement to a wrongful death lawsuit that would make him an executive producer. Souza has said he will return to directing "Rust" to honor the legacy of Halyna Hutchins.

Despite the settlement, attorneys for the Hutchins family said they welcomed the criminal charges against Baldwin when they were filed. They had no immediate comment on the pending dismissal Thursday.

After a scathing safety review by regulators in New Mexico that detailed ignored complaints and misfires before Hutchins' death in October 2021, the production company agreed to pay a \$100,000 fine.

Baldwin has not traveled to New Mexico to appear in court, which is not required of him under state law. Evidentiary hearings had been scheduled for next month to determine whether to proceed toward trial.

Dalton reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press writer Susan Montoya Bryan in Albuquerque, New Mexico, contributed.

Rupert Murdoch's son Lachlan ends Australian defamation suit

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Fox Corp. chief executive Lachlan Murdoch on Friday dropped his defamation lawsuit against Australian news website Crikey, citing the settlement of the separate U.S. case where Fox News agreed to pay almost \$800 million over its lies involving the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch's son filed the Crikey suit last August a day after executives at Crikey's publisher put their names to an ad in The New York Times inviting Lachlan Murdoch to sue to test the press freedom issue in court.

Murdoch's lawsuit targeted the publisher, Private Media, its then-managing editor Peter Fray, who was also the website's editor-in-chief, and Crikey's political editor, Bernard Keane.

Murdoch claimed he was defamed by Keane's column about the U.S. congressional investigation into the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol building which Crikey published in June last year under the headlines: "Trump is a confirmed unhinged traitor. And Murdoch is his unindicted co-conspirator."

Murdoch's lawyer John Churchill said in a statement he had filed a notice of discontinuance in Federal

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Court on Friday.

"Crikey has tried to introduce thousands of pages of documents from a defamation case in another jurisdiction, which has now settled," the statement said, referring to the Fox News settlement with Dominion Voting Systems that was announced Tuesday.

"Mr. Murdoch remains confident that the court would ultimately find in his favor, however he does not wish to further enable Crikey's use of the court to litigate a case from another jurisdiction that has already been settled and facilitate a marketing campaign designed to attract subscribers and boost their profits," Churchill said.

Private Media chief executive Will Hayward said his company, which is valued at less than 20 million Australian dollars (\$13.4 million), stood by Crikey's description of the Murdochs as conspirators in the Capitol violence.

"The initial statement was clearly intended with a certain degree of hyperbole," Hayward said.

"It's really important that in Australia, journalists have room to express good faith opinions and they don't have to be terrified of litigious billionaires," Hayward added.

Hayward and Private Media chairman Eric Beecher said in a joint statement they were "proud to have exposed the hypocrisy and abuse of power of a media billionaire."

"We stand by our position that Lachlan Murdoch was culpable in promoting the lie of the 2020 election result because he, and his father, had the power to stop the lies," the statement said.

Crikey's law firm Marque Lawyers said Lachlan Murdoch would be expected to pay all legal costs. "We and our client are well pleased," the firm tweeted.

The Crikey suit had been set for a three-week hearing in Sydney starting Oct. 9.

Lachlan Murdoch had alleged the Crikey article conveyed a meaning that he illegally conspired with former President Donald Trump to "incite a mob with murderous intent to march on the Capitol" to prevent the transfer of power to President Joe Biden.

In its defense, Crikey had argued Lachlan Murdoch was "morally and ethically culpable" for the attack on the Capitol "because Fox News, under his control and management, promoted and peddled Trump's lie of the stolen election despite Lachlan Murdoch knowing it was false."

The article did not name Lachlan Murdoch, but referred to "the Murdochs and their slew of poisonous Fox News commentators."

Sydney University defamation law expert David Rolph said the trial would have been the first test case of a new public interest defense that came into effect across most of Australia in 2021.

The public interest defense is part of a raft of reforms designed to make Australian defamation laws "slightly less plaintiff-friendly," Rolph said.

"That was a major defense that was pleaded by Crikey here. This was going to be the first test case. We'll have to wait for the next one," Rolph said.

Rolph said one of the reasons Murdoch dropped the case was that Crikey was trying to expand its defenses by incorporating revelations from the Dominion litigation.

The voting technology firm had sued Fox for \$1.6 billion, alleging its business was harmed and employees threatened when it was baselessly accused of rigging its voting machines against Trump in the 2020 election.

The settlement followed the disclosures of the mountain of evidence that would have been presented at trial, showing many Fox executives and on-air talent didn't believe the accusations aired on some Fox shows but they feared angering Trump fans with the truth.

Women's soccer team plays to keep Mariupol in spotlight

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — In an empty stadium in Ukraine's capital, a group of women soccer players draped in blue-and-yellow flags are getting ready for the match of the day.

As at every game these days, they observe a minute of silence for those who died because of Russia's

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invasion of Ukraine.

The logo on their uniform reads: "Mariupol is Ukraine."

They are members of Mariupol Women's Soccer Team. The eastern port city was devastated and captured by Russian forces last year after more than two months of stiff resistance by outmanned and outgunned Ukrainian forces, turning Mariupol into a worldwide symbol of Ukrainian defiance.

The city is now under Russian occupation, illegally annexed in September by the Russian president.

Refusing to give up, five original players from Mariupol have formed a new team based in Kyiv, recruiting members from all over the country.

Their goal? Not only to keep their place in the league but also to remind everyone that despite the Russian occupation that will soon reach the one-year mark, Mariupol remains a Ukrainian city.

"The main motivation was that people would watch the videos on social media from every game every week, and would see that the Mariupol team (still) exists," said coach Karina Kulakovska.

This week, the team was playing a match for the Ukrainian championship against the "Shakhtar" team, a tiny snapshot of normality on a soccer pitch. But not quite.

The authorities have banned spectators from attending the match due to security risks, resulting in an empty stadium and an eerie silence. To reach the field, players use an entrance which is stacked with sandbags bearing the word "shelter."

Midfielder Alina Kaidalovska remembers the 60 seconds of silence before the start of her first game in Kyiv after she fled Mariupol.

"Everything that happened in Mariupol immediately flashed through my head," she said. As memories flooded her mind, she recalled the bombed and charred buildings in the besieged city, the terror of running and hiding from Russian strikes, and the heartbreak of seeing people lose their lives.

In a humble stadium nestled amidst Kyiv's multi-story buildings, she and the other players gather for two hours every morning for training. They know they won't win this year's Ukrainian championship but keep training so that the team stays afloat.

"That was a good one, Margo! Give it more power next time," shouted Kulakovska. In 2015, she embarked on her coaching career and co-founded the Mariupol Women's Soccer Team along with club president Yana Vynokurova. It is now the oldest women's team in Ukraine's Donetsk province, a region that has been largely devastated by the ongoing war.

In early 2022, the Mariupol team ranked fourth in the top league of women's clubs. But the war Russia started in Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, not only interrupted the soccer season but thwarted the Mariupol team's ambitions to rise higher in the rankings as it brought calamity on their city and scattered players all over the world.

The core members of the team, including the club president and the head coach, sought refuge in Bulgaria as they struggled to come to terms with the trauma of their time spent in besieged Mariupol.

But when a new soccer season began in August, the idea of returning to Ukraine and starting their team again gave them the hope and courage to take the risk, even though they had nothing. Other clubs and people donated equipment, kit — even soccer shoes.

After a turbulent first few months, the club has now grown to 27 members, ranging in age from 16 to 34. Despite the diversity of their native cities, their dark blue training suits proudly display the logo linked to Mariupol, which features a seagull with a soccer ball in the background — a nod to the city's location on the north shore of the Sea of Azov.

A myriad of problems and a lack of funding notwithstanding, the women are determined to play.

"The girls go out on the pitch, and they fight until the end. They have a crazy dedication, and a crazy desire to play," says club president Yana Vynokurova. The players have a higher mission to pursue, in addition to keeping the Mariupol club afloat.

"That is to leave Mariupol at least on the soccer map of Ukraine, so that we remember that the people of Mariupol are the same fighters as Azov, who defended our city to the end."

Team captain Polina Polukhina, 33, hopes she will one day return to the stadium in Mariupol, her native

city.
"Deep down, you hope that you will return there again," she said. She has played soccer since she was 18 years old and said it was an honor for her to be part of the Mariupol team, even in such difficult times. Vynokurova is confident that every time the Mariupol team shows up for a game, it sends a message: "Even if you've lost everything, you can't give up."

Follow the AP's coverage of the war at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>.

North Korea calls its nukes 'stark reality,' criticizes G-7

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea's foreign minister on Friday called the Group of Seven wealthy democracies a "tool for ensuring the U.S. hegemony" as she lambasted the group's recent call for the North's denuclearization.

The top diplomats from G-7 nations, who met recently in Japan, had jointly condemned the North's recent ballistic missile tests and reiterated their commitment to the goal of North Korea's complete abandonment of its nuclear weapons. Their communique was prepared as a template for leaders at the G-7 summit next month in Hiroshima, where North Korea's nuclear program will likely be discussed again.

North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui said her country will take unspecified "strong counteraction" if G-7 countries — the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, Italy and the European Union — show "any behavioral attempt" to infringe upon the fundamental interests of North Korea.

"G7, a closed group of a handful of egoistic countries, does not represent the just international community but serves as a political tool for ensuring the U.S. hegemony," Choe said in a statement carried by North Korean state media.

Choe said the G-7 communique "malignantly" raised the North's legitimate exercise of its sovereignty.

North Korea has steadfastly argued it was forced to develop nuclear weapons because of U.S. nuclear threats against it. It has said the United States' regular military drills with South Korea are a rehearsal for invasion, though U.S. and South Korean officials have said their drills are defensive and they have no intentions of attacking the North.

North Korea has test-fired about 100 missiles since the start of last year in the name of responding to U.S. military training with South Korea. But many experts say North Korean leader Kim Jong Un likely uses his rivals' military drills as a pretext to advance his weapons programs, cement his domestic leadership and be recognized as a legitimate nuclear state to get international sanctions on the North lifted.

North Korea has been hit with 11 rounds of U.N. sanctions because of its past nuclear and ballistic missile tests banned by U.N. Security Council resolutions. Kim has previously said those sanctions "stifles" North Korea's economy.

The G-7 foreign ministers in their communique Tuesday said North Korea will never have the status of a nuclear-weapons state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

The treaty sought to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons beyond the five original armed powers — the U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France. It requires non-nuclear signatory nations to not pursue atomic weapons in exchange for a commitment by the five powers to move toward nuclear disarmament and to guarantee non-nuclear states' access to peaceful nuclear technology for producing energy.

Choe also said the North's position as a nuclear weapons state "will remain as an undeniable and stark reality." She said North Korea is free from any of the treaty's obligations because it withdrew from the treaty 20 years ago.

North Korea joined the NPT in 1985 but announced its withdrawal from the treaty in 2003, citing what it called U.S. aggression. Since 2006, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests and a slew of other weapons tests to develop nuclear-tipped missiles designed to attack the U.S. and South Korea.

South Korea's Unification Ministry said later Friday that North Korea must halt its threats against neigh-

bors and pay heed to international concerns about its "reckless" nuclear and missile programs. Deputy spokesperson Lee Hyojung told reporters that North Korea cannot earn what it wants from its nuclear program so it must not insist on "a wrong path."

Kim said earlier this week his country has built its first military spy satellite that will be launched at an unspecified date. Last week, North Korea test-launched a solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missile for the first time.

North Korea is expected to perform more weapons tests as the United States and South Korea continue their joint aerial exercise into next week.

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Judge's donations cloud rulings in Catholic bankruptcy case

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal judge donated tens of thousands of dollars to New Orleans' Roman Catholic archdiocese and consistently ruled in favor of the church amid a contentious bankruptcy involving nearly 500 clergy sex abuse victims, The Associated Press found, an apparent conflict that could throw the case into disarray.

Confronted with AP's findings, which have not been previously reported, U.S. District Judge Greg Guidry abruptly convened attorneys on a call last week to tell them his charitable giving "has been brought to my attention" and he is now considering recusal from the high-profile bankruptcy he oversees in an appellate role.

"Naturally," Guidry told them, "I will take no further action in this case until this question has been resolved."

AP's reporting on Guidry and other judges in the New Orleans bankruptcy underscores how tightly woven the church is in the city's power structure, a coziness perhaps best exemplified when executives of the NFL's New Orleans Saints secretly advised the archdiocese on public relations messaging at the height of its clergy abuse crisis.

It also comes at a fraught moment when attorneys in the bankruptcy are seeking to unseal a trove of thousands of secret church documents produced by lawsuits and an ongoing FBI investigation of clergy abuse in New Orleans going back decades. Guidry had rebuffed at least one such request to unseal some of the documents.

Ethics experts said the 62-year-old Guidry should immediately recuse himself to avoid even the appearance of a conflict, despite the slew of new hearings and appeals it could trigger three years into a complex bankruptcy.

"It would create a mess and a cloud of suspicion over every ruling he's made," said Keith Swisher, a professor of legal ethics at the University of Arizona, describing the judge's donations as "more like fire than smoke."

AP's review of campaign-finance records found that Guidry, since being nominated to the federal bench in 2019 by then-President Donald Trump, has given nearly \$50,000 to local Catholic charities from leftover contributions he received after serving 10 years as a Louisiana Supreme Court justice.

Most of that giving, \$36,000 of it, came in the months after the archdiocese sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in May 2020 amid a crush of sexual abuse lawsuits. That included a \$12,000 donation to the archdiocese's Catholic Community Foundation in September 2020 on the same day of a series of filings in the bankruptcy, and a \$14,000 donation to the same charity in July of the following year.

But Guidry's philanthropy over the years also appears to include private donations. Newsletters issued by Catholic Charities of New Orleans, the charitable arm of the archdiocese, recognized Guidry and his wife among its donors for unspecified contributions, in 2017 listing both the judge and his campaign. The judge previously provided pro bono services and served as a board member for Catholic Charities between 2000 and 2008, a time when the archdiocese was navigating an earlier wave of sex abuse lawsuits. Catholic

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Charities was involved in at least one multimillion-dollar settlement to victims beaten and sexually abused at two local orphanages.

Within a year of his most recent contributions, Guidry began issuing rulings that altered the momentum of the bankruptcy and benefited the archdiocese. He upheld the removal of several members from a committee of victims seeking compensation from the church. Those plaintiffs repeatedly complained about a lack of transparency in the case and argued that the archdiocese's primary reason for seeking the legal protection was to minimize payouts. The Moody's rating agency found that the archdiocese sought bankruptcy despite having "significant financial reserves, with spendable cash and investments of over \$160 million.

And just last month, Guidry affirmed a \$400,000 sanction against Richard Trahan, a veteran attorney for clergy abuse victims who was accused of violating a sweeping confidentiality order when he warned a local principal that his school had hired a priest who admitted to sex abuse. Trahan, who declined to comment, has become a prominent adversary of the archdiocese, drawing attention to what he calls a conspiracy by top church officials in New Orleans to cover up clergy abuse.

After AP sent a letter to Guidry detailing the findings and seeking comment, the judge did not respond. Instead, he called last week's status conference to tell attorneys in the bankruptcy that he is considering recusal. According to a transcript obtained by the AP, Guidry noted that the question of his potential conflict "has not been considered before" and he was seeking the guidance of the federal judiciary's Committee on Codes of Conduct, with his decision expected within days.

Charles Geyh, a professor at Indiana University who studies judicial ethics, said Guidry's devout religion alone shouldn't disqualify him from the case, but his generous donations and close ties to the church are clearly reasons to question his ability to be a fair referee.

"Not only has the judge made significant financial contributions to a church whose archdiocese is a party in litigation before him, but those contributions are inextricably linked to his status as a judge," Geyh said. "The judge chose to donate the overflow of campaign funds generated to further his professional life as a judge to further his religious life in the church, which implies a connection in the judge's mind between his religious and professional identities."

In heavily Catholic New Orleans, Guidry is far from the only federal judge with longstanding ties to the archdiocese. Several of Guidry's colleagues have recused themselves from the bankruptcy or related litigation. They include U.S. District Judge Wendy Vitter, who for years worked as general counsel for the archdiocese, defending the church against a cascade of sex abuse claims before Trump nominated her to the federal bench in 2018. Another federal judge, Ivan Lemelle, serves on the board of the Catholic Community Foundation.

Yet another, U.S. District Judge Jay Zainey recused himself from cases related to the bankruptcy after publicly acknowledging the role he played in the behind-the-scenes media relations campaign that executives of the New Orleans Saints did for the archdiocese in 2018 and 2019. At the time, Zainey told The Times-Picayune he would recuse himself from future church-related cases.

But less than a year ago, Zainey quietly struck down a Louisiana law, vigorously opposed by the archdiocese, that created a so called look-back window allowing victims of sexual abuse to sue the church and other institutions no matter how long ago the alleged abuse took place. Zainey didn't respond to a request for comment.

