

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Dec. 16

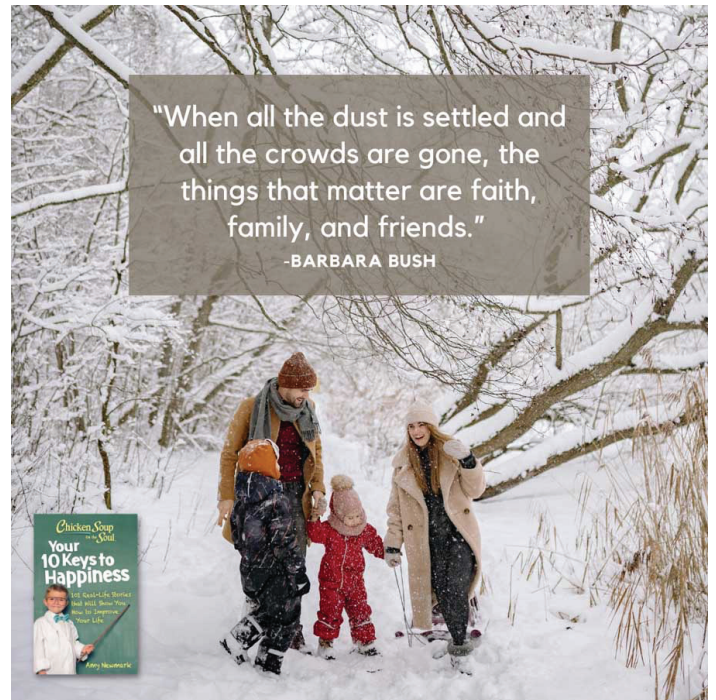
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.
Girls Wrestling at South Border (Ashley), 9 a.m.
Boys Wrestling at Sioux Valley (Volga), 10 a.m.

Sunday, Dec. 17

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sunday school program practice, 9 a.m.; Worship with Sunday school program, 10:30 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday school,

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

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



9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school Christmas program practice, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship with Sunday school Christmas program during service, 10:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.; Christmas program and dinner, 5 p.m. (everyone welcome to attend)

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.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Gordon Nelson passes

We are sorry to learn this morning of the passing of Gordon Nelson. He had agreed and was reappointed to a five-year term on the Planning and Zoning Commission. The day of the next meeting, he called in and said he had changed his mind and would not be serving. His daughter, Carmel Willett, and son, Corey Nelson, posted on Facebook that he passed earlier this morning.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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London's High Court yesterday ruled in favor of Prince Harry in a lawsuit accusing a British tabloid publisher of using illegal methods to report on the private lives of celebrities, athletes, and royalty, including phone hacking and high-level cover-ups.

A representative for the Israel Defense Forces said troops found the three Israeli hostages during a ground operation in Gaza Friday, mistakenly identifying them as a threat and opening fire. At least 130 people remain hostage in Gaza after Hamas abducted more than 240

people during its cross-border attack Oct. 7. See latest war updates here.

A judge in August found the former New York mayor liable for defamation for falsely claiming the two Georgia election workers, Ruby Freeman and her daughter, Shaye Moss, committed ballot fraud during the 2020 presidential election. In the second phase of the case, the eight-person jury was tasked with determining the monetary amount Giuliani had to pay for damages to Freeman and Moss.

One cardinal and nine other defendants were accused in 2021 of various financial crimes, including fraud, embezzlement, extortion, and money laundering. The case centers on the Vatican's roughly \$380M investment in a luxury building in London, which was later sold at a loss of about \$150M. The trial is considered historic, as the last time a cardinal was tried for financial crimes was in the 1730s.

The mother was sentenced for felony child neglect a year after her 6-year-old son brought her 9mm handgun to school and injured his first grade teacher in front of his classmates. Yesterday's sentencing is the second time the mother was held accountable for the shooting; she was sentenced in November to 21 months in prison for marijuana use while owning a gun, which is illegal under US law.

At least 26 others were also injured after the local council member dropped at least two grenades onto the floor of a local government building in western Ukraine's Zakarpattia Oblast region. Council members had reportedly been in a heated discussion about the 2024 budget.

The average rate on a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage has dropped for the seventh consecutive week to 6.95% from 7.03% the previous week, easing from an October peak of 7.79%, which was the highest level since late 2000. However, the rate is still up from 6.31% a year ago.

The layoffs, which will begin in January, are tied to the ending of the production of GM's Chevrolet Camaro and electric Chevrolet Bolt. GM is discontinuing the Camaro—first introduced in 1966—partly due to a decline in sales, while the Bolt is being discontinued partly to make room for next-generation electric vehicles.

The Life of Carolyn Synder

Carolyn Ruth Snyder, 91, of Grand Forks, ND, passed peacefully into the Lord's hands on Dec. 2, 2023.

Carolyn was born in Loveland, CO, on Sept. 23, 1932 to Oscar and Carola Geisler. Her childhood was largely in Pasadena, CA, but in high school, she lived in Colorado. She graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in nutrition. During her internship, she was engaged to Dr. Robert Snyder, and after marrying him in California, she moved to Groton, SD, to join him in building his veterinary practice. They lived there from 1957-2015 where they raised their family, and Groton remained the favorite gathering place for many holidays and celebrations as their kids' families grew. In 2015, Carolyn and Bob moved to Grand Forks to be closer to Paul and Shawn and their young family.

Carolyn and Bob had 5 children: Barbara, Kristine, Linda, R. Michael, and Paul. She had 17 grandchildren, five of whom are married. She had 5 great grandchildren and a sixth on the way, and she never tired of holding a newborn baby! Her life reflected her strong values of family, friends and faith.



She was active in church, educational groups, bridge clubs, and tirelessly offered help and support not only to her family but to many in the community. She loved a good cup of coffee at almost any time, and she loved to travel and shop. She was a loving wife, a good friend, and an excellent accountant and seamstress. She painted in her later years, and as she appreciated beauty, she also created beauty in the way she lived her life.

Her family and friends remember her as loving, accepting, constant, generous, kind, gentle, smart, gracious, supportive, affirming, servant-hearted, humble, unselfish, and patient, grounded, adventurous, easy-to-love, and always present for family.

She is survived by her children Barbara Luna, Kristine (John) Albrecht, Linda (Ben) Sparkman, Mike (Valerie) Snyder, and Paul (Shawn) Snyder as well as 17 grandchildren: Brittany Luna, Ethan (Cami) Albrecht, Liu Snyder, Elisabeth Sparkman, Daniel (Hilary) Sparkman, Catherine Sparkman, and Jonathan Sparkman, Jacob (Hannah) Snyder, Nathan (Hayley) Snyder, David (Amanda) Snyder, John (Kelby) Snyder, Titus Snyder, Claire Snyder, Leah Snyder, Simeon Snyder, Joshua Snyder and Caleb Snyder.

Carolyn was preceded in death by her parents, her husband Robert, and her five siblings Armin, Manfred, Rosie, Emma, and Floss.

Carolyn's private interment took place on Dec. 15 at the Groton Cemetery in Groton, SD.

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This is an experience I soon will not forget, and hope it never happens again. On our way to West Central Friday afternoon, I started to feel roughness on the road just south of Brookings. I at first thought it was the road. I was passing a semi and then started

to feel uneasy. I slowed up and as I slowed up, I realized that my passenger rear tire had blown. I maneuvered from the left lane to the right lane and pulled off the road. Jeslyn and I got out and examined the tire - yup - it's history.

I ended up unpacking the truck with all of my GDILIVE stuff in it and got the tire and jack out. I would say God was watching over me. For about that same time, Shane and Laura Clark drove by and noticed my situation. They turned around to come back and help.

Those jacks in the car are unique, to say the least. It took a little bit, but I finally figured out how to use it. I got the car jacked up and the tire off. I put on the spare and lowered the jack.

The spare did not look good. Shane got his pressure tester - yup, basically no air. But he had portable air compressor. We put it on and got the pressure up to 60 PSI. Then all was good to go.

What were the odds of the Clarks driving by at that moment and having the extra tools I need to get back on the road. All I could say was Thank the Lord!

I still had a 50 pound bag of salt in the truck. Shane offered to take the spare with him and the bag of salt to lighten the load. I don't think the tire can be patched!

Of course, with the donut, you don't go 80 mph on the road. I was thinking that the school was at Humboldt, but on our way south to Humboldt, I had another nudge that something was not right. I Googled West Central High School. Oops - it was in Hartford. Wonderful. That was about 15 minute delay on top of that.

Jeslyn was saying that right at 4:00, we'll probably start getting text messages about why we are not on the air. Then right at 4:00 on the dot, the text messages were coming in. I figured we should be set up by 4:15.

We got the gym where we met up with Andrea Johnson, their athletic director. She had the information for the wifi. We went to the girls game first as it was quick to set up the iPad for Laura and Shane. We got them going in a couple of minutes. Then we headed over to the boys games. Getting to their press box was interesting. We went up an elevator and marched through their wrestling room where they were having practice. We got upstairs and quickly set up. We were live just before halftime of the C boys game.

As Shane said, the morale of the story is this - check your spare tire to make sure it's fully inflated. You may not be as lucky as I was to have a Shane drop in to inflate it for you!



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Groton Community Transit 205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton invites you to its **Holiday Bake Sale**

Thursday, Dec. 21, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.

Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.

Any and all donations are welcome!

2024 DOG LICENSES DUE BY 12/29/2023

Fines start January 1, 2024



Spayed/Neutered
dogs are \$5 per dog,
otherwise \$10 per dog

Proof of rabies shot
information is RE-
QUIRED!!

Email proof to city.
kellie@nvc.net, fax to

(605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!!

Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422



SD Labor Department to cut job services staff, close offices Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. – As Gov. Kristi Noem continues a \$6.5 million advertising campaign to attract more workers to South Dakota, her Department of Labor and Regulation is cutting positions and closing offices across the state, according to an email obtained by South Dakota News Watch.

Labor Secretary Marcia Hultman sent an email to South Dakota Job Services offices Dec. 14 informing them of “22 reductions in force resulting in office closures and the elimination of positions.

“These reductions are the result of federal funds not increasing while the cost of doing business has grown. We have dealt with this in recent years by gradually reducing staff and utilizing carry-over funds. However, the inflationary impacts of the past year called for a more targeted effort resulting in today’s actions,” Hultman wrote. “Those impacted have been notified in person, and I would like everyone to have the same facts.”

The layoffs and closures taking effect Feb. 8, 2024, include:

Job services positions in Brookings, Winner and Madison will be eliminated and the offices will be closed. Employment service assistant positions will be eliminated in Aberdeen, Mitchell, Spearfish and Vermillion. Offices in Aberdeen, Mitchell, Pierre, Spearfish and Vermillion will be open by appointment only. Secretary positions will be eliminated in Rapid City and Watertown as well as one job services position in Lake Andes.



The South Dakota Department of Labor & Regulation office in Madison, S.D., is one of those that will close in February. (Photo: Jacob Boyko / South Dakota News Watch)

Lawmaker wants a meeting

Sen. Tim Reed, a Republican state legislator from Brookings and CEO of the community’s economic development corporation, told News Watch that he will request a meeting with Hultman to discuss the staff and office reductions.

Reed added that state lawmakers will likely have questions about the decision to reduce job service staff at a time of increased emphasis on finding workers in South Dakota, which has an unemployment rate of 2%.

“As a legislator, you look at (workforce efforts) as an investment,” said Reed. “Are we spending our money

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well to ensure that we are doing everything we can to get more workforce in the state? I think that needs to be looked at. How many boots on the ground do we need and how can they best be distributed?"

In a statement to News Watch, Hultman said that legislators in the areas impacted were notified of the actions, as well as House and Senate Leadership and the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Appropriations Committee. The Appropriations Committee will be briefed during the DLR budget hearing this coming Legislative Session, she said.

Timing of the cutbacks questioned

Job services offices provide assistance to those seeking employment and also help connect employers with workers through job fairs and workshops. Reed noted that the online presence of some of these services might have contributed to the cuts.

Democratic state Sen. Reynold Nesiba of Sioux Falls called the layoffs and closures "deeply unfortunate" and questioned the timing of the decision.

"These closures happen just as Republican leaders are working to impose work requirements on those receiving Medicaid," said Nesiba, a member of the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee and an economics professor at Augustana University.

"Intentional or not, it makes it look like South Dakota Republicans are doing all they can to deny voter-approved health care access to those who need and deserve it. Working to impose work requirements while simultaneously closing job service offices is unnecessarily cruel."

Lawmaker says impact of closures may be limited

State Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, a Watertown Republican who also serves on Commerce and Energy, downplayed the impact that the closures will have on people finding employment.

"If you need the government's help in finding a job, you'll drive by 30 'Help Wanted' signs on your way to the (job service) office," he told News Watch via text message.

The reductions come as Noem continues her national advertising effort through the Governor's Office of Economic Development, which used about \$5 million from the Future Fund for the initial campaign.

Economic development corporations and some major employers were then solicited for contributions to pay for a \$1.5 million "phase two" of advertisements that have hit the airwaves, with Noem playing the role of an accountant in the TV spots. She portrayed a plumber, electrician and dentist in earlier ads.

Laid off employees will be interviewed for other jobs

Hultman told News Watch that her top priority is to "help staff find employment within state government should that be their preference. We will be working diligently throughout this transition to prioritize continuity of service to our clients, partners, and communities."

She noted in her Dec. 14 email to Department of Labor staff that those losing their jobs "will be guaranteed an interview for state openings for which they apply and qualify."

"I have agonized over the right time to share this information," Hultman wrote in the email. "However, I determined it was best to provide individuals with as much time as possible to plan."

Department of Labor employees received an across-department raise of 13.6% for fiscal year 2024 as part of pay increases for state government employees passed by the Legislature last session.

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



ABOUT STU WHITNEY

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

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Boys Basketball Game: Aberdeen Roncalli @ Groton Area

Thursday, December 21st, 2023

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 5:00PM - Boys C

- 6:00PM - Boys JV

o Halftime Entertainment: "Shoot for a Pop" sponsored by Groton FCCLA.

- 7:30PM - Boys Varsity

o Halftime Entertainment: Roncalli HS Dance Team, followed by Groton HS Dance Team.

*The Groton Snow Queen Committee will also be holding a Split-Pot Drawing at the games as well.

Prior to the Boys Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

December 19, 2023 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Discussion Regarding Building Inspector
4. Accept Resignation of Gordon Nelson and Appoint Cody Lindgren as Planning and Zoning Board Representative
5. Second Reading of Ordinance No. 774 – Supplemental Appropriations No. 2
6. November Finance Report
7. 2024 Fee Schedule
8. Minutes
9. Bills
10. Reminder: City Offices will be Closed on December 25th and 26th for Christmas
11. Reminder: 2024 Dog Licenses are Due by December 29, 2023.
12. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
13. Promote Anna Fjeldheim to Skating Rink Manager and Establish Wage
14. Adjournment

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

December 19, 2023, 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. First Reading of Ordinances:
 - a. Ord. #262 – Rezone
 - b. Ord. #263 – Rezone
 - c. Ord. #264 - Rezone
5. Rachel Kippley, Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Carnival Contract
 - b. Entertainment Contract - Rowan Grace
 - c. Special Events Contract – Randy Buker – Hypnotist
 - d. Discuss Expo Roof
6. Karly Winter, States Attorney
 - a. Discuss Edwards Land Management Board
7. Dave Lunzman, Sheriff & Jon Lemke, Chief Deputy Sheriff
 - a. Award Body Camera & In Car Systems Bid
 - b. Authorize signing of the Brown County Jail & JDC Inmate Housing Agreements with the following counties: Walworth, Edmunds, Spink, Marshall & Jerauld
8. Dirk Rogers, Highway Superintendent
 - a. DOT Agreement for Guard Rail at Richmond Lake
9. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of December 12, 2023
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Travel Request
 - e. Auditor's Report of Accounts
 - f. Claim Assignment
10. Other Business
11. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
12. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: [+1 \(872\) 240-3311](tel:+18722403311)

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

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Varsity teams, girls JV win at West Central double header

Both varsity games and the girls junior varsity team were all winners at the West Central doubleheader played Friday at Hartford.

Girls Varsity: Groton Area 45, West Central 35

Groton Area scored 11 straight points at the end of the first quarter and then the Tigers kept their distance from the Trojans to post a 45-35 win in the girls varsity game.

The game was tied at seven when Groton Area scored 11 straight points to take an 18-7 after the first quarter. Groton Area's largest lead was 13 points which happened at 22-9 and the Tigers led at half time, 27-20. Groton Area got another 13-point lead at the end of the third quarter, 37-24.

Coach Matt Locke said, "Our defense stepped up really well and made things hard for them (West Central) and we did a real decent job getting rebounds. Their (Sydney Leicht and Kenendy Hansen) confidence grew once they saw their shots fall through the basket. It was a great win."

Sydney Leicht and Kennedy Hansen came out firing hot in the first quarter and both made two three-pointers and a two-pointer to set the temple for the game. Leicht finished with 17 points, three rebounds, two assists and one steal. Hansen had 14 points, three rebounds, three assists and one steal. Jerica Locke had a three pointer and three free throws to finish with six points, 10 rebounds and one steal. Jaedyn Penning had six points, eight rebounds and two assists. Brooklyn Hansen had two points, two rebounds and one assist. Rylee Dunker had five points, one assist and one steal and Faith Traphagen had one assist.

Groton Area made seven of 27 two-pointers for 26 percent, six of 16 three-pointers for 38 percent, made 13 of 19 free throws for 68 percent off of West Central's 20 team fouls, had 33 rebounds, 13 turnovers, 10 assists and four steals.

Alexa Borns and Janelle Jarding led West Central with seven points each, Kacey Jason had six points, Abbi Thornton five, Molly Anderson and Mara Schultz each had four points and Emille Stofferahn added two points. West Central had seven turnovers and made six of eight free throws off of Groton Area's 10 team fouls.

Groton Area, now 2-2 on the season, will be at Aberdeen Roncalli on Tuesday with a C game at 5 p.m. followed by the junior varsity and varsity game.

Girls Junior Varsity: Groton Area 28, West Central 23

Groton Area won the girls junior varsity game, 28-23. West Central held an 11-6 lead after the first quarter and the game was tied at half time at 12. Groton Area took a 21-18 lead into the fourth quarter.

Rylee Dunker led the Tigers with nine points followed by Laila Roberts with five, Talli Wright had four, having three each were Faith Traphagen, Taryn Traphagen and Mia Crank, and McKenna Tietz added one free throw.

3-Pointers: Roberts 1-, T. Traphagen 1.

Addison Kunzweiler led West Central with five points.

Girls C Game: West Central 32, Groton Area 13

West Central won the C game, 32-13. The Trojans led at the quarter stops at 7-6, 16-8 and 21-10.

McKenna Tietz led the Tigers with seven points while Emerlee Jones had three, Sydney Locke had two and Kella Tracy one.

Aubrey Borns led West Central with seven points while Avery Latham, Teagan Lupkes and Emma Voeltz each had six points.

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Boys Varsity: Groton Area 71, West Central 54

It was a 13-point run that propelled the Tigers to a 71-54 win in the boys varsity game. Four players hit double figures in scoring to power the offense.

Groton Area held a 17-16 lead after the first quarter. The lead changed hands four times and the game was tied once in the second quarter before Groton Area took a 35-31 lead at half time. Groton Area had a one-point lead at 32-31, but then scored 13 points spanning into the third quarter to take a 45-31 lead. The Tigers took a 56-37 lead into the fourth quarter.

Coach Brian Dolan posted on his facebook page: "Great road win last night vs. a tough West Central team. The boys played so connected . . . at times it was beautiful to watch." He echoed the same thoughts during the GDILIVE interview: "The second half was our best basketball in about two years. We connected on both ends of the floor . We shared the ball offensively Our defense was very aggressive but not gambling and it caused them (West Central) a lot of problems. I'm proud of the guys."

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 31 points, five rebounds, three assists and four steals. Jacob Zak had 11 points, two rebounds, three assists and one steal. Keegen Tracy had 11 points, two rebounds, five assists and three steals. Logan Ringgenberg had 11 points, four rebounds and one steal. Ryder Johnson had seven points, nine rebounds and two assists. Teylor Diegel had one steal and Colby Dunker had one rebound.

Groton Area made 18 of 26 two-pointers for 69 percent, seven of 17 three-pointers for 41 percent, 14 of 20 free throws for 70 percent, had 23 rebounds, seven turnovers rovers, 13 assists, 10 steals and 13 team fouls.

Jake Kuhl led West Central with 10 points (all of them in the first half) while Brodie Herr had nine, Connor Mebius, Crew Heier and Will Kuhl each had six points, Kolte Garry four, Baden Schulte three and Anthony Latham, Carter Tetzlaff and Elliot DeJong each had two points.

West Central made 22 of 48 field goals for 46 percent, two of four free throws for 50 percent, had eight turnovers and 16 team fouls.

Groton Area, now 2-1 on the season, will host Aberdeen Roncalli on Thursday with a C game at 5 p.m. followed by the junior varsity and varsity game.

West Central falls to 0-3 and plays next tomorrow (Saturday, December 16th) vs Crofton, NE in Vermillion at USD in the Vermillion Holiday Classic.

Boys Junior Varsity: West Central 45, Groton Area 39

The Trojans won the junior varsity game, 45-39. West Central led at the quarter stops at 14-9, 28-19 and 33-32. Groton Area tied the game at 34 with 5:35 left in the game, but was unable to reclaim the lead.

Taylor Diegel led Groton Area with 13 points while Easton Weber had eight, Gage Sippel five, Turner Thompson and Karson Zak each had four, Blake Pauli had three and Kassen Keough added two points.

3-Pointers: Pauli 1, Diegel 3, Weber 2.

Luke Knight led West Central with 12 points.

Boys C Game: West Central 46, Groton Area 42

West Central won the boys C game, 46-42. The Trojans had a 24-15 lead, but Groton Area battled back. It was 33-28 at the end of the third quarter. Groton Area battled back to within one point, 43-42, with 42 seconds left in the game, but West Central would make the final three free throws and the Tigers were scoreless at the end.

Karson Zak and Ryder Schelle led the Tigers with 10 points each, Jace Johnson and Easton Weber each had six, Logan Warrington five, Jayden Schwan had three and Ethan Kroll had two points.

3-Pointers: Zak 2, Weber 2.

Game Sponsors on GDILIVE.COM

All games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM (starting nearly half time of the C games). Subvarsity sponsors were Bary and Tricia Keith, Justin and Chelsea Hanson, Ed and Connie Stauch, and one "for all the grandparents watching." Varsity games were sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Locke Electric and Rix Farms/R&M Farms.

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Groton Area's December MS/HS Students of the Month

Back Left: Layne Johnson (8th), Emma Kutter (11th), Emerlee Jones (10th), Talli Wright (10th)
Front Left: Gavin Hanten (6th), Camryn Kurtz (12th), Arianna Dinger (7th)

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.

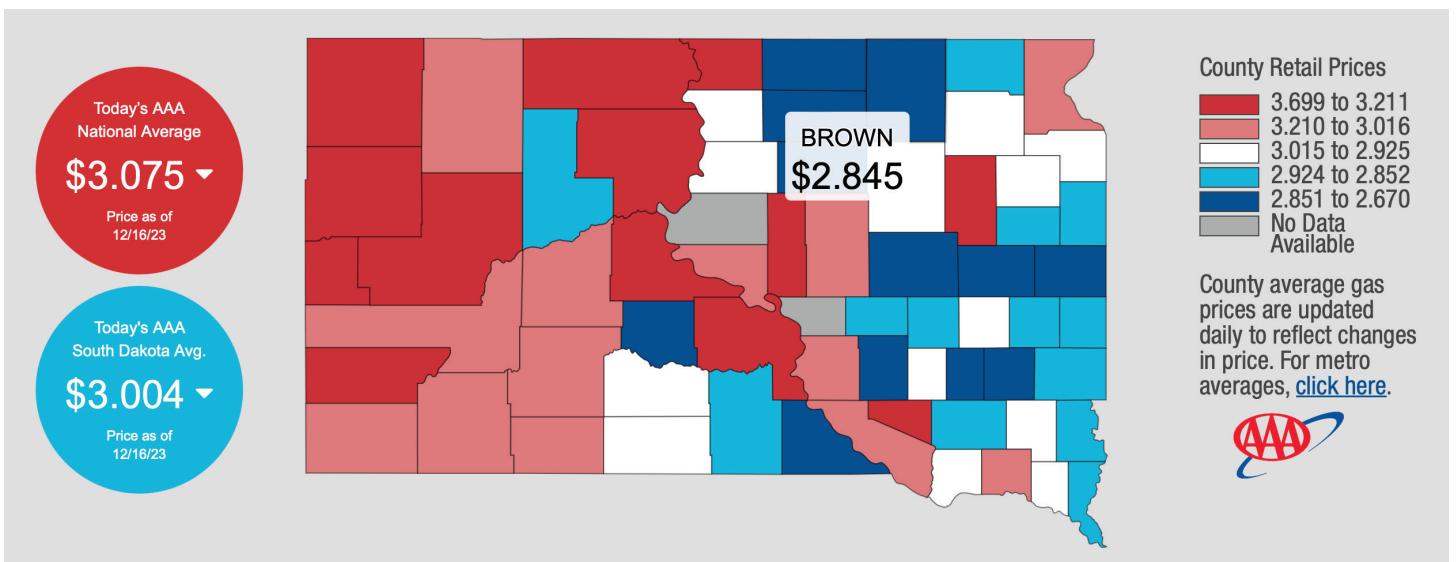
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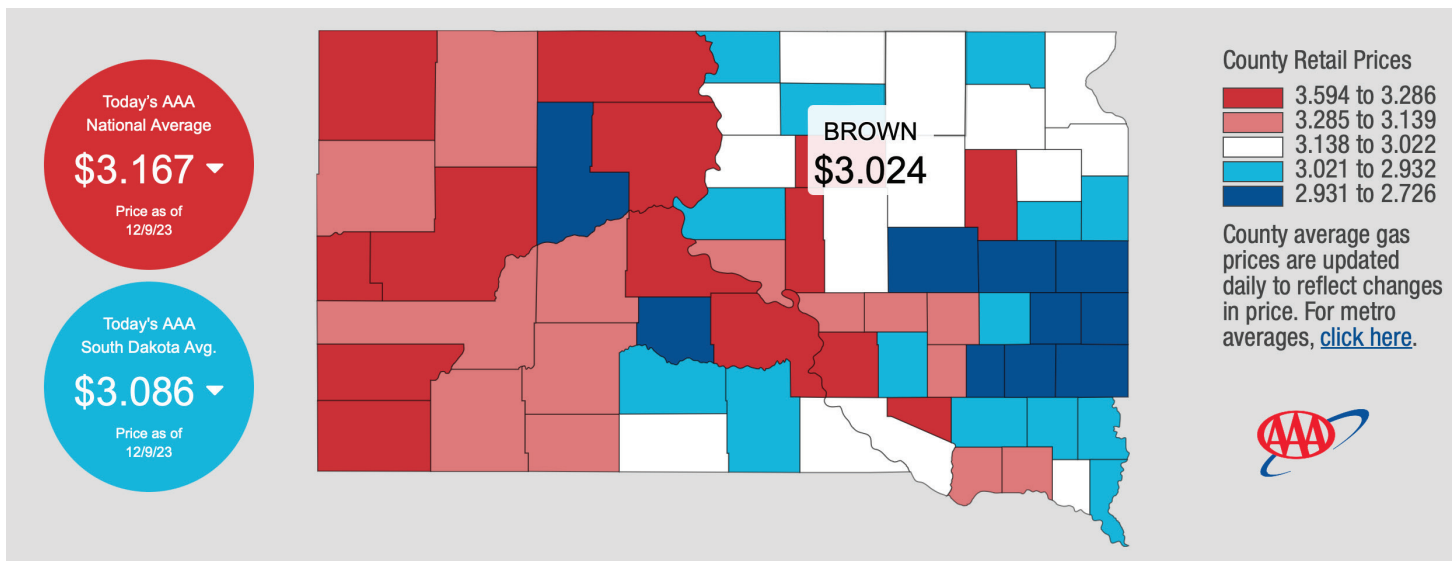
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.004	\$3.186	\$3.650	\$3.776
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.008	\$3.194	\$3.648	\$3.792
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.086	\$3.254	\$3.735	\$3.914
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.292	\$3.453	\$3.953	\$4.197
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.093	\$3.297	\$3.786	\$4.439

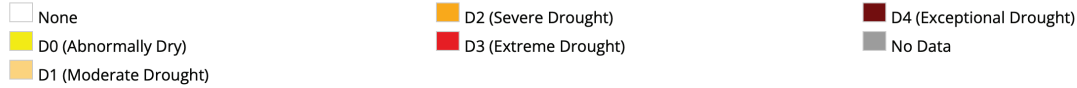
This Week



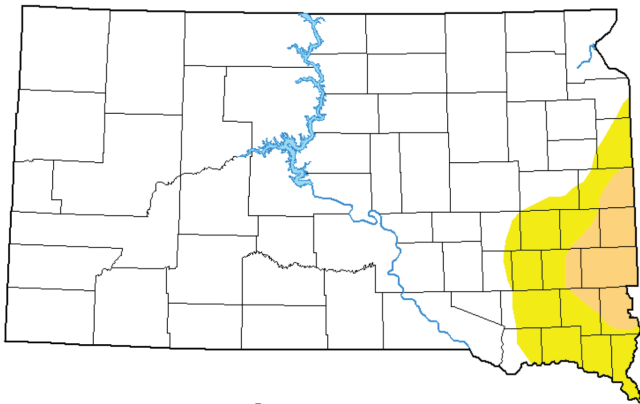
Two Weeks Ago



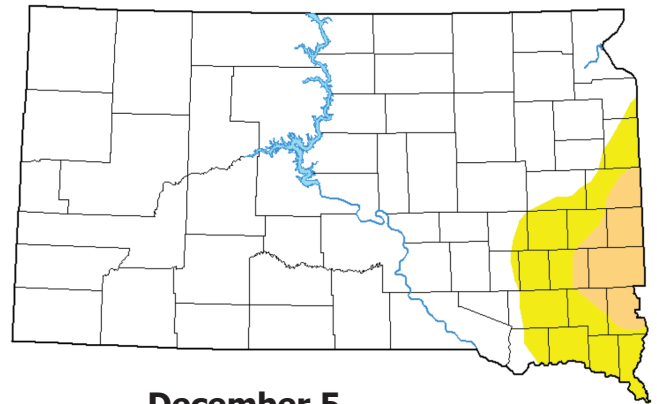
Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



December 12



December 5

Warmer-than-normal weather continued this week across the High Plains region. Temperatures ranged from mostly 4 to 12 degrees above normal, with locally higher readings. Weather across the lower elevation parts of the High Plains this week was mostly dry, which led to a few local degradations. In southeast Kansas, moderate drought expanded a bit, as streamflow and soil moisture dwindled and short-term precipitation shortages grew. Moderate drought expanded a small amount in western Kansas, where short-term precipitation shortfalls grew amid higher-than-normal atmospheric thirst. Larger changes occurred primarily in higher elevation parts of the region in Colorado and Wyoming. Conditions improved near Pueblo, Colorado and in adjacent parts of the plains, where recent snowfall alleviated short-term precipitation deficits. Low snowpack in the San Juan Mountains, on top of a drier-than-normal monsoon, led to the development of severe drought around Ouray and surrounding counties. Low snowpack in the Sangre de Cristo Range also led to the expansion of moderate drought outside of the San Luis Valley and into the high peaks east and north of Great Sand Dunes National Park. Severe drought also developed in and near parts of the Snowy Range of southern Wyoming, where the start of winter has featured much below normal snowpack. Southwest of there, recent snowfall has helped to alleviate precipitation deficits in parts of south-central Wyoming and northwest Colorado, leading to localized improvements. The northwest portion of the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming have seen much below normal snowpack to start the winter, and abnormal dryness has developed there.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem, Jackley weigh in on conflict-of-interest decision Supreme Court asked to outline standards for lawmaker behavior

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 15, 2023 5:02 PM

Gov. Kristi Noem wants the state Supreme Court to make the call on nine conflict-of-interest questions before she fills two vacant West River legislative seats.

