

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 1 of 77

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3 - Horton is hiring](#)
- [3- Dog License Ad](#)
- [4- GHS Boys Basketball](#)
- [5- Names Released for Meade Co. Fatal Crash](#)
- [6- Bierman Farm Service Christmas Ad](#)
- [6- BK Custom T's & More Christmas Ad](#)
- [7- First set of Groton Area Kindergarten students](#)
- [8- Blocker Construction Christmas Ad](#)
- [8- Drew Johnson Attorney Christmas Ad](#)
- [9- SD News Watch: Brain development science bolsters calls for quality preschool in South Dakota](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: CO2 pipeline debate has resulted in divisions among ethanol proponents](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Nursing home complaints up 38% since last year](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: The naughty and the nice: Home-state holiday decor bedecks congressional offices](#)
- [18- Weather Pages](#)
- [23- Daily Devotional](#)
- [24- 2023 Community Events](#)
- [25- Subscription Form](#)
- [26- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [27- News from the Associated Press](#)

Friday, Dec. 22

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.
No School - Christmas Break

Saturday, Dec. 23

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 24

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday school, worship with communion, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 10:30 a.m.
United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Conde Christmas Eve

Groton Daily Independent
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"Kindness is igniting a light in someone else for no reason other than to watch them enjoy the glow."

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

service, 5 p.m.; Groton Christmas Eve service, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.; Candlelight Christmas Eve service, 5 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.; Christmas Eve Program, 5 p.m.

Monday, Dec. 25

CHRISTMAS DAY!

City office and public works departments closed.
No senior menu.

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.

No School - Christmas Break

Tuesday, Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Chicken Alfredo, lemon buttered broccoli, pumpkin bar, cookie, whole wheat bread.
No School - Christmas Break
City office and public works departments closed.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 2 of 77

1440

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At least 14 people were killed and dozens more injured, several of them critically, in a shooting at Charles University's faculty of arts building in Prague's city center yesterday, marking the Czech Republic's deadliest mass shooting.

Harvard University President Claudine Gay will submit a trio of revisions to her 1997 graduate dissertation, according to reports yesterday, following allegations of plagiarism that have surfaced in recent weeks. The updates came the same day a university-sponsored independent

review accused Gay of using duplicative language and insufficient attribution while concluding the instances fell short of serious misconduct.

Parts of Southern California received major rainfall yesterday as a reportedly once-every-thousand-year storm system hovered over the region and headed toward Arizona, prompting flood watches for millions. Rescuers have aided dozens of stranded residents in several counties around Los Angeles and Santa Barbara while the town of Oxnard recorded over 3 inches of rain in one hour. No deaths have been reported as of this writing.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Los Angeles Dodgers' Shohei Ohtani edges Novak Djokovic and Lionel Messi to win AP Male Athlete of the Year for the second time in three years.

The 96th Academy Awards shortlists announced for 10 categories with "Barbie" and "Killers of the Flower Moon" leading for most shortlist mentions. Actor Vin Diesel accused in lawsuit of 2010 sexual battery by former assistant.

European court rules soccer governing bodies FIFA and UEFA can't ban formation of a European-wide Super League, which could replace the Champions League with a new, 64-team competition.

Science & Technology

AI platform demonstrates ability to autonomously plan and execute a chemistry experiment after taking input prompts from researchers.

Researchers develop modified plant toxin for use in neurological and antiparasite drugs; chemical is derived from seeds used by fishermen in Southeast Asia to paralyze and catch fish.

First fossilized megalodon tooth found in the deep sea recovered by scientists; 3.5-million-year-old specimen recovered by submersible nearly 2 miles below the surface.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.0, Dow +0.9%, Nasdaq +1.3%); S&P 500 rebounds from worst day since September. Nike shares fall over 10% in after-hours trading, plans to cut costs by roughly \$2B over the next three years amid softer outlook for second half of fiscal year.

Southern African nation of Angola to leave the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries after 16 years of membership following dispute over 2024 oil production quotas.