"These are federal judges who are incredibly active in different ministries throughout the archdiocese," said James Adams, a past president of the Catholic Community Foundation who was abused by a priest as a fifth-grader in 1980. "I'm not saying they don't do good works, but it certainly raises an eyebrow when they then have cases involving the Archdiocese of New Orleans."

Jason Berry, an author who has written several books on clergy abuse and most recently a history of New Orleans, said the influence of the church on the court system in the city "stinks to high heaven."

"The larger question here is whether justice has been compromised," he said. "You're talking about 500 people whose lives have been plundered, and that's one thing many people don't have a grasp of."

Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

The struggle to read: One third grader's winding journey

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Thomas snuggles under the covers with me at bedtime, warm and wiggly.

It is our third tour through the "Harry Potter" series, and tonight is like so many others. I pause and ask him to read a few pages of the Dr. Seuss classic "Hop on Pop" before I continue recounting the adventures of Harry, Ron and Hermione.

And like so many times, he refuses. Finally he fumbles through a couple pages, over passages like "Pup Cup. Pup in Cup," with copious praise. Then he is done.

It all seemed very normal that night last fall. But this was the beginning of third grade, and the Seuss book is sold as "The Simplest Seuss for Youngest Use."

Thomas has a learning disability, ADHD and epilepsy. And this is hard — harder than I thought possible.

Third grade is considered a crucial reading year. Children who can't read well by the end of this year are more likely to become dropouts. All sorts of bad things are possible, the research shows.

Yet here we are.

I know our situation is extreme. But I also know testing suggests we aren't alone. The pandemic was tough for these youngest of kids.

In kindergarten when the pandemic started, their schooling was disrupted at a crucial time. And because of their age, virtual learning was particularly hard for them. Kids like Thomas who needed something extra had an especially hard time.

Thomas struggled to learn to talk, so much so that he met with a speech therapist as a preschooler.

I still remember the screening evaluation. The evaluator was giggling. Later she told me that she showed him a picture of a chair. Asked what it was, he responded, "Time out." Other pictures were entirely mysterious.

I didn't know it then, but speech delays are often a sign of a future reading problem. With extra help, though, he started talking.

Thomas, the red-headed youngest of three, was clearly bright, obsessed with the Titanic and shipwrecks in general. Once he covered the floor with ice cubes and declared the melting puddles were icebergs.

Still, there were signs. He was picking up letters a little slower than his classmates in kindergarten, and he was so, so wiggly.

We were worried enough that we asked his teacher to fill out a screening form for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Forgetful: Check. Struggles to sustain attention: Check. While he was inquisitive, the teacher added in her own handwriting, visual learning was a struggle.

But then the pandemic hit. Fifteen days after the teacher handed me the form, the governor of Kansas became the first in the country to shut down schools for the rest of the academic year. My middle child, then 12, had very little schoolwork and was enlisted to homeschool Thomas.

The screening form was forgotten.

In my phone, there is still a notes file where I mapped out how we would make it all work. The daily schedule I envisioned included things like reading/story time, recess, gardening and even cooking class. Each was assigned half-hour intervals.

Who did I think I was? Who did I think we were?

I snapped a picture of a desk neatly set up. Hours later, the desk was toppled. That pretty much says it all.

By April, things got worse. Thomas had a seizure, his first.

I initially thought nothing of him lying face-down on the floor, stepping over him as I went to do laundry. My husband was the one to roll him over, to notice him drooling and his left arm moving rhythmically. His eyes were open, but he wasn't there.

The ambulance arrived minutes later. He was unconscious. The crew suggested we drive him to the

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hospital, that there could be COVID in the ambulance.

But we didn't leave for an hour and a half. We were scared, and I watched YouTube videos of puppies on my phone while Thomas lay beside me, unconscious, until the pediatrician's office called back. A nurse, then a doctor instructed us that this was urgent, that we needed to go.

The delay did no harm; there isn't much that can be done after a seizure. The emergency room doctor looked him over and sent us home.

Days later, when we met with a neurologist for the first time, Thomas still had a bruise on his forehead from toppling face forward. The doctor scheduled tests and prescribed medication for use if Thomas had a seizure that lasted five minutes or longer.

We might never need it, the neurologist said. But we had to use it just two weeks later when Thomas had a second, frightening seizure hours before an MRI and an EEG to measure his brain waves. Later that day, he was diagnosed with epilepsy, cause unknown.

We were shaken. My parents drove to our house, stood in our yard and said they were sorry. But it was early in the pandemic and we didn't even hug, too fearful we would expose each other to the virus.

That weekend, I insisted we buy kayaks. Curbside pickup was the only option, so I saw the boats for the first time when the sporting goods staff hauled them to the curb. For 10 of the next 11 days, I floated around on a local lake with a child or two in tow.

It was the only thing that eased the gnawing anxiety.

We soon learned that anti-seizure medications are a bit of a science experiment, and the first one was a mess. Although popular, it has a side effect of aggression in some kids. Thomas was among them.

My husband and I tried to work. We tried to do school. But there were daily tantrums. Cellphone screens were smashed, along with a tablet. My daughter threatened to quit watching Thomas while we worked. She demanded raises. Who could blame her? And why the heck were we asking this of her, anyway?

Women were quitting their jobs in droves, and I understood why. It all seemed impossible. At one point, I called his kindergarten teacher. We can't do school right now, I told her. Things are too much of a mess. He wouldn't sit through the virtual lessons. She said she understood and told me not to worry.

We switched medications and it helped, but there was still his behavior. He was wild.

When the day camp he was supposed to attend that summer was canceled, my mother started watching him. As a recently retired teacher, she was eager to play academic catch-up with him so he would be ready for first grade.

"We'll work on sight words," she told me. I responded with: "Mom, I don't think he knows his letters." She was dubious.

But a couple weeks later, she approached me, taken aback: "Thomas," she told me, "doesn't know his letters."

He resisted efforts to learn them, squirming away from flashcards or decodable books. But my mother, persistent as always, bought an online curriculum and plowed through it with him several days a week.

By midsummer, we had our first follow-up with the neurologist. Thomas was a whirling mass of energy, trying to turn the light off in the exam room and climb onto a rolling table designed to hold the doctor's laptop. Halfway through the appointment, I opened the door and shoved the table into the hallway.

More testing added dyslexia and ADHD diagnoses. The doctors said we should request special education services and armed me with a pile of test results and letters.

Our school district was offering a virtual and in-person option that fall. With Thomas' new string of diagnoses, my mother offered to oversee virtual school. As it began, I dropped him off with her each day.

I recall watching him log on with his virtual classmates one morning. The teacher was helping them download the apps they would use, but many of his classmates couldn't read. To help them, she announced the first letter of the app, tracing its shape in the air. Some kids had parents sitting beside them; other first graders were on their own, tearful and frustrated. But they trudged on, and most were catching on.

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And Thomas: Even with my mother sitting right by his side, he was struggling.

She had to modify almost every assignment. Instead of writing sentences, she wrote them and had him copy or trace over the letters. We met virtually to discuss screening him for special education services.

In late September, he met for the first time with the reading specialist. Within minutes, his head dropped, he got confused and struggled to speak. She rushed him to the office, where my husband was waiting, suspecting a seizure. His neurologist adjusted his meds repeatedly; we did two more EEGs. We were unable to sort out exactly what was happening. Still, I was grateful that he wasn't having big scary seizures.

The special education team initially decided he wasn't low enough to qualify for services. But when he continued to struggle so much that one teacher mentioned having him repeat first grade, we asked them to take another look.

Thomas returned to an in-person class for the final weeks of first grade. Just before classes dismissed, we learned he qualified for special education. He would get more small group and one-on-one help.

We sent him to a summer program designed for kids who had struggled, but he still found it a challenge. He refused to get out of the car each morning until we moved him down to the program for kids one year younger. That's when my in-laws offered to send him to a private school for kids with dyslexia. Classes are capped at 10 students.

It was what he needed. But his progress is slow and uneven. He learns things, but sometimes they don't seem to stick.

One night, the school offered an event for parents designed to simulate what it feels like to have a learning disability. Parents were assigned impossible tasks — reading texts with missing words, reading sentences printed backwards. All the while, someone walked around with a speaker making school announcements.

I wanted to quit. I guess I understood why he often complained of stomach aches or headaches when he was asked to read.

Now, in third grade, he is nowhere near reading at grade level. I told the teacher that at the end of the year, I would like him to be reading like a first grader. She thinks it is doable. And he has made progress, now fighting his way through harder passages as the year progresses.

Maybe we will get there — wherever "there" is. Maybe it is all clicking. The journey is a mix of frustration and laughter.

Once, he informed a bemused librarian that he needs books about dinosaurs, along with ancient Greece and nuclear energy. Chapter books, she asked? I sighed. He often walks up to strangers and demands to know their favorite dinosaur. I've come to believe it's a brilliant question. People who answer T. Rex seem fundamentally different than those who prefer a herbivore like a brachiosaurus.

Another time, Thomas interrogated a crew fixing a power outage, discussing wind turbines and batteries with the indulgent supervisor, a father himself. As Thomas walked home, he turned to my husband and told him: "Don't ever underestimate the power of my brain."

Thomas, we will try.

The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Autistic soccer fans can watch in comfort in Brazil stadiums

By MAURICIO SAVARESE AP Sports Writer

SAO PAULO (AP) — Hamilton Moreira is a huge fan of Brazil's Corinthians, one of the country's top soccer clubs.

But the 16-year-old, who uses a wheelchair and has autism, never saw them in person until last Sunday after his mother learned of their stadium's special room for people with autism. It's built into the ninth floor high above one of the goals.

"He just loved this," Ana Moreira, 53, told The Associated Press as she pushed her joyous and shrieking

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son out of the room and into the crowd after the Corinthians beat Cruzeiro 2-1 in a Brazilian championship match.

"Hamilton is a hardcore soccer fan, like the entire family. He watches until the very end, he celebrates with the players. It feels great to include him here," she said.

The facility in NeoQuimica Arena is called a "sensory room," designed to have a calming effect. It has noise-proof glass walls, special lighting, crayons spread on multiple tables, toys and food — all of which can keep occupants busy during matches.

Many Brazilian soccer teams are increasingly accommodating autistic fans by offering them free tickets, free snacks, hearing protection and sensory rooms.

Some people with autism find it difficult to deal with the roar of the crowd, or to be still for 90 minutes. Not so with Hamilton, who was hyper-focused on the entire match between the Corinthians and Cruzeiro.

He suffers from a rare, severe disorder called Pitt-Hopkins syndrome, which includes autism, and his mother previously was leery of bringing him to a game. However, things went so well that she wants to try having him watch from an open part of the stadium.

"Next time I want to take him to the wheelchair section. I think he can handle the noise," she said.

Autism spectrum disorder is an umbrella term for a broad range of developmental disorders that can involve widely varying degrees of intellectual, language and social difficulties, and repetitive behaviors. Brazil's health ministry says as many as 10 million people in the country of 213 million are on the autism spectrum.

Though most Brazilian cities offer little accommodation for people with disabilities, many facilities for the disabled were built into the country's soccer stadiums ahead of the 2014 World Cup, and some have been improved since.

The noise-proof facility at the Corinthians' stadium was begun for the World Cup, became a full-fledged sensory room during the 2020-21 pandemic period and now is gaining wide use as the Sao Paulo-based club becomes a national standard-bearer for accommodating autistic fans.

Last year, a fan group named Autistas Alvinegros, or Black and White Autists, got permission to place their banner in a prime lower section of the stadium, always visible during TV broadcasts. The team's veteran goalkeeper, Cássio, is the father of a 5-year-old autistic daughter who his wife posts about. And 41-year-old Corinthians fan Luis Butti has become a social media sensation with posts and podcasts about soccer, the team and his autism.

Even teams without their own stadiums have played a role. In the latest Rio de Janeiro state championship final, the Flamengo and Fluminense clubs arrived hand-in-hand with children with autism.

Sergio Cordeiro, 51, and a Corinthians fan, brought his 25-year-old son with autism, Pedro Roberto, to the sensory room at NeoQuimica Arena on Sunday even though the son is a fan of a rival team — the one his late grandfather favored.

Cordeiro said he'd like to change his son's allegiance, but "it is hard to change the mind of an autistic person, and he is no different."

"We came because of this sensory room; it's great," Cordeiro said. "My son is not very verbal. It is quieter here. I don't know how he would handle it downstairs. If there were fireworks, it would be impossible to be with him here."

"The autistic are becoming a nation of their own in Brazil. They are growing a lot and there's few public policies to address their needs. Soccer clubs are doing their part," Cordeiro said.

Some autistic fans can handle the noise relatively well, including 10-year-old Jean Lucca Alvarez, who wore an Autistas Alvinegros shirt and also came to the soccer stadium for the first time Sunday. However, he sat out in the stands with his mother, Amanda Alvarez, 44.

"We are here waiting for a goal. When everyone screams, if needed, we have hearing protection for him," Amanda Alvarez said when the match was still 0-0. "Every staffer here was super prepared for him since we arrived. ... They point us to the right direction, help us."

Jean Lucca, who asked to be interviewed by the AP, said his interest in soccer blossomed during last year's World Cup in Qatar.

"It is so beautiful here. It is so cool. And there's some very cool people here," he said, seconds before Corinthians scored its first goal. "I am an autistic Corinthians fan. I am."

Butti, the podcaster, also watches from the stands, where he has been given his own personal seat. He said his autism was diagnosed at 31 when he moved from the countryside to Sao Paulo. He now works at the stadium as a tour guide.

"When I got here to work no one talked about autism. It was not something mean, to exclude me. It just wasn't a big topic for our society. It was a bubble," Butti said. "Thank God that bubble has burst and now this is a topic for everyone."

In the sensory room, some kids choose to play with small footballs or even watch cartoons if they tire of watching the game.

"I like this room because of the other autistic children," said Ana Moreira, Hamilton's mom. "This is a place of happiness. We need more of those."

More AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/hub/soccer> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Guard actions in Mexico fire seen as key to who lived, died

By MARÍA VERZA Associated Press

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico (AP) — When a fire broke out at a Mexican immigration detention facility last month, dramatically different reactions by guards in the men's and women's sections appeared to make a difference in who lived and died, according to previously unreported surveillance videos and witness statements viewed by The Associated Press.

Forty male detainees perished in the March 27 blaze, allegedly started by a male migrant in protest of their rumored transfer from the facility in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas. All 15 of the female detainees safely escaped from their side of the facility as it began to fill with smoke.

The videos show that in the hours before the fire, the deadliest ever at migration detention center in the country, private security guards contracted by Mexico's immigration agency used keys to open the men's section to allow cleaning personnel to enter and to bring them large jugs of water.

However once the fire started, no one tried to open it again despite the presence of guards nearby. Meanwhile, on the women's side, a female security guard sprinted through the building with keys she said the immigration official in charge of that wing had given her. That official, Gloria Liliana Ramos, is among those charged with homicide.

A central question for investigators remains: Where were the keys to the men's section when the fire started?

Seven people – five immigration agents, a private security guard and the migrant who allegedly started the fire – have been charged with homicide and causing injury. On Friday the head of Mexico's National Immigration Institute and the retired Navy rear admiral who was the highest-ranked immigration official in the state of Chihuahua were scheduled to face accusations in court of failure to protect the migrants and homicide, respectively.

Mexico's Attorney General's Office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the contents of the videos and witness statements, which were provided to AP by a lawyer for one of the accused.

On the evening of the fire, they show, male migrants began to press mattresses against the bars to block guards' view of what was happening inside. They also apparently unplugged surveillance cameras that they were able to access.

One man allegedly set fire to a foam mattress, and within seconds smoke began to fill the area. A previously seen surveillance video clip showed guards approach the bars but then walk away without trying to open the gate.

The immigration official who was in charge of the men's side that evening was Rodolfo Collazo. In his statement to investigators, Collazo said that shortly before the fire erupted he had left to take two minors to another facility, placing the private security supervisor in charge and leaving behind the keys to the

men's section.

Ramos, his counterpart on the women's side, confirmed in her own statement that Collazo had left the private supervisor in charge.

An analysis of surveillance video by forensic investigator Luis Fermín Cal y Mayor for one of the defense teams concluded that the keys to the men's section were in the possession of the private security guards minutes before the fire started. That contradicts accounts from those guards in statements to government investigators saying that when the blaze began, they were in a bathroom filling jugs with water for the migrants and did not have the keys.

In the women's section, another private security guard, Angélica Hinojosa, ran out when the blaze began — to get help, she said later. She returned a short time later followed by a member of the National Guard.

Hinojosa is seen on video racing through the building as female migrants begin to cover their noses and mouths amid the increasingly dense smoke. She later told investigators that when "it started to smell bad and I saw a lot of smoke," she asked Ramos for the keys. The women's section was opened, and everyone escaped, retracing Hinojosa's steps to the building's entrance.