That was among the major takeaways from court documents filed on her behalf by General Counsel Katie Hruska on Friday, the deadline for briefs in a request for an advisory opinion that could clarify if, when and how lawmakers can benefit from state contracts.

Among the questions: Can a citizen be a lawmaker and also an employee of a state, county, city

or school district? Can a lawmaker be a foster parent and get state reimbursement for the costs? Can a business owned by a lawmaker collect Medicaid payments?

Attorney General Marty Jackley also submitted a brief on Friday in the advisory opinion case, sought by Noem, Jackley and state lawmakers. The Legislature submitted its briefs earlier in the week.



Gov. Kristi Noem speaks Sept. 8, 2023, during a rally at The Monument in Rapid City featuring former President Donald Trump. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

COVID funds spark inquiry

The issue bubbled over earlier this year when Noem called out now-resigned Sen. Jessica Castleberry, R-Rapid City, for her receipt of more than \$500,000 in COVID-related financial assistance for her preschool. Castleberry has since entered into an agreement with the state to repay the money.

Noem used a 2020 advisory opinion from the state Supreme Court on lawmakers' eligibility for program funds to cry foul over the Castleberry situation. The incident spurred a host of questions on what constitutes conflicts of interest in a state whose small population often sees its part-time legislators or their

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family members working on government funded projects or, in some cases, serving as elected officials or employees in counties that receive state assistance.

Conflict of interest questions have bubbled since Castleberry's resignation, and "inquiries hit a fervor of uncertainty," Noem's brief says, which is why she requested an advisory opinion from the state's high court.

Noem has yet to fill the seats relinquished by Castleberry and another West River lawmaker, Sen. Jess Olson, R-Rapid City, who resigned for medical reasons earlier this fall. The brief says that's because of a "lack of clear guidance" on what constitutes a conflict of interest – guidance that will be instructive in her choices for replacement lawmakers.

The questions are not hypothetical, the brief says.

"Each of the nine questions posed in the Request involves an inquiry either made by Legislators or state employees to the Governor's Office," it reads.

The Noem brief did not take a position on the questions, but rather encouraged the justices to address each to clarify the meaning of the state constitution's conflict clause.

Lawmakers: Appropriations votes alone don't create conflicts

Lawmakers weighed in on the issue earlier this week through a brief filed by Ron Parsons, a former U.S. attorney from Sioux Falls.

Parsons argued in his brief that merely voting on appropriations ought not disbar lawmakers from eventually collecting state dollars as private citizens might.

There's considerable legal distance between the specific conflict-of-interest verbiage in the state constitution and general appropriations votes taken by lawmakers, Parsons asserts.

The constitution says that lawmakers cannot "be interested, directly or indirectly, in any contract with the state or any county thereof, authorized by any law passed during the term for which he shall have been elected."

The general appropriations bill, Parsons argued, is not a law that authorizes contracts. Instead, it sets aside funds that may be awarded in contracts at a later date.

"The Contracts Clause clearly does not flatly prohibit a legislator from being interested in any contract with the state," wrote Parsons.

That clause would clearly apply in special appropriations votes, the legislature's brief says, which target money to specific programs for specific purposes.

Parsons encouraged the court to engage in a "textual analysis" of the constitutional language to draw clear lines around what does and does not constitute a vote in violation of the contracts clause.

Jackley: broad prohibitions for lawmakers unrealistic

Like Parsons, Attorney General Jackley's brief homed in on the practical implications of a strict interpretation of the contracts clause, though it doesn't always reach the same conclusions.

Much of the brief serves as an attempt to help the court answer Noem's questions.

Solicitor General Paul Swedlund, who wrote the brief, argued that the meaning of the word "interest" in "conflict of interest" could be interpreted quite broadly.

"A legislator certainly benefits from an appropriation to fund a contract to reconstruct a roadway near her home by providing her with an improved road on which she can drive, which arguably constitutes an 'interest' in the project in a literal sense," wrote Swedlund.

The court has already determined that a company owned by a lawmaker cannot ink a direct contract with the state, in a case referenced by all three briefs submitted this week.

The standards for what constitutes indirect benefits to a lawmaker are less clear, but Swedlund's brief points out that court decisions in other conflict cases have turned on benefits far removed from business ownership.

One state Supreme Court case from 2005 saw a local city council's decision to deny a liquor license overturned because a councilwoman worked as a server and collected tips in a competing restaurant

with its own liquor license. Another from 2001 saw the court strike a lawmaker and South Dakota State University employee's contract because her pay was an "indirect" benefit of the appropriations on which she voted. That case came down 3-2.

As to the issue of whether an appropriations vote alone can create a conflict, Swedlund's brief says that South Dakota would likely say "yes."

Courts in states with similar constitutional clauses, including Texas and Oklahoma, have interpreted the verbiage to mean that "an appropriation serves to 'authorize' a contract," Swedlund wrote.

The brief suggests a test to determine conflict: If the state could have entered into a contract without an appropriations vote by a hypothetically offending lawmaker, such as in contracts paid for with federal dollars, no conflict exists.

If the state can't award funds without a vote from lawmakers, he wrote, there's a conflict.

The timeline for the release of an advisory opinion is unclear. Unified Judicial System spokesperson Alisa Bousa said Friday there was no information to share on when a ruling may be expected.

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

Just a license plate? Not when it comes to our First Amendment Rights

STEPHANIE AMIOTTE

The fight for freedom of speech has been a bedrock of the American Civil Liberties Union's mission since the organization was founded in 1920, driven by the need to protect the constitutional rights of conscientious objectors and anti-war protesters. Our work quickly spread to combating censorship, securing the right to assembly, and promoting free speech in schools.

More than a century later, these battles have taken on new forms, but they still persist. That's why we continue to champion freedom of expression in all forms – protest, media, online speech, the arts, and yes, even personalized license plates.

Although only a few characters long, "vanity plates" are often used to convey a meaningful expression of the driver's personal identity, values, or sense of humor. Unfortunately, South Dakota state officials who issue license plates were given the discretion to censor the messages on these plates if they deemed them to be "offensive to good taste and decency."

That's why the ACLU of South Dakota filed a federal lawsuit challenging South Dakota's personalized license plate law and the Motor Vehicle Division's policy. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Lyndon Hart whose application for a "REZWEED" plate was initially denied as being allegedly "in poor taste."

"But it's just a license plate," people said. "Aren't there more important things to focus on?" they asked.

While it's tempting for some to classify this as an insignificant issue, this is about so much more than just a license plate. It's about our First Amendment rights.

Freedom of expression, a right protected by the First Amendment, is the foundation of a vibrant democracy. The Supreme Court has written that this freedom is "the matrix, the indispensable condition of nearly every other form of freedom." Without it, other fundamental rights, like the right to vote, would wither away. The diminishment of these protected rights also disproportionately impacts Black and Indigenous peoples historically, so when an issue arises like censorship of marginalized communities, we are even more aware of the need to protect those rights.

The First Amendment, after all, is the foundation of self-fulfillment. The right to express one's thoughts and to communicate freely with others affirms the dignity and worth of each and every member of society

and allows each individual to realize his or her full human potential. Thus, freedom of expression is an end in itself — and as such, deserves society's greatest protection.

But despite its "preferred position" in our constitutional hierarchy, the nation's commitment to freedom of expression has been tested over and over again. We protect the First Amendment not only because it is the lifeblood of democracy and an indispensable element of freedom, but because it is the guarantor of civil society itself.

If the state of South Dakota has the right to put the brakes on personalized license plate applications because they might carry "connotations offensive to good taste and decency" — a standard that is overly broad, vague and subjective — where does it stop? As the old adage says, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile." Not on our watch. We won't allow the government to chip away our constitutional rights like this one piece at a time.

It's dangerous to allow the government to decide which speech is allowed and which should be censored — even when we're talking about personalized license plates.

Stephanie Amiotte is the legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

Researchers look at how to help more community college students gain four-year degrees

BY: SAMANTHA DIETEL - DECEMBER 15, 2023 5:55 PM

WASHINGTON — Community colleges and four-year universities can work together to improve the transfer student experience, a data report from the U.S. Department of Education suggests.

The U.S. Department of Education released data about the institutions where transfer students have the highest graduation rates in each state, with New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Maryland and Virginia doing the best. At the other end were South Dakota, Delaware, Indiana, New Mexico and Louisiana.

The announcement of this report came in conjunction with a November summit featuring hundreds of higher education leaders, at Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale, Virginia.

The Department of Education data highlighted an ongoing problem of poor graduation outcomes among college transfer students.

While attending community college has become increasingly common for students in recent decades, schools have not accommodated their practices to match this demand, said Josh Wyner, who is a founder and executive director of the College Excellence Program at the Aspen Institute.

"When community colleges only educated a small percentage of Americans back in the 1950s and before, there just weren't a lot of students that were starting at community college and moving onto a four-year school," Wyner said.

Today, about 40% of all undergraduate students attend community colleges, Wyner said, and most of them plan to earn a bachelor's degree.

In a press release announcing the Northern Virginia summit and data report, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said there needs to be increased support for transfer students.

"Our current higher education system stacks the deck against community college students who aspire to earn four-year degrees — denying acceptance of their credits, forcing them to retake courses, and ultimately making their educational journeys longer and costlier than they need to be," Cardona said in the press release.

Pairing two-year and four-year institutions

The Department of Education data also focuses on the "dyads," or community college and four-year institution pairings, that have the highest graduation rates for transfer students.

The report particularly highlights the "top-performing" partnership between Northern Virginia Community College, known as NOVA, and George Mason University's ADVANCE program. George Mason is a public four-year institution in Fairfax, Virginia.

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ADVANCE, which launched in 2018, aims to improve the transfer experience and graduation rates for students, said Jennifer Nelson, the director of university transfer and initiatives at NOVA.

Of the students who transferred from NOVA to George Mason University, 13% graduated with a bachelor's degree within eight years, according to the Department of Education.

Jason Dodge, the executive director of ADVANCE at George Mason University and NOVA, said there are currently about 4,500 students in the ADVANCE program.

Nelson said that when ADVANCE was first developed in 2017, four key goals were defined to help transfer students. These goals "tend to be the hallmarks" of why students participate in the program, Nelson said.

First, the program seeks to increase associate's and bachelor's degree attainment for transfer students, since "completion leads to completion," Nelson said. The program aims to decrease the amount of time spent earning a degree, as well as lower the cost to do so, Nelson said.

The fourth goal of the program is to increase support for transfer students, including academic advising, Nelson said.

Nelson and Dodge said the ADVANCE program's collaboration between schools is what makes it special. "This is a 50/50 program," Nelson said. "Every decision that's made regarding this program is a joint decision."

Support for transfer students

Nelson said the ADVANCE program offers a "streamlined admission process" for community college students seeking to transfer from NOVA to George Mason.

Students join the program early in their time at NOVA, before they have completed over 30 credit hours, Nelson said. Transfer students can spend "no more than five minutes" to complete the ADVANCE program's free declaration form, Nelson said.

The final part of a student's onboarding process is to select a curricular pathway, or their major, Nelson said. This pathway serves as a "guide" for transfer students as they work to earn their associate's degree and move on to George Mason University, Nelson said.

There is also no transfer application or application fee for students in the ADVANCE program, which makes the transition process "seamless" for students, Dodge said.

ADVANCE offers financial aid specifically for these transfer students, and has so far awarded over \$2 million in scholarships and grants to participating students at NOVA and GMU, Dodge said.

In addition to having an academic adviser and access to resources at both institutions, students in the ADVANCE program have a coach. This coach "serves as a student's primary point of contact for the program," Nelson said.

Nelson said the coach helps make sure the student is sticking to their pathway and taking the right classes, as well as helps connect students to resources at both institutions.

These certified coaches recognize "that what happens outside of the classroom has a direct impact on a student's ability to excel inside of the classroom," Nelson said.

Patterns in transfer student data

Wyner said he sees "similar patterns" between his research with the Community College Research Center on National Student Clearinghouse data and the Department of Education's data.

The data collected from the National Student Clearinghouse data represents 90% of college students, which is more inclusive than the Department of Education's data report, Wyner said. The Department of Education's data only represents students who receive financial aid, he said.

Wyner was a presenter at the Department of Education's November summit at NOVA.

The first pattern, Wyner said, is that both data sets showcase low graduation rates for community college students transferring to four-year universities.

The second pattern is "incredibly variable bachelor's attainment rates among dyads of institutions," Wyner said, and these variations exist even within state lines.

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"That huge variation, even within states, says that what matters is institutional practice," Wyner said.

Wyner said that while state policies can make a difference, it's concerning that "some institutions are doing radically better than others" within the same state. This is "troubling," he said, because a student's chance of graduation appears to be tied to the whichever dyad they attend.

If a transfer student attends a community college-university pair with lower graduation rates, that student has "a very small chance of getting a bachelor's degree," he said.

"It shouldn't be a matter of luck as to where you enter community college, in terms of whether you're ultimately going to get a bachelor's degree," Wyner said.

Ensuring success

Wyner said that after the Pell Grant program was established in the 1970s, community college enrollment "dramatically increased" after primarily serving as "access institutions."

Despite this surge of community college enrollments, "colleges fundamentally didn't change their practices," Wyner said.

Community colleges have since been focused on helping students complete their associate degree, but "haven't worked as hard as they needed to make sure that students succeed after they graduate, that they actually go on to earn the bachelor's degree that they came for in the first place," Wyner said.

Four-year universities have primarily focused on first-year student enrollments, Wyner said, even though "the community college population of freshmen and sophomores in our country is as big as the one that starts at four-year schools."

"Our systems have not caught up to the realities of where students enter college," Wyner said.

Four-year universities also prioritize first-year students over transfer students when it comes to financial aid, Wyner said.

Steps toward transfer student success

With the Community College Research Center, Wyner has studied the colleges with high and improving success rates of transfer students.

These schools demonstrated three characteristics that made this success possible, he said. The colleges prioritize transfer students, create defined programs of study "that extend from the community college into the four-year school with clear course sequences and strong learning outcomes," as well as offer advising tailored to transfer students, Wyner said.

The first step to improving transfer student success is for leaders at both community colleges and universities to come together and analyze transfer student population data, Wyner said.

Wyner said that schools can further prioritize transfer students by bringing together faculty from individual areas of study from both the two year- and four-year colleges for shared discussions. This can help ensure that those programs of study are "perfectly well-aligned" for a smooth transition from the community college to the four-year college, he said.

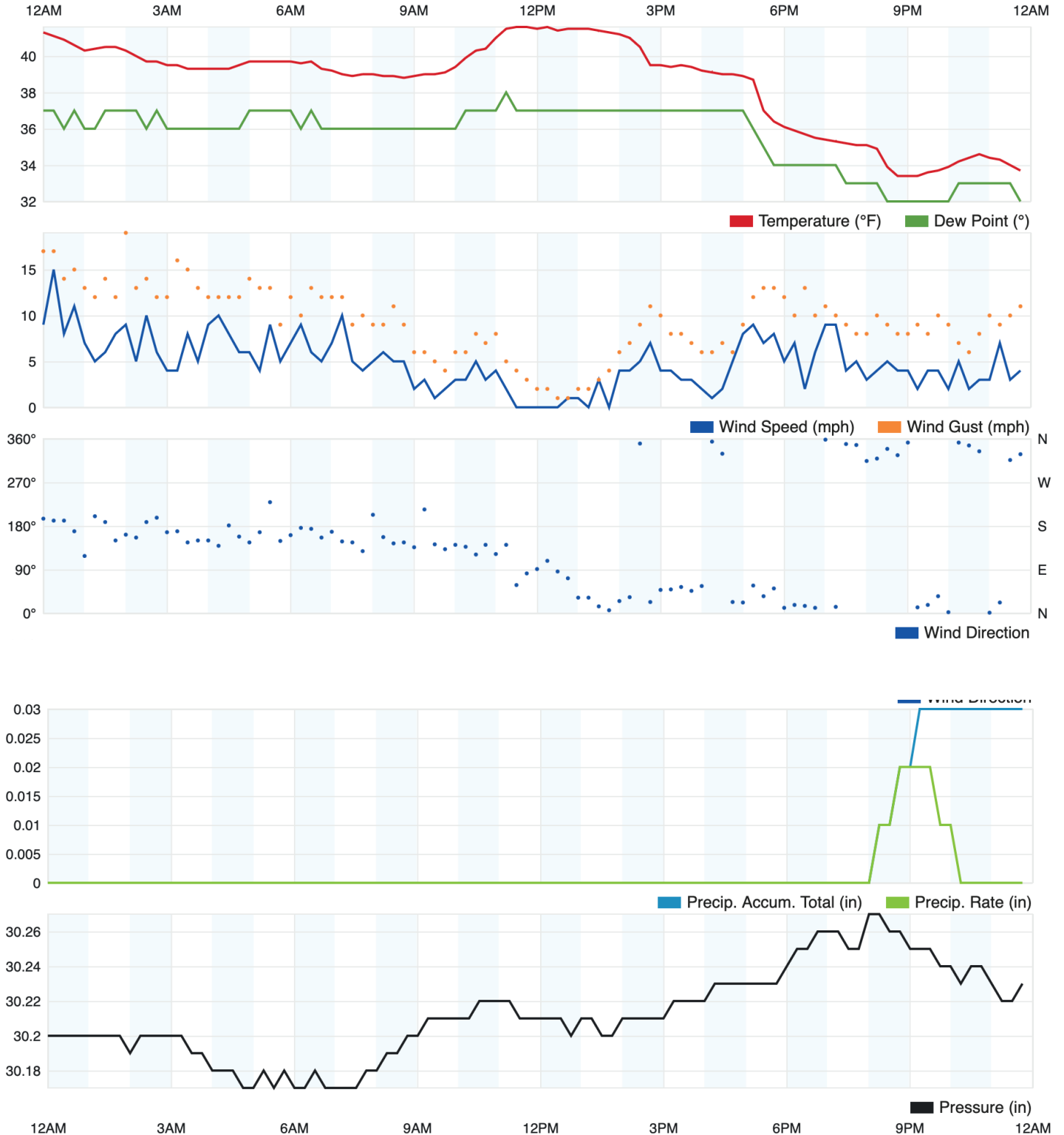
"They need to sit down and say, 'Alright, we're gonna map out exactly the courses students should take, and we're going to work hard together to make sure that we're aligned on our expectations for students and that we're delivering what students need,'" Wyner said.

Samantha Dietel is a reporter intern in Washington, D.C. She is pursuing a degree in journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has previously covered the Missouri legislature in Jefferson City as a reporter for the Columbia Missourian.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Dec 16	Dec 17	Dec 18	Dec 19	Dec 20	Dec 21	Dec 22
						
36°F	40°F	30°F	40°F	40°F	44°F	44°F
26°F	18°F	23°F	22°F	26°F	27°F	27°F
NNW	NNW	NNW	S	NE	SSE	SW
10 MPH	16 MPH	11 MPH	13 MPH	7 MPH	6 MPH	7 MPH

Dry Weather Returning Today...



A few slippery spots due to light snow and surface temperatures near freezing.



34 to 42°

Light snow and patchy fog ending over eastern SD & west central MN this morning.



Aberdeen, SD weather.gov/aberndeen

Light snow and fog will end over eastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota this morning. Little to no additional snow accumulation is expected today. Take extra precautions this morning if you are traveling as a few slippery spots have been reported over eastern South Dakota due to the light snow and surface temperatures near freezing.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 11:25 AM

Low Temp: 33 °F at 8:52 PM

Wind: 19 mph at 1:59 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 47 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1962

Record Low: -28 in 1951

Average High: 28

Average Low: 8

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.31

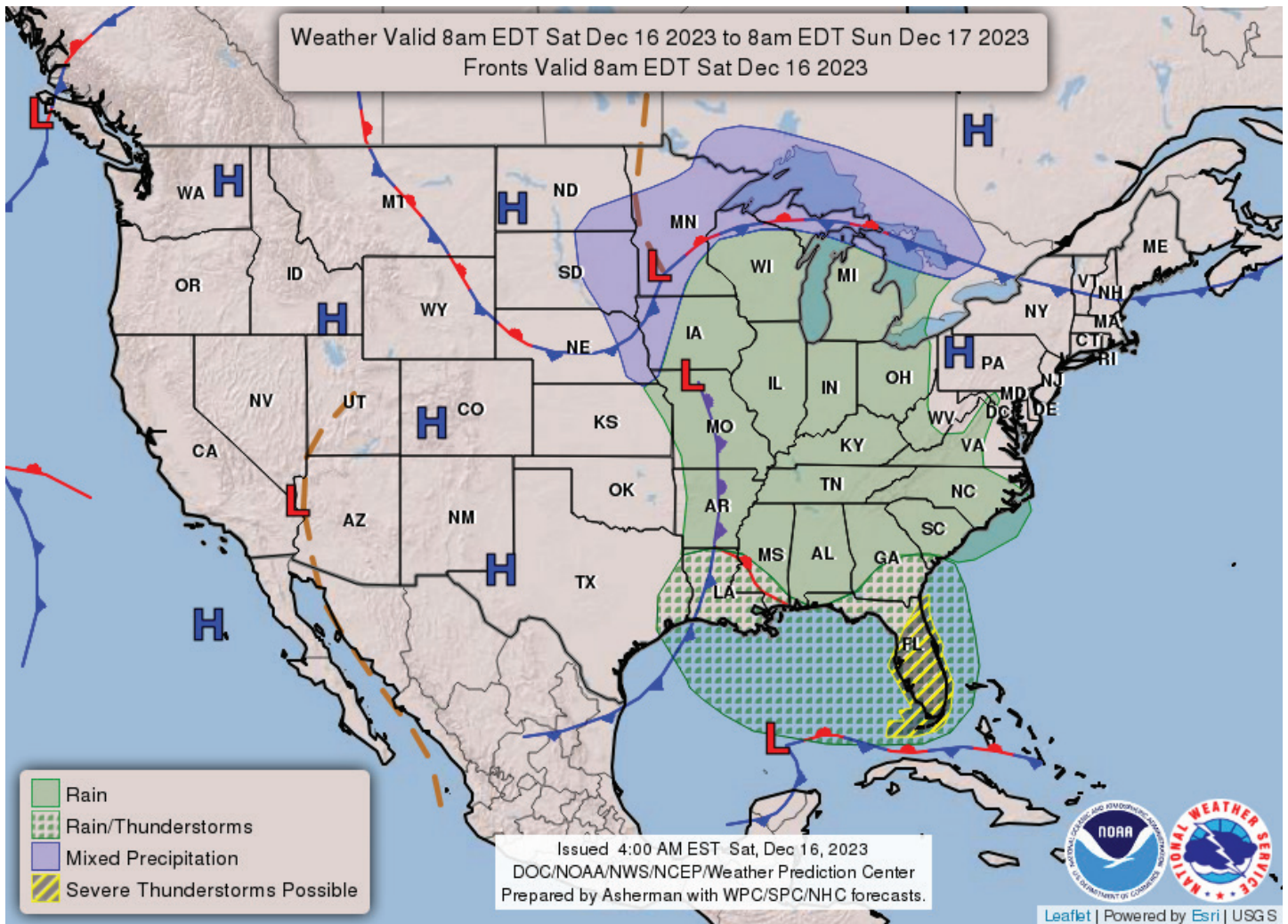
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.52

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:40 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:00 am



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Today in Weather History

December 16, 1967: With temperatures in the upper 20s, heavy freezing rain fell in west central and southwest Minnesota at night on the 16th, causing widespread ice accumulations on all exposed surfaces, and power and telephone poles and lines went down over a vast region. Some places were without power and phone service for three to four days. This storm was classified as the most severe ice storm in the past 20 years in some areas. Reports were received of turkeys and other poultry dying due to the cold in the countryside. 20 to 30 cars were in the ditch on one slick stretch of road in Rock County. Further west, throughout eastern South Dakota, freezing rain for most of the day formed ice from 3/8 to 3/4 inch on exposed surfaces. Extensive damage was caused to utility lines. All roads became dangerous for traveling, and one death was directly linked to the ice storm. The ice cut off a regular water supply, causing one person to attempt to get water from a cistern. She slipped on the ice into the cistern. Three deaths were indirectly related to the ice storm; two due to automobile accidents, and one due to a heart attack.

December 16, 2000: Northwest winds of 30 to 50 mph, with gusts to 60 mph, combined with newly fallen snow and arctic air to bring widespread blizzard conditions and extreme wind chills as low as 70 below zero to west central Minnesota and much of South Dakota from late on the 15th through the 16th. Events were canceled, travel was shut down, and some motorists were stranded. Both US Highway 12 and Interstate 29 in South Dakota were closed throughout the day. As an indirect result of the low visibility, a semi-truck hit and totaled a pickup truck in the snow just west of Clark.

December 16, 1811: An estimated Magnitude 7.5 earthquake struck the Mississippi Valley near the town of New Madrid in Missouri at 2:15 am local time. People were awakened by the shaking in New York City, Washington D.C., and Charleston, South Carolina. The ground motions were described as most alarming and frightening in places like Nashville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. In the epicentral area, the ground surface was described as in great convulsion with sand and water ejected tens of feet into the air.

1835 - New England experienced one of their coldest days of record. At noon on that bitterly cold Wednesday the mercury stood at four degrees below at Boston, 15 degrees below at Norfolk CT, and 17 degrees below at Hanover NH. The temperature at Boston was 12 degrees below zero by sunset. Gale force winds accompanied the severe cold, and that night a great New York City fire destroyed much of the financial district. (David Ludlum)

December 16, 1941: In 1941, only two women were employed by the Weather Bureau. By 1945, more than 900 women are employed by the Weather Bureau as observers and forecasters, as a result of filling positions of men during World War II. Eleven days after Pearl Harbor, the Army requested that all weather broadcasts be discontinued. The fear was that the enemy would use this information to plan an attack on the United States.

1917 - An ice jam closed the Ohio River between Warsaw, KY, and Rising Sun, IN. The thirty foot high ice jam held for 58 days, and backed up the river a distance of 100 miles. (David Ludlum)

1988 - Fairbanks, AK, reported freezing rain and record warm temperatures. The afternoon high of 41 degrees was 43 degrees above normal. Snow and high winds continued to plague the mountains of southern California. Mount Wilson CA reported two inches of rain in six hours during the early morning, and a storm total of more than 3.50 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Fifty-seven cities from the Southern and Central Plains to the Appalachians reported record low temperatures for the date, including North Platte NE with a reading of 17 degrees below zero. Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced 18 inches of snow at Syracuse NY, and 30 inches at Carlisle IND. Low pressure brought heavy snow to northern New England, with 18 inches reported at Derby VT and Saint Johnsbury VT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000 - An F4 tornado hits communities near Tuscaloosa, AL, killing 11 people and injuring 125 others. It was the strongest December tornado in Alabama since 1950.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GIFTS

Christmas gifts generate great excitement and interest. After the presents are wrapped and placed under the tree, many people spend countless hours trying to figure out what might be on the inside. Sometimes the gifts are carefully shaken or lifted to see if the weight or size might give an indication about what the contents might be.

But when God gave us the first Christmas gift, its value was obvious. It was a gift of love that could not be measured or found outside of Him. It was a gift of mercy that only He could provide. And, it was a gift of grace that only God could give us through His Son.

God's love is ultimately expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His love is the source of His mercy and grace, and it is because of His love that we have mercy and grace. It was because of His love for us that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will find His mercy and enjoy His grace and be with Him forever in eternity.

John says something very significant about this love. "If God loved us," he says, "we ought to love one another." His love does not end with our salvation and then begins with our obligation to share His love with others. It begins a pattern of self-sacrificing love that Christians must live by sharing His mercy and grace with others.

Prayer: Lord, we often forget how responsible we are to share Your gifts of love, mercy, and salvation with others. Give us no peace until we share Your gifts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: 1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.



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
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.15.23

10 20 28 40 54 12

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$41,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

4 25 34 38 46 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,850,000

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 44 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.15.23

5 16 20 23 30 15

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 59 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

1 3 4 7 8

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$92,000

NEXT DRAW: 12 Hrs 59 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

32 53 57 60 63 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 28 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.13.23

3 8 41 56 64 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$535,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 28 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 62, Spearfish 42
Dakota Valley 85, Canton 67
Dell Rapids St. Mary 55, Colman-Egan 49, OT
Deubrook 59, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 37
Elkton-Lake Benton 60, Iroquois-Lake Preston 43
Great Plains Lutheran 69, Tri-State, N.D. 49
Groton Area 71, West Central 54
Hanson 65, Menno 16
Harrisburg 51, Sioux Falls Washington 40
Huron 53, Rapid City Central 27
James Valley Christian 59, Sunshine Bible Academy 35
Mitchell 52, Rapid City Stevens 41
Morrill, Neb. 61, Edgemont 18
Parkston 45, Chamberlain 34
Potter County 53, Northwestern 33
Scottsbluff, Neb. 63, Douglas 41
Sioux Falls Christian 71, Elk Point-Jefferson 39
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58, Sioux Falls Jefferson 54
Sturgis Brown 73, Pierre T F Riggs High School 59
Tea Area 56, Dell Rapids 49
Tri-Valley 64, Garretson 36
Viborg-Hurley 79, Irene-Wakonda 35
Waverly-South Shore 58, Waubay/Summit 45
Webster 57, Britton-Hecla 30
Wolsey-Wessington 71, Highmore-Harrold 52
Yankton 79, Sioux Falls Lincoln High School 44
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=
Tiospaye Topa 55, Takini 40
Wakpala 55, Oelrichs 22
Matosica Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=
Todd County 68, Omaha Nation, Neb. 58
Wall 50, Crow Creek Tribal School 47
Semifinal=
Tiospa Zina Tribal 70, Little Wound 53
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=
Custer 85, Crazy Horse 50
Red Cloud 52, Lower Brule 42
Semifinal=
Pine Ridge 78, Lakota Tech 60

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Rapid City Christian 64, White River 38
Stateline Shootout=
Belle Fourche 50, Sundance, Wyo. 44
Newcastle, Wyo. 59, Lead-Deadwood 56, OT

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 54, Spearfish 47
Brandon Valley 61, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 29
Canistota 50, Bridgewater-Emery 34
Dakota Valley 54, Canton 44
Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 64, Bennett County 27
Groton Area 45, West Central 35
Hanson 70, Menno 19
Harrisburg 61, Sioux Falls Washington 54
Herreid/Selby Area 57, Sully Buttes 50
Howard 55, McCook Central-Montrose 52, 2OT
Ipswich 62, Langford 53
James Valley Christian 54, Sunshine Bible Academy 22
Kadoka Area 52, Newell 48
Mitchell 57, Rapid City Stevens 47
Morrill, Neb. 53, Edgemont 37
North Central Co-Op 49, South Border, N.D. 33
Parkston 58, Chamberlain 32
Pierre T F Riggs High School 51, Sturgis Brown 13
Platte-Geddes 39, Gregory 30
Rapid City Central 43, Huron 39
Scottsbluff, Neb. 55, Douglas 49
Sioux Falls Christian 51, Elk Point-Jefferson 41
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 43, Sioux Falls Jefferson 16
Tea Area 68, Dell Rapids 26
Viborg-Hurley 57, Irene-Wakonda 42
Webster 42, Britton-Hecla 38
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 45, Wilmot 24
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 59, Takini 18
Tiospaye Topa 68, Crazy Horse 18
Semifinal=
Oelrichs 69, Marty Indian 44
Santee, Neb. 64, Wakpala 53
Makosica Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=
Pine Ridge 60, Tiospa Zina Tribal 43
Todd County 58, St. Francis Indian 34
Semifinal=
Crow Creek Tribal School 51, Dupree 48
Omaha Nation, Neb. 73, Lower Brule 64
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Consolation Semifinal=

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Custer 47, McLaughlin 37
White River 65, Little Wound 41
Semifinal=
Red Cloud 63, Rapid City Christian 13
Wall 59, Lakota Tech 29
Stateline Shootout=
Belle Fourche 52, Sundance, Wyo. 42
Newcastle, Wyo. 57, Lead-Deadwood 35

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

Gronowski, South Dakota State return to FCS title game after 59-0 rout of Albany in semifinals

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Mark Gronowski threw for three touchdowns, Isaiah Davis ran for two and Tucker Large returned a punt for a score — all in the first half — and defending national champion South Dakota State rolled back into the FCS championship game with a 59-0 win over Albany on Friday night.