Honda Motor recalls more than 2.5 million Acura and Honda vehicles in the US due to fuel pump failure that could cause engine issues.

Politics & World Affairs

Cease-fire talks stall in Israel-Hamas war; Hamas says it will no longer agree to temporary pauses to conduct prisoner swaps and allow humanitarian aid to enter Gaza (More) | See updates on the war here.

US and Chinese military officials speak directly for the first time in 16 months, potentially signaling a thaw in relations.

Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani files for bankruptcy following \$148M judgment in defamation lawsuit brought by Georgia poll workers.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 3 of 77

WE'RE HIRING

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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-REQUIRED!!**

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

GHS Boys Basketball

Groton Area boys have clean sweep over Roncalli

Groton Area's boys basketball teams all posted wins over Aberdeen Roncalli Thursday night in Groton.

The varsity team won, 61-50, leading at the quarter stops at 13-10, 29-20 and 49-39.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 22 points, six rebounds and three steals. Jacob Zak had 16 points, four rebounds, five assists, two steals and one block. Keegen Tracy had 15 points, four rebounds, one assist and two steals. Ryder Johnson had six points, seven rebounds, two assists and two steals. Colby Dunker had two points. Logan Ringgenberg had four rebounds, one assist and two steals. Taylor Diegel had three assists and one steal. Gage Sippel had two rebounds and one block and Kassen Keough had two rebounds.

Groton Area made 22 of 40 two-pointers for 55 percent, four of 15 three-pointers for 27 percent, five of 10 free throws for 50 percent, 29 rebounds, four turnovers, 12 assists, 12 steals, 16 fouls and two block shots.

3-Pointers: Zak 1, Teeth 2, Tracy 1.

Groton Area is now 3-1 on the season and will play Pine Ridge on Dec. 29 at the Corn Palace in Mitchell at 12:30 p.m.

Maddox Miller led the Cavaliers with 25 points while Parker Green had 10, Keegan Stewart five, Aiden Fisher and Bryson Olson each had four points and Caden Shelton added two points.

Roncalli made 18 of 34 field goals for 53 percent, eight of 14 free throws for 57 percent, and 13 turnovers and 15 team fouls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 46-36, leading at the quarter stops at 13-5, 23-10 and 36-14.

Taylor Diegel led the Tigers with 14 points while Kassen Keough had nine, Gage Sippel six, Turner Thompson five, Logan Warrington four, Jayden Schwan and Easton Weber each had three points and Karson Zak had two points.

3-Pointers: Keough 3, Schwan 1, Diegel 3, Thompson 1, Weber 1.

Bryson Olson led Roncalli with six points followed by Jesse Hernandez, Austin Fisher and Quinten Shelton each had five, Finn Anderson had three and Joe Cogley had two points.

Groton Area started off the night with a 41-12 win in the C game, leading at the quarter stops at 13-2, 17-6 and 23-7.

Easton Weber led Groton Area with 13 points followed by Logan Warrington with, Jayden Schwan five, Jace Johnson and T.C. Schuster each had three points, Karson Zak, Keegan Harry and Ryder Schelle had two points apiece and Ethan Kroll had one point as all players scored.

3-Pointers: Johnson 1, Weber 4, Schuster 1.

Finn Anderson led Roncalli with four points while Ian Kramer, Lucas Daggett and Austin Fisher each had two points and Jean Anthony Thomas and Quinten Shelton each had one.

Varsity game sponsors on GDILIVE.COM were 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 and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking.

The junior varsity sponsor was the Groton Chiropractic Clinic while S & S Lumber sponsored the C game.