Female migrants told government investigators they heard shouts from the men's side of the facility, including desperate calls for water and questions about where the keys were.

Ramos' lawyer, Aglaeth González, said Ramos saved lives and should not be charged with a crime. González said she still has not been allowed access to surveillance videos, and immigration officials she tried to interview refused to talk citing fears of reprisals.

Collazo, the official who had left with the underage migrants, returned to find the facility ablaze. He told investigators he tried to enter to find the keys, but was turned back by the smoke. He is among those facing criminal charges of homicide and causing injury.

One of the private security guards told investigators that a colleague, one of those now charged with homicide, did go back inside and found the keys on a desk. That guard managed to open a back door but not another lock inside, he said.

The area remained sealed off until firefighters arrived and broke down a wall, and only then were those migrants still alive able to escape. More than two dozen were injured, but survived.

Lawyers for the accused have also questioned whether prosecutors have sufficiently analyzed the hours of video from the surveillance cameras, which numbered more than a dozen.

The countries where the victims came from have demanded a transparent investigation to find and hold responsible any officials and employees who share blame for the deaths, including those high up the chain of command.

Police make 6th arrest in Alabama Sweet 16 party shooting

DADEVILLE, Ala. (AP) — Investigators on Thursday charged a sixth person with reckless murder in connection with a deadly shooting at a Sweet 16 birthday party, saying in court documents they believe gunmen shot into the crowd during the celebration.

Investigators said in court documents filed Thursday that they believe five of those charged were present at the party on April 15 and "discharged firearms into the crowd," resulting in the deaths of four people.

The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency on Thursday night announced the arrest of a 15-year-old juvenile from Tuskegee, Alabama, the sixth person charged in the case, but court records were not released because of the person's age.

All six face reckless murder charges in connection with the fatal shooting, the state agency said.

The Sweet 16 birthday, at a dance studio just off the town square, was in full swing when gunfire erupted. Investigators have not discussed a motive or what they believe led to the shooting.

The shooting killed four young people, ranging in age from 17 to 23, and shocked the small east Alabama city of Dadeville. Besides the four slain, 32 others were injured, four of them critically.

Tyreese "Ty Reik" McCullough, 17, and Travis McCullough, 16, both of Tuskegee, were arrested Tuesday. Wilson LaMar Hill Jr., 20, of Auburn, Alabama, was arrested Wednesday. Johnny Letron Brown, 20, of Tuskegee and Willie George Brown Jr., 19, of Auburn, were arrested Thursday. All are charged with four

counts of reckless murder, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency said.

The district attorney said the teens will be tried as adults as required by Alabama law when anyone 16 or older is charged with murder.

All of the suspects are being held in the Tallapoosa County Jail with no bond with the exception of the 15-year-old, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency said.

The birthday girl's brother, 18-year-old Philstavious "Phil" Dowdell of Camp Hill, Alabama, died as his sister knelt beside him begging him to keep breathing. He and another fatal victim, 17-year-old Shaunkivia Nicole "KeKe" Smith of Dadeville, were high school seniors. Also slain were Marsiah Emmanuel "Siah" Collins, 19, of Opelika, Alabama, and Corbin Dahmontrey Holston, 23, of Dadeville.

The shooting was the 16th mass killing in the U.S. this year. A 17th took place in Maine on Tuesday. A total of 88 people have died in mass killings so far in 2023.

A mass killing is defined as the slaying of four or more people other than the perpetrator, according to a database maintained by The Associated Press and USA Today in partnership with Northeastern University.

Harden ejected, but not Embiid for groin-area shots to Nets

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — James Harden made direct contact when he swung at a Nets player's groin. Joel Embiid's kick to a different player landed in a safer spot.

That's why Harden was thrown out and Embiid dodged an ejection Thursday night in Philadelphia's 102-97 victory in Game 3.

Harden was dribbling while defended closely by Royce O'Neale when he swung out his arm and hit O'Neale, who fell to the court in pain. Referees reviewed the play and called Harden for a flagrant foul 2, an automatic ejection, after seeing evidence of where he had hit O'Neale.

"Based on the point of contact directly to the groin, it rose to the level of excessive and ejection," crew chief Tony Brothers said.

Two quarters earlier, the 76ers were perhaps lucky the same penalty wasn't given to Embiid.

He kicked his leg up toward Nets center Nic Claxton's groin, a play that looked worse than Harden's but was given a lesser flagrant 1.

Claxton had just dunked and Embiid fell to the court after fouling him. Claxton then slowly stepped over Embiid, who kicked up his leg into Claxton's upper leg area before players from both teams rushed in.

After a video review, Embiid was given a flagrant foul 1.

Embiid joked at first that he couldn't remember the play, but then said after it happened he knew he couldn't get mixed up in any more altercations.

"The whole game you could see what they were doing, just trying to get a rise out of me," Embiid said. "I'm too valuable, especially after the first one."

"I just understood I'm too valuable to get into this stuff."

Nets fans booed after the decision, angry that the two-time scoring champion was not thrown out. Golden State's Draymond Green was ejected from Game 2, then suspended for Game 3, of the Warriors' series against Sacramento after stepping on Kings center Domantas Sabonis.

"The contact was deemed unnecessary and based on the point of contact to the leg, it didn't rise to the level of excessive," Brothers said.

Nets coach Jacque Vaughn couldn't believe Embiid wasn't ejected.

"I don't think I've ever seen that in my career before, for a guy to intentionally kick someone in an area that none of us want to be kicked at or towards, and for him to continue to play," Vaughn said. "I've never seen that before. In a game and a guy continues to be able to play. Intentional."

Claxton was given a technical foul for stepping over Embiid and ended up getting ejected when he picked up a second tech in the fourth quarter.

Man accused of shooting girl, parents arrested in Florida

GASTONIA, N.C. (AP) — A North Carolina man accused of shooting and wounding a 6-year-old girl and her parents after children went to retrieve a basketball that had rolled into his yard was arrested in Florida Thursday afternoon, authorities said.

The violence was the latest in a string of recent shootings sparked by seemingly trivial circumstances.

Robert Louis Singletary, 24, was arrested in the Tampa area by Hillsborough County deputies, according to online jail records. He was being held without bail on a fugitive warrant. He's scheduled to appear in court Friday.

Gaston County Police Chief Stephen Zill said at a news conference Wednesday that his department and the U.S. Marshals Service's Regional Fugitive Task Force had been conducting a broad search for Singletary, who fled after the Tuesday night shootings near Gastonia, a city of roughly 80,000 people west of Charlotte.

Singletary had been out on bond in a December attack in which authorities say he assaulted a woman with a hammer. He was wanted in Tuesday's shootings on four counts of attempted first-degree murder, two counts of assault with a deadly weapon with the intent to kill inflicting serious injury, and one count of being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Zill declined to say what sparked the attack, explaining that the investigation was ongoing.

However, neighbor Jonathan Robertson said the attack happened after some neighborhood children went to retrieve a basketball that had rolled into Singletary's yard. He said Singletary, who had yelled at the children on several occasions since moving to the neighborhood, went inside his home, came back out with a gun and began shooting as parents frantically tried to get their kids to safety.

"As soon as I saw him coming out shooting, I was hollering at everybody to get down and get inside," Robertson said.

A 6-year-old girl, Kinsley White, was grazed by a bullet in the left cheek and was treated at a hospital and released, she and her family said. Her father, Jamie White, who had run to her aid, was shot in the back. He remained hospitalized Thursday with serious wounds, including liver damage, according to Kinsley's grandfather and neighbor, Carl Hilderbrand. The girl's mother, Ashley Hilderbrand, was grazed in the elbow. Authorities say Singletary also shot at another man but missed.

"It was very scary," Ashley Hilderbrand said Wednesday. "My daughter actually got to come home last night. She just had a bullet fragment in her cheek."

It is the latest in a string of recent U.S. shootings that occurred for apparently trivial reasons, including the wounding of a Black teenage honors student in Missouri who went to the wrong address to pick up his younger brothers, the killing of a woman who was in a car that pulled into the wrong upstate New York driveway, and the wounding of two Texas cheerleaders after one apparently mistakenly got into a car that she thought was her own.

'The damage is unbelievable:' Tornadoes kill 3 in Oklahoma

By KEN MILLER and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Crews scrambled Thursday to restore power to thousands of residents after tornadoes plowed through Oklahoma during another deadly spring storm in the U.S., killing at least three people and damaging dozens of homes.

A day after at least eight tornadoes spun through Oklahoma, Gov. Kevin Stitt said authorities were still assessing the scale of destruction. He toured the aftermath in Shawnee, where nearly every building at Oklahoma Baptist University showed damage. A home improvement store was destroyed, but several people sheltering inside survived. Two long-term care facilities and a hospital in Shawnee were also damaged.

"The damage is unbelievable when you walk through there," Stitt said after touring the city.

Stitt also visited the small town of Cole, where he said two people died and 50 to 100 homes were damaged. Authorities said a third person who was injured had also died, but it was not immediately clear where that person was injured.

"There are definitely dozens of various injuries, from minor all the way up to fatalities," said Deputy

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Sheriff Scott Gibbons of McClain County, the county south of Oklahoma City where Cole is located.

Gibbons told television station KOCO that one victim in McClain County, where Cole is located, is a 66-year-old man.

Deadly storms this spring have killed dozens of people across a wide swath of country, including one in March that produced tornadoes and killed at least 32 people from Arkansas to Delaware. Days later, another tornado left five dead in Missouri.

Employees of a pizza restaurant in Shawnee said they took shelter in the walk-in freezer, and when they emerged, parts of the roof and shattered windows littered the parking lot.

"There was a lot commotion. People were starting to get a little frantic," said Bekah Inman, general manager of a Papa John's Pizza in Shawnee, speaking to Oklahoma television station KOCO.

At Oklahoma Baptist University, sophomore Kennedy Houchin hid in a storm shelter with about 30 other people. When she was finally able to safely leave after about two hours, she saw the devastation the tornadoes had left on campus and elsewhere in Shawnee: downed trees, flipped cars and buildings with gaping holes.

When she ran into her volleyball teammates on campus, they embraced. "It was a good moment to see everyone and know everyone was OK," Houchin said.

Following the storms, Stitt declared a state of emergency in five counties: Cleveland, Lincoln, McClain, Oklahoma and Pottawatomie.

At the peak of the storm, there were more than 34,000 power outages reported, but that number had dropped by Thursday evening to about 16,000, the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management and the Office of Homeland Security reported.

KFOR-TV reported that residents south of Oklahoma City said they were trapped in their underground shelters. In Cole, two people emerged unhurt after riding out the storm in a manhole, the television station reported.

Miller reported from Jonesboro, Arkansas. Associated Press journalist Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed to this report.

California to meet 100% of water requests thanks to storms

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California will provide 100% of the water requested by cities and farms for the first time in years thanks to winter storms that filled reservoirs and runoff from a record snowpack, regulators announced Thursday.

The State Water Project will provide full allocations to 29 water agencies supplying about 27 million customers and 750,000 acres of farmland, the Department of Water Resources said.

As late as March, the agency was only expecting to provide 75% of requested water supplies.

The last time the state agency fully met water requests was in 2006.

Meanwhile, the federal Bureau of Reclamation announced it was increasing water allocations for the Central Valley Project to 100% for the first time since 2017.

The move was cheered by contractors who supply the federal water to the state's agricultural heartland. It will provide much-needed water to communities, farms and families in the San Joaquin Valley, said a statement from Jose Gutierrez, interim general manager of Westlands Water District.

"Following two years of 0% allocations, this water supply will assist growers in Westlands with putting the land to work to grow the food that feeds the world," he said.

Both the state and federal governments control networks of reservoirs and canals that supply water across California.

Three years of drought had pinched off supplies drastically in the nation's most populous state. Late last year, nearly all of California was in drought, including at extreme and exceptional levels. Wells ran dry, farmers fallowed fields, and cities restricted watering grass.

The water picture changed dramatically starting in December, when the first of a dozen "atmospheric

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ivers " hit, causing widespread flooding and damaging homes and infrastructure, and dumping as many as 700 inches (17.8 meters) of snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

The statewide reservoir storage on Thursday was at 105% of the average for the date, the Department of Water Resources said.

The runoff from the melting snow will supply additional water that the state agency said it is working to capture.

As of this week, more than 65% of California no longer had drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

However, the Department of Water Resources urged people to continue using water cautiously. State officials have warned that in the era of climate change, one extremely wet year could be followed by several dry years, returning the state to drought.

The state water agency noted that some northern areas of the state still have water supply issues. In addition, some areas, including the agricultural Central Valley, are still recovering after years of pumping that has depleted underground water.

"Millions of Californians rely on groundwater supplies as a sole source of water," the agency warned.

"The Colorado River Basin, which is a critical water supply source for Southern California, is still in the midst of a 23-year drought," the agency added. "Californians should continue to use water wisely to help the state adapt to a hotter, drier future."

Radio host Larry Elder announces 2024 GOP bid for president

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

Conservative talk radio host Larry Elder, who sought to replace the California governor in a failed 2021 recall effort, announced Thursday he is running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024.

Elder, 70, made the announcement on Fox News' "Tucker Carlson Tonight" and followed up with a tweet.

"America is in decline, but this decline is not inevitable. We can enter a new American Golden Age, but we must choose a leader who can bring us there. That's why I'm running for President," he wrote.

The long-shot candidate joins a Republican field that includes former President Donald Trump, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. President Joe Biden, a Democrat, has said he plans to seek reelection.

Elder made his first bid for public office in 2021, when he received the most votes out of 46 people who were hoping to replace California Gov. Gavin Newsom in a recall effort. But a majority of voters ended up voting against removing Newsom, making the vote count in the replacement contest irrelevant.

Some Democrats say Elder's role as a foil to Newsom helped the Democratic governor inspire voters in liberal California to turn out and reject the recall. Newsom attacked Elder for his support of Trump and his conservative positions, such as opposing abortion rights and restrictions imposed to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as mask mandates.

But Elder said the experience of running for office — and the millions of votes he received — showed he had a message that resonated with voters. A lawyer who grew up in Los Angeles' rough South Central neighborhood, Elder attended an Ivy League college and then law school. He has a following among conservatives through his radio programs and has been a frequent guest on Fox News and other right-wing media.

Elder, who is Black, has criticized Democrats' "woke" agenda, Black Lives Matter and the notion of systemic racism, positions that have put him at odds with many other Black people.

During the recall campaign, a former fiancée said Elder showed her a gun during a 2015 argument. Elder denied the allegations.

Alec Baldwin charge will be dropped in movie set shooting

By ANDREW DALTON and MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Prosecutors said Thursday they will dismiss an involuntary manslaughter charge against Alec Baldwin in the fatal 2021 shooting of a cinematographer on the set of the Western film “Rust,” but cautioned that their investigation is not over and the actor has not been absolved yet.

Special prosecutors Kari Morrissey and Jason Lewis announced their decision to dismiss the felony charge after “new facts were revealed that demand further investigation and forensic analysis,” without giving further details. An involuntary manslaughter charge against Hannah Gutierrez Reed, weapons supervisor on the film, remains unchanged, they said.

“We cannot proceed under the current time constraints and on the facts and evidence turned over by law enforcement,” the prosecutors said in a statement. “This decision does not absolve Mr. Baldwin of criminal culpability and charges may be refiled. Our follow-up investigation will remain active and on-going.”

Lawyers for Baldwin were first to announce that prosecutors were changing course, in a sharp turnaround for the Hollywood luminary who just a few months ago was confronting the possibility of a yearslong prison sentence.

“We are pleased with the decision to dismiss the case against Alec Baldwin and we encourage a proper investigation into the facts and circumstances of this tragic accident,” defense attorneys Luke Nikas and Alex Spiro said in a statement.

When word of the dismissal came, Baldwin was at Yellowstone Film Ranch on the set of a rebooted “Rust” production. Preparations for filming were underway Thursday at its new location in Montana, 18 months after the shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins shut it down, a representative for Rust Movie Productions said.

Baldwin was pointing a pistol at Hutchins during a rehearsal when it went off, killing Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza.

Baldwin has said the gun fired accidentally and he did not pull the trigger. An FBI forensic report found the weapon could not have fired unless the trigger was pulled, however.

John Day, a Santa Fe-based criminal defense attorney who is not involved with the “Rust” case, highlighted the arrival of a new prosecution team in late March and suggested it may have been a factor in the decision to dismiss the charge.

“This is very different from what the original prosecutor said,” he noted. “It does raise the question of initially the Santa Fe district attorney saying, ‘We’re holding Alec Baldwin responsible in part because of the role as CEO of the production and (that) it was a very sloppy production’ — does this mean that the new prosecutors have a different point of view?”

Gutierrez-Reed’s attorneys said they fully expect her to be exonerated in the judicial process.

“The truth about what happened will come out and the questions that we have long sought answers for will be answered,” the lawyers, Jason Bowles and Todd Bullion, said in a statement.