After the dominant first half, Jason Freeman had a 34-yard scoop-and-score on the second play of the third quarter that made it 42-0 for the Jackrabbits.

That was the fourth turnover, to go with three turnover on downs, for the Great Danes, who were out-gained by 221 yards in total offense in the first half.

Top-seeded South Dakota State (14-0), which has won 28-straight wins, faces the winner of Saturday's game between North Dakota State and second-seeded Montana in the championship on Jan. 7 in Frisco, Texas. The Jackrabbits beat NDSU 45-21 in the title game last year and 33-16 in a Missouri Valley Football Conference matchup on Nov. 4.

"It feels amazing. There's no place I'd rather be right now," Gronowski said. "We're going to Frisco and we're going to have fun. One more time with the seniors and just enjoy the last few moments we have and just have fun out there and go dominate in Frisco."

Fifth-seeded Albany (11-4), which was 3-8 last season, completed its most successful season in history after being picked to finish 11th in the Coastal Athletic Association. But the team that averaged 30.4 points on offense and allowed 17.2 on offense, was never in this one.

The Great Danes entered allowing an FCS-fewest 78 yards rushing a game but gave up 133 in the first half and 220 for the game. The Jackrabbits had 338 yards in the first half, seven more than Albany allowed per game, and finished with 556.

South Dakota State went 74 yards in 11 plays on the game-opening drive, which ended with Gronowski's 6-yard pass to Zach Heins. Gronowski was 4-for-4 passing and Davis had five carries for 34 yards.

The next two drives were capped by short Davis runs, the first set up by an interception by Large. Albany's third drive ended with Large returning a punt 79 yards for a touchdown.

The final score of the first half was a 36-yard pass to Jadon Janke, who finished the half with six catches for 151 yards, a school playoff record.

"It was awesome. Offensively we couldn't be stopped all day," Gronowski said. "The '605 Hogs' were playing awesome, they were giving me so much time. Jadon Janke was making great plays. Isaiah Davis, what a great running back. It was just great all day."

Davis finished with 15 carries for 107 yards, leaving the game on the first drive of the fourth quarter. Gronowski found Heins for a 25-yard score to end that drive and didn't return. Gronowski finished 15 of 19 for 265 yards.

Reese Poffenbarger, who led FCS with 36 touchdown passes against 10 interceptions, was 30 of 44 for 232 yards with three interceptions. He was also the leading rusher for Albany with 28 yards.

South Dakota State's last loss was 7-3 at Iowa to open last season.

A Black woman was criminally charged after a miscarriage. It shows the perils of pregnancy post-Roe

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio was in the throes of a bitter debate over abortion rights this fall when Brittany Watts, 21 weeks and 5 days pregnant, began passing thick blood clots.

The 33-year-old Watts, who had not shared the news of her pregnancy even with her family, made her first prenatal visit to a doctor's office behind Mercy Health-St. Joseph's Hospital in Warren, a working-class city about 60 miles (100 kilometers) southeast of Cleveland.

The doctor said that, while a fetal heartbeat was still present, Watts' water had broken prematurely and the fetus she was carrying would not survive. He advised heading to the hospital to have her labor induced, so she could have what amounted to an abortion to deliver the nonviable fetus. Otherwise, she would face "significant risk" of death, according to records of her case.

That was a Tuesday in September. What followed was a harrowing three days entailing: multiple trips to the hospital; Watts miscarrying into, and then flushing and plunging, a toilet at her home; a police investigation of those actions; and Watts, who is Black, being charged with abuse of a corpse. That's a fifth-degree felony punishable by up to a year in prison and a \$2,500 fine.

Her case was sent last week to a grand jury. It has touched off a national firestorm over the treatment of pregnant women, and especially Black women, in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump elevated Watts' plight in a post to X, formerly Twitter, and supporters have donated more than \$100,000 through GoFundMe for her legal defense, medical bills and trauma counseling.

Whether abortion-seekers should face criminal charges is a matter of debate within the anti-abortion community, but, post-*Dobbs*, pregnant women like Watts, who was not even trying to get an abortion, have increasingly found themselves charged with "crimes against their own pregnancies," said Grace Howard, assistant justice studies professor at San José State University.

"Roe was a clear legal roadblock to charging felonies for unintentionally harming pregnancies, when women were legally allowed to end their pregnancies through abortion," she said. "Now that Roe is gone, that roadblock is entirely gone."

Michele Goodwin, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and author of "Policing The Womb," said those efforts have long overwhelmingly targeted Black and brown women.

Even before *Roe* was overturned, studies show that Black women who visited hospitals for prenatal care were 10 times more likely than white women to have child protective services and law enforcement called on them, even when their cases were similar, she said.

"Post-*Dobbs*, what we see is kind of a wild, wild West," said Goodwin. "You see this kind of muscle-flexing by district attorneys and prosecutors wanting to show that they are going to be vigilant, they're going to take down women who violate the ethos coming out of the state's legislature." She called Black women "canaries in the coal mine" for the "hyper-vigilant type of policing" women of all races might expect from the nation's network of health-care providers, law enforcers and courts now that abortion isn't federally protected.

In Texas, for example, Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton mounted an aggressive and successful defense against a white Texas mother, Kate Cox, who sued for permission to skirt the state's restrictive abortion law because her fetus had a fatal condition.

At the time of Watts' miscarriage, abortion was legal in Ohio through 21 weeks, six days of pregnancy. Her lawyer, Traci Timko, said Watts left the hospital on the Wednesday when, coincidentally, her pregnancy arrived at that date — after sitting for eight hours awaiting care.

It turned out the delay was because hospital officials were deliberating over the legalities, Timko said. "It was the fear of, is this going to constitute an abortion and are we able to do that," she said.

At the time, vigorous campaigning was taking place across Ohio over Issue 1, a proposed amendment to enshrine a right to abortion in Ohio's constitution. Some of the ads were harshly attacking abortions

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later in pregnancy, with opponents arguing the issue would allow the return of so-called "partial-birth abortions" and pregnancy terminations "until birth."

The hospital did not return calls seeking confirmation and comment, but B. Jessie Hill, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, said Mercy Health-St. Joseph's was in a bind.

"These are the razor's edge decisions that health care providers are being forced to make," she said. "And all the incentives are pushing hospitals to be conservative, because on the other side of this is criminal liability. That's the impact of Dobbs."

Watts had been admitted to the Catholic hospital twice that week with vaginal bleeding, but she left without being treated. A nurse told the 911 dispatcher that Watts returned no longer pregnant on that Friday. She said Watts told her, "the baby's in her backyard in a bucket," and that she didn't want to have a child.

Timko said Watts insists she doesn't recall saying the pregnancy was unwanted; it was unintended, but she had always wanted to give her mother a grandchild. Her lawyer believes Watts may have meant that she didn't want to fish what she knew was a dead fetus from the bucket of blood, tissue and feces that she'd scooped from her overflowing toilet.

"This 33-year-old girl with no criminal record is demonized for something that goes on every day," she told Warren Municipal Court Judge Terry Ivanchak during Watts' recent preliminary hearing.

Warren Assistant Prosecutor Lewis Guarnieri told Ivanchak that Watts left home for a hair appointment after miscarrying, leaving the toilet clogged. Police would later find the fetus wedged in the pipes.

"The issue isn't how the child died, when the child died," Guarnieri told the judge, according to TV station WKBN. "It's the fact the baby was put into a toilet, was large enough to clog up the toilet, left in that toilet, and she went on (with) her day."

In court, Timko bristled at Guarnieri's suggestion.

"You cannot be broadcasting any clearer that you just don't get it," she said in an interview, suggesting Watts was scared, anxious and traumatized by the experience. "She's trying to protect Mama. She doesn't want to get her hair done. She wants to stop bleeding like crazy and start grieving her fetus, what she's just been through."

As chief counsel to the county's child assault protection unit, Assistant Trumbull County Prosecutor Diane Barber is the lead prosecutor on Watts' case.

Barber said she couldn't speak specifically about the case other than to note that the county was compelled to move forward with it once it was bound over from municipal court. She said she doesn't expect a grand jury finding this month.

"About 20% of the cases get no-billed, (as in) they do not get indicted and the case does not proceed," she said.

The size and stage of development of Watts' fetus — precisely the point when abortion crossed from legal to illegal without exceptions — became an issue during her preliminary hearing.

A county forensic investigator reported feeling "what appeared to be a small foot with toes" inside Watts' toilet. Police seized the toilet and broke it apart to retrieve the intact fetus as evidence.

Testimony and an autopsy confirmed that the fetus died in utero before passing through the birth canal. In regard to abuse, the examination identified "no recent injuries."

Ivanchak acknowledged the case's complexities.

"There are better scholars than I am to determine the exact legal status of this fetus, corpse, body, birthing tissue, whatever it is," he said from the bench. "Matter of fact, I'm assuming that's what ... Issue 1's all about: at what point something becomes viable."

Timko, a former prosecutor, said Ohio's abuse-of-corpse statute is vague. It prohibits treating "a human corpse" in a way that would "outrage" reasonable family or community sensibilities.

"From a legal perspective, there's no definition of 'corpse,'" she said. "Can you be a corpse if you never took a breath?"

Howard said clarity on what about Watts' behavior constituted a crime is essential.

"For rights of people with the capacity for pregnancy, this is huge," she said. "Her miscarriage was en-

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tirely ordinary. So I just want to know what (the prosecutor) thinks she should have done. If we are going to require people to collect and bring used menstrual products to hospitals so that they can make sure it is indeed a miscarriage, it's as ridiculous and invasive as it is cruel."

Dodgers, Ohtani got creative with \$700 million deal, but both sides still have some risk

By DAVID BRANDT AP Baseball Writer

PHOENIX (AP) — Once the initial shock wore off on the price tag of Shohei Ohtani's record-shattering \$700 million, 10-year deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers, details about the contract emerged that were nearly as stunning.

A total of \$680 million — 97% of the money — was deferred until 2034-43 with no interest.

Had the Dodgers invented some kind of contract voodoo new to Major League Baseball?

Not really. But it appears to be a team-friendly deal that also has benefits for Ohtani as the Japanese superstar departs the Angels, heads 30 miles up Interstate 5 and establishes a new home with the Dodgers in Chavez Ravine.

"Thanks to his endorsements and other off-the-field revenue streams, he has the luxury to defer compensation," said Michael Rueda, head of the U.S. division of sports and entertainment at Withers law firm. "But there's always some risk."

Part of Rueda's job is giving financial advice to high-profile sports stars and celebrities. He said the Ohtani-Dodgers deal looks like a solid arrangement, even if there are tradeoffs for both sides.

Make no mistake, the 29-year-old Ohtani is a rich man and will be rich long into the foreseeable future, but money promised later is never the same as money in hand.

One example of Ohtani's risk: Former Pittsburgh Penguins superstar Mario Lemieux was out about \$26 million in the 1990s when the franchise was in financial trouble and couldn't pay the money it owed the hockey legend in a deferred deal.

Things eventually worked out. Lemieux converted his deferred salary into equity with the team, then partnered with Ron Burkle to pull the club out of bankruptcy. They eventually made a windfall after selling part of their stake in 2021 — but it's a reminder that financial circumstances can change when 20 years pass. The Dodgers were certainly a fan-drawing juggernaut in 2023, but 2043 doesn't come for a long time. LA, after all, is only 12 years removed from filing for bankruptcy protection itself under former owner Frank McCourt.

There's also at least some risk for the franchise: The New York Mets famously deferred \$5.9 million that slugger Bobby Bonilla was owed in 2000 and — thanks to an 8% interest rate — will end up paying nearly \$30 million total in annual installments until 2035. The Mets have leaned into the self-own in recent seasons, with owner Steve Cohen celebrating the July 1 payment that Bonilla is due each year.

Of course, Ohtani's deferred pay comes with no interest. That's a potentially monstrous savings — we're talking billions — on a deal that could have been much more costly. Ohtani's deal with 8% interest would come out to nearly \$3 billion by 2043.

"It's interesting to me that the deferred money comes with no interest, from what I've read" Rueda said. "That's giving up a lot of money."

Ohtani's other potential advantage from the contract is he receives \$680 million of the \$700 million after he's done playing, which means he might not be living in California, where taxes are relatively high. Depending on where he lives from 2034-43, that could lead to sizable savings.

Rueda said the issue isn't black and white and there are lots of variables, particularly if he goes back to Japan.

"Tax is always a big part," Rueda said. "The concept of moving to a different jurisdiction and avoiding the California state tax — yeah, that could be accurate."

For purposes of baseball's luxury tax, the contract is valued as a yearly addition to the Dodgers' payroll of about \$46 million instead of \$70 million. Under the collective bargaining agreement, for the calculation

of a team's tax payroll the value of deferred money is discounted at the federal mid-term rate.

Arizona Diamondbacks owner Ken Kendrick — who talked about the contract at length earlier this week — said his understanding is the deal will save the Dodgers somewhere in the neighborhood of \$5 million each season because of the competitive balance tax savings — the exact amount depends on how often the Dodgers exceed the tax threshold and by how much.

"They're playing by the rules," Kendrick said. "They got a great player, who is going to be an addition that makes them more competitive. But the economics are not so tilted in a way that puts them at an incredible advantage over the rest of us."

Kendrick said he believes one major misconception of the deal is that the Dodgers are saving \$68 million each season from 2024-33 that they can use to pursue other free agents. Baseball's labor contract calls for the deferred money to be set aside by the second July 1 after the season it is earned, at the then-current present-day value discounted by at least 5% annually.

Rueda agreed.

"They have to demonstrate that they have that money," Rueda said. "You can't write checks that you can't cash."

3 hostages mistakenly killed by troops had been holding a white flag, Israeli military official says

By JULIA FRANKEL, NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Three Israeli hostages who were mistakenly shot by Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip had been waving a white flag and were shirtless when they were killed, an Israeli military official said Saturday.

Anger over the mistaken killings is likely to increase pressure on the Israeli government to renew Qatar-mediated negotiations with Hamas over swapping more captives for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel. Hamas has conditioned further releases on Israel halting its punishing air and ground campaign in Gaza, now in its 11th week.

The account of how the hostages died also raised questions about the conduct of Israeli ground troops. Palestinians on several occasions reported that Israeli soldiers opened fire as civilians tried to flee to safety.

The military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to brief reporters in line with military regulations, said it was likely that the hostages had been abandoned by their militant captors or had escaped. The soldiers' behavior was "against our rules of engagement," the official said, and was being investigated at the highest level.

The three, all young men in their 20s, were killed Friday in the Gaza City area of Shijaiyah, where troops have engaged in fierce fighting with Hamas militants in recent days. They had been among more than 240 people taken hostage during an unprecedented raid by Hamas into Israel on Oct. 7 in which around 1,200 people were killed, mostly civilians. The attack sparked the war.

Hundreds of protesters blocked Tel Aviv's main highway late Friday in a spontaneous demonstration calling for the hostages' return. The hostages' plight has dominated public discourse in Israel since the Oct. 7 attack. Their families have led a powerful public campaign calling on the government to do more to bring them home.

Hadas Kalderon, whose former partner is still held hostage after their two teenage children were released in November, said the Israeli government must pay any price to free all hostages. "To make a deal, now, that's what I'm saying. Yesterday, not now," said.

The military official said the three hostages had emerged from a building close to Israeli soldiers' positions. They were waving a white flag and were shirtless, possibly in an effort to signal they posed no threat.

Two were killed immediately, and the third ran back into the building screaming for help in Hebrew. The commander issued an order to cease fire, but another burst of gunfire killed the third man, the official said.

Israeli media gave a more detailed account. The mass circulation daily Yediot Ahronot said Saturday that according to an investigation into the incident, a sniper identified the three hostages as suspects when

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they emerged from the building, despite them not being armed, and shot two of the three.

Soldiers followed the third when he ran into the building and hid, shouting at him to come out and at least one soldier shot him when he emerged from a staircase, Yediot Ahronot said.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz gave a similar account based on a preliminary investigation, saying the soldiers who followed the third hostage into the building believed he was a Hamas member trying to pull them into a trap.

Hamas released over 100 hostages for Palestinian prisoners during a brief cease-fire in November. Nearly all those freed on both sides were women and minors. Talks on further swaps broke down, with Hamas seeking the release of more veteran prisoners for female soldiers it is holding.

Israeli political and military leaders often say freeing all the hostages is their top aim in the war alongside destroying Hamas. However, they argue that their release can only be achieved through military pressure on Hamas, a claim that has sharply divided Israeli public opinion.

After negotiations broke down, Hamas said it will only free the remaining hostages, believed to number more than 130, if Israel ends the war and releases all Palestinian prisoners. As of late November, Israel held nearly 7,000 Palestinians accused or convicted of security offenses, including hundreds rounded up since the start of the war.

The offensive has killed more than 18,700 Palestinians, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Thursday before a communications blackout that has hampered telephone and internet services in the Gaza Strip. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble.

The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Its latest count did not specify how many were women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead in previous tallies.

Dozens of mourners held funeral prayers Saturday for Samer Abu Daqqa, a Palestinian journalist working for the Al Jazeera network who was killed Friday in an Israeli strike in the southern city of Khan Younis. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the cameraman was the 64th journalist to be killed since the conflict erupted: 57 Palestinians, four Israelis and three Lebanese.

The war has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 85% of the territory's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis. Only a trickle of aid has been able to enter Gaza and distribution is disrupted by fighting.

Residents in northern Gaza meanwhile reported heavy bombing and the sounds of gunbattles overnight and into Saturday in devastated Gaza City and the nearby urban refugee camp of Jabaliya.

"It was a violent bombardment," Assad Abu Taha said by phone from the Shijaiyah neighborhood. Another resident, Hamza Abu Seada, reported heavy airstrikes in Jabaliya, with non-stop sounds of explosions and gunfire.

An Associated Press journalist in southern Gaza also reported airstrikes and tank shelling overnight in the cities of Khan Younis and Rafah.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, has expressed unease over Israel's failure to reduce civilian casualties and its plans for the future of Gaza, but the White House continues to offer wholehearted support with weapons shipments and diplomatic backing.

In meetings with Israeli leaders on Thursday and Friday, United States national security adviser Jake Sullivan discussed a timetable for winding down the intense combat phase of the war. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was also expected to visit Israel soon to discuss the issue.

The U.S. has pushed Israel to allow more aid into Gaza, and the government said it would open a second entry point to speed up deliveries.

Latino Democrats shift from quiet concern to open opposition to Biden's concessions in border talks

By STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO and REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Prominent Latinos in Congress looked on quietly, at first, privately raising concerns with the Biden administration over the direction of border security talks.

Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla of California was on the phone constantly with administration officials questioning why the Senate negotiations did not include any meaningful consideration of providing pathways to citizenship for longtime immigrants lacking the proper legal documents.

New Mexico Democrat Sen. Ben Ray Luján made similar arguments as he tried to get meetings with top-level White House officials.

But when the talks didn't seem to make enough difference, the influential lawmakers started leading the open opposition.

"A return to Trump-era policies is not the fix," Padilla said. "In fact, it will make the problem worse."

Padilla even pulled President Joe Biden aside at a fundraiser last weekend in California to warn him "to be careful" of being dragged into "harmful policy."

The Latino senators have found themselves on shifting ground in the debate over immigration as the Democratic president, who is reaching for a border deal as part of his \$110 billion package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs, has tried to reduce the historic numbers of people arriving at the U.S. border with Mexico.

The negotiations, which are expected to continue this weekend at the Capitol, come as the Biden administration has increasingly endured criticism over its handling of border and immigration issues — not just from Republicans, but from members of the president's own party as well. Democratic cities and states have been vocal about the financial toll that they say migrants have been taking on their resources.

But left off the table in the talks are pro-immigration changes, such as granting permanent legal status to thousands of immigrants who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children, often referred to as "Dreamers," based on the DREAM Act that would have provided similar protections for young immigrants but was never approved.

A few days after his conversation with the president, Padilla, Luján and Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., aired their concerns prominently at a Congressional Hispanic Caucus news conference in front of the Capitol.

They slammed Senate Republicans for demanding the border policy changes in exchange for Ukraine aid, and they criticized Biden for making concessions that they say ultimately undermine the United States' standing as a country that welcomes immigrants.

Padilla said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., has promised him and several other senators to allow them to see proposals before there is a final agreement. But Latino lawmakers have largely been left outside the core negotiating group, even as they consistently proposed progressive fixes to the U.S. immigration system.

Biden is facing pressure from all sides. He has been criticized about the record numbers of migrants at the border and he is also trying to address the political weakness before a potential campaign rematch next year with Donald Trump, the former Republican president, who has promised to enact far-right immigration measures.

And the issue is now tied to a top Biden foreign policy goal: providing robust support for Ukraine's defense against Russia.

The White House and Senate leaders are pushing for a framework of the border deal by Sunday, according to one person granted anonymity to discuss the situation. But others cautioned it may take longer.

Recently during the negotiations, the White House has pushed to include provisions that would legalize young immigrants who came to the U.S. illegally as children, according to two people with knowledge of the closed-door talks.

Republicans have demanded several asylum restrictions that Democrats have so far resisted, but the

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protections for “Dreamers” would be one way for Democrats to secure one of their long-standing immigration priorities.

“There’s still disagreements and we continue to work at them,” said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., told reporters after a round of talks Friday.

The bipartisan group negotiating the package has acknowledged that it expects to lose votes from both the left and right wings of either party.

“Regardless of people’s political persuasions, this is a crisis,” said Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who is part of the core negotiating group. “There is nothing that is humane about having thousands of individuals sitting in the desert without access to restrooms or food or water, no shade, just waiting for days to interact with a Border Patrol agent. That’s what’s happening in southern Arizona.”

But immigration advocates have been rallying opposition to the proposed changes — often comparing them to Trump-era measures.

Using words like “draconian” and “betrayal,” advocates argued during a Friday call with reporters that the proposals would undermine U.S. commitments to accepting people fleeing persecution and do little to stop people from making the long, dangerous journey to the border.

One of the policies under consideration would allow border officials to easily send migrants back to Mexico without letting them seek asylum in America, but advocates argue it could just place them into the hands of dangerous cartels that prey on migrants in northern Mexico.

Advocates also say that when the Trump and Biden administrations previously used the expulsion authority on public health grounds during the pandemic, migrants sent back to Mexico didn’t return home. Instead they tried over and over again to enter the U.S. because there were no repercussions.

Greg Chen, senior director of government relations for the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said it would just make the border region “more chaotic, more dangerous.”

The policies under consideration would also be difficult to implement. Detaining migrants or families would lead to hundreds of thousands of people in custody — at a huge cost — and could force the Department of Homeland Security to divert staff from other duties to the border.

“These are all things that are extremely, extremely worrying,” said Jason Houser, the former chief of staff at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

If the legislation comes to a vote, Padilla and other prominent House Democrats, such as Reps. Nanette Barragán of California, the chair of the Hispanic Caucus, and Pramila Jayapal of Washington state, chair of the Progressive Caucus, will likely lead opposition from the left.

Immigration advocates were also heartened to see support from prominent House members like Rep. Veronica Escobar of Texas, who is a co-chair of Biden’s reelection campaign, and Rep. Jerry Nadler of New York, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, at the Hispanic Caucus news conference in front of the Capitol this past week.

Padilla warned that Biden’s concessions on border restrictions could have lasting impact on his support from Latino voters.

“To think that concessions are going to be made without benefiting a single Dreamer, a single farm worker, a single undocumented essential worker is unconscionable,” he said.

Black Ohio woman criminally charged after miscarriage underscores the perils of pregnancy post-Roe

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio was in the throes of a bitter debate over abortion rights this fall when Brittany Watts, 21 weeks and 5 days pregnant, began passing thick blood clots.

The 33-year-old Watts, who had not shared the news of her pregnancy even with her family, made her first prenatal visit to a doctor’s office behind Mercy Health-St. Joseph’s Hospital in Warren, a working-class city about 60 miles (100 kilometers) southeast of Cleveland.

The doctor said that, while a fetal heartbeat was still present, Watts’ water had broken prematurely

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and the fetus she was carrying would not survive. He advised heading to the hospital to have her labor induced, so she could have what amounted to an abortion to deliver the nonviable fetus. Otherwise, she would face "significant risk" of death, records of her case show.

That was a Tuesday in September. What followed was a harrowing three days entailing: multiple trips to the hospital; Watts miscarrying into, and then flushing and plunging, a toilet at her home; a police investigation of those actions; and Watts, who is Black, being charged with abuse of a corpse. That's a fifth-degree felony punishable by up to a year in prison and a \$2,500 fine.

Her case was sent last week to a grand jury. It has touched off a national firestorm over the treatment of pregnant women, and especially Black women, in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump elevated Watts' plight in a post to X, formerly Twitter.

Michele Goodwin, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and author of "Policing The Womb," said the case follows a pattern of women's pregnancies being criminalized against them. She said those efforts have long overwhelmingly targeted Black and brown women.

Even before *Roe* was overturned, studies show that Black women who visited hospitals for prenatal care were 10 times more likely than white women to have child protective services and law enforcement called on them, even when their cases were similar, she said.

"Post-Dobbs, what we see is kind of a wild, wild West," said Goodwin. "You see this kind of muscle-flexing by district attorneys and prosecutors wanting to show that they are going to be vigilant, they're going to take down women who violate the ethos coming out of the state's legislature."

She called Black women "canaries in the coal mine" for the "hyper-vigilant type of policing" women of all races might expect from the nation's network of health-care providers, law enforcers and courts now that abortion isn't federally protected.

At the time of Watts' miscarriage, abortion was legal in Ohio through 21 weeks, six days of pregnancy. Her lawyer, Traci Timko, said Watts sat for eight hours at Mercy Health-St. Joseph's awaiting care on the eve of her pregnancy reaching 22 weeks, before leaving without being treated.

Timko said hospital officials had been deliberating over the legalities.

"It was the fear of, is this going to constitute an abortion and are we able to do that," Timko said. The hospital didn't return calls seeking confirmation and comment.

But B. Jessie Hill, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, said the hospital was in a bind.

"These are the razor's edge decisions that health care providers are being forced to make," she said. "And all the incentives are pushing hospitals to be conservative, because on the other side of this is criminal liability."

Warren Assistant Prosecutor Lewis Guarnieri told Warren Municipal Court Judge Terry Ivanchak during Watts' preliminary hearing that she left home for a hair appointment after miscarrying, leaving the toilet clogged. Police would later find the fetus wedged in the pipes.

"The issue isn't how the child died, when the child died," Guarnieri told the judge, according to TV station WKBN. "It's the fact the baby was put into a toilet, was large enough to clog up the toilet, left in that toilet, and she went on (with) her day."

In court, Timko bristled.

"This 33-year-old girl with no criminal record is demonized for something that goes on every day," she said.

The size and stage of development of Watts' fetus became an issue during her preliminary hearing.

At the time, vigorous campaigning over Issue 1, an ultimately successful amendment to enshrine a right to abortion in Ohio's constitution, included ads alleging the amendment would allow abortions "until birth."

A county forensic investigator reported feeling "what appeared to be a small foot with toes" inside Watts' toilet. Police seized the toilet and broke it apart to retrieve the intact fetus as evidence. An autopsy confirmed that the fetus died in utero before passing through the birth canal and identified "no recent injuries."

The judge acknowledged the case's complexities when he bound the case over to the grand jury.

"There are better scholars than I am to determine the exact legal status of this fetus, corpse, body, birthing tissue, whatever it is," he said from the bench.

Assistant Trumbull County Prosecutor Diane Barber, lead prosecutor on Watts' case, could not speak specifically about the case, other than to note the county is compelled to move forward with it. She doesn't expect a grand jury finding this month.

Timko, a former prosecutor, said Ohio's abuse-of-corpse statute is vague.

"From a legal perspective, there's no definition of 'corpse,'" she said. "Can you be a corpse if you never took a breath?"

Grace Howard, assistant justice studies professor at San José State University, said clarity on what about Watts' behavior constituted a crime is essential.

"Her miscarriage was entirely ordinary," she said. "So I just want to know what (the prosecutor) thinks she should have done. If we are going to require people to collect and bring used menstrual products to hospitals so that they can make sure it is indeed a miscarriage, it's as ridiculous and invasive as it is cruel."

Catholic activists in Mexico help women reconcile their faith with abortion rights

By MARÍA TERESA HERNÁNDEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — In a corner of their Mexico City office, activists from Catholics for the Right to Decide keep an image of the Virgin Mary close to a green scarf that reads: "Mary was consulted to be mother of God."

For these Catholic women, prayer does not conflict with their fight for abortion access nor does their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe prevent them from supporting LGBTQ+ rights.

"You might think that one cannot be a feminist and a Catholic," said activist Cinthya Ramírez. "But being women of faith does not mean that we oppose progressivity, human rights or sexual diversity."

The organization was founded in 1994 by theologians and activists following in the footsteps of Catholics for Choice in the United States. Now present in 10 Latin American countries, its members denounce the invisibility of women in some religious environments and advocate for the reinterpretation of sacred texts with a feminist perspective.

"Assuming our right to decide and dissent with the ecclesiastic hierarchy allows us, as Catholics who embrace our faith, to make decisions in freedom and choose our own life project," said activist Maribel Luna.

Believing the Virgin Mary made a choice to be a mother instead of just obediently fulfilling an archangel's request is unusual in Mexico, where conservatives frequently dress in light blue to protest against the decriminalization of abortion.