The case against Baldwin had already been diminishing. A weapons charge that would have meant a much longer sentence was dismissed, and the first special prosecutor appointed in the case resigned.

The A-list actor’s 40-year career has included the early blockbuster “The Hunt for Red October” and a starring role in the sitcom “30 Rock,” as well as iconic appearances in Martin Scorsese’s “The Departed” and a film adaptation of David Mamet’s “Glengarry Glen Ross.” In recent years he was known for his impression of former President Donald Trump on “Saturday Night Live.”

The 65-year-old has worked little since the shooting but hardly went into hiding. He stayed active on social media, making Instagram videos and posting podcast interviews and pictures of his wife and seven children.

“Rust” safety coordinator and assistant director David Halls pleaded no contest in March to a conviction for unsafe handling of a firearm and a suspended sentence of six months of probation.

Plans to resume filming were outlined last year by the cinematographer’s widower, Matthew Hutchins, in a proposed settlement to a wrongful death lawsuit that would make him an executive producer. Souza

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has said he will return to directing "Rust" to honor the legacy of Halyna Hutchins.

Despite the settlement, attorneys for the Hutchins family said they welcomed the criminal charges against Baldwin when they were filed. They had no immediate comment on the pending dismissal Thursday.

After a scathing safety review by regulators in New Mexico that detailed ignored complaints and misfires before Hutchins' death in October 2021, the production company agreed to pay a \$100,000 fine.

Baldwin has not traveled to New Mexico to appear in court, which is not required of him under state law. Evidentiary hearings had been scheduled for next month to determine whether to proceed toward trial.

Santa Fe District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies had said previously that her office is pursuing justice in the death of Hutchins and wants to show no one is above the law when it comes to firearms and public safety. She says the Ukrainian-born cinematographer's death was tragic and preventable.

Dalton reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press writer Susan Montoya Bryan in Albuquerque, New Mexico, contributed.

Twitter begins removing blue checks from users who don't pay

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

This time it's for real.

Many of Twitter's high-profile users are losing the blue checks that helped verify their identity and distinguish them from impostors on the Elon Musk-owned social media platform.

After several false starts, Twitter began making good on its promise Thursday to remove the blue checks from accounts that don't pay a monthly fee to keep them. Twitter had about 300,000 verified users under the original blue-check system — many of them journalists, athletes and public figures. The checks — which used to mean the account was verified by Twitter to be who it says it is — began disappearing from these users' profiles late morning Pacific Time.

High-profile users who lost their blue checks Thursday included Beyoncé, Pope Francis, Oprah Winfrey and former President Donald Trump.

The costs of keeping the marks range from \$8 a month for individual web users to a starting price of \$1,000 monthly to verify an organization, plus \$50 monthly for each affiliate or employee account. Twitter does not verify the individual accounts, as was the case with the previous blue check doled out during the platform's pre-Musk administration.

Celebrity users, from basketball star LeBron James to author Stephen King and Star Trek's William Shatner, have balked at joining — although on Thursday, all three had blue checks indicating that the account paid for verification.

King, for one, said he hadn't paid.

"My Twitter account says I've subscribed to Twitter Blue. I haven't. My Twitter account says I've given a phone number. I haven't," King tweeted Thursday. "Just so you know."

In a reply to King's tweet, Musk said "You're welcome namaste" and in another tweet he said he's "paying for a few personally." He later tweeted he was just paying for King, Shatner and James.

Singer Dionne Warwick tweeted earlier in the week that the site's verification system "is an absolute mess."

"The way Twitter is going anyone could be me now," Warwick said. She had earlier vowed not to pay for Twitter Blue, saying the monthly fee "could (and will) be going toward my extra hot lattes."

On Thursday, Warwick lost her blue check (which is actually a white check mark in a blue background).

For users who still had a blue check Thursday, a popup message indicated that the account "is verified because they are subscribed to Twitter Blue and verified their phone number." Verifying a phone number simply means that the person has a phone number and they verified that they have access to it — it does not confirm the person's identity.

It wasn't just celebrities and journalists who lost their blue checks Thursday. Many government agencies, nonprofits and public-service accounts around the world found themselves no longer verified, raising concerns that Twitter could lose its status as a platform for getting accurate, up-to-date information from

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authentic sources, including in emergencies.

While Twitter offers gold checks for “verified organizations” and gray checks for government organizations and their affiliates, it’s not clear how the platform does these out and they were not seen Thursday on many previously verified agency and public service accounts.

The official Twitter account of the New York City government, which earlier had a blue check, tweeted on Thursday that “This is an authentic Twitter account representing the New York City Government This is the only account for @NYCGov run by New York City government” in an attempt to clear up confusion.

A newly created spoof account with 36 followers (also without a blue check), disagreed: “No, you’re not. THIS account is the only authentic Twitter account representing and run by the New York City Government.”

Soon, another spoof account — purporting to be Pope Francis — weighed in too: “By the authority vested in me, Pope Francis, I declare @NYC_GOVERNMENT the official New York City Government. Peace be with you.”

Fewer than 5% of legacy verified accounts appear to have paid to join Twitter Blue as of Thursday, according to an analysis by Travis Brown, a Berlin-based developer of software for tracking social media.

Musk’s move has riled up some high-profile users and pleased some right-wing figures and Musk fans who thought the marks were unfair. But it is not an obvious money-maker for the social media platform that has long relied on advertising for most of its revenue.

Digital intelligence platform Similarweb analyzed how many people signed up for Twitter Blue on their desktop computers and only detected 116,000 confirmed sign-ups last month, which at \$8 or \$11 per month does not represent a major revenue stream. The analysis did not count accounts bought via mobile apps.

After buying San Francisco-based Twitter for \$44 billion in October, Musk has been trying to boost the struggling platform’s revenue by pushing more people to pay for a premium subscription. But his move also reflects his assertion that the blue verification marks have become an undeserved or “corrupt” status symbol for elite personalities, news reporters and others granted verification for free by Twitter’s previous leadership.

Twitter began tagging profiles with a blue check mark starting about 14 years ago. Along with shielding celebrities from impersonators, one of the main reasons was to provide an extra tool to curb misinformation coming from accounts impersonating people. Most “legacy blue checks,” including the accounts of politicians, activists and people who suddenly find themselves in the news, as well as little-known journalists at small publications around the globe, are not household names.

One of Musk’s first product moves after taking over Twitter was to launch a service granting blue checks to anyone willing to pay \$8 a month. But it was quickly inundated by impostor accounts, including those impersonating Nintendo, pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and Musk’s businesses Tesla and SpaceX, so Twitter had to temporarily suspend the service days after its launch.

The relaunched service costs \$8 a month for web users and \$11 a month for users of its iPhone or Android apps. Subscribers are supposed to see fewer ads, be able to post longer videos and have their tweets featured more prominently.

AP Technology Writer Matt O’Brien contributed to this report.

Transgender lawmaker silenced by Montana House speaker

By AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Montana’s House speaker on Thursday refused to allow a transgender lawmaker to speak about bills on the House floor until she apologizes for saying lawmakers would have “blood on their hands” if they supported a bill to ban gender-affirming medical care for transgender youth, the lawmaker said.

Rep. Zoey Zephyr, who was deliberately misgendered by a conservative group of lawmakers demanding her censure after Tuesday’s comments, said she will not apologize, creating a standoff between the first-term state lawmaker and Republican legislative leaders.

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Speaker Matt Regier refused to acknowledge Zephyr on Thursday when she wanted to comment on a bill seeking to put a binary definition of male and female into state code.

"It is up to me to maintain decorum here on the House floor, to protect the dignity and integrity," Regier said Thursday. "And any representative that I don't feel can do that will not be recognized."

Regier said the decision came after "multiple discussions" with other lawmakers and that previously there have been similar problems.

Democrats objected to Regier's decision, but the House Rules committee and the House upheld his decision on party-line votes.

"Hate-filled testimony has no place on the House floor," Republican Rep. Caleb Hinkle, a member of the Montana Freedom Caucus that demanded the censure, said in a statement.

Zephyr said she stands by what she said about the consequences of banning essential medical care for transgender youth.

"When there are bills targeting the LGBTQ community, I stand up to defend my community," Zephyr said. "And I choose my words with clarity and precision and I spoke to the real harms that these bills bring."

Regier also declined to recognize Zephyr Thursday when she rang in to speak about another bill, which was unrelated to LGBTQ+ issues and seeks to reimburse hotels that provide shelter to victims of human trafficking.

"The speaker is refusing to allow me to participate in debate until I retract or apologize for my statements made during floor debate," Zephyr said.

The issue came to a head Tuesday when Zephyr, the first transgender woman to hold a position in the Montana legislature, referenced the floor session's opening prayer when she told lawmakers if they supported the bill, "I hope the next time there's an invocation when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands."

She had made a similar comment when the bill was debated in the House the first time.

House Majority Leader Sue Vinton rebuked Zephyr on Tuesday, calling her comments inappropriate, disrespectful and uncalled for.

Later, the Montana Freedom Caucus issued its censure demand in a letter that called for a "commitment to civil discourse" in the same sentence in which it deliberately misgendered Zephyr. The caucus also misgendered Zephyr in a Tweet while posting the letter online.

"It is disheartening that the Montana Freedom Caucus would stoop so low as to misgender me in their letter, further demonstrating their disregard for the dignity and humanity of transgender individuals," Zephyr said in a statement Wednesday.

Zephyr also spoke emotionally and directly to transgender Montanans in February in opposing a bill to ban minors from attending drag shows.

"I have one request for you: Please stay alive," Zephyr said then, assuring them she and others would keep fighting and challenge the bills in court.

The legislature has also passed a bill stating a student misgendering or deadnaming a fellow student is not illegal discrimination, unless it rises to the level of bullying.

At the end of Thursday's House session, Democratic Rep. Marilyn Marler asked that the House majority allow Zephyr to speak on the floor going forward.

"This body is denying the representative ... the chance to do her job," Marler said.

Majority Leader Vinton, before moving for adjournment, said: "I will let the body know that the representative ... has every opportunity to rectify the situation."

The House meets again Friday afternoon.

Tennessee Republican lawmaker resigns after ethics violation

By JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A state lawmaker in Tennessee resigned suddenly for an ethics violation that became public Thursday, two weeks after he joined fellow Republicans in expelling two Black Democratic legislators for protesting in support of gun control on the state House floor.

Rep. Scotty Campbell, vice chair of the House Republican Caucus, violated the Legislature's workplace discrimination and harassment policy. The brief Ethics Subcommittee findings document from late March did not provide specifics and said no more information would be released.

Campbell's resignation came hours after a Nashville TV station confronted him about sexual harassment allegations involving legislative interns.

Campbell declined to provide a detailed account of what happened. Asked by WTVF-TV on Thursday about the ethics panel's decision, Campbell said, "I had consensual, adult conversations with two adults off property."

"If I choose to talk to any intern in the future, it will be recorded," Campbell said.

About six hours after the broadcaster questioned him, the Mountain City lawmaker issued his resignation effective immediately, according to a letter to fellow legislators.

WTVF-TV was first to report on the finding by the Ethics Subcommittee, which issued its decision in a document dated March 29 addressed to Republican House Speaker Cameron Sexton.

"I can't determine exactly when we saw it (the letter)," Sexton told reporters Thursday. "But, the determination was the subcommittee. The speaker has no role in putting out any kind of corrective action. That comes from the subcommittee."

Campbell stayed in office following the ethics finding, and on April 6 voted to expel Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson. They have since been reinstated. Campbell also voted to expel Democratic Rep. Gloria Johnson, who was spared expulsion by one vote.

Jones, Pearson and Johnson were targeted for expulsion for the March 30 protest at the front of the House floor in which hundreds of demonstrators packed the Capitol to call for passage of gun-control measures. Johnson called Campbell's ethics violation "horrendous" in a tweet Thursday afternoon.

"Yet if you talk without permission, you get expulsion resolutions," she added.

Expulsions are extremely rare in Tennessee, and considered an extraordinary action. Republicans have faced scrutiny about how they have chosen to wield, or not wield, the power.

Campbell's departure comes in the waning hours of a monthslong legislative session. GOP legislative leaders are trying to finish their work by the end of the week.

In 2019, lawmakers were under pressure to expel former Republican Rep. David Byrd after he faced accusations of sexual misconduct dating to when he was a high school basketball coach three decades ago.

At the time, Sexton said it was up to Byrd to decide whether he should continue in the Legislature.

"You have to balance the will of the voters and overturning the will of the voters," Sexton told WPLN in 2019, noting the allegations dated from 30 years earlier.

Byrd decided not to run for reelection in 2022.

Former Democratic Rep. Rick Staples of Knoxville, meanwhile, resigned a leadership position in 2019 after the same ethics panel found he had violated the Legislature's sexual harassment policy.

Often, expulsions have centered on a criminal conviction. Tennessee's state law and Constitution disqualify convicted felons from holding public office.

State lawmakers last ousted a House member in 2016 when the chamber voted 70-to-2 remove Republican Rep. Jeremy Durham after an attorney general's investigation detailed allegations of improper sexual contact with at least 22 women during his four years in office.

In 2017, a Republican House lawmaker resigned while facing allegations of inappropriate sexual contact with a woman at a legislative event. Before he stepped down, then-Rep. Mark Lovell denied the allegations. Instead, he said the elected position was more demanding than he expected and he needed time for his business interests and family.

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Meanwhile, former Republican Rep. Glen Casada became speaker in 2019 and resigned after months on the job, amid revelations that he and his then-chief of staff had exchanged sexually explicit text messages about women years earlier. But he remained in his seat and won reelection as a lawmaker in 2020, then didn't seek reelection in 2022. The former chief of staff lost his legislative job in the texting scandal.

Anti-abortion group blasts Trump over federal ban comments

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A major anti-abortion group blasted former President Donald Trump on the issue Thursday, saying his contention that abortion restrictions should be left up to individual states, not the federal government, is a "morally indefensible position for a self-proclaimed pro-life presidential candidate."

The Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America group was responding to a statement by Trump campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung for a Washington Post story about division among the 2024 GOP presidential field on abortion-related issues. The group has said it would not support any White House candidate who did not at a minimum support a 15-week federal abortion ban.

"The Supreme Court made clear in its decision that it was returning the issue to the people to decide through their elected representatives in the states and in Congress," the group's president, Marjorie Dannenfelser, said in a news release. "Holding to the position that it is exclusively up to the states is an abdication of responsibility by anyone elected to federal office."

The condemnation by one of the nation's largest anti-abortion groups amounted to a stunning rebuke of the former president, the leading contender for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination. His three nominations of conservative judges to the Supreme Court paved the way for the reversal of Roe v Wade, which had legalized abortion nationwide for nearly 50 years.

Cheung had told the Post that "President Donald J. Trump believes that the Supreme Court, led by the three Justices which he supported, got it right when they ruled this is an issue that should be decided at the State level."

Trump has referred to himself as "the most pro-life president in American history." But in the early months of his 2024 bid, he has often sidestepped the issue of abortion, even as Republicans across the country celebrate the Supreme Court decision stripping federal constitutional rights to abortion. He won't be among the GOP hopefuls gathering this weekend at the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition's spring kickoff but will instead be speaking to the group by video.

Last month in Iowa, Trump repeatedly refused to say whether he would support a federal law restricting abortion in every state, a move that anti-abortion activists have been demanding of the GOP's presidential contenders.

"We're looking at a lot of different things," Trump said when asked twice by the AP whether he supports a federal abortion ban.

Dannenfelser said in the statement Thursday that "life is a matter of human rights, not states' rights" and that Trump's characterization of last year's Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization case was wrong.

"President Trump's assertion that the Supreme Court returned the issue of abortion solely to the states is a completely inaccurate reading of the Dobbs decision and is a morally indefensible position for a self-proclaimed pro-life presidential candidate to hold," she said.

Pointing to a 2021 social media post from Dannenfelser's organization calling Trump "the most pro-life president in U.S. history," a spokesman for Trump's campaign also noted, "Even though much work remains to be done to defend the cause of life, President Trump believes it is in the States where the greatest advances can now take place to protect the unborn."

All of the candidates running in the Republican presidential primary or moving toward a bid have supported state bans on abortion. Most have been much more cautious about staking a position on a nationwide ban, though entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy's campaign has said he believes it's an issue for the states, not the federal government.

Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, who launched a presidential exploratory committee last week, has

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said he would support a federal law to prohibit abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis last week signed a state abortion ban that, if upheld by the courts, would ban the procedure after six weeks of pregnancy, or before many women know they are pregnant. It will take effect only if the state Supreme Court, which is controlled by conservatives, upholds Florida's current 15-week ban that is part of an ongoing legal challenge. The Florida ban would be one of the toughest in the U.S. But DeSantis has not made clear his position on whether such restrictions should be imposed across the country.

Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and one-time United Nations ambassador, has called abortion a "personal issue" that should be left to the states, though she has left open the possibility of a federal ban. Haley is scheduled to give a speech on abortion next week.

Former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, campaigning in Iowa, stopped short of saying whether he would support a federal six- or 15-week ban as president. "Obviously I would want to look at the bill," said Hutchinson, who as governor signed a law banning abortion after six weeks of pregnancy.

Trump's stance has provided an opening on the right for potential rivals like former Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian with long-held anti-abortion views.

Pence's advocacy group, Advancing American Freedom, has pushed for Congress to pass legislation including a national abortion ban beginning around six weeks.

Associated Press writer Sara Burnett in Chicago contributed to this report.

Meg Kinnard can be reached at <http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP>

House approves trans athlete ban for girls and women's teams

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transgender athletes whose biological sex assigned at birth was male would be barred from competing on girls or women's sports teams at federally supported schools and colleges under legislation pushed through Thursday by House Republicans checking off another high-profile item on their social agenda.

The bill approved by a 219-203 party-line vote is unlikely to advance further because the Democratic-led Senate will not support it and the White House said President Joe Biden would veto it.

Supporters said the legislation, which would put violators at risk of losing taxpayer dollars, is necessary to ensure competitive fairness. They framed the vote as supporting female athletes disadvantaged by having to compete against those whose gender identify does not match their sex assigned at birth.

Opponents criticized the bill as ostracizing an already vulnerable group merely for political gain.

The House action comes as at least 20 other states have imposed similar limits on trans athletes at the K-12 or collegiate level.

The bill would amend landmark civil rights legislation, known as Title IX, passed more than 50 years ago. It would prohibit recipients of federal money from permitting a person "whose sex is male" to participate in programs designated for women or girls. The bill defines sex as "based solely on a person's reproductive biology and genetics at birth."

The sponsor, Rep. Greg Steube, R-Fla., highlighted the case of Emma Weyant, a resident of his district and a 2020 member of the U.S. Olympic swimming team who finished second in the NCAA women's 500-yard freestyle championship last year. She was defeated by Lia Thomas, who had competed for three years on the University of Pennsylvania men's swimming team before joining the women's team.

"The integrity of women's sports must be protected," Steube said.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said it was a "great day for America, a great day for girls and women and for fairness in sports."

Democrats said every child regardless of gender identify deserves the opportunity to belong to a team and that preventing competitors from doing so sends the message that they don't matter.

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Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who has a transgender daughter, said Republicans were cruelly scapegoating transgender children to score political points. She said three-quarters of transgender students report having experienced harassment or discrimination at school and many have considered suicide.

"These bills tell some of the most vulnerable children in our country that they do not belong," Jayapal said. "Shame on you."

Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., said most people in the United States don't know anyone who is transgender and that can create fear for politicians to exploit. The bill, he said, does nothing to address the severe inequities in the resources dedicated to men's and women's sports.

He highlighted the stance taken by Gov. Spencer Cox, R-Utah, who last year vetoed a bill banning transgender students from playing girls sports. Cox said: "I struggle to understand so much of it and the science is conflicting. When in doubt however, I always try to err on the side of kindness, mercy and compassion."

Pocan noted that in Utah at the time of the veto there were four transgender players out of 85,000 competing in high school sports, with only one competing in girls sports.

"There's your raging national problem," Pocan said. "What's the Republicans response to this nonexistent issue? Hurt kids for being kids."

In a message this week threatening a veto, the White House said that being part of a team is an important part of growing up, staying engaged in school and learning leadership and life skills. It said a national ban that does not account for competitiveness or grade level targets people for who they are and is discriminatory.

The administration also has issued a proposed rule that would prevent any school or college that receives federal money from imposing a "one-size-fits-all" policy that categorically bans trans students from playing on sports teams consistent with their gender identity. Such policies would be considered a violation of Title IX.

Any limits would have to consider the sport, the level of competition and the age of students. Elementary school students would generally be allowed to participate on any teams consistent with their gender identity, for example. More competitive teams at high schools and colleges could add limits, but those would be discouraged in teams that don't have tryouts or cuts.

"We don't want biological men taking away the achievements of women who fought so hard to get where they are today," said Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., the first woman to graduate from The Citadel military college.

It was the latest proposal by newly empowered Republicans to win over parents concerned about what their children are experiencing in school.

But Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeke, R-Iowa, assessing Thursday's action, said, "Make no mistake, this is not a culture war." She spoke of those who "are trying to diminish and erase who we are as women and I will not stand for it."

Last month, the House passed a measure that would require schools to publish course studies and a list of books kept in libraries, as well as affirm parents' ability to meet with educators, speak at school board meetings and examine school budgets. That legislation is also not expected to advance, though it gives House supporters the chance to promote their vote for it during next year's election.

The American Civil Liberties Union condemned the vote and said that so far this year, more than 450 bills attacking the rights of transgender people have been introduced in state legislatures.

"Why are Republicans in Congress spending their time bullying children? This is not what voters elected them to do," said Deirdre Schifeling, the ACLU's national political director.

GOP senator demands DEA boss explain no-bid contracts, hires

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

A senior Republican on the Senate Judiciary committee is demanding that U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration chief Anne Milgram address allegations of improper hiring and contracting of her past associates.

The request Thursday by Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa follows an Associated Press investigation finding that a federal watchdog is investigating whether strict federal rules on no-bid contracting and hiring may

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have been violated to channel DEA work to Milgram's associates.

"These are serious allegations, and DEA must respond to them and clear the air," Grassley wrote in a letter sent to Milgram's office, a copy of which was obtained by the AP.

The scrutiny by the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General comes as the DEA is struggling with repeated revelations of agent misconduct and a fentanyl crisis claiming more than 100,000 overdose deaths a year that Milgram has called the "deadliest drug threat our country has ever faced."

The DEA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on the letter. But Milgram's boosters inside and outside the agency have defended her actions as part of an ongoing effort to clean house, recruit talented individuals and pursue innovative ways to protect national security and the health of the American people.

Much of Grassley's five-page letter focuses on a \$1.4 million no-bid contract to a Washington law firm for a recent review of the DEA's scandal-plagued foreign operations that he criticized for giving short shrift to agent misconduct and how to prevent it. That review was co-authored by Boyd Johnson, former right-hand man to one of Milgram's closest friends, Preet Bharara, when he was U.S. Attorney in Manhattan. Bharara himself landed at the firm, WilmerHale, even as the review was being conducted.

"The report by all measures fell well short of the mark, spending most of its scant 49 pages citing publicly-available sources or the DEA's operations manuals," Grassley wrote, demanding that Milgram provide any correspondence with WilmerHale where DEA issued instructions or suggested edits of the report. "Rather than answering the questions we had, this only raises new ones."

Grassley, who is also co-chair of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, said his office had received "multiple credible allegations" from whistleblowers of irregular hiring that point to possible waste of federal resources as well as conflicts of interests among DEA leadership.

Among them, he cites a nearly \$400,000 no-bid award for data analytics to Jose Cordero, a former law enforcement official who worked closely with Milgram when she served as New Jersey attorney general more than a decade ago. DEA awarded The Cordero Group a contract within three weeks of Milgram being confirmed by the Senate to head the agency on the basis of Cordero's record designing public safety strategies with rigorous crime data analysis.

"These do not appear to be skills that are possessed by only one company, which demands explanation of why the contract was awarded outside the normal bidding process required by law," Grassley wrote.

The Iowa Republican is also looking at whether Milgram or anyone else from the DEA directed contractors to specifically hire specific subcontractors, including a New York City publicist and a former Democratic congressional staffer who Milgram knew from a public safety project she helped run in Indianapolis while teaching at New York University's law school.

Goodman reported from Miami, Mustian from New York. Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

Biden 2024 campaign announcement coming as soon as next week

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will formally announce his 2024 reelection campaign as soon as next week, three people briefed on the discussions said Thursday.

The people, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said they were not aware that a final decision on timing had been made, but that Biden had been eyeing Tuesday, April 25, four years to the day since the Democrat entered the 2020 race. The upcoming announcement is expected to be in the form of a video released to supporters.

Biden, 80, has repeatedly said he intends to run for a second term but advisers say he has felt little need to jump into campaigning because he faces no significant opposition to his party's nomination.

It'll be a markedly different experience from four years ago, as when Biden was written off by much of the political establishment until he consolidated support as the candidate Democrats believed was best positioned to defeat then-President Donald Trump while the coronavirus pandemic raged. This time around,

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he will have to juggle the challenge of running for reelection while also running the country.

Biden in recent months has been focused on implementing the massive infrastructure, technology investment and climate laws passed during his first two years in office and drawing a sharp contrast with Republicans as Washington gears up for a fight over raising the nation's borrowing limit. Aides believe those priorities will burnish his image ahead of his reelection campaign.

The president, already the oldest person ever elected the job, will also need to contend with voter concerns about his fitness for the job. He has brushed aside those concerns, telling voters to "watch me," and aides say he plans to mount a robust campaign ahead of what they expect to be a close general election owing to the country's polarization, no matter who emerges as the GOP standard-bearer.

Biden has summoned top Democratic donors to Washington next week for what was expected to be a dinner with him and a strategy session with his chief political advisers.

The Washington Post first reported on the expected timing of the announcement.

BuzzFeed News to be shuttered in corporate cost cutting move

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

Pulitzer Prize winning digital media outlet BuzzFeed News is being shut down as part of a cost-cutting drive by its corporate parent that's shedding about 15% of its entire staff, adding to layoffs made earlier this year.

In a memo sent to staff, BuzzFeed Inc. co-founder and CEO Jonah Peretti said Thursday that in addition to the news division, layoffs would take place in its business, content, tech and administrative teams. BuzzFeed is also considering making job cuts in international markets.

BuzzFeed has about 1,200 total employees, according to a recent regulatory filing, meaning about 180 people will be losing their jobs in the latest cuts.

Peretti said in his memo that he "made the decision to overinvest" in the news division, but failed to recognize early enough that the financial support needed to sustain operations was not there.

Digital advertising has plummeted this year, cutting into the profitability of major tech companies from Google to Facebook. Waves of layoffs have rolled through the tech industry and more are expected.

"I've learned from these mistakes, and the team moving forward has learned from them as well," Peretti wrote in the memo. "We know that the changes and improvements we are making today are necessary steps to building a better future."

The announcement comes just a few months after BuzzFeed said that it would be cutting 12% of its workforce, citing worsening economic conditions. Job cuts at were also announced in December.

Christian Baesler, the BuzzFeed Inc.'s chief operating officer, and Edgar Hernandez, its chief revenue officer, are also leaving after they assist with the restructuring.

The company will have one remaining news brand, HuffPost, Peretti wrote.

Journalists who previously worked at BuzzFeed News lamented its end.

"I'm heartsick about it, and proud of the great journalism we did when I was there and after I left," said Ben Smith, BuzzFeed News' editor from 2011 to 2020 and now editor in chief of Semafor.

Smith made the controversial decision in 2017 to publish a "dossier" of information about then-President Donald Trump, though many outlets avoided it as unreliable and even BuzzFeed said there were serious reasons to doubt the allegations. He wrote then that "we have always erred on the side of publishing.

BuzzFeed News' shutdown "really marks the end of the marriage between news and social media," said Smith, author of "Traffic," a forthcoming history of that era.

BuzzFeed News won its first Pulitzer in 2021, in international reporting, for a series by Megha Rajagopalan, Alison Killing and Christo Buschek on the infrastructure built by the Chinese government for the mass detention of Muslims.

That same year, BuzzFeed News and the International Consortium of Journalists were finalists in that category for an expose on the global banking industry's role in money laundering. A former U.S. Treasury Department employee was sentenced to six months in prison this month for leaking the trove of confi-

dential financial reports that served as the basis for the series.

BuzzFeed said Thursday that all of the news division's work will be preserved and available within the BuzzFeed network. The company is also working to make sure that any stories currently in progress will be published and promoted on BuzzFeed properties.

Associated Press Media Writer David Bauder contributed to this report.

An end to the reading wars? More US schools embrace phonics

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Move over "Dick and Jane." A different approach to teaching kids how to read is on the rise.

For decades, two schools of thought have clashed on how to best teach children to read, with passionate backers on each side of the so-called reading wars. The battle has reached into homes via commercials for Hooked on Phonics materials and through shoebox dioramas assigned by teachers seeking to instill a love of literature.

But momentum has shifted lately in favor of the "science of reading." The term refers to decades of research in fields including brain science that point to effective strategies for teaching kids to read.

The science of reading is especially crucial for struggling readers, but school curricula and programs that train teachers have been slow to embrace it. The approach began to catch on before schools went online in spring 2020. But a push to teach all students this way has intensified as schools look for ways to regain ground lost during the pandemic — and as parents of kids who can't read demand swift change.

OK, CLASS. TIME FOR A HISTORY LESSON.

One historical approach to teaching reading was known as "whole language." (Close cousins of this approach are "whole word" and "look-say.") It focused on learning entire words, placing the emphasis on meaning. A famous example is the "Dick and Jane" series, which, like many modern-day books for early readers, repeated words frequently so students could memorize them.

The other approach involved phonics, with supporters arguing students need detailed instruction on the building blocks of reading. That meant lots of time on letter sounds and how to combine them into words.

In 2000, a government-formed National Reading Panel released the findings of its exhaustive examination of the research. It declared phonics instruction was crucial to teaching young readers, along with several related concepts.

Whole language had lost.

What emerged, though, was an informal truce that came to be known as "balanced literacy" and borrowed from both approaches. The goal: Get kids into books they found enjoyable as quickly as possible.

But in practice, phonics elements often got short shrift, said Michael Kamil, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University.

"It wasn't a true compromise," said Kamil, who had sat on the national reading panel. The approach often led to students learning how to guess words, instead of how to sound them out.

Now, as schools look to address low reading scores, phonics and other elements of the science of reading are getting fresh attention, fueled in part by a series of stories and podcasts by APM Reports. Textbook makers are adding more phonics, and schools have dumped some popular programs that lacked that approach.

WHAT IS THE SCIENCE OF READING?

While the phrase doesn't have a universal definition, it refers broadly to research in a variety of fields that relates to how a child's brain learns to read. Neuroscientists, for instance, have used MRIs to study the brains of struggling readers.

In practice, this science calls for schools to focus on the building blocks of words. Kindergartners might play rhyming games and clap out the individual syllables in a word to learn to manipulate sounds. Experts call this phonemic awareness.

Students later will learn explicitly how to make letter sounds and blend letters. To make sure students

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aren't just guessing at words, teachers might ask them to sound out so-called nonsense words, like "nant" or "zim."

Gone is rote memorization of word spellings. Instead, students learn the elements that make up a word. In a lesson using the word "unhappy," students would learn how the prefix "un-" changed the meaning of the base word.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For some kids, reading happens almost magically. Bedtime stories and perhaps a little "Sesame Street" are enough.

But 30% to 40% of kids will need the more explicit instruction that is part of the science of reading, said Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Other kids fall somewhere in between. "They're going to learn to read," said Shanahan, also one of the members of the 2000 panel and the former director of reading for Chicago Public Schools. "They're just not going to read as well as they could be or should be."

Complicating the situation, colleges of education often have stuck with balanced literacy despite concerns about its effectiveness. That means teachers graduate with little background on research-backed instructional methods.

The upshot: Parents often pick up the slack, paying for tutors or workbooks when their children struggle, Shanahan said. Extra help can be costly, contributing to racial and income-based disparities.

As a result, a growing number of NAACP chapters are pushing for wider adoption of the science of reading, describing literacy as a civil rights issue.

WHAT IS DYSLEXIA'S ROLE IN THE READING DEBATE?

Parents of children with dyslexia have led the push to use the science of reading. For them, the issue has special urgency. Kids with dyslexia can learn to read, but they need systematic instruction. When the wrong approach is used, they often flounder.

"I can't even tell you how many screaming fits we had," recalled Sheila Salmond, whose youngest child has dyslexia. "My daughter would come home and say, 'Mom, I'm not learning.' And then it became, 'Mom, I'm stupid.'"

Salmond found herself testifying before Missouri lawmakers, taking a graduate class so she could tutor her daughter and eventually moving her from a suburban Kansas City district to a parochial school. She now is making progress.

WHAT IS CHANGING?

Just a decade ago, it was rare for a state to have laws that mentioned dyslexia or the science of reading.

Now every state has passed some form of legislation. The laws variously define what dyslexia is, require that students are screened for reading problems and mandate that teachers are trained in the most effective strategies, said Mary Wennersten, of the International Dyslexia Association.

States often look to duplicate what has happened in Mississippi, which has credited reading gains to a curriculum revamp that started a decade ago. The multi-million dollar effort includes training teachers on the science of reading.

The changes have put some curriculum programs in the crosshairs.

Some Colorado districts, for instance, have ditched instructional materials that didn't pass muster under a state law that requires schools to use scientifically based reading programs. New York City, whose mayor often talks about his personal struggle with dyslexia, is making changes in its schools as well.

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE OF READING MEAN FOR PARENTS?