The Catholic archbishop of Mexico City, Carlos Aguiar Retes, advocated for an anti-abortion presidential candidate months ago and religious groups are used to praying outside abortion clinics, using Catholic symbols to strengthen their message.

"May the Blessed Virgin intercede for all vulnerable lives and inspire us to be instruments of love and compassion," the Mexican branch of 40 Days for Life published on Facebook days ago.

To address the complexity of terminating a pregnancy in this context, Catholics for the Right to Decide created a spiritual accompaniment group. The team is led by theologians and faith leaders — among them, a Presbyterian and a Lutheran pastor — who listen and comfort women who struggle to reconcile their faith with their decision to get an abortion.

"We created a guide with a biblical and theological foundation, but it also has a sense of freedom," said the Rev. Rebeca Montemayor, a Baptist pastor who is part of the group.

Most women make contact by phone or social media. Some communicate shortly after having an abortion, or when trying to decide whether to have one. Others contact the organization after decades of feeling overwhelmed with guilt.

"I have encountered women who have drawn this out for 30 years," said the Rev. Julián Cruzalta, a Dominican friar and one of the founders of Catholics for the Right to Decide.

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"They have never felt free," Cruzalta said. "It is very difficult to remove years of guilt, to watch their anguished eyes."

The group keeps the women's identity anonymous, but its members discuss their general impressions to update their strategies and understand Mexico's social context.

According to Montemayor and Cruzalta, many of the women who contact them feel tormented with remorse and doubt. "Did I commit murder? Will I go to hell?" they ask. Others think that not only them, but their families, will be condemned.

"It can take up several sessions for them to forgive themselves," Cruzalta said.

As part of the spiritual healing process, some faith leaders ask the women to review booklets on guilt and reinterpret biblical texts. Meditations and healing rituals are encouraged too.

"I ask them to write in a notebook who they were. Not who they are now, but who they were when they made the decision," Cruzalta said. "We judge ourselves from the present, but it helps to go back, to understand that they did the best they could."

Outside the spiritual accompaniment group, Catholics for the Right to Decide offers lectures in universities during sexuality fairs, provides training for medical personnel — who frequently claim conscientious objection to avoid performing legal abortions — and produces "Catholicadas," an animated series that addresses religious themes.

People sometimes provide feedback, Ramírez said, and their words fill their hearts.

According to the activist, there was once a young man from the LGBTQ+ community who approached them and said that through a new reading of the Bible he could finally accept his own identity without feeling remorse. On another occasion, a woman who had an abortion and received spiritual accompaniment said that she was able to take communion again and sleep in peace for the first time in years.

"In the midst of so much violence, we want to bring together communities from different faiths to have a common understanding," Montemayor said. "You can assume your faith in freedom, and regardless of your religion, someone will always be there to accompany you."

'Insurance godmothers' sign up Latinos for Obamacare in pro-Trump areas as he threatens to repeal it

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Salsa music blares from the food court in a rundown Miami shopping center as Latinos head to a kiosk and an office showing signs for "Obamacare," where they hope to renew their health coverage plans before the year ends.

It's areas near this mall where former Democratic President Barack Obama's health care overhaul is more popular than anywhere in the country, according to federal data. The region has also shifted away from Democrats to Republicans in recent years, with Donald Trump hosting several rallies here as part of his outreach to Latino voters.

Trump, the current front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, has pledged to renew efforts to repeal and replace the 2010 law — something that would be felt heavily in the region and could possibly reverse some of the GOP shift among South Florida's Latinos, experts say.

President Joe Biden's reelection campaign has already seized on Trump's statements about "Obamacare," which was enacted when Biden was vice president, as part of its broader efforts to shape the widely expected rematch with Trump next year.

"Health insurance is something that is extremely needed for everyone," said Odalys Arevalo, one of the managing partners of a health insurance agency serving Spanish-speaking clients in Miami. "And I know that everybody that supports the Republican Party that has health insurance through Obamacare would not support the fact that it would be taken away from one day to another. That is a fact."

Arevalo and her business partner, Mercy Cabrera, started enrollment centers to help people navigate the Affordable Care Act's insurance marketplaces and remember how some Cubans would walk away ut-

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tering “no, no, no,” after seeing the name “Obamacare,” which was coined by Republicans opposing the overhaul as an expensive government takeover of health insurance.

Insurers could no longer deny coverage based on preexisting medical conditions, and that drew many Latinos to consider it, Arevalo says. In the following years, the women started enrolling tens of thousands, earning the nickname of “Madrinas del Obamacare,” or “Obamacare” godmothers, evoking the crucial role godparents play in Latino culture.

They have since renamed themselves “Las Madrinas de los Seguros,” or “insurance godmothers,” because they offer other plans. But they continue to feature the word “Obamacare” on their office walls and in their ads.

“Obamacare” is seen throughout Miami in advertising flags, businesses and bus signs. Federal data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services indicates how widely used it is here.

About 3.4 million Hispanics are signed up with insurance through the health law. Florida leads enrollment with more than 3.2 million consumers selecting a plan during last year’s enrollment period from November 2022 to January. Miami-Dade is the county with the most people enrolled, with about 750,000 consumers, or more than one-fourth of the total population.

Florida is also one of 10 states that has resisted expanding Medicaid coverage under a provision of the health law.

The two Zip codes with the most sign-ups last year and this year are in Doral and Hialeah, hubs for the Venezuelan and Cuban communities that are just north of Miami and are common stops for Trump’s visits and rallies.

Last month, Trump posted on his Truth Social social media site that “the cost of Obamacare is out of control, plus, it’s not good Healthcare.” While he said he is looking at alternatives, he has not shared any plans. But Trump said he would not give up on terminating it — recalling when the late Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., blocked the then-president’s effort to repeal the law in July 2017.

During Trump’s administration, Republicans managed to pass a provision that reduced the penalty for not having health insurance to zero, the most unpopular part of the law and something that people in South Florida say made them feel more at ease with the plans.

The Miami Herald, in a recent editorial, called the plans by Trump — also echoed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, another 2024 GOP presidential candidate — “exceedingly out of touch with voters.”

Biden’s campaign quickly mobilized a response and the chair of the Florida Democratic Party, Nikki Fried, specifically mentioned an area where “Obamacare” is popular.

“Miami-Dade County would be hardest hit by Trump’s anti-health care agenda,” Fried said.

According to a KFF poll conducted in May 2023, 59% of Americans say they have a favorable opinion of the Affordable Care Act. The same poll by the nonprofit organization focused on health policy found that 66% of Hispanics say they have a favorable opinion of the law.

According to APVoteCast, a wide-ranging survey of U.S. voters, 62% of 2022 midterm voters in Florida said it should be the responsibility of the federal government to make sure that all people in the country have health care coverage. About one-third of Florida voters in the 2022 midterm elections said that shouldn’t be the government’s job. Among Latino or Hispanic midterm voters in Florida, 77% said ensuring health care coverage for all should be the responsibility of the federal government, while 1 in 5 said it should not be.

Zulina Ruiz, a 72-year-old retired lawyer from Venezuela, said she found out about the Affordable Care Act options quickly after arriving in the U.S. in 2017. She said she is particularly grateful for having access to drugs to treat her high blood pressure. Green-card holders, refugees and other migrants who have been granted temporary protected status or who have come recently with humanitarian parole also qualify for coverage under the law.

“This is very important for me. I don’t think a candidate can just make this program disappear,” she said. “They would leave millions of low-income people without insurance.”

Ruiz became a U.S. citizen in May, but has not registered with any party. She does not know whom she

will vote for next year.

"I am still not decided, and we don't have official candidates yet," Ruiz said, adding that she still feels more connected politically to Venezuela. Much of the growing support for Republicans in Miami is owed to Trump's record opposing socialist leaders across Latin America, including imposing White House sanctions on Venezuelan officials.

"But health policy is a top priority for me," Ruiz said.

The Biden campaign has run advertising in battleground states contrasting his efforts to lower drug costs with Trump's renewed promise to repeal the health overhaul. The ad campaign did not include markets in Florida.

Arevalo, one of the "Obamacare godmothers," thinks voters in Miami may not necessarily approve of all the positions of the candidates they ultimately back.

But as far as a local verdict on "Obamacare," and despite initial hesitations about it, the program grew on people in Miami once they understood it, she said.

"When Trump was elected, some people came and said they wanted nothing to do with Obamacare. We said 'Obamacare, Trumpcare, whatever,'" she said of what they told people. "The important thing is that everybody has access to health insurance and that they can take care of their health."

Federal Reserve on cusp of what some thought impossible: Defeating inflation without steep recession

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was the most painful inflation Americans had experienced since 1981, when "The Dukes of Hazzard" and "The Jeffersons" were topping the TV charts. Yet the Federal Reserve now seems on the verge of defeating it — and without the surge in unemployment and the deep recession that many economists had predicted would accompany it.

Inflation has been falling more or less steadily since peaking in June of last year at 9.1%. And when the Fed's preferred inflation gauge for November is reported next week, it's likely to show that in the past six months, annual inflation actually dipped just below the Fed's target of 2%, economists at UBS estimate.

The cost of goods — such as used cars, furniture and appliances — has fallen for six straight months. Compared with a year ago, goods prices are unchanged, held down by improved global supply chains.

Housing and rental costs, a major driver of inflation, are growing more slowly. Wage growth has cooled, too, though it still tops inflation. Milder wage growth tends to ease pressure on restaurants, hotels and other employers to increase their prices to cover their labor costs.

"I think it's really good to see the progress that we're making," Chair Jerome Powell said at a news conference Wednesday after the Fed's latest policy meeting. "If you look at the ... six-month measures, you see very low numbers."

On Friday, the Congressional Budget Office, a nonpartisan agency, estimated that inflation will drop to 2.1% by the end of next year.

There will likely be bumps on the road toward getting inflation fully under control, officials have said. Powell insisted that "no one is declaring victory." And he reiterated that the central bank wants to see further evidence of falling inflation before it would feel confident that it is sustainably headed back to the 2% target.

Yet many economists, normally a cautious lot, are now willing to declare that inflation is nearly back under control after two-plus years in which it imposed hardships on millions of American households.

"It appears that inflation has returned to 2%," said Tim Duy, chief economist at SGH Macroeconomics. "The Fed looks like it has won that battle."

Prices spikes are also moderating overseas, with both the Bank of England and European Central Bank keeping their benchmark interest rates unchanged this week. Though inflation is still at 4.6% in the United Kingdom, it has fallen to 2.4% in the 20 countries that use the euro currency.

With inflation cooling, Powell said the 19 officials on the Fed's policy setting committee had discussed

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the prospects for rate cuts at this week's meeting. The officials also projected that the Fed will cut its key interest rate three times next year.

That stance marked a drastic shift from the rate-hiking campaign the Fed began in March 2022. Beginning then, the central bank raised its benchmark rate 11 times, from near zero to roughly 5.4%, its highest level in 22 years, to try to slow borrowing, spending and inflation. The result was much higher costs for mortgages, auto loans, business borrowing and other forms of credit.

Powell's suddenly more optimistic words, and the Fed's rate-cut projections, sent stock market indexes soaring this week. Wall Street traders now foresee a roughly 80% likelihood that the first rate cut will occur when the Fed meets in March, and they are forecasting a total of six cuts in 2024.

On Friday, John Williams, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and a top lieutenant of Powell's, sought to pour some cold water on those expectations. Speaking on CNBC, Williams said it was "premature to be even thinking" about whether to cut rates in March. But he also mentioned that his forecast was for inflation to move down "sustainably" to 2%.

The week's events represented a departure from just two weeks ago, when Powell had said it was "premature" to say whether the Fed had raised its key rate high enough to fully conquer high inflation. On Wednesday, he suggested that the Fed was almost certainly done with rate increases.

Recent data appeared to have helped shift Powell's thinking. On Wednesday, a measure of wholesale prices came in lower than economists had expected. Some of those figures are used to compile the Fed's preferred inflation gauge, which, as a result, is expected to show much lower inflation numbers next week.

Powell said some Fed officials had even updated their economic projections on Wednesday, not long before they were issued, in light of the lower-than-expected wholesale price report.

"The speed at which inflation has fallen has been like an earthquake at the Fed," Duy wrote in a note to clients Wednesday.

And yet in the meantime, the economy keeps growing, defying widespread fears from a year ago that 2023 would bring a recession, a consequence of the much higher borrowing rates the Fed engineered. A report on retail sales Thursday showed that consumers grew their spending last month, likely encouraged by increased discounting that will also lower inflation. Such trends are supporting the growing belief that the economy will achieve an elusive "soft landing," in which inflation is defeated without an accompanying recession.

"We think the Fed cannot believe its luck: We are back to 'immaculate disinflation,'" Krishna Guha, an economic analyst at investment bank Evercore ISI, wrote in a client note.

Economists credit the Fed's rapid rate hikes for contributing to inflation's decline. In addition, a recovery in global supply chains and a jump in the number of Americans — and recent immigrants — searching for jobs have helped cool the pace of wage growth.

Jon Steinsson, an economics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, said that by aggressively raising their key interest rate in about 15 months — the fastest such pace in four decades — Fed officials kept Americans' inflation expectations largely in check. Expectations can become self-fulfilling: If people expect higher inflation, they often take actions, such as demanding higher wages, that can send prices higher still.

"They played a crucial role," Steinsson said.

Still, a continued decline in inflation isn't guaranteed. One wild card is rental prices. Real-time measures of new apartment leases show those costs rising much more slowly than they did a year ago. It takes time for that data to flow into the government's figures. In fact, excluding what the government calls "shelter" costs — rents, the cost of homeownership and hotel prices — inflation rose just 1.4% last month from a year earlier.

But Kathy Bostjancic, an economist at Nationwide, said she worries that a shortage of available homes could raise housing costs in the coming years, potentially keeping inflation elevated.

The Fed's rate hikes, Bostjancic said, could actually prolong the shortage. Today's higher mortgage rates may limit home construction while also discouraging current homeowners from selling. Both trends would keep a lid on the supply of homes and keep prices elevated.

Yet Fed officials appear confident in their forecasts that inflation is steadily slowing. In September, 14 of 19 Fed policymakers had said there were risks that inflation could rise faster than they expected. This month, only eight said so.

"Their projections have mostly gone down, and they think the probability that there will be some flare-up of inflation is lower," said Preston Mui, senior economist at Employ America, an advocacy group.

A cardinal and 9 others will learn their fate in a Vatican financial trial after 2 years of hearings

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — A once-powerful cardinal and nine other people learn their fates Saturday when a Vatican tribunal hands down verdicts in a complicated financial trial that has aired the tiny city state's dirty laundry and tested its justice system.

At the start of the hearing, Judge Giuseppe Pignatone praised prosecutors and defense attorneys alike for their professionalism in what he acknowledged was a "certainly unusual" trial for the Vatican in terms of its complexity. He stressed that the tribunal had tried, "within the limits ... of the legal framework in force" to guarantee ample space for both sides to present their case, and in particular the defense.

The three-judge panel then went into closed consultations pending a late afternoon reading of the verdicts in the converted courtroom in the Vatican Museums, where the two sides have sparred for 2½ years over the details of a money-losing investment in a luxury London property.

Cardinal Angelo Becciu, the first-ever cardinal to be prosecuted in the Vatican's criminal court, is accused of embezzlement-related charges in two tangents of the London deal and faces up to seven years in prison if convicted. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Unlike most defendants, Becciu attended nearly all of the 86 hearings, during which 69 witnesses were heard, saying Pope Francis clearly wanted him to face court judgment after Francis himself forced his resignation and removed his privileges as a cardinal before he was even charged.

The trial has raised questions about the rule of law in the city state and Francis' power as absolute monarch, given that he wields supreme legislative, executive and judicial authority and has exercised it in ways the defense says jeopardized a fair trial.

The defense attorneys did praise Pignatone's even-handedness and said they were able to present their arguments amply. But they lamented the Vatican's outdated procedural norms gave prosecutors enormous leeway to withhold evidence and otherwise pursue their investigation nearly unimpeded.

In addition to Becciu, prosecutors charged nine others with a host of alleged financial crimes stemming from the secretariat of state's 350 million euro investment in developing a former Harrod's warehouse into luxury apartments. Prosecutors allege Vatican Monsignors and brokers fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions and then extorted the Holy See for 15 million euros to cede control of the building.

Prosecutors are seeking convictions for nearly 50 different charges of fraud, embezzlement, money-laundering, corruption, abuse of office and extortion. They are seeking prison terms from three to 13 years and damages of over 400 million euros to try to recover the estimated 200 million euros they say the Holy See lost in the bad deals.

The trial was initially seen as a sign of Francis' financial reforms and willingness to crack down on alleged financial misdeeds in the Vatican. But it had something of a reputational boomerang for the Holy See, with revelations of vendettas, espionage and even ransom payments to Islamic militants.

The secretariat of state, for example, is seeking damages to fund a marketing campaign to try to repair the reputational harm it says it incurred. Even the Vatican communications department said the trial itself had been a "stress test" for the legal system.

Much of the London case rested on the passage of the property from one London broker to another in late 2018. Prosecutors allege the second broker, Gianluigi Torzi, hoodwinked the Vatican by maneuvering to secure full control of the building that he relinquished only when the Vatican paid him off 15 million euros.

For Vatican prosecutors, that amounted to extortion. For the defense — and a British judge who rejected Vatican requests to seize Torzi's assets — it was a negotiated exit from a legally binding contract.

The two former managers of the Vatican's financial watchdog, Rene Bruehlhart and Tommaso Di Ruzza, were accused of abuse of office for not blocking the payment to Torzi and for not reporting it all to Vatican prosecutors.

But in testimony that brought Francis into the heart of the trial, they argued that Francis himself had asked them to help the secretariat of state wrest control of the property from Torzi once the Vatican realized it didn't actually own the building.

They cited written testimony from the Vatican chief of staff, Monsignor Edgar Pena Parra, who said Vatican lawyers had advised against suing Torzi since their case was so weak. The Vatican chose to negotiate a payout with Torzi because that option was considered best in terms of cost, risk and outcome.

"It also appeared to be purely aligned with the will of the superior," he said, referring to Francis, who he said wanted to "turn the page and start over."

The original London investigation spawned two other tangents that involved the star defendant, Becciu, once one of Francis' top advisers and himself considered a papal contender.

Prosecutors accused Becciu of embezzlement for sending 125,000 euros in Vatican money to a Sardinian charity run by his brother. Becciu argued that the local bishop requested the money to build a bakery to employ at-risk youths and that the money remained in the diocesan coffers.

Becciu was also accused of paying a Sardinian woman, Cecilia Marogna, for her intelligence services. Prosecutors traced some 575,000 euros in wire transfers from the Vatican to a Slovenian front company owned by Marogna and said she used the money to buy luxury goods and fund vacations.

Becciu said he thought the money was going to pay a British security firm to negotiate the release of Gloria Narvaez, a Colombian nun taken hostage by Islamic militants in Mali in 2017.

He said Francis authorized up to 1 million euros to liberate the nun, an astonishing admission that the Vatican was willing to make ransom payment to al-Qaida-linked militants.

Marogna, who is also on trial, denied wrongdoing.

Women and children first? Experts say that in most crises, it's more like everyone for themselves

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — So much for women and children first.

The phrase and its grave implications about who to save first in a catastrophe are rooted in the shipwrecks of centuries past and popularized by Hollywood's treatment of the Titanic disaster. It is getting another airing at a time when, in many societies, women are expected to do most everything men do. Experts say the unwritten law of the sea is a Hollywood-fed myth and a relic of Victorian-era chivalry.

At the center of this round of questions is the prisoners-for-hostages deal between Israel and Hamas in November that prioritized releasing women and children after negotiators agreed that mothers and their children should not be separated. Israelis are overwhelmingly supportive of this approach. But it leaves behind elderly and injured men during the most chaotic phase of the war, a result that has angered some families. On Friday, Israel said the army had mistakenly killed three of the remaining hostages, all men.

"To say 'women and children' in the 21st century — as if families can be whole without the fathers, as if children that have come back with their fathers still there can in any way start recovering from the trauma — is unthinkable," Sharone Lifshitz, whose mother was freed in October and whose 83-year-old father, Oded, remains in captivity, told The Associated Press.

Of about 240 people who were kidnapped during Hamas' Oct. 7 rampage, 86 Israelis were released. Seventeen Thai men also were let go. That left 119 men — many of them injured or elderly — and 17 women and children as hostages in Gaza.

In a private meeting on Dec. 5, Israeli media reported, the families of the remaining captives ripped Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for agreeing to prioritize women and children — then resuming

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Israel's bombardment of Gaza with no known plans to negotiate the release of anyone else.

"You think the men are strong? It's too hard for them. Bring them all home," Sharon Cunio, whose husband, David, and other family members are still hostages, told Netanyahu and Israel's war cabinet, according to local media.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE NOTION?

"Children first" seems to be a widely agreed-upon crisis action plan, whether it's a rescue from a natural disaster or a hostage-taking. And women and children generally pay an outsized price in crises: The death toll from Israel's bombardment of Gaza tops 18,700 — around two-thirds of them women and children.

But other standards, such as women before men, can lead to fraught judgments about whose lives are most valuable — and reflect the human impulse to sort each other.

Experts say the choice nowadays often is to save the most vulnerable first, which would include children but also older people and those who are sick and the injured, no matter their gender. When everyone can't be rescued at once, the critical factors seem to be the exercise of leadership and all players making a choice — typically between themselves and others.

Other dynamics weigh heavily, such as how much time people have before a ship sinks as well as the societal and cultural norms of the people involved.

"What is considered 'valuable' is determined by the actors controlling the situation," says Edward Galea, a professor at the University of Greenwich who specializes in evacuation and human behavior. In a fire or other disaster, it's those directly involved — say, a ship captain or passengers. In a hostage situation, he says, "it's external actors" — in the case of the Gaza war, it's intense politics and a watching world.

"For example, it could be considered valuable to be seen to attempt to release the most vulnerable first or to release women and children first or to be gender and age neutral," Galea said in an email. There's no law or regulation that says women and children must be saved first; rather, he's said, it's a tradition ingrained by Hollywood.

In real time, human behavior in catastrophes often plays out more like every person for themselves, according to experts who have studied the dynamics. There's often no time to consider who belongs to which group, or to fight over terms as in a wartime hostage release. Leadership is key; someone has to go first.

In Italy in 2012, that someone was Francesco Schettino, the captain of the luxury liner Costa Concordia who slammed it into a reef, capsizing off the Tuscan island of Giglio. Thirty-two people died. Schettino is serving a 16-year prison sentence for manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning a ship before all the passengers and crew had evacuated.

On the Israel-Hamas prisoners-for-hostages deal, the negotiators agreed that mothers and children should not be separated. Hamas, which broke hostage-taking norms by abducting women and children, was more open to their release because they were getting in the way. Not all women were released, however: Some are in the army, and some have died.

After Israel resumed its bombing of Gaza on Dec. 1, Netanyahu reportedly told the families of the male hostages that Hamas was now making demands that even they, the relatives of those still missing, would not have accepted in exchange for their loved ones.

A LONG HISTORY OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST

The women-and-children ethos is widely attributed to the 1852 sinking of the HMS Birkenhead a few miles off the coast of South Africa. In the wee hours of Feb. 25, with about 638 people aboard, the steam paddler hit a rock off Danger Point. Water flooded the forward hull and the equipment used to lower most of the lifeboats malfunctioned, according to accounts at the time.

British Lt. Col. Alexander Seton, 38, is widely credited with understanding as the ship sank that fleeing men would swamp the few functioning lifeboats, which were filled with women and children.

He gave the order to his crew: "I implore you not to do this thing and I ask you all to stand fast." They did, according to multiple survivor accounts. Britain's National Army Museum says the 193 survivors included all 26 women and children aboard.

Thus was born what became known as "the Birkenhead drill," whereby women and children were saved first in shipwrecks. "To stand an' be still to the Birken'ead drill is a damn tough bullet to chew," Rudyard

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Kipling wrote in 1896.

The drill would become most closely associated with the sinking of the RMS Titanic on April 15, 1912, killing at least 1,500 of the more than 2,200 people aboard. Accounts differ, but testimony from the inquiries afterward indicates that someone or someones — from Capt. Edward Smith to various passengers — prioritized putting women and children into the lifeboats, of which there were not enough to evacuate everyone aboard.

In the end, 70% of the women and children were saved compared to only 20% of the men, according to a 2012 study by two economists at Uppsala University in Sweden. The 1997 movie "Titanic" immortalized the order when actor Leonardo DiCaprio says the words "women and children first" during a key scene.

That's not how evacuations and rescues tend to play out in real life, according to one of the authors of the 2012 study, which looked at 18 maritime disasters over three centuries. The Titanic was the exception, according to Mikael Elinder, because leadership had an effect on the behavior of the crew.

"We don't see this in most shipwrecks, just chaos," Elinder said. "When there is a threat to loss of life, one tries to save oneself."

In most shipwrecks, the study found, women have a survival disadvantage compared with men. Captains and crew survive at a significantly higher rate than passengers. And it turned out that some survivors later spoke of men trying to save themselves.

And there were other distinctions made, according to Lucy Delap of Cambridge University, a historian of feminism in the United States and Britain.

"It turned out that not all women were equally deserving of protection at sea," she wrote in 2012. "Lower-class women — wives of sailors or soldiers, or poor emigrant women — were frequently excluded from the rule, and women of color were equally marginalized."

Russia and Ukraine exchange drone attacks after EU funding stalled

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia and Ukraine each reported dozens of attempted drone attacks in the past day, just hours after Hungary vetoed 50 billion euros (\$54.5 billion) of EU funding to Ukraine.

Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Ukrainian air defense had shot down 30 out of 31 drones launched overnight against 11 regions of the country.

Russia also said Friday evening that it had thwarted a series of Ukrainian drone attacks.

Russian anti-aircraft units destroyed 32 Ukrainian drones over the Crimean peninsula, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Telegram. Russia annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in 2014, a move that most of the world considered illegal, and has used it as a staging and supply point during the war.

Earlier, Russia's Defense Ministry said that six drones had been shot down in the Kursk region, which borders Ukraine.

In Ukraine's partially occupied southern Kherson region, Russian-installed governor Vladimir Saldo reported on Telegram that Russian anti-aircraft units had downed at least 15 aerial targets near the town of Henichesk.

Meanwhile, shelling wounded two people in Ukrainian-held parts of the Kherson region, regional Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin said Saturday.

Stepped-up drone attacks over the past month come as both sides are keen to show they are not deadlocked as the war approaches two years' duration. Neither side has gained much ground despite a Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in June, and analysts predict the war will be a long one.

On Friday, EU leaders sought to paper over their inability to boost Ukraine's coffers with a promised 50 billion euros (\$54.5 billion) over the next four years, saying the check will likely arrive next month after some more haggling between the other 26 leaders and the longtime holdout, Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary.

Instead, they wanted Ukraine to revel in getting the nod to start membership talks that could mark a sea

change in its fortunes — although the process could last well over a decade and be strewn with obstacles placed by any single member state.

A vibrant art scene in Uganda mirrors African boom as more collectors show interest

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Lilian Nabulime hasn't forgotten the time in the 1990s when the Ugandan capital had just one commercial art gallery, a small space that emerging artists struggled to get into.

Now, there are at least six in Kampala, including one whose curator recently exhibited the sculptor's contrarian work.

Nabulime's show, which has attracted audiences for its conspiratorial take on the peculiarities of urban "gossip," might never have happened if she hadn't approached Xenson Art Space and asked for the opportunity to exhibit her work. Her work includes terracotta works topped with the deformed facial features of gossip bearers.

"Nobody ever comes to me and says, 'Oh, can we show your work?'" she said, sitting amid her sculptures. "For me, I just decided and said, 'Let me go and exhibit my work.' I asked for the exhibition, and they gave me the space."

Her solo show, which will last until Dec. 20, exemplifies an expanding artistic landscape that allows more room for local artists who once struggled for space. Nabulime, who teaches sculpture at a prestigious art school in Kampala, is among a growing list of artists whose body of work contributes to a feeling among curators of an exciting moment for Ugandan art.

Their sense of cheer mirrors a similar trend across Africa that's fueled not just by an explosion of compelling new work but also by the growing ability of curators from the continent to reach new collectors at a time of rising global interest in modern African art.

There are fresh signs of this momentum. The Ivorian painter Aboudia was the world's bestselling artist in 2022, selling two more artworks than the popular Damien Hirst, according to the Hiscox Artist Top 100 survey. And in November, an artwork by the Ethiopian-born artist Julie Mehretu fetched \$10.7 million at auction, a new record for an African artist.

In addition to the annual Art Auction East Africa in Kenya — during which dead and living artists are valued if not rediscovered — the most ambitious curators from Africa are accredited to attend events such as the influential Art Basel.

"Let us have more curators so that they can show other people's work," Nabulime said, speaking of the growing number of gallerists in Kampala. "In Uganda, if we are to have more work on the international market, we have to have more curators who are well connected."

Daudi Karungi, an artist and entrepreneur who founded Kampala's Afriart Gallery in 2002, spoke to the AP of his struggle to nurture talented artists from hungry beginnings to a level of professionalism where their work is properly documented and accessible to global collectors.

One of Africa's most prominent art spaces, Afriart Gallery runs a training program for artists, with the most successful among them now able to show their work abroad. Karungi usually invites some of his artists to join him at art fairs abroad, a key element in giving them international visibility, he said.

"We are now doing shows with artists in other places in the world," he said. "We are publishing books about these artists because some of the things that we need to correct is that we need to write our own stories. We are doing that kind of work for now, and all so far is good."

Those artists not represented by Afriart Gallery have choices, including an alternative space in a disused banking hall in the central district of Masaka, the scene now of a vibrant artistic community that was unimaginable five years ago. A painter born and raised there, Godwin Champs Namuyimba, has had some of his pieces sold for six figures at auction in Europe despite being largely unknown at home.

The regular art auction in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, also has been critical in the reappraisal in recent years of Ugandan artists such as Geoffrey Mukasa, a painter who was underappreciated in his lifetime and

died poor but now commands hefty prices.

Many of Mukasa's works remained unsold by the time he died in 2009, but his work is now acknowledged as "timeless," said Danda Jaroljmek, an influential curator whose Circle Art Gallery in Nairobi puts on the annual auction.

"We were able to source works and to be able to put them in the auction and introduce them to a new audience," she said, adding that the auction creates a "secondary market" for collectors.

Jaroljmek described the Kampala art scene as more intellectually engaged in ways that the Nairobi scene isn't. That's partly because a prominent art school at Uganda's Makerere University has proved a pivotal "central location" in educating artists, she said.

Yet Uganda's collecting class remains minuscule, with new shows patronized by hip youngsters and expatriates. Gallerists still struggle to make sales, relying mostly on collectors outside Uganda who may spot desirable artworks through promotional materials before making offers.

These poor circumstances vex artists, despite optimism by curators and others who say more and more Ugandans are starting to appreciate art as an attractive investment option.

In 2022, a small group of Ugandans formed the Contemporary Art Society of Uganda, whose goal is to promote the emergence of private and corporate art collections in this East African country of 45 million people. Each of the group's members is asked to collect at least one artwork by a Ugandan each year, creating opportunities for emerging artists.

Ugandan attorney Linda Mutesi, an art collector who helped launch the Contemporary Art Society of Uganda, said that collecting for her and others has become a principled effort aimed at retaining Africa's most unique cultural resources.