Should they be researching the tenets of the science of reading? Do they need to help their children form letters out of Play-Doh? What about drilling their kids on nonsense words? Flashcards?

Only if they want to, said Amelia Malone, director of research and innovation at the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

What parents must do, she said, is read to their kids. Otherwise, she recommends helping teachers when they ask for it and pushing for evidence-based practices in their children's schools.

"Parents can be part of the solution," she said, "if we educate them on why this is kind of the movement

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we need.”

The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Distrust in America: Small mistakes, deep fear — and gunfire

By TIM SULLIVAN and AARON MORRISON Associated Press

In suburban Detroit, it was a lost 14-year-old looking for directions. In Kansas City, it was a 16-year-old who went to the wrong house to pick up his younger brothers. There was the 12-year-old rummaging around in a yard in small-town Alabama, the 20-year-old woman who found herself in the wrong driveway in upstate New York and the cheerleader who got into the wrong car in Texas.

All of them, and dozens more across America, were met by gunfire. Some were injured, some killed.

In a nation where strangers are all too often seen as threats and fear has been politicized, honest mistakes and simple acts like going to the wrong address or car in a parking lot, or even just ringing the wrong doorbell, can seem like a fateful question of trust.

It is a tension not lost on Jae Moyer, who was at a rally at the federal courthouse in Kansas City on Tuesday, demanding a U.S. Department of Justice investigation into the shooting of Ralph Yarl, the Black teenager shot last week when he went to the door of an elderly white man while looking for his brothers. Yarl, who was shot in the head and arm, is recovering at home.

“I want to be welcoming and inviting to anyone that comes to my home. Even if they are asking for help and I can’t help them I’m going to be kind to them. I think that’s the way everyone should be,” Moyer said.

“But I don’t think that’s the culture we have right now,” Moyer said. “There’s a lot of fear in our country.” There is also plenty of mistrust.

AMERICAN SUSPICION

In the early 1970s, surveys showed that about half of America believed most people were trustworthy. By 2020, that number had fallen to less than one-third. Meanwhile, Americans have believed for decades that crime is going up — even in years when it is going down — and also wildly overestimate their chances of being a crime victim.

“Part of that is you guys,” said Warren Eller, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, referring to the media’s relentless focus on crime. “We get 24 hours a day of all the dangers out there.”

That’s hardly surprising. Politicians have long used crime as a wedge issue to gain footholds. Neighborhood message boards foment paranoia about suspicious outsiders. And local and national newscasts bombard TV viewers daily with images of grainy surveillance videos showing a variety of crimes and provocative headlines about cities in decay.

That includes shootings where innocent victims are shot by people who wrongly believe that they are under threat. While there are few statistics on these shootings, they appear to make up a very small percentage of the more than 15,000 people killed every year in the U.S. in firearm homicides.

And yet in just six days in April, four young people across the U.S. were shot — and the woman in New York killed — for being at what someone decided was the wrong place. Just Tuesday, a man shot and wounded two cheerleaders in a Texas supermarket parking lot after one said she mistakenly got into his car thinking it was her own. One cheerleader was grazed by a bullet and treated at the scene. Her teammate was shot in the leg and back.

This American mistrust has settled in as something that, while not normal, is less surprising than ever. And when mixed with legal confusion, easy access to weapons, poor firearms training and sometimes outright racism, it has produced a string of shootings like these that never seems to end.

Take the legal issues. Shooters in incidents like these often use defenses based on “stand-your-ground” laws, which have broadened people’s rights to defend themselves if they are threatened. But those laws, which have spread across America in the last 25 years, may have actually driven up violence.

A study published in 2022 by the JAMA Network Open, a peer-reviewed medical journal, found that

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monthly homicide rates increased between 8% and 11% in states with stand-your-ground laws.

"I think it has commonly become known of as a license to use deadly force whenever someone feels threatened," said Geoffrey Corn, the chair of criminal law at the Texas Tech University School of Law. He has extensively studied such laws, which he believes are deeply misunderstood by the public.

"The fear has to be justified by the circumstances," he said. "You don't get to kill somebody just because you fear them."

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Legal experts expect Andrew Lester, the 84-year-old man who shot Yarl, to claim self-defense and cite Missouri's stand-your-ground law. On Wednesday, he pleaded not guilty in Yarl's shooting.

Corn, a 22-year-military veteran, also wonders about America's recent boom in firearm sales and whether it has combined with insufficient training to compound the problem.

"What troubles me isn't that there are a lot of firearms, it's that nothing is required of someone who takes on the awesome responsibility" of wielding them, Corn said. Even in states that require firearms training, he says training is often insufficient, with poor explanations of self-defense laws.

When he was in the military, he had weeks of training before he was even allowed to touch a bullet. "I was always conscious of the awesome killing power of a firearm," he said.

Then there is the unavoidable question of race, a central pillar of American distrust across the centuries.

False notions about threats posed by nonwhite people have played out repeatedly in modern American history, including in a number of high-profile cases when assailants attacked Black or Hispanic people who they believed meant them harm, even when no threat was apparent.

Yarl's shooting has drawn comparisons to the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, 17, a Black teenager visiting his father's home in a gated Florida community when George Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchman, decided he looked suspicious and shot him to death. Zimmerman was acquitted after a trial in which his attorneys essentially used the state's stand-your-ground law as a defense.

It also echoes the case of Renisha McBride, a Black woman who knocked on doors in a Detroit-area community in 2013, seeking help after a car accident. She was fatally shot by a white resident who fired through his screen door, saying he feared she meant him harm.

These cases, said Ibram X. Kendi, the bestselling author of books on racism and founder of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, occurred because people of all races and backgrounds are groomed to fear Black people as more prone to criminality and violence.

"No one is born fearing another person because of their skin color," Kendi said. "There's so many different ways in which people are taught that Black people are dangerous, and those ideas actually create all sorts of dangers for Black people, including Black teenagers."

"The more we unlearn that idea and realize that we can't attach danger to skin color in any way," he said, "the less likely people are going to be to use lethal force against a 16-year-old child who is ringing their doorbell."

This story has been corrected to show the Kansas City rally was held at the federal courthouse, not police headquarters.

AP researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York and writer Margaret Stafford in Kansas City, Missouri contributed to this report.

Why Sudan's conflict matters to the rest of the world

By The Associated Press undefined

Fighting in Sudan between forces loyal to two top generals has put that nation at risk of collapse and could have consequences far beyond its borders.

Both sides have tens of thousands of fighters, foreign backers, mineral riches and other resources that could insulate them from sanctions. It's a recipe for the kind of prolonged conflict that has devastated

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other countries in the Middle East and Africa, from Lebanon and Syria to Libya and Ethiopia.

The fighting, which began as Sudan attempted to transition to democracy, already has killed hundreds of people and left millions trapped in urban areas, sheltering from gunfire, explosions and looters.

A look at what is happening and the impact it could have outside Sudan.

WHO IS FIGHTING?

Gen. Abdel Fattah Burhan, head of the armed forces, and Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces that grew out of Darfur's notorious Janjaweed militias, are each seeking to seize control of Sudan. It comes two years after they jointly carried out a military coup and derailed a transition to democracy that had begun after protesters in 2019 helped force the ouster of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. In recent months, negotiations were underway for a return to the democratic transition.

The victor of the latest fighting is likely to be Sudan's next president, with the loser facing exile, arrest or death. A long-running civil war or partition of the Arab and African country into rival fiefdoms are also possible.

Alex De Waal, a Sudan expert at Tufts University, wrote in a memo to colleagues this week that the conflict should be seen as "the first round of a civil war."

"Unless it is swiftly ended, the conflict will become a multi-level game with regional and some international actors pursuing their interests, using money, arms supplies and possibly their own troops or proxies," he wrote.

WHAT DOES THE FIGHTING MEAN FOR SUDAN'S NEIGHBORS?

Sudan is Africa's third-largest country by area and straddles the Nile River. It uneasily shares its waters with regional heavyweights Egypt and Ethiopia. Egypt relies on the Nile to support its population of over 100 million, and Ethiopia is working on a massive upstream dam that has alarmed both Cairo and Khartoum.

Egypt has close ties to Sudan's military, which it sees as an ally against Ethiopia. Cairo has reached out to both sides in Sudan to press for a cease-fire but is unlikely to stand by if the military faces defeat.

Sudan borders five additional countries: Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, Eritrea and South Sudan, which seceded in 2011 and took 75% of Khartoum's oil resources with it. Nearly all are mired in their own internal conflicts, with various rebel groups operating along the porous borders.

"What happens in Sudan will not stay in Sudan," said Alan Boswell of the International Crisis Group. "Chad and South Sudan look most immediately at risk of potential spillover. But the longer (the fighting) drags on the more likely it is we see major external intervention."

WHAT EXTERNAL POWERS ARE INTERESTED IN SUDAN?

Arab Gulf countries have looked to the Horn of Africa in recent years as they have sought to project power across the region.

The United Arab Emirates, a rising military power that has expanded its presence across the Middle East and East Africa, has close ties to the Rapid Support Forces, which sent thousands of fighters to aid the UAE and Saudi Arabia in their war against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Russia, meanwhile, has long harbored plans to build a naval base capable of hosting up to 300 troops and four ships in Port Sudan, on a crucial Red Sea trading route for energy shipments to Europe.

The Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary outfit with close ties to the Kremlin, has made inroads across Africa in recent years and has been operating in Sudan since 2017. The United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on two Wagner-linked gold mining firms in Sudan accused of smuggling.

WHAT ROLE DO WESTERN COUNTRIES PLAY?

Sudan became an international pariah when it hosted Osama bin Laden and other militants in the 1990s, when al-Bashir had empowered a hard-line Islamist government.

Its isolation deepened over the conflict in the western Darfur region in the 2000s, when Sudanese forces and the Janjaweed were accused of carrying out atrocities while suppressing a local rebellion. The International Criminal Court eventually charged al-Bashir with genocide.

The U.S. removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism after the government in Khartoum agreed to forge ties with Israel in 2020.

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But billions of dollars in loans and aid were put on hold after the 2021 military coup. That, along with the war in Ukraine and global inflation, sent the economy into free-fall.

CAN EXTERNAL POWERS DO ANYTHING TO STOP THE FIGHTING?

Sudan's economic woes would seem to provide an opening for Western nations to use economic sanctions to pressure both sides to stand down.

But in Sudan, as in other resource-rich African nations, armed groups have long enriched themselves through the shadowy trade in rare minerals and other natural resources.

Dagalo, a one-time camel herder from Darfur, has vast livestock holdings and gold mining operations. He's also believed to have been well-paid by Gulf countries for the RSF's service in Yemen battling Iran-aligned rebels.

The military controls much of the economy, and can also count on businessmen in Khartoum and along the banks of the Nile who grew rich during al-Bashir's long rule and who view the RSF as crude warriors from the hinterlands.

"Control over political funds will be no less decisive than the battlefield," De Waal said. "(The military) will want to take control of gold mines and smuggling routes. The RSF will want to interrupt major transport arteries including the road from Port Sudan to Khartoum."

Meanwhile, the sheer number of would-be mediators — including the U.S., the U.N., the European Union, Egypt, Gulf countries, the African Union and the eight-nation eastern Africa bloc known as IGAD — could render any peace efforts more complicated than the war itself.

"The external mediators risk becoming a traffic jam with no policeman," De Waal said.

Associated Press writers Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Rodney Muhumuza in Kampala, Uganda, and Joseph Krauss in Ottawa, Ontario, contributed.

SpaceX giant rocket explodes minutes after launch from Texas

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas (AP) — SpaceX's giant new rocket exploded minutes after blasting off on its first test flight Thursday and crashed into the Gulf of Mexico.

Elon Musk's company was aiming to send the biggest and most powerful rocket ever built on a round-the-world trip from the southern tip of Texas, near the Mexican border. The nearly 400-foot (120-meter) Starship carried no people or satellites.

SpaceX later said multiple engines on the 33-engine booster were not firing as the rocket ascended, causing it to lose altitude and begin to tumble. The rocket was intentionally destroyed by its self-destruct system, exploding and plummeting into the water.

Instead of a best-case-scenario 1 1/2-hour flight with the spacecraft on top peeling away and taking a lap around the world, the whole thing lasted four minutes. The rocket reached a maximum speed of about 1,300 mph (2,100 kph) and as high as 24 miles (39 kilometers), before going sideways and dropping.

Throngs of spectators watched from South Padre Island, several miles away from the Boca Chica Beach launch site, which was off-limits. As Starship lifted off with a thunderous roar, the crowd screamed: "Go, baby, go!"

Musk, in a tweet, called it "an exciting test launch of Starship! Learned a lot for next test launch in a few months." SpaceX termed it a "rapid unscheduled disassembly."

In the weeks leading up to the flight, Musk gave 50-50 odds that the spacecraft would reach orbit. He stressed that clearing the launch tower and not blowing up the pad would be a win.

"You never know exactly what's going to happen," said SpaceX livestream commentator and engineer John Insprucker. "But as we promised, excitement is guaranteed and Starship gave us a rather spectacular end."

At liftoff, the rocket kicked up huge plumes of sand and dust around the pad. In Port Isabel, about 10 miles (6 kilometers) away, particles covered cars and other surfaces. The only other report, said John Sandoval, assistant to the city manager, was a shattered window at a local business. "Yes, it shook, rattled

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and rolled," he said of the rocket.

The Federal Aviation Administration said it would oversee the accident investigation, noting that no injuries or public property damage were reported. The agency also said that until it determines that there is no threat to public safety, Starships are grounded.

SpaceX intends to use Starship to send people and cargo to the moon and, eventually, Mars. NASA has reserved a Starship for its next moonwalking team, and rich tourists are already booking lunar flybys.

Despite the abbreviated flight, congratulations poured in from NASA chief Bill Nelson and others in the space industry. Retired Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield tweeted, "Huge accomplishment, huge lessons, onwards to the next attempt."

"It fell somewhere between a small step and their hoped-for giant leap, but it still represents significant progress toward a reusable super-heavy lift rocket," University of Chicago's Jordan Bimm, a space historian, said in an email.

At 394 feet and nearly 17 million pounds of thrust, Starship easily surpasses NASA's moon rockets — past, present and future. NASA successfully launched its new 322-foot (98-meter) moon rocket last November on a test flight, sending the empty Orion capsule around the moon.

The stainless steel Starship rocket is designed to be fully reusable with fast turnaround, dramatically lowering costs, similar to what SpaceX's smaller Falcon rockets have done soaring from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Nothing was to be saved from this test flight, with the spacecraft — if all had gone well — aiming for a watery grave in the Pacific near Hawaii.

The futuristic spacecraft flew several miles into the air during testing a few years ago, landing successfully only once. But this was the inaugural launch of the first-stage booster with 33 methane-fueled engines.

SpaceX has more boosters and spacecraft lined up for more test flight; the next set is almost ready to go. Musk wants to fire them off in quick succession, so he can start using Starships to launch satellites into low-Earth orbit and then put people on board.

It was the second launch attempt. Monday's try was scrapped by a frozen booster valve.

Jason and Lisa Flores drove down from Corpus Christi to watch the launch with their daughter, and noticed something was amiss.

Lisa Flores cried seeing the liftoff and then realized, "It's not working out the way it was supposed to."

Elizabeth Trujillo, 13, wearing a "Star Wars" shirt and carrying toy binoculars, skipped school to see the launch from the beach with her mother and other relatives. The crowd cheered when Starship cleared the tower.

Despite the failed attempt, "it was worth it," said Jessica Trujillo, Elizabeth's mother. "Just hearing and seeing the view, the excitement of the crowd, it was priceless."

"Practice makes perfect. They just got to practice some more," she added.

AP reporter Valerie Gonzalez contributed.

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As US sports bets boom, internet gambling is slow to expand

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — While two-thirds of the country now offers legal sports betting, only six states offer online casino gambling, confounding industry hopes that the rapid growth of sports betting would also bring internet casino wagering along with it.

Speaking Wednesday at the East Coast Gaming Congress in Atlantic City, industry executives and legislators from gambling states offered various explanations for why internet gambling has yet to expand beyond a handful of eastern states.

Internet gambling is legal in New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Pennsylvania and West Virginia; Nevada offers online poker but not casino games.

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By contrast, 33 states plus Washington, D.C. offer legal sports betting.

"It's a mystery to me why we have 30 or so states that have sports wagering, and only six that allow I-gaming," said Lloyd Levenson, an attorney who represents many Atlantic City casino companies. "You have to scratch your head as to why."

Shawn Fluharty, the minority whip of the West Virginia House of Delegates, said the disparity is surprising because internet gambling brings in much more money than sports betting does. He said in his state, it takes three months of sports betting revenue to match a single month of online casino revenue.

Some in the gambling industry, as well as in state houses around the country, continue to fear that authorizing internet gambling will cannibalize revenue that would otherwise go to brick-and-mortar casinos — even though the experience of states like New Jersey has shown that not to be the case.

Internet gambling brought in \$1.6 billion in New Jersey in 2022, up more than 21% from a year earlier. Atlantic City's nine casinos won nearly \$2.8 billion from in-person gamblers, an increase of 9% from the previous year.

Indiana state Sen. Jon Ford said his state tried unsuccessfully to pass internet gambling this year, an effort that was at least partly undone by an analytical report from legislative researchers that worried that online gambling would eat into revenue from brick and mortar casinos to an unacceptable extent.

"I question the validity of that report," he said, adding he plans to try again next year to get the bill passed.

Howard Glaser, global head of government affairs with Light & Wonder, the gambling equipment manufacturer, said efforts to expand internet gambling are "dead in every state this year."

"Where we run into a problem is there is a realization that this is about revenue — who gets a piece of the pie?" he said.

Glaser said many casino companies are reluctant to give a perceived foothold to companies "that they view as an existential threat. There's a fight for dominance within the casino industry about who gets growth."

Fluharty said about 65% of the country is governed by Republican-controlled state legislatures, a group he said is less likely to favor gambling at all, let alone expanding it.

But he and others said that with federal pandemic-related aid coming to a close, states will once again be looking for money to avoid raising taxes. That should give internet gambling another look in many places, they said.

Panelists agreed that New York and Indiana are among the states most likely to add internet gambling in the next two years. Fluharty also said states that recently adopted sports betting might also be likely to add internet gambling, including Ohio.

"There's been a push in New York; this just wasn't the year to get it done," said Jordan Bender, a senior equity research analyst with JMP Securities. "That's a market we estimate can get to \$3 billion, That's a massive, massive number."

Duane Bouligny, a managing director with Wells Fargo Bank, said Texas remains a longshot possibility.

"There has been a shift in tone in the last two or three years, where there is a future for gaming in Texas," he said, adding he does not expect it to happen anytime soon.

Other possibilities include Iowa or Illinois, they said.

Siobhan Lane, CEO of Gaming for Light & Wonder, said she is optimistic about the likely expansion of internet gambling.

"I-gaming is still in its infancy in the U.S.," she said. "We know that will change. The revenues being generated in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Michigan are just far too great for other states to ignore for long."

This story was first published on April 19, 2023. It was updated on April 20, 2023, to correct the title of Siobhan Lane of Light & Wonder. She is CEO of Gaming for the company, not CEO of the company.

Follow Wayne Parry on Twitter at www.twitter.com/WayneParryAC

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Muslims end Ramadan, begin holiday amid war, reconciliation

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB and NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Large parts of the Muslim world marked the end of the fasting month of Ramadan at sundown Thursday and ushered in the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, but the festivities were overshadowed by raging battles for control of Sudan and a deadly stampede in Yemen.

In other parts of the region, the holiday came against the backdrop of reconciliation and rapprochement between former rivals.

The Islamic calendar is lunar and depends on the sighting of the moon — something Muslim religious authorities tend to disagree on. Ramadan sees worshippers fasting daily from dawn to sunset, ending with Eid al-Fitr celebrations.

This year again, the holiday comes amid fighting and devastation, particularly in the Middle East.

In Sudan, the holiday was eclipsed by raging battles between the army and its rival paramilitary force, despite two attempted cease-fires. The fighting since Saturday has killed hundreds of people and wounded thousands.

In Yemen, the Arab world's most impoverished nation, a stampede late Wednesday at a charitable event in the rebel-held capital of Sanaa killed at least 78 people and injured 77.

Religious authorities in both Sudan and Yemen said they will mark the start of Eid al-Fitr on Friday.

In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population worldwide, the second-largest Islamic group, Muhammadiyah — with over 60 million members — said that according to its astronomical calculations, the holiday of Eid al-Fitr starts on Friday. However, the country's religious affairs minister had announced on Thursday that the start of the holiday would fall on Saturday.

In some places, tensions and fighting had calmed. Long-time Mideast rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed last month to restore diplomatic ties after China-brokered negotiations — an ongoing reconciliation that has deescalated proxy wars in the region.

Saudi officials and Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen recently began talks in Sanaa and during the last days of Ramadan exchanged hundreds of prisoners captured in Yemen's civil war, which erupted in 2014.

Riyadh also sent its top diplomat to Syria to meet with President Bashar Assad on Tuesday, a significant step towards ending his political isolation and potentially returning the war-torn country to the Arab League.

However, Tehran and Riyadh disagreed on the start of the holiday — for Saudis, Eid al-Fitr would begin Friday while officials in Iran said it starts on Saturday.

The start of the holiday is traditionally based on sightings of the new moon, which vary according to geographic location, while some countries rely on astronomical calculations rather than physical sightings to determine the start of Eid al-Fitr.

United Arab Emirates and Qatar, followed Saudi Arabia and announced the holiday would begin for them on Friday, while their Gulf Arab neighbor, Oman, declared that the moon had not been sighted and the holiday would begin on Saturday.

Iraq's Sunni authorities announced the holiday would begin Friday, while the country's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, set a Saturday start date. The governments of Lebanon and Syria, both in the throes of crippling economic crises, said Friday would mark the beginning of the dayslong holiday.

Indonesia's Security Minister Mohammad Mahfud called on Muslims to be respectful of each other's celebrations, and asked Muhammadiyah members to have their holiday feasts at home — in consideration of the Muslims who would still be fasting on Friday.

The country's roads and highways were gridlocked as millions crammed into trains, ferries, busses and on motorcycles, as they left cities to return to their villages to celebrate with family. The government estimated that more than 123 million travelers were expected to crisscross the vast archipelago that spans 17,000 islands, with about 18 million departing from Jakarta's greater metropolitan area.

Meanwhile, clerics of Pakistan's state-backed moon sighting committee announced at a news conference in Islamabad that Eid al-Fitr would be celebrated on Saturday in Pakistan as there were no sightings of the moon there.

Egypt and Jordan said that for them, Eid al-Fitr would begin on Friday. In divided Libya, the religious

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authorities based in the capital of Tripoli, said it would start on Saturday. In the country's east, run by a rival administration, authorities marked Friday as the start.

In Afghanistan, the head of the Taliban-appointed judiciary, Abdul Hakim Haqqani, also said the holiday would start on Friday.

Karmini reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. Associated Press writers Abby Sewell in Beirut, Samy Magdy in Cairo, and Munir Ahmad and Rahim Faiez in Islamabad contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show that one of Libya's rival administrations in the country's capital said the holiday would start on Saturday, the other said Friday.

IRS agent alleges Hunter Biden probe is being mishandled

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An IRS special agent is seeking whistleblower protection to disclose information about what the agent alleges is mishandling of an investigation into President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, according to a letter sent to members of Congress.

Mark Lytle, the attorney for the IRS whistleblower, wrote to lawmakers Wednesday that his client has information about a "failure to mitigate clear conflicts of interest in the ultimate disposition" of a criminal investigation related to the younger Biden's taxes and whether he made a false statement in connection with a gun purchase.

"Despite serious risks of retaliation, my client is offering to provide you with information necessary to exercise your constitutional oversight function and wishes to make the disclosures in a nonpartisan manner to the leadership of the relevant committees on both sides of the political aisle," Lytle said in a letter, obtained by The Associated Press, that was sent to the chairmen and ranking members of several House and Senate committees.

The letter states that the supervisory special agent previously disclosed the information they are seeking to share with Congress internally with the IRS and a watchdog for the Justice Department. Lytle added that his client is able to contradict sworn testimony to lawmakers "by a senior political appointee." That appointee is not named.

The special agent also wants to disclose "examples of preferential treatment and politics improperly infecting decisions and protocols that would normally be followed by career law enforcement professionals in similar circumstances if the subject were not politically connected," the lawyer added.

"The president respects the rule of law and the independence of the Department of Justice," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during a briefing Thursday. The Justice Department declined to comment. Hunter Biden's legal team had no immediate comment. A request for comment from the IRS was not immediately returned.

Hunter Biden's taxes and foreign business work have been under federal investigation by a federal grand jury in Delaware since at least 2018. So far no charges have been filed. Additionally, his membership on the board of a Ukrainian energy company and his efforts to strike deals in China have long raised questions by Republicans about whether he traded on his father's public service.

Joe Biden has said he has never spoken to his son about foreign business. There are no indications that the federal investigation involves the president.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a congressional hearing last month that he won't interfere with the department's investigation.

He told the Senate Judiciary Committee that he has left the matter in the hands of U.S. Attorney David Weiss, the top federal prosecutor in Delaware, who would be empowered to expand his investigation outside the state if needed.

"He has been advised he is not to be denied anything he needs," Garland said. "I have not heard anything from that office to suggest that they are not able to do everything the U.S. Attorney wants to do."

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The whistleblower letter, first reported by The Wall Street Journal, comes as House Republicans have opened their own investigations into nearly every facet of Hunter Biden's business dealings, including examining foreign payments and other aspects of his finances.

Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., the chairman of the House Oversight Committee, recently reviewed financial transactions by members of the Biden family that were flagged for attention. Those financial reports are routine, with larger financial transactions automatically flagged to the government, and are not evidence on their own of misconduct.

But Comer, who has been leading the various probes into Hunter Biden, said the whistleblower letter is further evidence of the importance of congressional inquiry into the president and his family.

"It's deeply concerning that the Biden Administration may be obstructing justice by blocking efforts to charge Hunter Biden for tax violations," Comer said in a statement Thursday.

'Too much to learn': Schools race to catch up kids' reading

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Michael Crowder stands nervously at the front of his third grade classroom, his mustard-yellow polo shirt buttoned to the top.

"Give us some vowels," says his teacher, La'Neeka Gilbert-Jackson. His eyes search a chart, but he doesn't land on an answer. "Let's help him out," Gilbert-Jackson says.

"A-E-I-O-U," the class says in unison.

Michael missed most of first grade, the foundational year for learning to read. It was the first fall of the pandemic, and for months Atlanta only offered school online. Michael's mom had just had a baby, and there was no quiet place in their small apartment. He missed part of second grade, too. So, like most of his classmates at his Atlanta school, he isn't reading at the level expected for a third grader.

That poses an urgent problem.

Third grade is the last chance for Michael's class to master reading with help from teachers before they face more rigorous expectations. If Michael and his classmates don't read fluently by the time this school year ends, research shows they're less likely to complete high school. Pandemic-fueled school interruptions have raised the stakes. Nationally, third graders lost more ground in reading than kids in older grades.

To address learning loss, Atlanta has been one of the only cities in the country to add class time — 30 minutes a day for three years.

Gilbert-Jackson hopes it will be enough. The school year has been a race to prepare her students for future classes, where reading well is a gateway to everything else.

"Yes, I work you hard," she says about her students. "Because we have too much to learn."

Right before December vacation, Gilbert-Jackson's class is subdued and visibly tired. But Gilbert-Jackson moves on with her lessons.

She reviews suffixes, how to spell words ending in -ch, -tch, and how to make words plural. Some students have spellings memorized; for those who don't, Gilbert-Jackson explains the rules. It's a phonics-based program the district now mandates for all third graders, in line with science-backed curricula gaining momentum across the country.

It can be dry and tedious stuff, replete with obscure jargon like "digraph" and "trigraph." The strong readers nod and respond, but the students still learning the basics look lost.

To inject fun into the lesson, Gilbert-Jackson turns it into a quiz game.

"Teach," Gilbert-Jackson calls out. "How do you spell teach?"

Students choose between "teach" and "teatch."

"Yes!" some of the children shout.

Only half got it right.

As the first semester draws to a close, 14 of Gilbert-Jackson's 19 students aren't meeting expectations for reading. That includes Michael.

Gilbert-Jackson has an important advantage: She taught Michael and most of his classmates in first grade

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and second grade, and followed them to third. She knows how much school many of them missed — and why. The strategy was adopted by Boyd Elementary to give students consistency through the crisis.

The long-term connection — or perhaps just the continuity of attending school daily — has helped Michael start reading. At the end of first grade he knew two of the so-called “sight words” — “a” and “the.” By that point, first graders were expected to have memorized 200 of these high-frequency words that aren’t easily decodable by new readers.

Now, midway through third grade, he is reading like a mid-year first grader. It’s progress, Gilbert-Jackson says.

“I see a change in him,” says Michael’s stepfather, Rico Morton. “I feel like he has the potential to be someone.”

Michael isn’t the only student who’s still far behind.

In a couple cases, Gilbert-Jackson believes students’ parents were doing work for them when school was online. “Let’s say she does go to fourth grade: Nobody is going to read anything to her,” she says of one such student. “I don’t want to set them up for failure.”

On paper, Atlanta’s policy is to promote elementary school students who “master” reading, math and other subjects. But how often the district actually holds students back is unclear. Atlanta’s school system did not respond to requests for data.

Atlanta students can attend four weeks of summer school, but that likely won’t be enough to catch them up.

Before leaving for Christmas vacation, Gilbert-Jackson started reaching out to students’ parents to talk about how their children were progressing. The parents of some struggling readers don’t return her calls.

One day in late February, Gilbert-Jackson asks her students to revise a narrative they’d each been writing about a glowing rock.

One new student, a boy with a 100-watt smile, had transferred from another school. Instead of taking out his narrative, he chooses a book from the class library and starts writing. A few minutes later, he presents his notebook to Keione Vance, the teacher’s assistant.

“I know you just copied it,” she says.

She asks him to read to her. He happily starts on the book, aimed at a first grade reading level. He struggles with words: nice, true, voice, sure, might, outside, and because.

When he arrived in November, it appeared he needed “to learn everything from first, second and third grade,” says Gilbert-Jackson.

Gilbert-Jackson worries she isn’t serving her new students as well as she’d like. “This train has been running for three years,” she says. “I can’t start over.”

As the other students keep working, some ask Gilbert-Jackson to read their stories. Some are written in complete sentences. Others lack punctuation and have misspellings throughout.

“Mrs. Gilbert-Jackson cannot be the person who says when your final draft is ready,” she tells the class. “I’m not going to be there when you are in fourth grade.”

Gilbert-Jackson and the other third grade teachers are so concerned about their students’ reading and math skills, they decided after Christmas break to cut back on social studies and science.

The extra time may have helped. Now only seven of the 19 students are below grade level in reading. Of the students who are still behind, Gilbert-Jackson is the least worried about one: Michael Crowder. She’s confident he’ll find a way to navigate the new world ahead of him — even if there is too much to learn.

“He wants it,” she says. “He’ll catch up.”

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More peril for Trump in pending probes than NY: AP-NORC poll

By JILL COLVIN and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump has emerged largely unscathed politically from his New York indictment. But a new poll suggests that investigations in Georgia and Washington could prove more problematic.

Only 4 in 10 U.S. adults believe Trump acted illegally in New York, where he has been charged in connection with hush money payments made to women who alleged sexual encounters, according to the new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. More — about half — believe he broke the law in Georgia, where he is under investigation for interfering in the 2020 election vote count.

The poll finds about half feel similarly about his role in the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and his handling of classified documents found at Mar-a-Lago, which are both under investigation by the Justice Department.

The findings suggest potential future charges in those cases against Trump may resonate more deeply with the American public than his alleged cover-up of payments to porn actor Stormy Daniels and other women at the height of the 2016 campaign — charges that nearly 6 in 10 adults believe were politically motivated. While the case drew intense media coverage and made Trump the first former president in U.S. history to be charged criminally, legal experts have long argued that the other investigations pose far more serious potential risk.

The Georgia case, in particular, concerns even some longtime Trump supporters.

"I just feel like he kind of got himself involved in something that he shouldn't have. I don't know if it's necessarily illegal, but just let the votes be the votes," said Stephanie Trinidad, a Republican who lives in Dracut, Massachusetts, and voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020.

The poll offers further evidence that Trump has faced limited political fallout from the indictment, which instead proved a massive fundraising boon. His campaign has raised more than \$15 million since news of the indictment broke — much from new donors — and he has rolled out a list of new endorsements.

While the poll finds only 30% of Americans, including 55% of Republicans, say they want Trump to run for president again in 2024, those numbers have changed little since an AP-NORC poll conducted in January. Trump's favorability has also held constant: 34% of U.S. adults overall and 68% of Republicans say they have a favorable opinion of him, similar to three months ago.

Still, Trump, who remains the undisputed front-runner for the Republican nomination, would face substantial headwinds if he wins the Republican nomination. About half of Americans — 53% — say they will definitely not support him in the general election if he emerges as the GOP nominee, according to the poll.

When it comes to the New York case, the poll found 41% say Trump did something illegal. Thirty-three percent say they believe he did something unethical but not illegal. Only a small minority — 14% — say he did nothing wrong.

A majority of Americans — 57% — say Trump's indictment in the case was justified, the poll shows, but just as many say they believe the charges were politically motivated.

They include Gino Lentine, a loyal Trump supporter from Akron, Ohio, who said he doesn't "give two hoots" about the case.

"If you're going to lock up every guy in the world — and every girl — who cheated on their spouse and paid them off, you're going to have to lock up the whole country," said Lentine, 57.