"Over the years, the African middle class has been awakened to the things around them, the beauty around them and the issues that surround them and, as you can see, it's always been the expatriates that sort of come to our countries and take all this art away," she said.

"I feel that we are approaching collecting of art as an intervention. We are sort of safeguarding and saying, 'Hey, let's not have this continue. Let's not have the bleeding of these works, all this intellectual property leaving the continent. Let's keep it here.'"

No room at the inn? As holidays approach, migrants face eviction from New York City shelters

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It could be a cold, grim New Year for thousands of migrant families living in New York City's emergency shelter system. With winter setting in, they are being told they need to clear out, with no guarantee they'll be given a bed elsewhere.

Homeless migrants and their children were limited to 60 days in city housing under an order issued in October by Mayor Eric Adams, a move the Democrat says is necessary to relieve a shelter system overwhelmed by asylum-seekers crossing the southern U.S. border.

That clock is now ticking down for people like Karina Obando, a 38-year-old mother from Ecuador who has been given until Jan. 5 to get out of the former hotel where she has been staying with her two young children.

Where she will end up next is unclear. After that date, she can reapply for admission to the shelter system. A placement might not happen right away. Her family could wind up getting sent to one of the city's huge tent shelters far from where her 11-year-old son goes to school.

"I told my son, 'Take advantage. Enjoy the hotel because we have a roof right now,'" Obando said in Spanish outside Row NYC, a towering, 1,300-room hotel the city converted into a shelter for migrants in the heart of the theater district. "Because they're going to send us away and we're going to be sleeping on the train, or on the street."

A handful of cities across the U.S. dealing with an influx of homeless migrants have imposed their own limits on shelter stays, citing a variety of reasons, including spiraling costs, a lack of space and a desire

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to put pressure on people to either find housing on their own, or leave town entirely.

Chicago imposed a 60-day shelter limit last month and is poised to start evicting people in early January. In Massachusetts, Gov. Maura Healey, a Democrat, has capped the number of migrant families in emergency shelters at 7,500.

Denver had limited migrant families to 37 days but paused the policy this month in recognition of winter's onset. Single adults are limited to 14 days.

In New York, the first families were expected to reach their 60-day limits just days after Christmas, but the mayor's office said those migrants will receive extensions through early January. Roughly 3,500 families have been issued notices so far.

Unlike most other big cities, New York has a decades-old "right to shelter" obligating the city to provide emergency housing to anyone who asks.

But officials have warned migrants there is no guarantee they will get to stay in the same hotel, or the same city borough, for that matter.

Adult migrants without children are already subject to a shorter limit on shelter stays: 30 days.

Those who get kicked out and still want help are told to head for the city's so-called "reticketing center" that opened in late October in a former Catholic school in Manhattan's East Village.

Dozens of men and women, many with their luggage and other belongings in tow, line up every morning in freezing weather where they must petition for a renewed stay.

They are offered a free, one-way ticket to anywhere in the world. Most people decline.

Some are able to secure another shelter for 30 days, but many others say they leave empty-handed and must line up again the next day to try their luck.

"I'm scared of dying, sleeping on the street," Barbara Coromoto Monzon Peña, a 22-year-old from Venezuela, said as she spent a second day waiting in line on a recent weekday.

Obando said her eldest son, who is 19, hasn't been able to find a place to rent since he and his wife exhausted their 30 allowed days at the Row NYC hotel.

"As a mother, it hurts," she said, breaking down in tears. "He's sleeping on the train, on the street, in the cold. He's in a lot of pain, and now it's our turn. They told me that this country was different, but for me it's been hell."

Adams has insisted the city is doing a lot more for migrant families than almost anywhere else. New York is on track to spend billions of dollars opening shelters, paying for hotel rooms, buying meals and offering assistance overcoming bureaucratic hurdles for asylum-seekers.

The mayor also has warned repeatedly that the city's resources are stretched thin, with more than 67,200 migrants still in its care and many more arriving every week.

"We're doing everything in our power to treat families as humanely as possible," said Kayla Mamelak, a spokesperson for Adams. "We have used every possible corner of New York City and are quite simply out of good options."

She stressed that the administration intends to avoid having families sleeping on the streets and said there will be an orderly process for them to request another 60-day stay.

Advocates for immigrants say the end result will still uproot vulnerable families during the coldest months of the year and disrupt schooling for new students just settling into classes.

"It's maybe the most Grinch move, ever," said Liza Schwartzwald, a director at the New York Immigrant Coalition. "Sending families with children out like in the middle of winter right after the holiday season is just cruel."

Adams has stressed that migrant children would not be required to change schools when they move. But some kids could potentially face epic commutes if they are placed in new shelters far from their current schools.

Migrant parents say two months simply isn't enough time to find a job, get kids settled into childcare or school and save up enough for rent.

Obando, who arrived in the U.S. three months ago, said that outside of the odd cleaning job, she has struggled to find consistent work because there is no one to care for her 3-year-old daughter with her

husband still detained at the border in Arizona.

"It's not that we Ecuadorians come to take their jobs or that we're lazy," she said. "We're good workers. More time, that's all we ask."

For Ana Vasquez, a 22-year-old from Venezuela who is eight months pregnant, the situation is more urgent.

Her baby is due in late December, but she has until Jan. 8 to leave the Row NYC, where she has been staying with her sister and two young nieces for the past four months.

"They are going to leave me out in the cold," Vasquez lamented in Spanish one chilly morning this month outside the hotel. "We don't have an escape plan. The situation is difficult, even more so with the baby."

Matthew Perry died from the effects of ketamine, autopsy report says

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Matthew Perry died from the acute effects of the anesthetic ketamine, according to the results of an autopsy on the 54-year-old "Friends" actor released Friday.

The Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner said in the autopsy report that Perry also drowned in "the heated end of his pool," but that it was a secondary factor in his Oct. 28 death, deemed an accident.

People close to Perry told investigators that he was undergoing ketamine infusion therapy, an experimental treatment used to treat depression and anxiety. But the medical examiner said the levels of ketamine in Perry's body were in the range used for general anesthesia during surgery, and that his last treatment 1 1/2 weeks earlier wouldn't explain those levels. The drug is typically metabolized in a matter of hours.

The report says coronary artery disease and buprenorphine, which is used to treat opioid use disorder, also contributed.

The amount of ketamine detected "would be enough to make him lose consciousness and lose his posture and his ability to keep himself above the water," said Dr. Andrew Stolbach, a medical toxicologist with Johns Hopkins Medicine who reviewed the autopsy report at the request of The Associated Press.

"Using sedative drugs in a pool or hot tub, especially when you're alone, is extremely risky and, sadly, here it's fatal," said Stolbach, who noted that both ketamine and buprenorphine can be used safely.

Perry was declared dead after being found unresponsive at his home in the Pacific Palisades area of Los Angeles. Investigators performed the autopsy the following day.

The actor had taken drugs in the past but had been "reportedly clean for 19 months," according to the report.

Perry had played pickleball earlier in the day, the report says, and his assistant, who lives with him, found him face down in the pool after returning from errands.

The assistant told investigators Perry had not been sick, had not made any health complaints, and had not shown evidence of recent alcohol or drug use.

Postmortem blood tests showed "high levels" of ketamine in his system, which could have raised his blood pressure and heart rate and dulled his impulse to breathe.

Buprenorphine, commonly used in opioid addiction and found in therapeutic levels in Perry's blood, could have contributed to the breathing problem, the autopsy said. It would have been risky to mix the central nervous system depressant with ketamine "due to the additive respiratory effects when present with high levels of ketamine," according to the autopsy report.

The report said his coronary artery disease would have made him more susceptible to the drugs' effects.

Perry was among the biggest television stars of his generation when he played Chandler Bing alongside Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc and David Schwimmer for 10 seasons from 1994 to 2004 on NBC's megahit sitcom "Friends."

His castmates, like many of his friends, family and fans, were stunned by his death, and paid him loving tribute in the weeks that followed.

Perry was open about discussing his struggles with addiction dating back to his time on "Friends." "I loved everything about the show but I was struggling with my addictions which only added to my sense of shame," he wrote in his 2022 memoir. "I had a secret and no one could know."

A woman whose name is redacted in the autopsy report told investigators that Perry had been in good spirits when she spoke to him a few days earlier, but had been taking testosterone shots which she said were making him "angry and mean." She said he had quit smoking two weeks earlier.

The woman said he had been receiving the ketamine infusions for his mental health, and that his doctor had been giving them to him less often because he had been feeling well.

Ketamine is a powerful anesthetic approved by U.S. health regulators for use during surgery, but in the past decade it has emerged as an experimental treatment for a range of psychiatric and hard-to-treat conditions, including depression, anxiety and chronic pain.

While not approved by regulators, doctors are free to prescribe drugs for these alternate uses if they think their patients could benefit, and hundreds of clinics across the U.S. offer ketamine infusions and other formulations for various health conditions.

With Iowa's caucuses a month away, Trump urges voters to hand him not just a victory, but a blowout

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

CORALVILLE, Iowa (AP) — Donald Trump was uncharacteristically serious when he implored an audience in eastern Iowa to carry him to a blowout in next month's Republican caucuses.

"The margin of victory is very important, it's just very important," Trump told about 1,000 people attending a Wednesday rally aimed at organizing campaign volunteers. "It's time for the Republican Party to unite, to come together and focus our energy and resources on beating Crooked Joe Biden and taking back our country. Very simple."

For the blustery former president, it was both caution against complacency and a sign that he and his team believe the first contest on Jan. 15 can be not just the start of the nominating campaign, but the beginning of the end.

Trump is the overwhelming favorite to win Iowa, one month away from the caucuses. A myriad of well-qualified GOP challengers and anti-Trump groups haven't changed that dynamic after crisscrossing the state over the last year and spending more than \$70 million in Iowa on advertising, according to the media tracking firm AdImpact. And unlike his first time in the caucuses, which he narrowly lost in 2016, Trump's campaign is now run by Iowa veterans who are not just locking in caucus commitments but building a formidable organization to try to lock in his lead.

Among rival campaigns, most question not whether Trump will win, but by how much — and whether a second-place finisher can claim momentum for the rest of the race.

"For me, it looked like for a long time there was a narrow lane, but there was a lane, for a not-Trump candidate," said Gentry Collins, a veteran Republican strategist and former state GOP executive director who ran Mitt Romney's 2008 GOP caucus campaign. "But there isn't really a single alternative people can rally around."

Trump was the first choice of 51% of likely Iowa caucus participants in a Des Moines Register-NBC News-Mediacom Iowa Poll published Monday. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has vowed that he will win Iowa, had the support of 19%. Former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, who has suggested she can beat DeSantis in the state and go head to head with Trump in later primaries, was at 16%.

Next year's GOP nomination is officially an open race. But many primary voters believe Trump was cheated in 2020 when he lost his reelection bid to Democrat Joe Biden. Multiple government and outside investigations have not found evidence of any voter fraud, despite Trump's frequent and repeated false claims that are often repeated by many of his supporters.

Trump remains popular with Republicans, both in Iowa and nationally, who credit him for his handling of the economy, the U.S.-Mexico border, and his appointment of three Supreme Court justices who voted

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to overturn a federally guaranteed right to abortion.

"You've got basically a quasi-incumbent president," said Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster and senior adviser to Marco Rubio's 2016 campaign. "Of course, he's got the overwhelming advantage."

Beyond Trump's built-in advantages, a massive and ongoing effort on his behalf in Iowa reflects the campaign's realization — especially compared to his seat-of-the-pants 2016 effort — that turning out many thousands of Iowans to caucus on a cold January night requires intense organizing.

State Republican Party officials who run the contests and strategists with the various campaigns suggest January's caucuses will break the record of nearly 187,000 people in 2016.

Trump's team says it has collected and processed tens of thousands of commitment cards, most of them coming from his 11 visits to Iowa in the past three months. Aides say the cards are entered into a database within three days before a campaign volunteer replies by phone.

Though Trump has visited far less often than DeSantis, Haley and others, he has drawn more than 20,000 to events since early September, thousands of whom say they are first-time caucus participants.

When asked if they were first-timers, hundreds of people raised their hands at Wednesday's event in Coralville. The audience sat before a stage flanked by large video screens with a QR code and text code that guided them to the campaign's digital portal.

Volunteers circulated around the Hyatt Regency hosting the event, identifiable with their white ball caps emblazoned in gold lettering with "Trump Caucus Captain."

One volunteer, a University of Iowa student, approached Ginger Marolf as she was waiting in a line of hundreds of people snaking around the hotel. The student asked Marolf to fill out a caucus pledge card and give it back so they could get "an accurate count of how many people support Trump in Iowa."

After signing her card, Marolf called Trump a fighter for "us, the people" and suggested that she isn't considering any of the other Republican candidates.

"Trump needs to be back in office, like now," she said, blaming Biden for high prices, an unprotected southern border and global instability.

Caucus captains are given a list of 25 neighbors and responsible for delivering at least 10 to a caucus. Key between now and the caucuses is "grinding away at recruiting caucus captains and training them," said Alex Latcham, the campaign's early state director whose background is in Iowa politics.

Other candidates also claim to have the backing of strong organizations.

DeSantis entered the race to the national fanfare of a big-state governor who had won a crushing 2022 reelection victory and is pushing through conservative priorities in a traditional swing state. But he faltered during the summer and fall, with several shake-ups in his campaign and overall strategy.

Still, the main super PAC backing him, Never Back Down, is the largest political operation on the ground in Iowa and claims to have tens of thousands of signed support cards for DeSantis, who has said he plans to win the caucuses.

Haley won a second look from some in Iowa after early fall debate performances. Her candidacy had little apparent support on the ground in Iowa but is now supported by Americans for Prosperity Action, the political arm of the well-heeled conservative Koch Brothers network. AFP Action backed Haley in late November and began knocking on doors for her this month.

In a sign that she's still trying to reintroduce herself to Iowans, Haley began a recent event by retelling her early life's story to an audience of about 400 in suburban Des Moines near word for word as she did on her first Iowa trip as a candidate 10 months ago.

DeSantis remains the primary focus of the Trump campaign's attacks. Trump, who continually has accused DeSantis of disloyalty for running against him despite the president's 2018 endorsement of him in Florida, has long sought to bury the governor in Iowa. Despite Trump's markedly different to DeSantis' traditional county-by-county effort and fewer overall visits, the president's Iowa push appears to have kept him well ahead.

Sondra Michels said she had long avoided politics before this year. She plans not only to caucus for the first time but to be a caucus leader in her precinct in Walcott, an eastern Iowa town known for being the home of the world's largest truck stop.

"We've got to see him win here and keep going," said Michels, 49. "He had the prices lower and we were safer."

Arizona's governor is sending the state's National Guard to the border to help with a migrant influx

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona's governor on Friday ordered the state's National Guard to the border with Mexico to help federal officials manage an influx of migrants.

Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs said she issued the executive order because "the federal government is refusing to do its job to secure our border and keep our communities safe."

"I am taking action where the federal government won't," Hobbs said.

It was unclear when the troops would arrive at the border and exactly how many would be mobilized.

Hobbs asked President Joe Biden's administration a week ago to mobilize 243 Arizona National Guard troops already in the Border Patrol's Tucson sector that includes Lukeville, Arizona, to help federal officers reopen the border crossing that was indefinitely closed Dec. 4.

Customs and Border Protection has said shutting down the official crossing was necessary to allow personnel stationed there to help Border Patrol agents manage the hundreds of migrants illegally crossing in that area daily.

Although remote, the crossing is a popular route for Arizonans traveling to the Mexican resort of Puerto Peñasco, or Rocky Point, about 62 miles (100 kilometers) south of the border on the northern shores of the Sea of Cortez.

Hobbs said the National Guard members will be stationed at multiple locations along the southern border, including around Lukeville.

There, they will support state and local agencies engaged in law enforcement, including interdiction of illegal drugs and human trafficking.

The San Miguel crossing located farther east on the Tohono O'odham Nation is also seeing hundreds of migrant arrivals daily, but tribal officials said the National Guard would not be stationed on the reservation.

"We are in close communication with Governor Hobbs on this issue," said Verlon Jose, chairman of the Tohono O'odham Nation. "We made clear that no National Guard would be deployed to the Nation and her office has agreed. Today's action by the Governor is a necessary step in addressing the current crisis at the border."

Hobbs said the Biden administration had not responded to her request that the U.S. government reimburse Arizona for border security spending.

Customs and Border Protection officials said they did not have an immediate response to the governor's decision.

The Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs, National Guard confirmed Friday afternoon it was activating members.

Major Gen. Kerry L. Muehlenbeck, who oversees the Arizona National Guard, noted that in September it wrapped up a 30-month active-duty mission providing support to law enforcement agencies in southern Arizona.

Muehlenbeck said the earlier mission provided logistics, administrative, cyber, and medical support.

U.S. Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva, who represents southern Arizona, said he disagreed with Hobbs' executive order.

"But I do appreciate that Governor Hobbs has rejected the brutal and cruel tactics of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott who have taken advantage of this crisis to inhumanely and illegally use migrants as political pawns and to politicize and pander instead of working on real solutions," Grijalva said in a statement.

A review defends police action before the Maine mass shooting.

Legal experts say questions persist

By PATRICK WHITTLE and DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — An independent report conducted for a police agency clears the agency's response to growing concerns about the mental health of a man who later went on to commit the deadliest mass shooting in Maine history, but it does reveal missed opportunities to intervene to prevent the tragedy, legal experts said Friday.

Despite receiving warnings about the man's deteriorating mental health, drunken threats and possession of guns, the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office avoided confronting Robert Card, the 40-year-old Army reservist who later killed 18 people at a bowling alley and a bar on Oct. 25 in Lewiston, the experts said of the report released late Thursday by Sheriff Joel Merry.

Card's body was found — with a self-inflicted gunshot wound — two days after the shootings. Reports soon began to emerge that he had spent two weeks in a psychiatric hospital months before the attacks and had amassed weapons.

The legal experts told The Associated Press that the report — prepared for the sheriff's office by a lawyer who's a retired federal drug agent— leaves unresolved questions about police's potential ability to have removed guns from Card before the shootings happened.

The report delved into mental health concerns raised about Card. It states that the response to those concerns by the department's officers "was reasonable under the totality of the circumstances" at the time. In a statement, Merry said the review "found that responding deputies followed the law and their training with the information available at the time."

Democratic Gov. Janet Mills has appointed an independent commission led by a former state chief justice to review all aspects of the tragedy. And Maine's congressional delegation said Friday there will be an independent Army inspector general's investigation to review the Army's actions, alongside an ongoing administrative Army investigation.

The Sagadahoc report makes clear that local law enforcement knew Card's mental health was deteriorating, with reports that he was paranoid, hearing voices, experiencing psychotic episodes and possibly dealing with schizophrenia.

In May, Card's ex-wife and his son reached out to a school resource officer about what they called Card's erratic behavior. A deputy worked with the family to get help and heeded its suggestion not to confront Card directly for fear that it could cause an unnecessary escalation, the report states.

In September, police were alerted by officials with the Army Reserves about Card, who was hospitalized in July after exhibiting erratic behavior while training. The officials warned that Card still had access to weapons and that he had threatened to "shoot up" an Army Reserve center in Saco, the report said.

That caught the full attention of police, who responded by briefly staking out the Saco facility and going to Card's home in Bowdoin, Maine, even as an Army Reserve leader suggested that all that was needed was a "welfare check."

A visit to Card's home by Sagadahoc Sgt. Aaron Skolfield on Sept. 16 represented the best opportunity for police to assess Card face-to-face — something that could have been necessary to take him into protective custody, a step needed to trigger Maine's "yellow flag" law, which allows a judge to temporarily remove someone's guns during a psychiatric health crisis.

Skolfield called for backup, knowing Card was considered armed and dangerous, and knocked on Card's door. The deputy saw curtains move and heard noises suggesting Card was inside. But Card did not answer the door, and Skolfield correctly concluded he lacked the legal authority to force the issue during a wellness check, the report said.

Worried for his own safety, Skolfield went back to his cruiser, visited the nearby home of Card's father and then returned to stake out Card's home before leaving to respond to a domestic assault, the report said.

All that day, Skolfield was in contact with other law officers, Army officials and family members about Card's mental health and to ensure that family members were trying to prevent Card's access to guns.

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The report concluded that Skolfield "did not have sufficient grounds to take Mr. Card into protective custody, which also foreclosed his discretion to initiate the process for confiscation of Mr. Card's firearms."

No family member or reservist contacted the sheriff's office after Sept. 17, and a sheriff's advisory bulletin asking agencies to locate Card was lifted on Oct. 18.

The report's conclusion that the officers' actions were reasonable is subject to interpretation, said Adanté Pointer, a civil rights attorney based in Oakland, California, who reviewed the report. What it makes clear is that local law enforcement had numerous opportunities to intercede in "this growing, escalating and ultimately deadly situation" and did not, Pointer said.

The report paints a picture of officers who were "scared" to deal with Card, Pointer said.

There was already enough evidence back in May to begin the process of seizing Card's weapons under the yellow flag law, said Neama Rahmani, a former federal prosecutor and current president of the West Coast Trial Lawyers in Los Angeles who reviewed the report.

"A different approach to policing, or a different set of laws, might have saved a lot of lives," Rahmani said.

Prepared by Michael Cunniff, a Portland attorney who is a former supervisory special agent for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the report also addressed protective custody of those in crisis, the yellow flag law and the temporary seizure of guns.

Cunniff declined comment Friday. Sheriff Merry didn't immediately respond to questions, including how the report was commissioned and who funded it.

Merry did say his office is cooperating with all investigations.

Jury awards \$148 million in damages to Georgia election workers over Rudy Giuliani's 2020 vote lies

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A jury awarded \$148 million in damages on Friday to two former Georgia election workers who sued Rudy Giuliani for defamation over lies he spread about them in 2020 that upended their lives with racist threats and harassment.

The damages verdict follows emotional testimony from Wandrea "Shaye" Moss and her mother, Ruby Freeman, who tearfully described becoming the target of a false conspiracy theory pushed by Giuliani and other Republicans as they tried to keep then-President Donald Trump in power after he lost the 2020 election.

There was an audible gasp in the courtroom when the jury foreperson read aloud the \$75 million award in punitive damages for the women. Moss and Freeman were each awarded another roughly \$36 million in other damages.

"Money will never solve all my problems," Freeman told reporters outside Washington's federal courthouse after the verdict. "I can never move back into the house that I call home. I will always have to be careful about where I go and who I choose to share my name with. I miss my home. I miss my neighbors and I miss my name."

Giuliani didn't appear to show any emotion as the verdict was read after about 10 hours of deliberations. Moss and Freeman hugged their attorneys after the jury left the courtroom and didn't look at Giuliani as he left with his lawyer.

The former New York City mayor vowed to appeal, telling reporters that the "absurdity of the number merely underscores the absurdity of the entire proceeding."

"It will be reversed so quickly it will make your head spin, and the absurd number that just came in will help that actually," he said.

It's not clear whether Giuliani will ever be able to pay the staggering amount. He had already been showing signs of financial strain as he defends himself against costly lawsuits and investigations stemming from his representation of Trump. In September, his former lawyer sued him, alleging Giuliani had paid only a fraction of nearly \$1.6 million in legal fees he racked up.

His attorney in the defamation case told jurors that the damages the women were seeking "would be

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the end of Mr. Giuliani.”

Giuliani had already been found liable in the case and previously conceded in court documents that he falsely accused the women of ballot fraud. Even so, the former mayor continued to repeat his baseless allegations about the women in comments to reporters outside the Washington, D.C., courthouse this week.

Giuliani’s lawyer acknowledged that his client was wrong but insisted that Giuliani was not fully responsible for the vitriol the women faced. The defense sought to largely pin the blame on a right-wing website that published the surveillance video of the two women counting ballots.

Giuliani’s defense rested Thursday morning without calling a single witness after the former mayor reversed course and decided not to take the stand. Giuliani’s lawyer had told jurors in his opening statement that they would hear from his client. But after Giuliani’s comments outside court, the judge barred him from claiming in testimony that his conspiracy theories were right.

The judgment adds to growing financial and legal peril for Giuliani, who was among the loudest proponents of Trump’s false claims of election fraud that are now a key part of the criminal cases against the former president.

Giuliani is still facing his biggest test yet: fighting criminal charges in the Georgia case accusing Trump and 18 others of working to subvert the results of the 2020 election, won by Democrat Joe Biden, in that state. Giuliani has pleaded not guilty and characterized the case as politically motivated.

Jurors in the defamation case heard recordings of Giuliani falsely accusing the election workers of sneaking in ballots in suitcases, counting ballots multiple times and tampering with voting machines. Trump also repeated the conspiracy theories through his social media accounts. Lawyers for Moss and Freeman, who are Black, also played for jurors audio recordings of the graphic and racist threats the women received.

On the witness stand, Moss and Freeman described fearing for their lives as hateful messages poured in. Freeman described strangers banging on her door and recounted fleeing her home after people came with bullhorns and the FBI told her she wasn’t safe. Moss told jurors she tried to change her appearance, seldom leaves her home and suffers from panic attacks.

“Our greatest wish is that no one, no election worker, or voter or school board member or anyone else ever experiences anything like what we went through,” Moss told reporters after the verdict. “You all matter, and you are all important.”

Defense attorney Joseph Sibley had told jurors they should compensate the women for what they are owed, but he urged them to “remember this is a great man.”

An attorney for Moss and Freeman, in his closing argument, highlighted how Giuliani has not stopped repeating the false conspiracy theory asserting the workers interfered in the November 2020 presidential election. Attorney Michael Gottlieb played a video of Giuliani outside the courthouse on Monday, in which Giuliani falsely claimed the women were “engaged in changing votes.” Giuliani kept pressing false election claims even after the verdict, telling reporters, “I know my country had a president imposed on it by fraud.”

“Mr. Giuliani has shown over and over again he will not take our client’s names out of his mouth,” Gottlieb said. “Facts will not stop him. He says he isn’t sorry and he’s telegraphing he will do this again. Believe him.”

The judge overseeing the election workers’ lawsuit had already ordered Giuliani and his business entities to pay tens of thousands of dollars in attorneys’ fees. In holding Giuliani liable, the judge ruled that the former mayor gave “only lip service” to complying with his legal obligations while trying to portray himself as the victim in the case.

Israeli military says it mistakenly killed 3 Israeli hostages in battle-torn part of Gaza

By NAJIB JOBAIN, JACK JEFFERY and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli troops mistakenly shot three hostages to death Friday in a battle-torn neighborhood of Gaza City, and an Israeli strike killed a Palestinian journalist in the south of the besieged territory, underscoring the ferocity of Israel’s ongoing onslaught.

The deaths were announced as a U.S. envoy tried to persuade the Israelis to scale back their campaign

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sooner rather than later.

The hostages were killed in the Gaza City area of Shijaiyah, where troops have been engaged in fierce fighting with Hamas militants in recent days. The soldiers mistakenly identified the three Israelis as a threat and opened fire on them, said the army's chief spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari.

He said it was believed that the three had either fled their captors or been abandoned.

"Perhaps in the last few days, or over the past day, we still don't know all the details, they reached this area," Hagari said. He said the army expressed "deep sorrow" and was investigating.

Hamas and other militants abducted more than 240 people in the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war, and the hostages' plight has dominated public discourse in Israel ever since. Their families have led a powerful public campaign calling on the government to do more to bring them home.

Demonstrations in solidarity with the hostages and their families take place nearly every day. Late Friday, hundreds of protesters blocked Tel Aviv's main highway in a spontaneous demonstration calling for the the hostages' return.

Israeli political and military leaders often say freeing all the hostages is their top aim in the war alongside destroying Hamas.

Still, in seven weeks since ground troops pushed into northern Gaza, they have not rescued any hostages, though they freed one early in the conflict and have found the bodies of several others. Hamas released over 100 in swaps for Palestinian prisoners last month, and more than 130 are believed to still be in captivity.

The three hostages were identified as young men who had been abducted from Israeli communities near the Gaza border — Yotam Haim, 28, Samer Al-Talalka 25, and Alon Shamriz, 26.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called their deaths an "unbearable tragedy" and vowed to continue "with a supreme effort to return all the hostages home safely."

In southern Gaza, the Al Jazeera television network said an Israeli strike Friday in the city of Khan Younis killed cameraman Samer Abu Daqqa and wounded its chief correspondent in Gaza, Wael Dahdouh. The two were reporting at a school that had been hit by an earlier airstrike when a drone launched a second strike, the network said.

Khan Younis has been the main target of Israel's ground offensive in the south.

Speaking from a hospital bed, Dahdouh told the network that he managed to walk to an ambulance. But Abu Daqqa lay bleeding in the school and died hours later. An ambulance tried to reach the school to evacuate him but had to turn back because roads were blocked by the rubble of destroyed houses, it said.

Dahdouh, a veteran of covering Israel-Gaza wars whose wife and children were killed by an Israeli strike earlier in the war, was wounded by shrapnel in his right arm.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Abu Daqqa is the 64th journalist to be killed since the conflict erupted: 57 Palestinians, four Israelis and three Lebanese journalists.

Palestinian U.N. Ambassador Riyad Mansour told a General Assembly meeting on the war that Israel "targets those who could document (their) crimes and inform the world, the journalists."

"We mourn one of those journalists, Samer Abu Daqqa, wounded in an Israeli drone strike and left to bleed to death for six hours while ambulances were prevented from reaching him," Mansour said.

The Israeli army did not immediately respond to an Associated Press request for comment about Abu Daqqa's death.

Israel's offensive has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis.

The offensive has killed more than 18,700 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Its latest count did not specify how many were women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead in previous tallies.

While battered by the Israeli onslaught, Hamas has continued its attacks. On Friday it fired rockets from Gaza toward central Israel, setting off sirens in Jerusalem for the first time in weeks but causing

no injuries. The group's resilience called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory.

Israelis remain strongly supportive of the war and see it as necessary to prevent a repeat of the Hamas attack, in which militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has expressed unease over Israel's failure to reduce civilian casualties and its plans for the future of Gaza, but the White House continues to offer wholehearted support with weapons shipments and diplomatic backing.

Israeli airstrikes and tank shelling continued Friday, including in Khan Younis and in Rafah, which is one of the shrinking areas of tiny, densely populated Gaza to which Palestinian civilians have been told by Israel to evacuate. Details on many of the strikes could not be confirmed because communications services have been down across Gaza since late Thursday because of fighting.

In meetings with Israeli leaders on Thursday and Friday, U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan discussed a timetable for winding down the intense combat phase of the war.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told Sullivan that it would take months to destroy Hamas, but he did not say whether his estimate referred to the current phase of heavy airstrikes and ground battles.

"There is no contradiction between saying the fight is going to take months and also saying that different phases will take place at different times over those months, including the transition from the high-intensity operations to more targeted operations," Sullivan said Friday.

Sullivan also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss Gaza's postwar future. A senior U.S. official said one idea being floated is to bring back Palestinian security forces driven from their jobs in Gaza by Hamas in its 2007 takeover.

Any role for Palestinian security forces in Gaza is bound to elicit strong opposition from Israel, which seeks to maintain an open-ended security presence there. Netanyahu has said he will not allow a postwar foothold for the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The U.S. has said it eventually wants to see the West Bank and Gaza under a "revitalized Palestinian Authority" as a precursor to a Palestinian state — an idea soundly rejected by Netanyahu, who leads a right-wing government that is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

Palestinian officials have said they will consider a postwar role in Gaza only in the context of concrete U.S.-backed steps toward statehood.