"In my book, he's innocent — well, maybe guilty, but who cares?" he said. "Who cares if he spent \$100,000? Nobody cares. It's costing me \$100,000 to put gas in my car. Come on."

The poll's New York findings represents a rosier picture for Trump than in Georgia, where Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis has been investigating whether Trump and his allies illegally meddled in Georgia's 2020 presidential election. The foreperson of a special grand jury convened to hear evidence in the case said the panel recommended that Willis indict over a dozen people, including possibly Trump, who was recorded asking state election officials to "find 11,780 votes" to help him win. It is now up to Willis to decide whether to pursue charges.

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But already in the Georgia case, the poll finds 53% say they think Trump broke the law. Twelve percent say he did something they consider unethical but not illegal, while 17% said he did nothing wrong.

Trinidad, 36, said she sees the flurry of investigations Trump faces as a politically motivated distraction aimed at keeping him from winning the White House again. But when it comes to the Georgia case, she said, "I just feel it is a little bit different."

"Once you start getting into our voting system and counts, then I start to get a little wary because that's literally our right as an American citizen. So once you start to fiddle with that, it sort of becomes a little bit more of an issue for me, personally," she said, adding that she hasn't thought much yet about whom she plans to support in 2024.

In the federal cases, about half of Americans — 47% — believe Trump acted illegally in his handling of classified documents, while 49% say he broke the law in connection with the Jan. 6 Capitol riot. About 2 in 10 say they think he did something unethical but not illegal in those cases, and close to that many say they think he did nothing wrong.

The poll makes clear that Americans' views of the investigations are deeply partisan. In the Georgia case, 86% of Democrats but just 22% of Republicans say they think Trump did something illegal. In the New York case, 68% of Democrats and 13% of Republicans say they think he broke the law.

Meanwhile, 9 in 10 Democrats but only a quarter of Republicans say they think the indictment in the New York case was justified. Nearly 9 in 10 Republicans — but only about a third of Democrats — say they think the charges were politically motivated.

That includes Nicole Sawyer, a registered independent from Middletown, Pennsylvania, who typically backs Democrats and praises President Joe Biden. While she believes Trump has done "a lot of immoral things" that are worth investigating, she also sees the probes as driven by politics.

"I think people are sort of just throwing stuff at him, anything they can," said Sawyer, 45, who views the investigations as a distraction from more important issues, like Social Security and health care. Those issues, she said, are "kind of being overshadowed with all this drama with Trump."

Still, Sawyer said that if Trump is found guilty, "he doesn't deserve to be our president."

"I think that kids should be able to look up to the president of America and not have a whole bunch of drama overshadowing the real things that need to be taken care of," she said.

Colvin reported from New York.

The poll of 1,230 adults was conducted April 13-17 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Why is Karl Lagerfeld, the Met Gala theme, controversial?

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Karl Lagerfeld, the subject of this year's Met Gala, transformed Chanel from frumpy to modern. He revolutionized the merger of hip-hop culture and high fashion. He dressed and befriended celebrities and transformed once-staid runway shows into masterful, theatrical displays.

He was also a self-proclaimed "big mouth," publicly sounding off with fatphobia. He spoke against gay men who want to adopt children, migrants, sexual assault survivors, the #MeToo movement and "ugly" people, without apology.

And he left behind the receipts, his own contentious words.

Lagerfeld died in 2019 after dominating the fashion universe into his 80s. Come May 1, his legacy will be on display at the starry fundraising party and its companion exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. Likely not on display, however, will be his polemical tendencies.

"He offended people right and left, making as much of an art out of the cutting aside as the perfectly cut double-face gown," New York Times fashion critic Vanessa Friedman wrote soon after Lagerfeld's death.

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"He judged," Friedman wrote, "and knew he would be judged himself, but he didn't care. Rather, he embraced it."

The choice of Lagerfeld for fashion's biggest night is not without critics, though gala visionary and close friend Anna Wintour is, clearly, not among them. An emailed request for her comment on this side of Lagerfeld went unreturned.

When 400 or so celebrities and elite from fashion, tech, politics, music, social media, film, TV and sports ascend the Met's Grand Staircase for the gala, Jameela Jamil won't be there.

The actor and activist was a rare public figure to condemn the theme, taking to Instagram to acknowledge his fashion genius but denounce his "distinctly hateful" remarks, often toward women.

"Why is THIS who we celebrate when there are so many AMAZING designers out there who aren't bigoted white men? What happened to everyone's principles and 'advocacy.' You don't get to stand for justice in these areas, and then attend the celebration of someone who reveled in his own public disdain for marginalized people," Jamil wrote.

In 2020, a group of internet friends decided to democratize the A-list, invitation-only gala with a Twitter companion that's open to creators who submit digital fashion in line with the real thing's annual theme.

Don't look for the High Fashion Twitter Met Gala this year.

"As we approach the first Monday of May, the hf twitter met gala team would like to announce that we will not be celebrating this year's met gala as our values don't align with the selection of Karl Lagerfeld as the theme," the coordinators tweeted.

Called the "living soul of fashion" by Wintour, Lagerfeld and his gifts were outsized. So were his words.
THE #METOO MOVEMENT

In the international fashion magazine Numéro in 2018, Lagerfeld said he was "fed up" with the effort to reveal sexual harassment, assault, misconduct and rape.

"What shocks me most in all of this are the starlets who have taken 20 years to remember what happened. Not to mention the fact there are no prosecution witnesses. That said I cannot stand Mr. Weinstein. I had a problem with him at amfAR," he said, referring to disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein and a gala held during the Cannes Film Festival in support of the fight against AIDS.

ON MODELS

"If you don't want your pants pulled about, don't become a model! Join a nunnery, there'll always be a place for you in the convent. They're recruiting even!" he told Numéro in the same interview, when asked about accusations against stylist and former Interview creative director Karl Templer.

To German news magazine Focus in 2009, Lagerfeld declared of plus-size models: "No one wants to see curvy women."

In 2010, however, to Vice, when asked if he loved both the emaciated and voluptuous in fashion, Lagerfeld said: "Yes, totally."

LAGERFELD'S FATPHOBIA

The man who co-authored a diet book after losing 92 pounds (42 kilograms) in 13 months was vocally critical throughout his career of women larger than size 0 or 2. That includes his defense of designers exclusively hiring rail-thin runway models.

Asked in the same 2009 Focus interview about German women's magazine Brigitte declaring it would only publish photographs of "real women," as opposed to professional models, Lagerfeld went on: "You've got fat mothers with their bags of chips sitting in front of the television and saying that thin models are ugly. The world of beautiful clothing is about 'dreams and illusions.'"

According to the book "The World According to Karl," a collection of Lagerfeld's own words, he once said: "I think that for both women and men, fashion is the healthiest motivation for losing weight."

ON 'UGLY' AND ANDY WARHOL

"I shouldn't say this, but physically he was quite repulsive," Lagerfeld told Vice of Warhol in 2010.

In the same interview, as he discussed his penchant for wearing dark glasses, he described a German journalist who once interviewed him as "some horrible, ugly woman."

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MERKEL AND MIGRANTS

In 2017, the Hamburg-born Lagerfeld sniped at Merkel, then the German chancellor, for opening her country's borders to migrants during the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe two years prior.

"One cannot — even if there are decades between them — kill millions of Jews so you can bring millions of their worst enemies in their place," he told French talk show "Salut les Terriens!" on Canal 8.

In some English translations, he offered this anecdote: "I know someone in Germany who took a young Syrian and after four days said: 'The greatest thing Germany invented was the Holocaust.'"

However, others reported the comment this way: "I know someone in Germany who took in a young Syrian who spoke a little English. After four days, do you know what he said to the (German) lady? 'Germany's best invention is the Holocaust.'"

Either way, the words prompted hundreds of complaints to Canal 8.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Lagerfeld sent two brides in identical wedding dresses down the runway for the finale of his spring 2013 Chanel haute couture show in Paris, telling The Guardian it was a show of support for the French same-sex marriage law.

But in the 2010 Vice interview, he spoke against same-sex marriage, particularly as it pertains to two men.

"In the 60s, they all said we had the right to the difference. And now, suddenly, they want a bourgeois life," Lagerfeld said. "For me it's difficult to imagine — one of the papas at work and the other at home with the baby. How would that be, for the baby? I don't know. I see more lesbians married with babies than I see boys married with babies. And I also believe more in the relationship between mother and child than in that between father and child."

In 2013, while supporting same-sex marriage, Lagerfeld said he was "less keen" on same-sex couples being allowed to adopt.

Follow Leanne Italie on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/litalie>

US invests in alternative solar tech, more solar for renters

By ISABELLA O'MALLEY and JENNIFER MCDERMOTT Associated Press

The Biden administration announced more than \$80 million in funding Thursday in a push to produce more solar panels in the U.S., make solar energy available to more people, and pursue superior alternatives to the ubiquitous sparkly panels made with silicon.

The Department of Energy announced the investments in the morning and Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm plans to visit a community solar site in Washington in the afternoon. Community solar refers to a variety of arrangements where renters and people who don't control their rooftops can still get their electricity from solar power. Two weeks ago, Vice President Kamala Harris announced what the administration said was the largest community solar effort ever in the United States.

Now it is set to spend \$52 million on 19 solar projects across a dozen states, including \$10 million from the infrastructure law, as well as \$30 million on technologies that will help integrate solar electricity into the grid.

The DOE also selected 25 teams to participate in a \$10 million competition designed to fast-track the efforts of solar developers working on community solar projects.

The Inflation Reduction Act already offers incentives to build large solar generation projects, such as renewable energy tax credits. But Ali Zaidi, White House national climate advisor, said the new money focuses on meeting the nation's climate goals in a way that benefits more communities.

"It's lifting up our workers and our communities. And that's, I think, what really excites us about this work," Zaidi said. "It's a chance not just to tackle the climate crisis, but to bring economic opportunity to every zip code of America."

The investments will help people save on their electricity bills and make the electricity grid more reliable, secure, and resilient in the face of a changing climate, said Becca Jones-Albertus, director of the energy

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department's Solar Energy Technologies Office.

Jones-Albertus said she's particularly excited about the support for community solar projects, since half of Americans don't live in a situation where they can buy their own solar and put in on the roof.

Michael Jung, executive director of the ICF Climate Center agreed. "Community solar can help address equity concerns, as most current rooftop solar panels benefit owners of single-family homes," he said.

In typical community solar projects, households can invest in or subscribe to part of a larger solar array offsite. "What we're doing here is trying to unlock the community solar market," Jones-Albertus said.

The U.S. has 5.3 gigawatts of installed community solar capacity currently, according to the latest estimates. The goal is that by 2025, five million households will have access to it — about three times as many as today — saving \$1 billion on their electricity bills, according to Jones-Albertus.

The new funding also highlights investment in a next generation of solar technologies, intended to wring more electricity out of the same amount of solar panels. Currently only about 20% of the sun's energy is converted to electricity in crystalline silicon solar cells, which is what most solar panels are made of. There has long been hope for higher efficiency, and today's announcement puts some money towards developing two alternatives: perovskite and cadmium telluride (CdTe) solar cells. Zaidi said this will allow the U.S. to be "the innovation engine that tackles the climate crisis."

Joshua Rhodes, a scientist at the University of Texas at Austin said the investment in perovskites is good news. They can be produced more cheaply than silicon and are far more tolerant of defects, he said. They can also be built into textured and curved surfaces, which opens up more applications for their use than traditional rigid panels. Most silicon is produced in China and Russia, Rhodes pointed out.

Cadmium telluride solar can be made quickly and at a low cost, but further research is needed to improve how efficient the material is at converting sunlight to electrons.

Cadmium is also toxic and people shouldn't be exposed to it. Jones-Albertus said that in cadmium telluride solar technology, the compound is stable and encapsulated in glass and additional protective layers.

The new funds will also help recycle solar panels and reuse rare earth elements and materials. "One of the most important ways we can make sure CdTe remains in a safe compound form is ensuring that all solar panels made in the U.S. can be reused or recycled at the end of their life cycle," Jones-Albertus explained.

Recycling solar panels also reduces the waste from solar and can provide materials for new panels. Eight of the projects in Thursday's announcement focus on improving solar panel recycling, for a total of about \$10 million.

Clean energy is a fit for every state in the country, the administration said. One solar project in Shungnak, Alaska was able to eliminate the need to keep making electricity by burning diesel fuel, a method sometimes used in remote communities that is not healthy for people and contributes to climate change.

"Alaska is not a place that folks often think of when they think about solar, but this energy can be an economic and affordable resource in all parts of the country," said Jones-Albertus.

Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Today in History: April 21, Queen Elizabeth II is born

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, April 21, the 111th day of 2023. There are 254 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 21, 1975, with Communist forces closing in, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned after nearly 10 years in office and fled the country.

On this date:

In 1649, the Maryland Toleration Act, providing for freedom of worship for all Christians, was passed by the Maryland assembly.

In 1836, an army of Texans led by Sam Houston defeated the Mexicans at San Jacinto, assuring Texas

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independence.

In 1910, author Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, died in Redding, Connecticut, at age 74.

In 1926, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II was born in Mayfair, London; she was the first child of The Duke and Duchess of York, who later became King George VI and the Queen Mother.

In 1930, fire broke out inside the overcrowded Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus, killing 332 inmates.

In 1976, clinical trials of the swine flu vaccine began in Washington, D.C.

In 1980, Rosie Ruiz was the first woman to cross the finish line at the Boston Marathon; however, she was later exposed as a fraud. (Canadian Jacqueline Gareau was named the actual winner of the women's race.)

In 1998, astronomers announced in Washington that they had discovered possible signs of a new family of planets orbiting a star 220 light-years away, the clearest evidence to date of worlds forming beyond our solar system.

In 2015, an Egyptian criminal court sentenced ousted Islamist President Mohammed Morsi to 20 years in prison over the killing of protesters in 2012. (Morsi collapsed and died during trial on espionage charges in June 2019.)

In 2016, Prince, one of the most inventive and influential musicians of modern times, was found dead at his home in suburban Minneapolis; he was 57.

In 2020, researchers reported that a malaria drug that had been widely touted by President Donald Trump for treating the coronavirus showed no benefit in large study of its use in U.S. veterans hospitals.

Ten years ago: On the first Sunday since the deadly Boston Marathon bombing, churches paused to mourn the dead and console the survivors while in West, Texas, residents prayed for comfort four days after a fertilizer plant explosion killed 15 people. In Britain, the London Marathon sent out a powerful message of solidarity with Boston and its victims as runners crossed the line in front of Buckingham Palace with black ribbons on their chests (Tsegaye Kebede of Ethiopia won the men's race). Joe Scarborough, a 50-year-old self-employed electrical contractor, rolled the first 900 series in Professional Bowlers Association history — three straight perfect games.

Five years ago: North Korea announced that it would suspend nuclear tests and intercontinental ballistic missile launches ahead of its summits with South Korea and the United States. Barbara Bush was remembered as the "first lady of the Greatest Generation" during a funeral in Houston attended by four former U.S. presidents and hundreds of others. Actor Verne Troyer, best known for his role as "Mini-Me" in the "Austin Powers" movies, died in Los Angeles at the age of 49; a coroner later ruled that the death was suicide by alcohol intoxication.

One year ago: Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed victory in the battle for the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, even as he ordered his troops not to take the risk of storming the giant steel plant where the last Ukrainian defenders were holed up. CNN shut down its CNN+ streaming service less than a month after its launch, a spectacular flameout for a venture that had attracted stars like Chris Wallace and Alison Roman and was seen as a way to attract a new generation of news consumers. Actor Robert Morse, who won a Tony Award for playing a brash corporate climber in "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" and a second one a generation later as the brilliant, troubled Truman Capote in "Tru," has died at age 90.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-comedian-writer Elaine May is 91. Anti-death penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean is 84. Singer-musician Iggy Pop is 76. Actor Patti LuPone is 74. Actor Tony Danza is 72. Actor James Morrison is 69. Actor Andie MacDowell is 65. Rock singer Robert Smith (The Cure) is 64. Rock musician Michael Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) is 64. Actor-director John Cameron Mitchell is 60. Rapper Michael Franti (Spearhead) is 57. Actor Leslie Silva is 55. Actor Toby Stephens is 54. Rock singer-musician Glen Hansard (The Frames) is 53. Actor Rob Riggle is 53. Comedian Nicole Sullivan is 53. Football player-turned-actor Brian White is 50. Olympic gold medal pairs figure skater Jamie Sale (sah-LAY') is 46. Rock musician Dave Brenner (Theory of a Deadman) is 45. Actor James McAvoy is 44. Former NFL quarterback Tony Romo is 43. Actor Terrence J is 41. Actor Gugu Mbatha-Raw is 40. Actor Christoph Sanders is 35. Actor Frank Dillane is 32. Rock singer Sydney Sierota (Echosmith) is 26.