In the meeting, Abbas called for an immediate cease-fire and ramped-up aid to Gaza, and emphasized that Gaza is an integral part of the Palestinian state, according to a statement from his office. It made no mention of conversations about postwar scenarios.

The 88-year-old Abbas is deeply unpopular, with a poll published Wednesday indicating close to 90% of Palestinians want him to resign. Meanwhile, Palestinian support for Hamas has tripled in the West Bank, with a small uptick in Gaza, according to the poll. Still, a majority of Palestinians do not back Hamas, according to the survey.

Federal judge rejects request from Oregon senators who boycotted Legislature seeking to run in 2024

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A federal judge has rejected a request from Oregon Republican state senators who boycotted the Legislature to be allowed on the ballot after their terms end.

U.S. District Court Judge Ann Aiken issued the decision Wednesday.

State Sens. Dennis Linthicum, Brian Boquist and Cedric Hayden were among the plaintiffs who filed the federal lawsuit to challenge their disqualification from running for reelection under Measure 113. The voter-approved constitutional amendment, which passed by a wide margin last year, bars legislators from seeking reelection after 10 or more unexcused absences.

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Each of the three senators racked up more than 10 absences during a record six-week walkout that paralyzed the 2023 legislative session. The boycott stemmed from bills on abortion, transgender health care and guns.

The lawmakers sought, among other things, a preliminary injunction to prevent the secretary of state's office from enforcing their disqualification from the ballot. The office in September disqualified Linthicum and Boquist from the 2024 ballot, court filings show. Hayden's term ends in January 2027.

The senators argued that walkouts are a form of political protest protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

"The Senators were punished solely for exercising their First Amendment rights," their attorneys said in court filings.

Aiken disagreed with their claims in her opinion.

"However, these walkouts were not simply protests — they were an exercise of the Senator Plaintiffs' official power and were meant to deprive the legislature of the power to conduct business," she wrote.

"Their subsequent disqualification is the effect of Measure 113 working as intended by the voters of Oregon," she added.

The Oregon Senate and House of Representatives must have two-thirds of their members present in order to have a quorum and conduct business. In recent years, Republicans have protested against Democratic policies by walking out of the Legislature and denying a quorum in a bid to stall bills.

The federal suit named Secretary of State LaVonne Griffin-Valade and Democratic Senate President Rob Wagner as defendants. The senators claimed, among other things, that Wagner violated their First Amendment right to freedom of expression and their Fourteenth Amendment right to due process by marking their absences as unexcused.

Attorneys from Oregon's justice department representing Griffin-Valade and Wagner argued the First Amendment does not protect legislators' refusal to attend legislative floor sessions.

"Under Oregon law, a senator's absence has an important legal effect: without the attendance of the two-thirds of senators needed to achieve a quorum, the Senate cannot legislate," they wrote in court filings.

The federal court decision was issued one day before the Oregon Supreme Court heard a separate challenge to the measure. In oral arguments before the state's high court in Salem Thursday, a lawyer for a different group of Republican state senators argued that confusion over the wording of the constitutional amendment means that legislators whose terms end in January can run in 2024.

Griffin-Valade, the secretary of state, is also a defendant in that lawsuit. Earlier this year, she said the boycotting senators were disqualified from seeking reelection in 2024. She directed her office's elections division to implement an administrative rule to clarify the stance. She said the rule reflected the intent of voters when they approved the measure last year.

All parties in the suit are seeking clarity on the issue before the March 2024 filing deadline for candidates who want to run in next year's election.

Israeli military opens probe after videos show Israeli forces killing 2 Palestinians at close range

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Friday said it was opening a military police investigation into the killing of two Palestinians in the West Bank after an Israeli human rights group posted videos that appeared to show Israeli troops killing the men — one who was incapacitated and the second unarmed — during a military raid in a West Bank refugee camp.

The B'Tselem human rights group accused the army of carrying out a pair of "illegal executions."

The security camera videos show two Israeli military vehicles pursuing a group of Palestinians in the Faraa refugee camp in the northern West Bank. One man, who appears to be holding a red canister, is gunned down by soldiers. B'Tselem identified the man as 25 year-old Rami Jundob.

The military jeep then approaches Jundob as he lies bleeding on the ground and fires multiple shots at him until he is still. Soldiers then approach a man identified by B'Tselem as 36-year-old Thaar Shahin as he cowers underneath the hood of a car. They shoot at him from close range.

Btselem said that Shahin was killed instantly and Jundob died of his wounds the next day.

Israel's military said its military police unit opened an investigation into the Dec. 8 shootings "on the suspicion that during the incident, shots were fired not in accordance with the law." It said that the findings would be referred to a military prosecutor, an indication that criminal charges could be filed.

Israel rarely prosecutes such cases, and human rights groups say soldiers rarely receive serious punishments even if wrongdoing is found. In a high-profile case, an Israeli soldier was convicted of manslaughter and served a reduced nine-month sentence in jail after shooting a badly wounded Palestinian who was lying on the ground in 2016.

The army recently opened an investigation into a soldier who shot and killed an Israeli man who had just killed a pair of Palestinian attackers at a Jerusalem bus stop. The soldier apparently suspected the Israeli was also an assailant — despite kneeling on the ground, raising his hands and opening his shirt to show he wasn't a threat. The shooting underscored what critics say is an epidemic of excessive force by Israeli soldiers, police and armed citizens against suspected Palestinian attackers.

In a separate incident Friday, police said they had suspended officers caught on video beating up a Palestinian photojournalist in east Jerusalem. The photojournalist was identified on social media as Mustafa Haruf, who works for the Turkish news agency Anadolu.

In the video, one officer approaches Haruf and strikes him with the butt of his gun while another officer pushes him against a car. One points his gun at Haruf and another pulls him to the ground in a headlock. An officer kneels on Haruf's body, the other officer kicking Haruf repeatedly in the head as he screams in pain.

Other officers stand by, watching and pushing back shocked onlookers.

"The Border Police Command views the conduct of these officers as inconsistent with the values of the force," the police said in a statement as it announced the suspensions of the officers and an investigation.

Both incidents come as tensions in the West Bank and east Jerusalem have been inflamed by the war between Israel and Hamas, with Israelis on edge and bracing for further attacks. Palestinians and human rights groups have long accused Israeli forces of using excessive force and skirting accountability.

Since the outbreak of war, violence in the West Bank from Israeli forces and settlers has reached record levels. Since Oct. 7, 287 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. That's the deadliest year on record in the West Bank in 18 years, it said.

Hawaii governor wants 3,000 vacation rentals converted to housing for Maui wildfire survivors

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii Gov. Josh Green on Friday said he wants 3,000 condos and homes that are normally rented to Maui tourists converted to long-term housing for displaced wildfire survivors who are now living in hotels.

Green said he's prepared to use the "hammer" of post-fire emergency orders to make sure owners of short-term vacation rentals extend them to long-term units if enough spaces aren't converted voluntarily by mid-January.

The governor said that as of Thursday, there were 6,297 residents still living in hotels more than four months after the Aug. 8 wildfire wiped out historic Lahaina. The vast majority don't have anywhere else to go given the extreme housing shortage on Maui.

The lack of stable housing has been a source of stress for Lahaina residents, some of whom have had to switch hotel rooms multiple times since the fire. One group is camping out on Kaanapali Beach in front of resort hotels and vows to stay there until short-term rentals are converted for the use of residents.

Green said a combination of county tax incentives and generous rent subsidies offered by the Federal

Emergency Management Agency should help.

FEMA on Monday sent letters to 13,000 short-term rental operators across Maui informing them the agency would offer to pay them the same rent they earned during the previous year for their units, Green said.

In addition, the Maui County Council is currently considering legislation for property tax breaks promoted by the mayor.

"So there is no reason at all for people not to take this opportunity provided they want to be a helpful part of the solution," Green said.

Green said he aims for these measures to provide interim housing for two years while more housing is built on Maui.

There are currently between 12,000 to 14,000 units legally rented on a short-term basis on Maui, according to Green. Including illegal ones, he estimated there could be nearly 25,000.

"So we really only need to get about 10%, maybe 12%, of all the available short term units on Maui," he said.

Ideally, officials could rent out an entire building or an entire timeshare property, he said.

FEMA will pay for units rented to about 2,000 families. The state of Hawaii and private philanthropists will cover rent for the remaining 1,000 families who are undocumented or are citizens from so-called Compact of Free Association states and who aren't eligible for FEMA aid, Green said.

He didn't have an estimate for how much this would cost. He said it would depend on how many rentals become available.

The governor plans to release details of his new budget proposals at a news conference on Monday.

Green said it is currently costing \$350-500 a day to house one family in a hotel room, once food and services are included.

Jets' Solomon Thomas is driven by the memory of his sister and an ever-present call to help people

By DENNIS WASZAK Jr. AP Pro Football Writer

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. (AP) — Solomon Thomas was lost, stuck in a dark place mentally while desperately trying to overcome the anxiety, depression and sadness that gnawed at him.

He needed help. He wasn't sure if he could overcome it all. And he didn't know where to turn.

Thomas' older sister Ella died by suicide in January 2018 at 24 years old after dealing with her own mental health issues. Thomas, who had just completed his rookie NFL season with San Francisco, grieved with his family, but those dire thoughts never left his mind — until he started talking about them.

Long chats with therapists helped him and his family move forward. So did a few media interviews, which resulted in the surprising realization he was not alone.

"There's a stigma about suicide and mental health," said the 28-year-old Thomas, in his second season with the New York Jets. "We started to speak and started telling Ella's story and we started helping people. We saw the impact of just talking about it.

"About a year later when I kind of found myself again, went to therapy and was mentally healthy-ish, I was able to understand, hey, this helped me heal, but also helped me understand the world better, people better and myself better."

Their personal tragedy resulted in Thomas and his parents Martha and Chris creating The Defensive Line in 2021, a nonprofit focused on raising awareness of youth suicide and trying to end it by encouraging communication and education about mental health.

"I saw this space that needed so much attention and so much support that wasn't getting it," Thomas said. "So it's just been a mission and a passion of mine."

He tells anyone struggling with their mental health to "hold on" and "keep pushing" because they're not alone.

"There are people who love you and who want you here," Thomas said. "But also they have to under-

stand it's OK to not be OK."

Thomas, who has a career-high four sacks this season, is the Jets' nominee for the Walter Payton Man of the Year award — which honors a player's commitment to philanthropy and impacting their community — for the second straight year.

"Solly's always got a smile on his face," Jets edge rusher Jermaine Johnson said. "His stance in the community definitely gives me something to strive for because it just reminds you it's not all about wins and losses all the time."

Last Monday night, Thomas received the Heisman Humanitarian Award for his work with The Defensive Line. Thomas spent the next night with several teammates treating 25 students to a shopping spree at a sporting goods store.

"There's a lot of people struggling in this world and I truly believe that you don't live this life for yourself," Thomas said. "There's so much more to this life than yourself and so much more to why we're on this Earth."

He also recently met with Chelsea Clinton to discuss mental health issues. Thomas also regularly collaborates with several other charities throughout the year, heeding an always present call to help.

"He's an amazing example of how to treat people, first and foremost," defensive tackle Quinnen Williams said. "He finds a way to change somebody's life every single day. And, man, that's an inspiration to me."

Thomas said the importance of service was instilled in him at a young age while growing up in Texas, where he and his family often donated their time to homeless shelters.

"I grew up very fortunate," Thomas said. "My parents always had food on the table, we had a nice house. But my parents made sure we understood, hey, this is not normal. We have a good life, but not everyone has that."

Thomas carried that with him to Stanford, where he was the No. 3 overall pick by the 49ers in the 2017 draft. He had three sacks as a rookie, but never truly lived up to expectations, and a knee injury cut short his fourth season in San Francisco.

After one year with Las Vegas, Thomas signed as a free agent with the Jets in 2022. He was a productive backup in New York and re-signed last offseason.

"When we had the opportunity to get him here, he stands for everything you want," said Jets coach Robert Saleh, who was the 49ers' defensive coordinator when Thomas was there. "He's an unbelievable human off the field. He's unbelievable on the field."

Thomas still speaks to a therapist once every two weeks or so, likening it to having a coach or mentor for his emotions.

Sometimes it's just to vent, others to learn more about himself. And other times, it's about making sure he's using the right coping techniques if he feels his mind wandering into that "dark place."

"Everything I've gone through has led me here, my seventh year (in the NFL), really finding myself, loving myself and believing in myself," Thomas said. "And that took a while to do. But it's been a really cool journey. I don't really regret anything. The only thing I wish is that my sister was still here. But through it all, I've been able to find myself and understand who I am."

"And the more I've understood who Solomon Thomas was outside the game, the better I have become in the game. So it's something I've learned and something I preach to the guys around me."

Mother of 6-year-old who shot teacher in Virginia gets 2 years in prison for child neglect

By BEN FINLEY and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — The mother of a 6-year-old boy who shot his teacher in a Virginia classroom was sentenced Friday to two years in prison for felony child neglect by a judge who chastised her for abdicating her responsibilities as a parent.

Deja Taylor's sentence was much harsher than the maximum six months prosecutors had agreed to recommend as part of a plea deal and also surpassed the high end of advisory state sentencing guidelines. Taylor, 26, pleaded guilty to a single count of felony neglect in August. As part of the plea agreement,

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prosecutors agreed to drop a misdemeanor count of recklessly storing a firearm.

Circuit Court Judge Christopher Papile said the sentencing guidelines did not take into account the shooting's physical and psychological toll on first-grade teacher Abigail Zwerner or the emotional trauma it has wrought on other students and staff at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News.

Zwerner was critically injured when the boy fired a single shot at her, striking her hand and chest, breaking bones and puncturing a lung. She spent weeks in the hospital, had five surgeries, and says she is so mentally scarred by the shooting that she does not plan to return to teaching.

Papile noted that "we are lucky" someone wasn't killed at the elementary school. In admonishing Taylor, the judge said a parent's ultimately responsibility is to "protect the child, to keep them from bad influences, to keep them from dangerous situations, to keep them healthy and nurtured. Ms. Taylor has abdicated most, if not all, of those responsibilities."

The state sentence handed down Friday was the second time Taylor was held to account for the classroom shooting in January, which stunned the nation and shook this military shipbuilding city.

Taylor was sentenced in November to 21 months in federal prison for using marijuana while owning a gun, which is illegal under U.S. law. Her state sentence will be served consecutively, making a combined state and federal sentence of nearly four years behind bars.

Taylor's son told authorities he got his mother's 9 mm handgun by climbing onto a drawer to reach the top of a dresser, where the firearm was in his mom's purse. He concealed the weapon in his backpack and then his pocket before shooting Zwerner in front of her first-grade class.

Moments later, the boy told a reading specialist who restrained him, "I shot that (expletive) dead," and "I got my mom's gun last night," according to search warrants.

Taylor initially told police she had secured her gun with a trigger lock, but investigators said they never found one.

Following the shooting, the boy was removed from his mother's custody and spent 227 days in inpatient treatment, during which he was attended to by a team of physicians, psychiatrists and other clinicians, prosecutor Travis White told the judge. The boy, now 7, had problems with "basic socialization" and suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome and insomnia, among other disorders.

"That is the depths of neglect that Deja Taylor inflicted on her child," the prosecutor said, calling the shooting "a consequence and manifestation of that neglect."

The boy now lives with his great-grandfather, Calvin Taylor, who told reporters after the hearing that he believes the sentence handed down by Papile is "excessive." He said Deja Taylor tried to get help for her son before the shooting but child protective services did not follow through on her request.

The elder Taylor said the boy is now doing well in a structured environment. The child told him that he wanted "Santa to bring his mom home for Christmas."

Deja Taylor did not speak during Friday's hearing. Her attorney, James Ellenson, said Taylor struggled with addiction and domestic violence. He said Taylor, 26, smoked marijuana "all day, every day" since age 15.

"Who knows what the effects were on that teenage brain?" he said.

Ellenson said earlier this year there were "mitigating circumstances," including Taylor's miscarriages and postpartum depression. She also has been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a condition sharing symptoms with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, according to court documents.

Taylor told ABC's "Good Morning America" in May that she feels responsible and apologized to Zwerner. "That is my son, so I am, as a parent, obviously willing to take responsibility for him because he can't take responsibility for himself," Taylor said.

During her sentencing in federal court last month, one of Taylor's attorneys read aloud a brief statement in which Taylor said she would feel remorse "for the rest of my life."

Zwerner is suing Newport News Public Schools for \$40 million, alleging administrators ignored multiple warnings the boy had a gun at school the day of the shooting.

During the sentencing hearing Friday, Zwerner recounted the shooting, telling the judge: "I was not sure whether it would be my final moment on earth."

She said she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, and has difficulty

sleeping.

"The shooting has instilled many fears in me that will remain forever," she said.

She said she will not return to teaching because she's now afraid to work with children.

"Now, at 26 years old, what am I supposed to do?" she said. "My life will never be close to the same again."

US homelessness up 12% to highest reported level as rents soar and coronavirus pandemic aid lapses

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States experienced a dramatic 12% increase in homelessness to its highest reported level as soaring rents and a decline in coronavirus pandemic assistance combined to put housing out of reach for more Americans, federal officials said Friday.

About 653,000 people were homeless, the most since the country began using the yearly point-in-time survey in 2007. The total in the January count represents an increase of about 70,650 from a year earlier.

The latest estimate indicates that people becoming homeless for the first time were behind much of the increase.

A rise in family homelessness ended a downward trend that began in 2012.

"For those on the frontlines of this crisis, it's not surprising," said Ann Oliva, chief executive officer at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, an advocacy group.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge said the data underscored an "urgent need" to support proven solutions that help people quickly exit homelessness and that prevent homelessness in the first place.

Going back to the first 2007 survey, the U.S. then made steady progress for about a decade in reducing the homeless population as the government focused particularly on increasing investments to get veterans into housing. The number of homeless people dropped from about 637,000 in 2010 to about 554,000 in 2017.

The numbers ticked up to about 580,000 in the 2020 count and held relatively steady over the next two years as Congress responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with emergency rental assistance, stimulus payments, aid to states and local governments and a temporary eviction moratorium.

Jeff Olivet, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, a federal agency, said the extra assistance "held off the rise in homelessness that we are now seeing." He said numerous factors are behind the problem.

"The most significant causes are the shortage of affordable homes and the high cost of housing that have left many Americans living paycheck to paycheck and one crisis away from homelessness," Olivet said.

Within the overall rise, homelessness among individuals rose by nearly 11%, among veterans by 7.4% and among families with children by 15.5%.

People who identify as Black make up about 13% of the U.S. population but comprised 37% of all people experiencing homelessness. People who identify as Hispanic or Latino make up about 19% of the population but comprised about 33% of those experiencing homelessness. Also, more than a quarter of the adults experiencing homelessness were over age 54.

HUD said that rental housing conditions were "extraordinarily challenging" in 2022, with rents increasing at more than twice the rate of recent years. It noted that trend has subsided since the January count. Such relief could show benefits when volunteers and housing officials around the country begin the next homeless count in just a few weeks.

Officials also noted that President Joe Biden's budget for this fiscal year has recommended guaranteed vouchers for low-income veterans and youths aging out of foster care, among other investments designed to reduce homelessness.

More than half the people experiencing homelessness in the country were in four states: California, New York, Florida and Washington. While about 28% of the nation's homeless are estimated to be in California,

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its increase was only about half the national rate. New York's homelessness went up more than three times the national rate, according to HUD's report.

New Hampshire, New Mexico and Colorado along with New York saw the largest percentage increases in homelessness. In all, the number of people experiencing homelessness increased in 41 states and the District of Columbia, and decreased in just nine states.

Dave Giffen, executive director of The Coalition for the Homeless in New York City, said the cost of rental housing soared after the pandemic.

"So when we saw the pandemic-era protections go away, we did start to see homelessness starting to increase again. We saw more people being evicted, housing instability," Giffen said. "But then all of that got kind of masked by the sudden, very rapid influx of new asylum seekers, and that is a crisis for which the city and state were more unprepared to deal with."

Starting in the summer of 2022, New York City's homeless shelter system has been overwhelmed by waves of international migrants who are being bused into the city from southern U.S. border states. More than 150,000 migrants have been in the city's shelters for some period of time.

Mayor Eric Adams has pleaded with the federal government for aid to help defray the cost of housing migrants, which he says will run into the billions of dollars over the next few years. He has chastised the governor of Texas, for arranging to bus migrants out of that state to New York. Adams, a Democrat, has also asked for legal and bureaucratic changes that would allow migrants to get work permits more easily.

HUD did not get data that enabled it to separate out the specific impact of migrants and asylum seekers on homelessness, but some communities indicated it did affect their increase. The Biden administration has provided more than \$1 billion in grant funding to cities and states to fund critical needs for migrants. It's also identifying potential federal land and buildings that can be made available for shelter and other services for migrants, said a senior HUD official not authorized to publicly discuss the report.

HUD also sought to highlight improvements and noted that some communities bucked the national trend. Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the surrounding region, for example, saw a 49% drop from the 2022 count to this year's. Chattanooga increased efforts to more rapidly connect people to permanent housing and boosted efforts to prevent people from becoming homeless.

Other communities highlighted for a drop were Dallas, which experienced a 3.8% decrease, and Newark and Essex County, New Jersey, which saw a 16.7% drop. Houston has closed numerous homeless encampments across the city and saw a 17% reduction in unsheltered homelessness. San Jose, California, and Tucson, Arizona, were also cited for improvements.

One fourth of United Methodist churches in US have left in schism over LGBTQ ban. What happens now?

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

A quarter of U.S. congregations in the United Methodist Church have received permission to leave the denomination during a five-year window, closing this month, that authorized departures for congregations over disputes involving the church's LGBTQ-related policies.

This year alone, 5,641 congregations received permission from their regional conferences to leave the denomination as of Thursday, according to an unofficial tally by United Methodist News. In total, 7,658 have received permission since 2019. Thursday marked the last scheduled regional vote, according to the news service, when the Texas Annual Conference authorized four congregations' departures.

The vast major are conservative-leaning churches responding to what they see as the United Methodists' failure to enforce bans on same-sex marriage and the ordaining of openly LGBTQ persons.

The new year is expected to bring more changes.

The first denomination-wide legislative gathering in eight years, slated for spring 2024, will consider calls to liberalize policies on marriage and ordination. It will also debate rival proposals, either to decentralize the international church — which has at least as many members outside the United States as in — or provide overseas congregations with the same exit option their U.S. counterparts had.

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The schism marks a historic shift in a denomination that was until recently the third largest in the United States, and perhaps the closest to the mainstream of American religious culture — its steeples prominent in rural crossroads and urban squares, scenes of countless potluck suppers, earnest social outreach, and warm yet decorous worship.

Many departing congregations have joined the more conservative Global Methodist Church, with others joining smaller denominations, going independent or still considering their options.

United Methodist rules forbid same-sex marriage rites and the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” but progressive Methodist churches and regional governing bodies in the U.S. have increasingly been defying these rules.

Conservatives have mobilized like-minded congregations to exit. The Global Methodist Church has declared its intention to enforce such rules.

“We are sad about losing anybody,” said New York Area Bishop Thomas Bickerton, president of the United Methodists’ Council of Bishops. “There’s also — at the end of the year — grief and trauma, parishioners that have said goodbye to friends, pastors who have had relationships over the years that have ended.”

He depicted the debates in the church as difficult, and said some who urged churches to disaffiliate used “falsehoods.”

“This whole disaffiliation process has in large measure not been about human sexuality, it’s been about power, control and money. That’s surprising and disappointing,” Bickerton said. “It’s time for this denomination to pivot” to focusing on mission rather than disaffiliation votes.

The United Methodists reported having 30,543 U.S. churches as of 2019 and 6 million U.S. members as of 2021. It had at least one church in 95% of U.S. counties, more than any other religious group, according to the 2020 Religion Census, produced by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

There’s no immediate estimate on how many individual members are leaving the UMC, since some members of departing congregations are joining other UMC churches, but the departing churches include some of the largest in their states. UMC officials are already preparing historic budget cuts to denominational agencies in anticipation of lower revenue from fewer churches.

The UMC also reports having 7 million members overseas as of 2019, the majority in Africa, where more conservative sexual mores are common.

In 2019, a special legislative gathering of Methodists voted to strengthen longstanding bans on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ ordination. The votes came from a coalition of conservatives in the U.S. and overseas, particularly from fast-growing African churches. At the same time, that conference offered a five-year window for U.S. churches to leave under somewhat favorable terms, such as being able to keep their properties while compensating the denomination for certain costs.

That measure was expected to be used by progressive congregations dissenting with the letter of the church law, and a handful did take the church up on its offer. But in the end, the vast majority of departing congregations reflect conservative dismay over what they saw as the denomination’s failure to discipline those defying church law, as well as other liberal trends.

In the legislative General Conference, scheduled for April and May in Charlotte, North Carolina, efforts to lift bans on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ ordination are expected to have a strong chance, given the departure of many conservative votes.

The delegates will also consider a decentralization plan favored by progressives — which, among other things, would enable U.S. and overseas churches to set separate standards for ordination and marriage — and another sought by conservatives enabling overseas churches to leave under the same provisions that U.S. churches had.

The Rev. Keith Boyette, who is the Global Methodist Church’s top executive, said it has registered about 4,100 U.S. churches so far — former UMC churches as well as new ones organized by former United Methodists whose congregations voted to stay in the UMC. It has been organizing in other countries where United Methodist churches or individuals left that denomination, he said, such as Bulgaria, Slovakia, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It’s unclear how many U.S. churches are going independent, but “the fact that so many churches have

aligned indicates their commitment to wanting to be part of a connectional system," Boyette said.

The Rev. Scott Field, president of the conservative Wesleyan Covenant Association, which has advocated for churches leaving the UMC, said congregations' experiences varied in regional conferences, depending on what financial and other conditions they have required of churches. "It's been punitive in some and it's worked seamlessly in others," he said.

Under the slogan, "Fair for some, fair for all," the group will be advocating for overseas churches to have the same option to leave.

Field predicted "an African wave" of churches seeking to leave.

Several African bishops, however, issued a statement in 2022 denouncing efforts to get churches to leave as false and destructive.

Field also predicted many U.S. churches, despite missing the 2023 deadline, may try to exit under other church law provisions.

"We'd like every congregation, whether it's a liberationist church or a solidly evangelical church, to end up where they'd like to be," Field said. "It makes no sense for our United Methodist Church to attempt locking the gate."

Jan Lawrence, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, said the personal toll of the schism is deep.

She knew members of a church that had an acrimonious break after it chose to disaffiliate. "It really broke relationships," she said.

She expressed hope that the 2024 General Conference will open ordination and marriage rites to LGBTQ persons — realizing a decades-long goal for the network.

"Those churches that are disaffiliating and joining the Global Methodist Church, I hope they find what they're looking for and they're able to thrive as a new denomination," she said. "I don't know anyone that doesn't want everybody to live into what they believe God is calling them to do."

Bickerton said he particularly laments the departure of many churches that are longtime, rural-area fixtures.

"When Methodism came to the United States, it went to where the people were. It was carried in the saddlebags of the circuit riders," he said.

A return to informal ministry may be needed to maintain a presence in many regions, he said.

"The hallmarks of United Methodism is a theology based on grace, hope, joy, love and justice," he said. "Where do we send people strategically so that message can be heard?"

After 40 witnesses and 43 days of testimony, here's what we learned at Trump's civil fraud trial

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After hearing from 40 witnesses over 2½ months, Judge Arthur Engoron sounded almost wistful as he presided over the last day of testimony in former President Donald Trump's civil business fraud trial.

"In a strange way, I'm gonna miss this trial," he said Wednesday.

Things aren't over yet in the case, in which New York Attorney General Letitia James has accused Trump of inflating his wealth on financial statements used to secure loans and make deals.

Closing arguments are scheduled for early January. The judge has already ruled that Trump is liable for making fraudulent statements, but other claims and a potential final penalty still need to be decided. Trump denies any wrongdoing. He says the financial documents actually understated his net worth and came with caveats that should shield him from liability.

The trial has offered fresh insight into Trump's finances, his dealings with lenders, his aspiration to be an NFL owner, and some of the fuzzy math — mistaken or intentional — at issue in the case.

The trial also gave a glimpse of the Republican 2024 presidential front-runner's political and legal strategies as his court and campaign calendars increasingly overlap. The first of his four criminal trials is scheduled

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for March.

So far, Trump's legal woes aren't denting his standing in the Republican presidential race. He leads by a wide margin in national and early-state polls. In fact, his lead is stronger than it was before his first criminal indictment in March.

Here are some other things we learned from the trial:

COURT AS A CAMPAIGN STOP

Trump wasn't required to be in court, except for the one day he testified, but he showed up eight times as a spectator.

Every time, he turned his appearance into a de facto campaign stop, griping outside the courtroom that he was being persecuted. He had the same message during his often defiant turn on the witness stand Nov. 6.

"This is a very unfair trial, very, very. And I hope the public is watching it," Trump said. His testimony led a frustrated Engoron to warn, "This is not a political rally."

Trump didn't go to court last year when his company was convicted of tax fraud. Nor did he show for a civil trial where a jury found him liable for sexually assaulting writer E. Jean Carroll and ordered him to pay her \$5 million.

Why attend the fraud trial? "Because I want to point it out to the press, how corrupt it is," Trump said.

Outside court, he frequently insulted the judge and even Engoron's chief law clerk. After Trump made a false, disparaging comment about the clerk's personal life on social media, Engoron imposed a gag order barring trial participants from commenting further about court staff.

The judge later found that Trump repeatedly violated the order and fined him \$15,000.

TRUMP AND THE BANK

Much of the trial was devoted to the hundreds of millions of dollars Deutsche Bank loaned Trump's company, starting in 2011.

The state says Trump rooked his way into the financing, at attractive interest rates, by padding his wealth. The defendants say they didn't and maintain the bank was delighted with the loans. All were paid off, the last of them during the trial.

Several Deutsche bankers testified that they expected unaudited financial statements like Trump's to be generally accurate but understood them as estimates and internally made "haircuts" that at times lopped billions off Trump's net worth, which still left it at over \$2 billion.

Dueling experts debated whether those adjustments showed that the bank didn't rely on Trump's numbers and that he was rich enough to qualify for the loans anyway (as the defense contends) or whether the "haircuts" were essentially standard deductions that didn't compensate for his alleged inflation (the state's view).

As for the bankers' own views of their dealings with Trump, testimony was often oblique.

For example, when retired Deutsche Bank risk management officer Nicholas Haigh was asked whether the loans were a good credit decision, he demurred that it was "a subjective question" but said the bankers did a good job analyzing the information they had. But he also said the bank needs a true picture of risk to set interest rates.

Managing Director David Williams and former colleague Rosemary Vrablic said they hadn't been troubled by big gaps between Trump's and the bank's estimates of his assets.

A 'WHALE' OF A CLIENT

What was clear was that Deutsche Bank's private wealth management division, which caters to rich people, was eager to lend to Trump.

Testimony and internal documents showed the bankers courted him as a big-dollar "whale" of a client who could connect them to "the wealthiest people on the planet." Alongside the loan deals came multimillion-dollar bank deposits from Trump, and the bankers envisioned "cross-selling" him lucrative, fee-based services such as estate planning.

There was little mention at the trial of Trump's tempestuous prior relationship with a different part of Deutsche Bank. Amid the 2008 financial crisis, Trump defaulted on a loan that Deutsche's commercial

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real estate division had provided for a Chicago hotel and condo skyscraper. He sued, accusing the bank of "predatory lending." Deutsche countersued. They settled.

Not long after, Trump's company again approached Deutsche's commercial real estate group while bidding to buy the Doral golf resort near Miami.

But the Trump Organization found a considerably lower interest rate through Deutsche's private wealth management bankers, who were introduced to the Trumps by the former president's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The private bankers ultimately made loans for Doral, a Washington hotel and even the same Chicago skyscraper involved in the lawsuit.

The deals required guarantees that Donald Trump would pay personally if necessary, so they came with conditions about his net worth and, sometimes, liquidity. Hence the scrutiny of his financial statements, which he often was required to submit annually.

BIDDING FOR THE BUFFALO BILLS

Before vying for the White House, Trump tried to buy the Buffalo Bills, offering \$1 billion for the NFL franchise in 2014. Emails aired at the trial shed new light on how Trump was seen behind the scenes.

Investment bankers involved in shopping the team said Trump's history of owning Atlantic City casinos and his leading role, as owner of the New Jersey Generals, in the rival USFL's 1980s antitrust lawsuit against the NFL gave him "little chance of being approved" by the league.

"That being said, his strong show of support doesn't hurt the process," then-Morgan Stanley executive K. Don Cornwell wrote to colleagues in April 2014.

"He probably does have the dough," colleague Jeffrey Holzschuh wrote back, adding, "but never know the real facts with him."

Trump claimed his net worth was over \$8 billion in an initial offer letter but never provided his financial statements. Trump's then-lawyer Michael Cohen told the bankers the financial records would be released only when Trump was "the final bidder."

Instead, at a presentation to the bankers, Trump handed out copies of one of Forbes magazine's lists of wealthy celebrities, Cornwell testified.

The owners of the National Hockey League's Buffalo Sabres, Terry and Kim Pegula, ultimately bought the Bills for \$1.4 billion.

While running for president in 2016, Trump told The Associated Press that had he bought the Bills, "I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing."

THE TRIPLED TRUMP TOWER TRIPLEX

He built it. He lived in it. Yet from at least 2012-2016, the former president's Trump Tower triplex penthouse was valued in his financial statements as though it measured 30,000 square feet (2,800 square meters), nearly three times its actual size.

How did this happen, especially since Trump had signed a 1994 document that correctly listed 10,996 square feet (1,022 square meters)?

Former Trump Organization controller Jeffrey McConney said he got the 30,000-square-foot figure from Kevin Sneddon in the company's realty sales arm. Sneddon said he got it from former Trump Organization finance chief Allen Weisselberg, who said he didn't "walk around knowing the size" of the apartment.

As for Trump, he maintained that "they just made a mistake." He also suggested the high number is "not that far off" when factoring in his access to the building roof.

"As we're sitting here now, do you know how big your apartment is?" state lawyer Kevin Wallace asked.

"I have heard, obviously, because of the trial, they say 11-to-12-to-13,000 feet," Trump replied.

After Forbes publicly reported the discrepancy in 2017, the Trump Organization adjusted the size and dropped the estimated value from \$327 million to about \$117 million.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE TRIAL?

The trial involves six claims, including allegations of conspiracy and insurance fraud. James is seeking penalties over \$300 million and wants Trump banned from doing business in New York.

Both sides have until Jan. 5 to submit written arguments. They will return to the courthouse for summations Jan. 11, just four days before the Iowa caucuses start.

Engoron said he hopes to have a decision by the end of January.

Meanwhile, Trump's lawyers are appealing Engoron's pretrial fraud ruling. They are preparing to appeal if they lose on the remaining issues.

When they said this week they were laying the groundwork for that, the judge quipped, "You're going to appeal?"

Tiger Woods and son get another crack at PNC Championship. Woods jokingly calls it the 5th major

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — No wonder Tiger Woods jokingly refers to the PNC Championship as the fifth major. Woods was together with 14-year-old son Charlie on Friday, their swings eerily similar and the encouraging words coming as only Woods can deliver them. They were warming up ahead of the pro-am, hitting flop shots, when Charlie hit one that was ... well, let Woods explain.

"We're ending on that one right there. That was nasty," Woods said, repeating the second part with an extra word for emphasis.

Woods felt good enough to turn down a golf cart and walk 18 holes in a strong wind during the pro-am, which is not to suggest he is completely on the mend.

"I felt like I was physically fit to do it," Woods said. "Also, walking is better for my back. I just wanted to keep it loose and keep it going, and we're having so much it doesn't really matter."

Woods chose not to speak to media, wanting to avoid any queries about his place on the PGA Tour board as it negotiates commercial deals with the Saudi backer of LIV Golf — the deadline is about two weeks away — and a private investment group of powerful U.S. sports team owners.

This is the fourth year Woods is playing with Charlie. They were runner-up two years ago and while Woods repeatedly talks about "having a blast," getting the Willie Park Trophy that goes to the winners would have its own place among some 100 wins worldwide.

"Winning majors is unbelievable and how he's won his majors," Justin Thomas said. "But seeing how much he cares about Charlie and having (daughter) Sam out here and him doing that together with Charlie as he's watching him grow up, it would be a very, very different kind of win that doesn't maybe come with the record books and history."

The question is how much Charlie, whose high school team won the Class A state championship, carries the load.

He is not the little crumb-snatcher — a term Woods' father affectionately used for him — that first played in the PNC Championship in 2020 at age 11. He is taller and stronger, with more speed in his swing and plenty of pop.

Charlie has been moved back a set of tees, just one in front of his father. He will be playing The Ritz-Carlton Club at 6,576 yards, the same set of tees used by Steve Stricker and Jim Furyk, and Nelly Korda from the LPGA Tour.

"I can't quite give him as much brief anymore because he's close to beating me up," Thomas said. "It's impressive from a golfer standpoint because he's still a 14-year-old but maturing in the sense of his golf game, and he's more willing to learn and he's open to it all times."

"I'm just glad he keeps moving back tee markers. He's leading the tournament in inches grown."

He has a pretty good teacher in his father, even at this stage in his career.

The PNC Championship, which starts Friday, is only the fourth competition this year for Woods. He made the cut but didn't finish the third round of the Masters, and then had ankle fusion surgery shortly thereafter.

Woods returned sooner than he expected at the Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas two weeks ago. He finished 18th in the 20-man field, and it was fair to speculate that he was using that to warm up for the big one — the PNC Championship.

"I was able to knock a lot of the rust off there at the Hero," Woods said. "My hands felt better with control hitting shots. And especially today with the wind blowing as hard as it was, I was able to hit flighted

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shots nicely, which was not quite as sharp as I wanted to be at Hero.”

The big concern is the weather. The wind was enough to shake trees, and rain is in the forecast over the next two days. Starting times have been moved up. Everyone will be in a cart, as this is run by the PGA Tour Champions.

Woods has caddied for his son — one of those events is what gave him the green light to play in the Bahamas — and watched him develop. He has taught him about the process of deciding how to hit shots, and the kid sounds inquisitive.

“And sometimes he doesn’t see it the way I saw, which is fun,” Woods said.

Part of that relationship is giving Charlie space to figure it out on his own, golf and life, though Woods said he also provides what he called “guardrails.”

“There’s so much of the noise in our lives that people are always trying to get stuff out of us, and my job as a parent is to protect him from a lot of that stuff,” Woods said. “Then again, as a teenager, I want him to try and become his own man at the same time. So it’s a challenge as a parent and to provide that atmosphere for him, to learn, to grow, and have that freedom, meanwhile understanding that there’s so much noise looking into our lives.”

Woods said it was different for him at that age, mainly because there were no phones and cameras at every turn, and no social media.

On the topic of phones came one pet peeve.

“I just don’t like the fact that he stares at his phone all the time,” Woods said.

Court ruling backs tribes’ effort to force lawmakers to redraw North Dakota legislative boundaries

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A federal appeals court denied a request on Friday to delay a judge’s decision that North Dakota’s legislative map violates the Voting Rights Act in diluting the voting strength of two Native American tribes.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals’ decision comes a week before the deadline set by the judge for the state to adopt a new map of legislative districts.

Last month, U.S. District Chief Judge Peter Welte ruled that the map violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in that it “prevents Native American voters from having an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.” He gave North Dakota Republican Secretary of State Michael Howe and the GOP-controlled Legislature until Dec. 22 “to adopt a plan to remedy the violation.”

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and the Spirit Lake Tribe brought the lawsuit early last year. They alleged the 2021 redistricting map “simultaneously packs Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians members into one house district, and cracks Spirit Lake Tribe members out of any majority Native house district.”

Days after Welte’s Nov. 17 ruling, Howe announced plans to appeal, citing a recent 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision that private individuals and groups such as the NAACP can’t sue under a major section of the landmark civil rights law.

Welte on Tuesday rejected Howe’s motion to stay his judgment. Howe then asked the 8th Circuit for a stay pending appeal and through the 2024 elections. The court on Friday denied his request in a brief order. Two phone messages were left for Howe seeking comment. His appeal remains pending before the 8th Circuit.

Plaintiffs’ attorney Tim Purdon welcomed Friday’s decision as a “swift denial” and “good news” for the two tribes and the Voting Rights Act.

“Given that the Secretary of State’s motion to stay did not argue that the current North Dakota map is legal under the VRA, we are hopeful that the Legislature will reconsider its position here, adopt the Voting Rights Act compliant map that has been proposed by the Tribes and approved by the Court, and stop the

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spend of taxpayer dollars on this litigation," Purdon said by email.

Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor said the Legislature won't be able to satisfy the judge's Dec. 22 deadline for a new map, given the time that would be needed.

"If we did everything today ... no, there's no way," Lefor said.

What happens if the deadline passes without a new map is up to the judge, Lefor and Purdon said. The Legislature is not part of the lawsuit, which was filed against the secretary of state.

North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley said the days ahead will be eventful and consequential as to "what the Legislature decides is their best option, whether it's just to allow the lines to be imposed by the court, or does the Legislature choose to call themselves in and adopt different lines."

Crafting a new map wouldn't be as complicated as starting from scratch because three or four districts at most would be affected, plaintiffs' attorney Mark Gaber said. North Dakota got 35 days to redraw its map; courts usually give legislatures two weeks, he said. After the deadline, the tribes would probably ask the judge to implement one of their proposed maps, Gaber said.

The Legislature this week restarted its redistricting panel to begin to address Welte's ruling. The Redistricting Committee plans to meet again next week.

The two tribes unsuccessfully proposed to the Legislature a single legislative district encompassing the two reservations, which are roughly 60 miles (97 kilometers) apart.

North Dakota has 47 legislative districts, each with one senator and two representatives. Republicans control the House 82-12 and the Senate 43-4. At least two lawmakers, both House Democrats, are members of tribes.

The Legislature created four subdistricts in the House, including one each for the Fort Berthold and Turtle Mountain Indian reservations.

Lawmakers who were involved in the 2021 redistricting process have previously cited 2020 census numbers meeting population requirements of the Voting Rights Act for creating those subdistricts.

Chargers fire coach Brandon Staley, general manager Tom Telesco in midst of disappointing season

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Dean Spanos has decided he isn't "All In" anymore on Brandon Staley and Tom Telesco leading the Los Angeles Chargers.

The Chargers owner fired Staley as coach and Telesco as general manager Friday morning after one of the worst losses in franchise history.

Los Angeles made the playoffs last season but is one of this year's biggest disappointments at 5-9, with losses in five of their last six games. The Bolts dropped into last place in the AFC West after Thursday night's 63-21 loss at Las Vegas.

It was the most points allowed in franchise history and the 42-point margin was the third-worst.

Spanos thanked Staley and Telesco in a statement for their hard work, dedication and professionalism, but he did not mince words on why the move was made with three games remaining in the regular season.

"Doing nothing in the name of continuity was not a risk I was willing to take. Our fans have stood strong through so many ups and downs and close games. They deserve more. Frankly, they've earned more," he said.

Giff Smith will serve as the interim head coach and JoJo Wooden as interim general manager. Los Angeles' next game is against Buffalo on Dec. 23.

Smith, the outside linebackers coach, has been with the organization for eight seasons and was the only position coach retained by Staley when he was hired in 2021. Wooden was one of Telesco's first front office hires in 2013 and is the director of player personnel.

Run game coordinator/defensive line coach Jay Rodgers was also fired.

Staley — who had an overall record of 24-25 — is the third NFL coach to be fired this season, joining

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Josh McDaniels of the Raiders and Carolina's Frank Reich.

It is the first time since 1998 that the Chargers have made an in-season coaching move.

Telesco had been the general manager since 2013. The team only made three playoff appearances under his tenure and were 86-95 overall.

When the Chargers fell behind 42-0 late in the second quarter, some thought the move should have happened at halftime.

"Brandon Staley. I hate to say this because you don't ever want to call for somebody's job, but they should fire him. They should make history. They should fire him at halftime," Amazon Prime Video analyst Richard Sherman said. "We've got an Uber X carpool outside and we'll send you on your way because right now, I've never seen a team come out this uninspired."

While Staley had been confident about his job security in the past, Thursday night's titanic defeat had him questioning his future. He said "I don't know" when asked if he would still be leading the Chargers on Friday.

However, Staley wasn't lacking in confidence and said he should remain in charge.

"I know what I've done here for three years, and I know what I've put into this. I know what we're capable of. I know the type of coach that I am, and I believe in myself," he said.

Staley's questionable late-game decisions and aggressive go for it approach on fourth downs drew many critics. The Chargers were 6-12 in games decided by three points or less, including 0-5 this season.

The defining game of Staley's tenure will be the 2022 AFC Wild-Card round game at Jacksonville, when the Chargers had a 27-0 lead late in the second quarter only to see the Jaguars rally for a 31-30 victory.

Staley was hired in January 2021 after one season as the Los Angeles Rams defensive coordinator. The Rams were the league's top-ranked defense during his tenure, but the Chargers never came close to matching that under Staley's leadership.

The Chargers are on pace to finish 20th or lower in total defense three straight seasons for the first time since 1986. They are currently ranked 29th after finishing 20th last year and 23rd in 2021.

Staley brought in Kellen Moore as offensive coordinator during the offseason, but the unit regressed during the season. The offensive line struggled after center Corey Linsley's year ended after three games because of a heart issue and the running game remained inconsistent.

Quarterback Justin Herbert, who signed a \$252 million, five-year contract extension during the offseason, suffered a pair of finger injuries. His season ended during the second quarter of last Sunday's game against the Denver Broncos when he broke the index finger on his right hand and had surgery two days later.

All three of Telesco's hires were first-time head coaches. They all followed a similar pattern of success the first two years followed by massive regression after that.

Mike McCoy led the Bolts to the playoffs in 2013 and had 9-7 records in each of his first two years, only to be followed by 5-11 in 2015 and 4-12 one season later.

Anthony Lynn was 9-7 in his first year before tying for the AFC's best record at 12-4 in 2018. The Chargers were 5-11 in 2019 and 7-9 in 2020.

Staley was the defensive coordinator at John Carroll, a Division III school in Cleveland, before being hired as linebackers coach in Chicago in 2017. He spent two seasons with the Bears before going to Denver in 2019 when Vic Fangio was hired as coach.

Telesco hit on most of his first-round picks, including Herbert (2020), edge rusher Joey Bosa (2016), wide receiver Mike Williams (2017) and safety Derwin James (2018). But he re-signed only four of his original draft picks from the second through seventh rounds.

Telesco also struggled throughout his tenure to build roster depth, especially on a team frequently beset by injuries.

The Chargers started a YouTube documentary series called "All In" when Staley was hired. Friday started the process of them going "All Out" to find a new duo to chart their future.

Declared missing as a child, British teenager lives off-grid for 6 years, then pops up in France

By JOHN LEICESTER and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LE PECQ, France (AP) — The vehicle's headlights silhouetted the exhausted teenager walking alone in the rain in deepest rural France, with a skateboard tucked under his arm.

"I said to myself, 'That's strange. It's 3 am in the morning, it's raining, he's all by himself on the road between two villages,'" delivery driver Fabien Accidini recounted.

From there, the story gets stranger still. The youngster, it turned out, was Alex Batty, a 17-year-old from Britain who had been missing since 2017.

British and French authorities confirmed on Friday that the teenager found by Accidini this week was the boy who vanished at age 11, when his mother and grandfather took him on what was meant to be a two-week family holiday in Spain.

Instead, it turned out to be a six-year odyssey through Morocco, Spain and southwest France, living an off-the-grid life.

Until this week. Batty suddenly popped back up on the radar on Wednesday. That's when Accidini found him alone on the remote French road and delivered him to the safe keeping of French police.

The youngster told French investigators that he, his mother and her father had moved from house to house, carrying their own solar panels, growing their own food, living with other families, meditating and contemplating reincarnation and other esoteric subjects.

"It was a nomadic life," said police officer Lea Chambonnière. "The only constants, the only things they carried with them, were the solar panels and their vegetable plants."

The teenager decided to put an end to his roaming, parting ways with his mother after she told him she wanted them to move again — to Finland, said French prosecutor Antoine Leroy. He and Chambonnière, a commander in the gendarmerie, spoke at a news conference in the southwestern French city of Toulouse.

"When his mother indicated that she intended to leave for Finland with him, this young man understood that this journey had to stop," the prosecutor said.

He said he couldn't employ the term 'sect' to describe how the mother, grandfather and Batty lived. "The term he uses himself is 'spiritual community,'" he said.

"He was never locked up," he added. "But he was always obliged to live in these conditions."

Until he decided to go his own way. Batty walked for four nights — resting during the days — and fed himself with "different things that he found in fields or gardens" before the delivery driver picked him up, the prosecutor said. Batty told police he'd been aiming for Toulouse, hoping authorities there would return him to the United Kingdom to be reunited with his grandmother, who had custody of him before he vanished as a child.

The prosecutor said they'll be reunited in the U.K. this weekend.

"I cannot begin to express my relief and happiness that Alex has been found safe and well," the grandmother, Susan Caruana, said in a statement released by British police.

She said they spoke by video call and "it was so good to hear his voice and see his face again. I can't wait to see him."

The mother, Melanie Batty, has probably left for Finland, the prosecutor said. The grandfather, David Batty, is thought to have died about six months ago, he said. Both are sought by British police in connection with the youngster's disappearance.

After failing to return to the U.K. from the 2017 trip to Spain, the trio spent about two years in Morocco before traveling back via Spain to southwestern France, where they appear to have spent the last two years roaming in the region of the Pyrenees mountains.

But Batty "does not know exactly where he was, which is very surprising," the prosecutor said. "We will dig a bit."

The delivery driver who found him spotted the teen alone in the rain and dark with a flashlight, a rucksack and his skateboard. He stopped "and asked if he was OK, what he was doing there, if he needed

help and if he wanted me to drop him in a village," Accidini told French broadcaster BFMTV.

Initially, Batty was suspicious, giving a false name, Zac, but he was also "very, very tired," Accidini said. So he climbed aboard and they got chatting while Accidini finished his deliveries.

"Once he felt reassured, he gave me his real name and told me that he had been kidnapped by his mother five years ago," Accidini said. The teen added "that he'd been in France for the past two years in a spiritual community that was a bit strange with his mother who is also a bit strange, a bit loopy."

"He'd had enough. He said, 'I am 17. I need a future.' He didn't see a future for him there."

Batty used Accidini's mobile phone to send a message to his grandmother. Accidini showed it to BFM.

It read: "Hello grandma it is me Alex i am in France Toulouse i really hope that you receive this message i love you i want to come home."

Prince Harry claims vindication in court victory as judge finds British tabloid hacked his phone

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry's phone was hacked by journalists and private investigators working for the Daily Mirror who invaded his privacy by snooping on him unlawfully, a judge ruled Friday, delivering an historic victory for the estranged royal who broke from family tradition to take on the British press.

Phone hacking was "widespread and habitual" at Mirror Group Newspapers, and executives at the papers covered it up, Justice Timothy Fancourt said in his 386-page ruling handed down in the High Court.

The newspapers were ordered to pay the Duke of Sussex 140,000 pounds (\$180,000) for using unlawful information gathering in 15 of the 33 newspaper articles examined at trial.

Harry said the ruling was "vindicating and affirming" and should serve as a warning to other news media that used similar practices, an overt reference to two tabloid publishers that face upcoming trials in lawsuits that make nearly identical allegations.

"Today is a great day for truth, as well as accountability," Harry said in a statement read by his lawyer outside court. "I've been told that slaying dragons will get you burned. But in light of today's victory and the importance of doing what is needed for a free and honest press, it is a worthwhile price to pay. The mission continues."

Fancourt awarded the duke damages for the distress he suffered and a further sum to "reflect the particular hurt and sense of outrage" because two directors at Trinity Mirror knew about the activity and didn't stop it.

"They turned a blind eye to what was going on and positively concealed it," Fancourt said. "Had the illegal conduct been stopped, the misuse of the duke's private information would have ended much sooner."

Harry, 39, the alienated younger son of King Charles III, had sought 440,000 pounds (\$560,000) as part of a crusade against the British media that bucked his family's longstanding aversion to litigation and made him the first senior member of the royal family to testify in court in over a century.

His appearance in the witness box over two days in June created a spectacle as he lobbed allegations that Mirror Group had employed journalists who eavesdropped on voicemails and hired private investigators to use deception and unlawful means to learn about him, other family members and associates.

"I believe that phone hacking was at an industrial scale across at least three of the papers at the time," Harry asserted in the High Court. "That is beyond any doubt."

But Harry had little proof of his own to back his allegations.

The Mirror's lawyer showed him examples of stories that mirrored those published previously in competing papers and even stories that had come from Buckingham Palace and, in one instance, a story from an interview the prince himself had given to mark his 18th birthday.

Harry repeatedly insisted there was no way the papers could have landed their scoops legitimately.

The judge said Harry had a tendency in his testimony "to assume that everything published was the product of voicemail interception because phone hacking was rife within Mirror Group at the time."

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Fancourt said Mirror Group was "not responsible for all of the unlawful activity directed at the duke" by the press, but found it had eavesdropped on his messages as early as 2003 and when hacking was "extensive" at the newspapers from 2006 to 2011.

Mirror Group welcomed the judgment for providing the "necessary clarity to move forward from events that took place many years ago," Chief Executive Jim Mullen said.

"Where historical wrongdoing took place, we apologize unreservedly, have taken full responsibility and paid appropriate compensation," Mullen said in statement.

Attorney Philippa Dempster, who wasn't involved in the case, said hundreds of people who had articles written about them decades ago that contained private information from questionable sources may now be inspired to bring a claim against the newspapers.

"This is a landmark victory for the privacy rights of individuals and marks another clear line in the sand for press standards," Dempster said. "It shows that the courts are willing to reach back into the past, sift through evidence and hold those who practiced the so-called 'dark arts' of the press to account."

The case is the first of three lawsuits Harry has filed against the tabloids over allegations of phone hacking or some form of unlawful information gathering. They form the front line of attack in what he says is his life's mission to reform the media.

Harry's beef with the news media runs deep and is cited throughout his memoir, "Spare." He blames paparazzi for causing the car crash that killed his mother, Princess Diana, and he said intrusions by journalists led him and his wife, Meghan, to leave royal life for the U.S. in 2020.

Harry alleged that Mirror Group used unlawful means to produce nearly 150 stories on his early life between 1996 and 2010, including his romances, injuries and alleged drug use. The reporting caused great distress, he said in sometimes emotional testimony, but was hard to prove because the newspapers destroyed records.

Of the 33 articles at the center of the trial, Mirror denied using unlawful reporting methods for 28 and made no admissions concerning the remaining five.

Fancourt previously tossed out Harry's hacking claims against the publisher of The Sun. He is allowing Harry and actor Hugh Grant, who has made similar claims, to proceed to trial on allegations that News Group Newspapers journalists used other unlawful methods to snoop on them.

Another judge recently gave Harry the go-ahead to take a similar case to trial against the publisher of the Daily Mail, rejecting the newspaper's efforts to throw out the lawsuit. Harry is joined in that litigation by Elton John, actors Elizabeth Hurley, Sadie Frost and others.

Attorney Michael Gardner, who was not involved in the case, said the judgment will get the attention of other publishers facing trial, particularly after the judge called out higher-ups who were aware of the unlawful activity.

"Overall, the media organizations that Harry is still suing will be worried that this will give him a lift and strengthen his determination to pursue them," Gardner said. "To the extent that Harry's other cases could implicate individuals at other media groups, then clearly there will be concerns there."

Phone hacking by British newspapers dates back more than two decades to a time when unethical journalists used an unsophisticated method of phoning the numbers of royals, celebrities, politicians and sports stars and, when prompted to leave a message, punched in default passcodes to eavesdrop on voicemails.

The practice erupted into a full-blown scandal in 2011 when Rupert Murdoch's News of the World was revealed to have intercepted messages of a murdered girl, relatives of deceased British soldiers and victims of a bombing. Murdoch closed the paper.

Newspapers were later found to have used more intrusive means such as phone tapping, home bugging and obtaining flight information and medical records.

Mirror Group Newspapers said it has paid more than 100 million pounds (\$128 million) in other phone hacking lawsuits over the years, but denied wrongdoing in Harry's case. It said it used legitimate reporting methods to get information on the prince.

At the start of the trial, Mirror Group apologized "unreservedly" for one instance when it admitted to

hiring a private investigator for a story about Harry partying at a nightclub in February 2004. Although the article, headlined "Sex on the beach with Harry," wasn't among those at issue in the trial, Mirror Group said he should be compensated 500 pounds (\$637).

Harry brought the case along with three other claimants, including two members of Britain's longest-running TV soap opera, "Coronation Street."

The judge found all had legitimate claims but he tossed out cases brought by actor Nikki Sanderson and Fiona Wightman, the former wife of comedian Paul Whitehouse, because they were filed too late. He awarded actor Michael Turner 31,000 pounds (\$40,000).

The trial was a test case against Mirror Group and the verdict could influence the outcome of hacking claims made by the estate of the late singer George Michael, former Girls Aloud member Cheryl and former soccer player Ian Wright.

Harry's case is also not resolved. He could receive additional compensation over the remaining 115 articles that were not examined at trial.

The judge told the parties to work out an agreement on those or they would have to go to trial again.

Americans agree that the 2024 election will be pivotal for democracy, but for different reasons

By GARY FIELDS and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a politically polarized nation, Americans seem to agree on one issue underlying the 2024 elections — a worry over the state of democracy and how the outcome of the presidential contest will affect its future.

They just disagree over who poses the threat.

A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 62% of adults say democracy in the U.S. could be at risk depending on who wins next fall. Majorities of Democrats (72%) and Republicans (55%) feel the same way, but for different reasons.

President Joe Biden has attempted to paint a dystopian future if GOP front-runner and former President Donald Trump returns to the White House after promising to seek retribution against opponents and declining to rule out that he would abuse the powers of the office. The former president has tried to flip the narrative lately, saying the election subversion and documents cases against him show Biden has weaponized the federal government to prosecute a political opponent. He has called Biden the "destroyer of American democracy."

"I think from the side of the left, it's pretty obvious that they're concerned about electing a president who is avowedly authoritarian, someone who clearly wants to reduce checks and balances within the government to strengthen the presidency and to do so in ways that give the executive branch kind of an unprecedented reach across the population and sectors of the government," said Michael Albertus, political science professor at the University of Chicago.

"From the right, the Republicans think about government overreach, big government, threats to freedom and mandates to act in a certain way or adopt certain policies," he said.

Against that backdrop, the poll found that about half of U.S. adults, 51%, say democracy is working "not too well" or "not well at all."

The poll asked about the importance of the coming presidential election for 12 issues and found that the percentage who said the outcome will be very or extremely important to the future of democracy in the U.S. (67%) ranked behind only the economy (75%). It was about equal to the percentage who said that about government spending (67%) and immigration (66%).

Tony Motes, a retired firefighter who lives in Monroe, Georgia, cited a number of reasons he believes "we're not living in a complete democracy." That includes what he sees as a deterioration of rights, including parental rights, thieves and other criminals not being held accountable, and a lack of secure borders.

The 59-year-old Republican also said the various criminal cases being brought against Trump undermine

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the country's democratic traditions.

"They're trying to keep him from running because they know he's going to win," he said.

The poll's findings continue a trend of Americans' lackluster views about how democracy is functioning. They also believe the country's governing system is not working well to reflect their interests on issues ranging from immigration to abortion to the economy.

Robert Lieberman, a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, has studied the fall of democracies elsewhere and the common elements that feed their demise.

The factors include polarization, growing ethnic or racial antagonism, rising economic inequality and a concentration of power under a country's executive officeholder.

"For a number of years now, the United States has had all four of these conditions, really for the first time in history," he said. "So we're in a period that's ripe for challenges to democracy."

Trump is not the cause of the pattern, Lieberman said, but "seems to have an unerring instinct to make things worse, and he certainly has authoritarian impulses and a lot of followers who seem to validate or applaud him."

The AP-NORC poll found that 87% of Democrats and 54% of independents believe a second Trump term would negatively affect U.S. democracy. For Republicans, 82% believe democracy would be weakened by another Biden win, with 56% of independents agreeing.

About 2 in 10 U.S. adults (19%) say democracy in the U.S. is "already so seriously broken that it doesn't matter who wins the 2024 presidential election." Republicans (23%) are more likely than Democrats (10%) to say this, but relatively few in either party think U.S. democracy is resilient enough to withstand the outcome.

Social media platforms and news sites that reinforce biases accelerate the polarization that leads people from different political perspectives to believe the other side is the one representing the gravest threat to the nation's democracy, said Lilliana Mason, an associate professor of political science at Johns Hopkins.

"I don't think that people are exaggerating. I think it's that they actually are living in information environments in which it is true for them that democracy is under threat," she said.

Mason said one side fears what Trump has said he will do if he wins, while the other is responding to the fear created in a media ecosystem that says the Democrats want to destroy America and turn it into a socialist or communist society.

For some, the danger is more than Trump's statements and concern over how he might turn toward authoritarianism. It also is what's happening in the states and courts, where political gerrymandering and threats to voting rights are continuing, as are measures that limit people's ability to vote easily, such as reducing drop box locations for mail-in ballots and tightening voter identification requirements.

"Look at all the roadblocks that have been put up to keep people, especially people of color, from being able to vote," said Pamela Williams, 75, of New York City, who identifies as a Democrat. "That isn't democracy."

Douglas Kucmerowski, 67, an independent who lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York, is concerned over those state-level actions and the continued use of the Electoral College, which can allow someone to be president even if they lose the popular vote.

He also questions the state of the nation's democracy when a large proportion of the country supports a candidate facing multiple criminal charges who has spoken about pursuing retribution and using the military domestically, among other things.

Trump also has lied about the outcome of the 2020 election, which has been affirmed by multiple reviews in the battleground states where he disputed his loss, and called his supporters to a Washington rally before they stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in a violent attempt to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's win.

"That candidate, in any other age, probably would have been ruled out. But for some reason, in this society, he's one of the best choices," Kucmerowski said. "If this country is that confused that they can't tell the difference between right and wrong and ex-presidents making statements that on day one he will be a dictator, doesn't anybody care about day two or three or four when he's still a dictator?"

Prince Harry's phone hacking victory is a landmark in the long saga of British tabloid misconduct

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry's victory against Mirror Group Newspapers on Friday over what a British judge called "habitual" illegal activity is a landmark moment in the long and twisting saga of lawbreaking by Britain's tabloid press.

Judge Timothy Fancourt ruled that Mirror newspapers had hired private investigators to snoop for personal information and engaged in illegal phone hacking for well over a decade.

It's the latest chapter in a tale of tabloid power and attempts to tame it stretching back years — but it's unlikely to be the end of the story.

WHAT IS PHONE HACKING?

In the pre-digital era, Britain's fiercely competitive tabloid newspapers sold millions of copies a day and would go to great lengths to get scoops, including by using underhanded techniques.

One method was phone hacking — calling someone's number and punching in 0000 or another default PIN number in hope that would give access to their voice messages. Often, it did.

Targets included members of the royal family, politicians, athletes, celebrities, friends and family of famous people and ordinary citizens who found themselves caught in the public eye.

Fancourt said in his ruling that phone hacking was "habitual" at Mirror newspapers as far back as 1998, and went on until at least 2011.

WHEN DID THE PUBLIC FIND OUT ABOUT IT?

The first most people knew about phone hacking was when the royal editor of the News of the World and a private investigator for the paper were jailed in 2007 for eavesdropping on messages left by Prince William and others on the phones of royal aides.

The paper's owner, Rupert Murdoch, dismissed the wrongdoing as the work of two rogue employees. Then, in 2011, it emerged that the News of the World had hacked the phone of Milly Dowler, a 13-year-old girl who was abducted and later found murdered.

The outcry opened the floodgates on a scandal that forced Murdoch to shut down the 168-year-old tabloid, Britain's best-selling newspaper.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

The government set up a judge-led public inquiry into media ethics, which examined the complex web of ties — close and, some said, too cozy — binding Britain's political, media and police elite. Justice Brian Leveson recommended the creation of a strong press watchdog, backed by government regulation. His findings have been partially implemented but have been resisted by large segments of the press, wary of state interference.

Judge Fancourt said it was clear that Leveson had not been told the full truth. He said the Mirror's wrongdoing "was concealed from the board, from Parliament ... from the Leveson Inquiry, from shareholders, and from the public for years."

After the 2011 revelations, several editors and executives at the News of the World were charged with illegal phone hacking. After an eight-month trial at London's Central Criminal Court, former editor Andy Coulson was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2014 for conspiring to hack phones. Five other defendants were acquitted, while several others entered guilty pleas.

Since then, there have been no more criminal cases, but Murdoch's News Group and the Mirror Group have paid hundreds of millions to settle claims from dozens of alleged victims of hacking and other illegal activity. The publisher of the Daily Mail, Associated Newspapers, faces hacking lawsuits from Prince Harry, Elton John and others.

WHAT DOES THE LATEST JUDGMENT MEAN?

While many tabloid targets have accepted out-of-court settlements, Prince Harry was determined to go before a judge. The Mirror Group case is one of three lawsuits he has launched against newspaper

publishers — and the first to reach a full trial.

Harry has made it his mission to tame the tabloid press, which he blames for the death of his mother Princess Diana, for hounding him throughout his youth and for helping drive him and his wife Meghan out of the United Kingdom.

He said in a statement read by his lawyer David Sherborne outside the High Court in London on Friday: "Today is a great day for truth, as well as accountability."

The judge awarded Harry a modest 140,000 pounds (\$180,000) in damages, but the case is likely to cost the Mirror Group much more than that, since the findings could strengthen the claims of others who have filed suits against the company. The publisher has already paid more than 100 million pounds (\$126 million) to settle claims of unlawful information-gathering.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THOSE INVOLVED?

In a partial win for the company, the judge ruled against two of Harry's co-claimants on the grounds that they had waited too long to take legal action.

Mirror Group's parent company, Reach PLC, said Friday that the judgment was expected to "reduce the number of live claims, and substantially limit and bar all or most future claims" for historical wrongdoing.

The ruling could have severe ramifications for Sly Bailey, former chief executive of the Mirror Group's parent company, and the firm's ex-legal director, Paul Vickers. The judge said they both knew about the hacking and covered it up.

It also piles pressure on broadcaster Piers Morgan, a former Daily Mirror editor who has always denied that he knew about phone hacking at the paper. The judge said there was "compelling evidence" that editors of all the Mirror newspapers knew phone hacking "was being used extensively and habitually."

"I've never hacked a phone or told anybody else to hack a phone," Morgan reiterated after Friday's verdict.

Prince Harry said people involved in the lawbreaking should face criminal charges.

"I respectfully call upon the authorities, the financial regulator, the stock market who were deliberately deceived by Mirror Group, and indeed the Metropolitan Police and prosecuting authorities to do their duty for the British public and to investigate bringing charges against the company and those who have broken the law," he said in a statement.

Vermont, ranked as one of the safest states, sees dramatic spike in gun violence

By LISA RATHKE Associated Press

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) — The recent shootings of three college students of Palestinian descent in Vermont's largest city come as the small rural state, often ranked as one of the nation's safest, is grappling with a spike in gun violence.

Two days after the students were shot and seriously wounded during their Thanksgiving break, Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger said it "was one of the most shocking and disturbing events in this city's history."

Statewide, Vermont has had 10 homicides and one suspicious death since October, including a double homicide in Burlington, Weinberger said. Burlington has seen 16 gunfire incidents so far this year, he said, adding that Vermont's largest city is not alone.

"Many communities are experiencing an alarming rise in gun violence with recent shootings happening in Newport, Danville, St. Johnsbury, Brattleboro, Castleton, Leicester, Brookfield," Weinberger said at the time.

The shooting deaths around the state this fall have taxed the short-staffed Vermont State Police, which has made arrests in two of them. The agency has a 15% vacancy rate — with 51 positions unfilled — and about a 25% functional vacancy rate meaning there are a certain number of people on family, military or other leave who are not available, said Vermont State Police Director Col. Matthew Birmingham.

"So that puts us in a challenging position. We're doing more work — our calls for service go up every year — with less people," he said.

Overall the country had a 6% decrease in national firearms homicides between 2021 and 2022, but

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Vermont saw a 185% jump, according to Vermont State Police Capt. Shawn Loan.

"So we went from seven firearms deaths in 2021 to 20 in 2022," he said, adding that he did not have the current total for this year.

About half of the homicides in Vermont involved a firearm between 2017 and 2021, he said. Last year that rose to 86%, Loan said.

While authorities are investigating the shooting of the students as a possible hate crime, many of the homicides around Vermont this fall are likely drug-related and all are isolated from each other, Birmingham said.

"Vermont is experiencing many drug-related issues. Fentanyl is a huge problem for this state and the country, for that matter," said Birmingham. "Our overdose death rate is climbing every year, which is a problem and something that should be on everybody's radar."

Statewide, Vermont's homicide rate last year was about 3.9 per 100,000, compared with Los Angeles at 3.1 and New York City at 2.3 per 100,000, Loan said. Burlington's rate was 11.2 per 100,000, exceeding the rates in Philadelphia, Phoenix and Springfield, Massachusetts, according to Loan.

"We don't have enough ambulances to run, we don't have enough homicide investigators because we're not designed to have that high rate of violent crime. So it has a bigger effect," he said.

In Burlington, the drug problem is spiraling out of control and it's routine to see people injecting drugs downtown, in City Hall Park and in other places, said Andrew Vota, who has lived in the city for 25 years.

"It's a citywide issue and people experience it in the downtown but they're also experiencing it in their neighborhoods and it's everywhere across the city and it's scary," he said of the drug activity.

Retail theft and other crime has increased and some businesses have left downtown.

Vota and Jane Knodell, a former president of the Burlington City Council, drafted a letter this fall that has been signed by about 1,500 residents in the city of about 45,000, that outlines concerns and makes recommendations.

"The increasing levels of violence, burglary, retail, automobile, and bike theft, unlawful public drug and alcohol consumption, drug dealing, graffiti, and other illegal activity are unacceptable," the letter states.

The crimes come as the city's police department tries to rebuild its staffing levels. In 2020, the City Council passed a resolution directing the department to reduce its maximum number of officers through attrition from 105 to 74, amid calls in Burlington and nationwide for racial justice and to defund police.

More than a year later, the City Council authorized the department to increase its staffing level to an effective number of 87, but then-Acting Police Chief Jon Murad said it would take years to rebuild the department. As of Nov. 15, Burlington had 69 sworn officers.

"I think the fundamental problem is the reduction in the police force because that's kind of the back bone. Because they are a deterrent," said Knodell, who did not support the cap.

The city has added security guards to the Church Street Marketplace, a pedestrian outdoor mall downtown, to help shoppers feel safe during the holiday season. Other businesses are planning to fill some of the vacancies, Weinberger said. The city also planned to hold a community public safety forum Thursday and has another one planned next week to discuss drug trafficking, gun crime, substance use and property crime.

After the shooting of the Palestinian students, suspect Jason J. Eaton, 48, was arrested the next day at his Burlington apartment. He has pleaded not guilty to three counts of attempted murder and is being held without bail. The shooting came as threats against Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities have increased across the U.S. since the the Israel-Hamas war erupted in early October.

Meanwhile, Vermont State Police are making progress on the investigations into other shooting deaths, Birmingham said, including that of a 77-year-old retired college dean who was shot while walking on a recreational trail in the small town of Castleton in October.

Castleton residents are still rattled. They don't think police are doing enough and don't feel safe walking on the trail, said Mark Brown, a business owner in town, who has organized a daily group walk Monday through Friday on the trail. An effort led by Brown has raised more than \$25,000 for a reward leading to

an arrest.

Some investigations will take longer than others, Birmingham said last month. "But I am confident that we are going to make progress on all of them that will end in resolutions for victims," he said.

2 attacks launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels strike container ships in vital Red Sea corridor

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A ballistic missile fired by Yemen's Houthi rebels slammed into a cargo ship Friday in the Red Sea near the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait, following another attack only hours earlier that struck a separate vessel, authorities said.

The missile attack on the MSC Palatium III and the earlier assault on the Al Jasrah escalate a maritime campaign by the Iranian-backed Houthis. The attacks also endanger ships traveling through a vital corridor for cargo and energy shipments for both Europe and Asia from the Suez Canal out to the Indian Ocean.

The Houthis say their attacks aim to end the pounding Israeli air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip amid that country's war on Hamas. However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue.

"The Yemeni armed forces confirm they will continue to prevent all ships heading to Israeli ports from navigating in the (Red Sea) until they bring in the food and medicine that our steadfast brothers in the Gaza Strip need," the Houthi military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, said in a statement claiming responsibility for Friday's attacks.

The recent attacks led Maersk, the world's biggest shipping company, to announce Friday that it's told all of its vessels planning to pass through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to "pause their journey until further notice." German-based shipper Hapag-Lloyd that was operating the Al Jasrah also said it was pausing all its container ship traffic through the Red Sea until Monday.

Meanwhile, hijackers, likely from Somalia, separately seized a Bulgarian ship in the Arabian Sea.

A U.S. defense official and the private intelligence firm Ambrey said the MSC Palatium III, a Liberian-flagged container ship, caught fire after the strike. It wasn't immediately clear if anyone on board the vessel had been hurt.

Two missiles were fired in the attack, likely trying to hit the Al Jasrah, the U.S. official said. One went wide and splashed down in the water, the other slammed into the Palatium, the official said.

The Palatium turned around after the attack and was now trying to head south, tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press showed.

The Switzerland-based MSC, or Mediterranean Shipping Co., earlier had another vessel, the MSC Alanya, warned by the Houthis around the Bab el-Mandeb, Ambrey said. "The parent company had cooperated with Israel, and this was likely the reason why she was threatened."

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. MSC did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In the earlier Al Jasrah attack, it remained unclear if it was a missile or drone that hit the vessel, the official said. Ambrey and the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which monitors Mideast shipping lanes, also confirmed that attack.

"The projectile reportedly hit the port side of the vessel and one container fell overboard due to the impact," Ambrey said. "The projectile caused a 'fire on deck' which was broadcast via" radio.

Shipper Hapag-Lloyd said no crew member had been hurt in the attack. It later announced that it was also pausing its ships through the Red Sea until Monday and "will decide for the period thereafter."

Ambrey noted that Hapag-Lloyd "is known to have offices in the Israeli ports of Ashdod, Haifa and Tel Aviv."

In his statement, military spokesman Saree claimed the Houthis targeted the Palatium III and the Alanya — not the Al Jasrah. It wasn't immediately clear why he erroneously identified the second ship.

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The attacks Friday further escalate a campaign by the Houthi rebels, who have claimed responsibility for a series of missile assaults in recent days that just missed shipping in the Red Sea and its strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

On Thursday, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile that missed a container ship traveling through the strait. The day before that, two missiles fired from Houthi-held territory missed a commercial tanker loaded with Indian-manufactured jet fuel near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Also near the strait, a missile fired by Houthis on Monday night slammed into a Norwegian-flagged tanker in the Red Sea.

Global shipping has increasingly been targeted as the Israel-Hamas war threatens to become a wider regional conflict — even during a brief pause in fighting during which Hamas exchanged hostages for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The collapse of the truce has raised the risk of more sea attacks.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is only 29 kilometers (18 miles) wide at its narrowest point, limiting traffic to two channels for inbound and outbound shipments, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Nearly 10% of all oil traded at sea passes through it. An estimated \$1 trillion in goods pass through the strait annually.

In November, Houthis seized a vehicle transport ship linked to Israel in the Red Sea off Yemen. The rebels still hold the vessel near the port city of Hodeida. Separately, a container ship owned by an Israeli billionaire came under attack by a suspected Iranian drone in the Indian Ocean.

A separate, tentative cease-fire between the Houthis and a Saudi-led coalition fighting on behalf of Yemen's exiled government has held for months despite that country's long war. That's raised concerns that any wider conflict in the sea — or a potential reprisal strike from Western forces — could reignite those tensions in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Also Thursday, unknown attackers boarded the Malta-flagged bulk carrier Ruen, managed by Navigation Maritime Bulgare, in the Arabian Sea off the Yemeni island of Socotra, Ambrey and the UKMTO said. Bulgarian authorities said the ship's 18-member crew hailed from Angola, Bulgaria and Myanmar.

"The necessary steps have been taken to pass the information on to all foreign partners and institutions that we will count on to provide assistance," Bulgarian Foreign Minister Maria Gabriel told reporters Friday.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the assault. However, suspicion immediately fell on pirates from Somalia. Somali piracy had dropped in recent years, but there has been growing concern it could resume amid the wider chaos of the Houthi attacks and the political uncertainty gripping the east African nation.

On Friday, the UKMTO issued a warning to shippers saying the security manager for the Ruen "believes the crew no longer has control of the vessel" and that it is heading toward Somalia. The European Union's anti-piracy force in the region said the Spanish frigate Victoria was on its way to intercept the "alleged pirate-hijacked vessel."

Why more women live in major East Coast counties while men outnumber them in the West

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

Anyone who has suspected that there are more women than men where they live, or vice versa, will find fodder for their suspicions in new data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Whether it refutes or confirms their suspicions likely depends on where they live.

Women outnumber men in the largest urban counties east of the Mississippi River, along the Eastern Seaboard and in the Deep South, while the West skews male, according to data released last week from the 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, the most comprehensive source of data on American life. Those numbers were also backed up by age and sex figures from the 2020 census released earlier this year.

There are limitations to what can be concluded from the data. Still, Nancy Averbach, 57, doesn't find the numbers surprising. She lost her husband eight years ago, and has since found it hard to meet a compat-

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ible partner.

Across the U.S. in 2022, the most recent year that figures are available, there were 96.6 adult men for every 100 adult women — and in the Atlanta suburb of DeKalb County, where Averbach lives, that ratio was 87.1, according to the survey. An equal ratio of men to women would be 100.

“It’s really tough to find quality men who share similar values,” Averbach said. There aren’t many singles groups that cater to her age group, she says, and when such groups put on events, they usually attract more women than men.

Her county has a low sex ratio, which means there are more women than men. A high ratio indicates there are more men than women.

The sex ratio numbers don’t reflect sexual preference, gender identity or whether those surveyed are looking for partners. The figures also don’t reflect intersex people, who, historically, have had relatively scant data collected on them.

The ratios vary by geography, in part because of the presence of certain institutions and industries with gender imbalances. In the most populous counties in the West, this is especially discernible. San Diego, for instance, has several male-dominated military bases, which is reflected in the sex ratio. In Austin, San Francisco, Seattle and San Jose there are plentiful jobs in tech, a sector where men account for around three-quarters of the workforce.

This is in contrast to areas with large numbers of colleges or universities, which typically have more women, according to a Census Bureau report from May.

Adding to the imbalance are the effects of historic racism in the U.S., including high rates of incarceration and the mortality gap, which have lowered the number of men in some communities, said Karen Guzzo, director of the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina.

Among U.S. counties with 500,000 residents or more, the areas where adult women outnumber adult men most noticeably were in Baltimore, New York, Atlanta and Philadelphia, as well as Birmingham, Alabama; and Memphis, Tennessee; where the ratios ranged in the mid-80s.

The biggest imbalances of men to women, with ratios above 103 for those age 18 and over, were recorded in the West, in counties that are home to Colorado Springs, Colo.; and Austin, as well as California counties that are home to San Francisco, San Jose and Bakersfield, where agriculture and energy are two of the biggest industries.

At birth, the sex ratio in the U.S. has historically been 105 men for every 100 women. The ratio inverts around age 30. Since the mortality rate is higher for men than it is for women at almost every age group — due to violence, drinking, smoking, job hazards and suicide — that ratio decreases with age, until at age 90 or above there are typically about two women to every man.

Compared to the previous decade though, more men are now living into older age, according to the 2020 census.

Michal Naisteter, a professional matchmaker in the Philadelphia area, has given the imbalance some thought — and mostly in terms of the dating market because of her work. She thinks single women are more likely than men to live within the city limits of Philadelphia, but that single men are more willing to commute from the suburbs than vice versa.

She advises people looking for a partner to put in the effort, perhaps even to expand the geographical reach of their day-to-day lives.

“It should take work,” Naisteter said. “Because nothing is sweeter than something you have to work for.”

In communities with more men than women, people tend to marry at an earlier age than in places where women outnumber men. Women are more likely to live with a partner without getting married in places where they outnumber men, and if they do marry, it is more often to men who are less educated or earn less than they do, Guzzo said.

That’s not likely to happen with Averbach, who is doing just fine on her own in suburban Atlanta.

“Why would I want to settle?” she said. “I don’t need a guy to make me happy.”

Sports fan Trump hits UFC fights and big games to try to put his 2024 nomination in a headlock

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After Donald Trump attended South Carolina's annual Palmetto Bowl, video of the crowd chanting "We want Trump!" as the former president arrived at Williams-Brice Stadium spread across conservative social media.

It was much the same two weeks earlier when the GOP front-runner attended an Ultimate Fighting Championship event in New York, fist-bumping and waving to the crowd as he entered Madison Square Garden like he was one of the fighters, with an entourage that included the musician Kid Rock, UFC president Dana White and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

While Trump has spent less time campaigning in early-voting states than many of his Republican primary rivals, his campaign has been filling his schedule with appearances at major sporting events including Saturday's UFC fight in Las Vegas. Videos of his appearances routinely rack up hundreds of thousands of views across social media, particularly on non-political outlets, including popular online sports channels and fan sites. And they are far easier and cheaper to produce than campaign rallies.

It's a strategy that, aides say, puts him in front of potential voters who may not closely follow politics or engage with traditional news sources. And it is part of a broader effort to expand Trump's appeal with young people and minority voters, particularly Latino and Black men, that the campaign hopes to win over in greater numbers after gains in 2020. UFC's fanbase in particular is overwhelmingly male.

Aides stress Trump is a genuine sports fan who frequented fights and games long before he ran for the White House and would be attending even if he weren't running. He is a particular aficionado of boxing and other combat sports. During a summer appearance on the "UFC Unfiltered" podcast, Trump recalled his favorite fights from decades ago, blow by blow.

In the 1980s, he befriended boxing legends like Mike Tyson and promoter Don King as he hosted high-profile fights at his Atlantic City casinos and became so involved with professional wrestling that he starred in WrestleMania 23's "Battle of the Billionaires." And for a time, he owned the New Jersey Generals, a professional football team that played in the NFL-rival United States Football League.

In recent years, he has become particularly tied to mixed martial arts and its machismo. He is close personal friends with White, UFC's founder, who spoke at the Republican National Conventions in 2016 and 2020 and credits Trump for saving the sport by hosting fights when others shunned it as too violent.

Campaign staff often tune into fights late at night aboard Trump's private plane as he returns to Palm Beach, Florida, following events, streaming fights on ESPN+ or DAZN.

Trump has also drawn support from the sport's stars, including Colby Covington, who will be fighting Leon Edwards Saturday night for UFC's welterweight title. Covington said this week that organizers overruled his request to have Trump walk him out to the octagon. But Trump may still get a role if he wins.

"He's going to wrap that belt around me," Covington told reporters on Thursday, wearing a suit jacket signed by Trump that featured the former president's mug shot on the back. "It's going to be a spectacle."

There is of course a long history of sports in presidential politics. Candidates have used them to project an image of strength and vigor, endear themselves to voters and seem more accessible.

Presidential historian Michael Beschloss wrote about how Theodore Roosevelt was frequently pictured boxing, horseback riding and hiking, while John Kennedy swam, sailed and played touch football despite serious injuries sustained during the war. Richard Nixon "went to great lengths" to emphasize his football and baseball fandom as he tried to court working-class voters, while George W. Bush famously threw out the ceremonial first pitch of the first World Series game in New York after 9/11, trying to signal to nervous Americans that life would go on after the terror attack.

Trump's team sees the appearances as a way to connect with sports fans, signaling he shares their interests, and a way to showcase a different side of the combative politician, who has been indicted four times and is usually shown on the news railing from behind a rally lectern. They also hope to capitalize on his history as a celebrity and his relationships with business and entertainment figures.

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When Trump attends an event like Saturday's fight, "The audience gets to see him through an unvarnished filter that isn't tainted by news media and political biases," said his spokesman Steven Cheung, who previously worked for UFC himself. "It gives us the great opportunity to connect with voters who are, quite frankly, turned off by many traditional news outlets."

Jeffrey Montez de Oca, a professor of sociology and the founding director of the Center for Critical Sport Studies at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, said politicians "use sports all the time and they're used to connect with regular people," as well as to "project strength and power."

Sports, he said, generate "powerful emotions" that take hold of fans and "make you feel like you're a part of something much larger than yourself" — emotions that politicians try to harness.

"For Trump to walk into that space, he's able to participate in the general feeling going on in that room. The love, the enthusiasm, the feeling of connection with the sport, with the athletes, then attaches to him as well," he said.

Kyle Kusz, a University of Rhode Island professor who studies the connection between sports and the far right, recalled how Trump aligned himself with sports figures during his 2016 campaign, appearing with basketball coach Bobby Knight, who was fired for abusive behavior, and invoking Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, who was fired in connection with the child sex abuse scandal involving his former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky, among others facing scandal. He noted all were white men whose diehard fans saw them as unfairly victimized.

Sports stars in 2016 were among the few celebrities willing to campaign with Trump, who was shunned by the Hollywood establishment.

This time, Trump's appearances are part of a broader effort by the former president's team to engage with non-traditional media outlets, including YouTube shows and podcasts like "UFC Unfiltered" that can drive millions of views. The appearances allow Trump to reach listeners who may be turned off by the mainstream media and politics, and get their news from alternative sources.

They have also tried to harness the power of social media by creating their own viral moments. His team realized early on that video of Trump interacting with supporters had particular traction, and now often organizes stops where he has passed out Blizzards at Dairy Queen or tossed autographed footballs into the crowd at a frat house in Iowa.

The scenes have also provided a contrast, first with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, once seen as Trump's leading primary rival, who is often criticized for seeming wooden and awkward at public events, and now with President Joe Biden as both men gear up for a widely expected general election rematch. Biden has largely eschewed campaign events, holding just a single rally, his campaign launch event.

'Reacher' star Alan Ritchson talks season two of hit show and how 'Amazon took a risk' on him

By ALICIA RANCILIO Associated Press

There's a common phrase associated with Jack Reacher in Lee's Child's books: "Reacher says nothing." Saying nothing, however, can be terrifying for Alan Ritchson, who plays Reacher on TV.

"He's socially awkward, very stoic, very cerebral and none of those things should make for an interesting character," Ritchson recently told The Associated Press. "As I play Reacher, I swear there's not one scene where I feel like, 'That was the most interesting scene of all TV.'"

"And then like the director, Sam Hill will come out, 'It was so good! Oh, it's so muscular and it was so full and like, it was right there, and we could just feel it coming out of your pores!'"

"I was just standing there," deadpans Ritchson.

Reacher is a former U.S. Army officer who travels the country with only a toothbrush and wants no attachments or possessions. Nomad life leads Reacher to constantly meet new people and be in different environments, providing "Reacher" an easy set up for its anthology format. He also can't help but step in when he notices trouble brewing, which is often, but often laments that he doesn't want to be involved.

While the series' debut season was based on Child's first Reacher novel "Killing Floor," season two is

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actually adapted from the 11th book in the series called "Bad Luck and Trouble." In season two, debuting Friday, Reacher reunites with three Army comrades to track down the people who have been targeting and killing members of the elite group they once served in. (They're played by Serinda Swan, Shaun Sipos and Maria Sten who, spoiler alert, viewers will recognize from season one.)

"Reacher is such a strong character he really is the bow of a ship just carving through the water," said Sipos. "You need characters that cause him to behave slightly differently that you see different sides to him."

Swan believes viewers will get used to Reacher interacting with (mostly) new characters each season. "Our job, was to make sure that the people that came in for season two didn't feel a deficit, like you will miss the first characters, just as you will miss our characters in the next one, but casting and the story-telling means each season you should actually start to be excited because you know that you're going to be able to fall in love with new people."

Ritchson spoke to The Associated Press about the show and the books. Answers are condensed for clarity and brevity.

AP: Season one of this show was a hit, but I feel like it was kind of a quiet release. Do you think the success was a surprise?

RITCHSON: It was interesting. The fact that the guy they got to play Reacher was not really a household name, a little less recognizable, it was a little harder to get people to talk to us. I think Amazon took a risk. But then when people watched the season and the numbers came in, it started to get treated differently.

AP: For season two did you feel nervous about the new setting and new cast or were you confident viewers would take to it like they did season one?

RITCHSON: The thing I love is in season one, Reacher was the mystery. We're getting a chance to see what it's like when he's got his family around him and in a way that really ups the stakes as well. But it also makes it a lot of fun to see what he's like in a more familiar, comfortable environment.

AP: The show has already been renewed for a third season. It must be so interesting to be in on those discussions of which book to cover next.

RITCHSON: There are so many options. There was a lot of discussion and I think every year there's going to be a lot of discussion. Myself included, I've read every book. A lot of people involved in this with a much higher pay grade than mine have read the books. Everybody's got their favorites. Everybody wants to see their favorite story come to life on screen.

AP: What is it about this character that people enjoy?

RITCHSON: He really brings to life in us the desire that we all have to see justice done in a world that is so unjust, in a world where law is so cumbersome and clumsy and slow and he's instant righteousness. I think we're fascinated by that. There's a lot of wish fulfillment in that for us, at least for me.

AP: Do you think he's almost a superhero?

RITCHSON: We shot a crowbar fight in season one, where I got hit in the head with a vase (made of sugar glass) and ended up in a pool with the gunman. I was in so much pain after filming. I had a beanie on and that sugar vase hit so hard when I took the beanie off, I had blood pouring out of my head. So I called (executive producer) Don Granger and I was like, "OK, question. I'm feeling it. I feel it everywhere. So, like, is Reacher limping or what's his pain level?"

And there's like a slight pause and Granger goes, "Yeah, he's fine. He's kind of like a superhero so he's OK."

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Today in History: December 16, World War II's Battle of the Bulge begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 16, the 350th day of 2023. There are 15 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 16, 1944, the World War II Battle of the Bulge began as German forces launched a surprise attack against Allied forces through the Ardennes Forest in Belgium and Luxembourg. (The Allies were eventually able to turn the Germans back.)

On this date:

In 1653, Oliver Cromwell became lord protector of England, Scotland and Ireland.

In 1773, the Boston Tea Party took place as American colonists boarded a British ship and dumped more than 300 chests of tea into Boston Harbor to protest tea taxes.

In 1907, 16 U.S. Navy battleships, which came to be known as the "Great White Fleet," set sail on a 14-month round-the-world voyage to demonstrate American sea power.

In 1950, President Harry S. Truman proclaimed a national state of emergency in order to fight "world conquest by Communist imperialism."

In 1960, 134 people were killed when a United Air Lines DC-8 and a TWA Super Constellation collided over New York City.

In 1991, the U.N. General Assembly rescinded its 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism by a vote of 111-25.

In 2000, President-elect George W. Bush selected Colin Powell to become the first African-American secretary of state.

In 2001, after nine weeks of fighting, Afghan militia leaders claimed control of the last mountain bastion of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida fighters, but bin Laden himself was nowhere to be seen.

In 2011, in San Francisco, eight years of being investigated for steroid allegations ended for home run king Barry Bonds with a 30-day sentence to be served at home. (Bonds never served the sentence; his conviction for obstruction of justice was overturned.)

In 2012, President Barack Obama visited Newtown, Connecticut, the scene of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre; after meeting privately with victims' families, the president told an evening vigil he would use "whatever power" he had to prevent future shootings.

In 2013, Ray Price, one of country music's most popular and influential singers and bandleaders, died in Mount Pleasant, Texas at age 87.

In 2014, Taliban gunmen stormed a military-run school in the northwestern Pakistan city of Peshawar, killing at least 148 people, mostly children.

In 2019, House Democrats laid out their first impeachment case against President Donald Trump; a sweeping report from the House Judiciary Committee said Trump had "betrayed the Nation by abusing his high office to enlist a foreign power in corrupting democratic elections."

In 2020, the first COVID-19 vaccinations were underway at U.S. nursing homes, where the virus had killed 110,000 people.

Today's Birthdays: Civil rights attorney and co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center Morris Dees is 87. Actor Joyce Bulifant is 86. Actor Liv Ullmann is 85. CBS news correspondent Lesley Stahl is 82. Pop musician Tony Hicks (The Hollies) is 78. Pop singer Benny Andersson (ABBA) is 77. Rock singer-musician Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top) is 74. Rock musician Bill Bateman (The Blasters) is 72. Actor Xander Berkeley is 68. Actor Alison LaPlaca is 64. Actor Sam Robards is 62. Actor Jon Tenney is 62. Actor Benjamin Bratt is 60. Actor-comedian JB Smoove is 58. Actor Miranda Otto is 56. Actor Daniel Cosgrove is 53. R&B singer Michael McCary is 52. Actor Jonathan Scarfe is 48. Actor Krysten Ritter is 42. Actor Zoe Jarman is 41. Country musician Chris Scruggs is 41. Actor Theo James is 39. Actor Amanda Setton is 38. Rock musician Dave Rublin (American Authors) is 37. Actor Hallee Hirsh is 36. Actor Anna Popplewell is 35. Actor Stephan James is 30.