Colby Dunker came off the bench to get a nice feed under the basket to give Groton Area a 42-31 lead. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Names Released for Meade Co. Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: SD Hwy 79 near Mile marker 120 between Vale and Sturgis, SD

When: 11:22 a.m., Monday, December 18, 2023

Vehicle 1: 2003 Chevrolet Cobalt

Driver 1: Ethan Averill Reasy, a 29 yr. old male from Andover, SD, Fatal injuries

Vehicle 2: 2010 Peterbilt

Driver 2: Vernon Anthony Kuntz, a 56 yr. old male from Dickinson, ND, Minor injuries

Meade County, S.D.- A 29-year-old man died Monday morning in a two vehicle crash in Meade County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2003 Chevrolet Cobalt driven by Ethan A. Reasy, 29, was traveling on SD 79 and crossed the centerline into oncoming traffic near mile marker 120. An approaching 2010 Peterbilt semi driven by Vernon A. Kuntz, 56, tried to avoid collision by braking and steering into a ditch. Reasy's vehicle continued toward the semi until they collided.

Reasy suffered fatal injuries. Seatbelt use is under investigation. Kuntz was wearing a seatbelt.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 6 of 77

There may be beauty in the season, but the reason reaches deep into our hearts!



Seed
Chemical
Fertilizer

Joel Bierman Dylan Vogel
Jordan Steen Kent Webb



THIS
SEASON,
LET HIM BE
BORN INSIDE
YOUR HEART

*Merry Christmas from BK Custom T's & More
bkecustomsd.com*

Groton Area Kindergarten



Emersyn Giedt is the daughter of Heath and Katelyn Giedt of Groton. What Christmas means to me is decorating for Preslees Secret Santa



Claire Erickson is the daughter of Andy and Shari Erickson of Aberdeen. What Christmas means to me is being with my family and getting presents



Lelina Po is the daughter of Day Day Po and Victoria Shwe of Groton. What Christmas means to me is Santa and the elves making toys



Aunna Freeland is the daughter of Sarah Freeland of Houghton. What Christmas means to me is toys and being with family



Grace Oswald is the daughter of Matt and Sam Oswald. What Christmas means to me is decorating the Christmas tree



Cory Paulson is the son of Andy and Kara Paulson of Andover. What Christmas means to me is decorating my tree

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 8 of 77

For we have seen
His star in the East
and have come to
worship Him.



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

Warm wishes from

	New Construction Remodeling Hoop Barns Shops	13379 Sperry Ln, Bath
	Perry Blocker	605/216-2677 prblocker@hotmail.com

**Merry Christmas
from the attorney
that makes a
difference!**



Drew C. Johnson

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Brain development science bolsters calls for quality preschool in South Dakota

By Jackie Hendry
SDPB / For South Dakota News Watch

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of stories on children that Jackie Hendry, producer and host of South Dakota Public Broadcasting's "South Dakota Focus" will write for South Dakota News Watch. Each month, she will preview the show that will air the following week.

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. – Raising a child looks different for every generation. Amy Elliott, chief clinical research officer at Avera Research Institute, understands how quickly new science and research can change ideas that used to be taken for granted. Her research focuses on child health and development.

"For example, drinking during pregnancy," she said. "That's something you don't have to go back too many generations — and that actually may have been something that had been encouraged. Now we know the effects that can have on fetal development, which is why there's the recommendation of no drinking during pregnancy."

In the same way, researchers are uncovering new information about brain development. Even the past five years have uncovered new information, Elliott said.

"We're able to look at the brain, for example, and look at brain development to a much greater degree than we were ever, ever before with those technologies," she explained.

That means researchers have a clearer picture of what parts of the brain develop, when they develop, and how rapidly. Elliott said when a child is born, its brain is about the fourth the size it will be when the child is an adult. By the child's first birthday, the brain will grow to half its eventual size.



Preschool students at the YMCA of Rapid City, S.D., use pieces of wood to create letters of the alphabet. (Photo: Krystal Schoenbauer / South Dakota

Public Broadcasting)



Amy Elliott is the chief clinical research officer for Avera Research Institute in Sioux Falls, S.D. She explained the recent developments in brain research to SDPB's Jackie Hendry. (Photo: Krystal Schoen-

bauer / South Dakota Public Broadcasting)

"Some have even said in those first three months, the brain is increasing every day at almost a 1% capacity — every day," said Elliott. "Millions of connections being formed in a very short amount of time, much more rapid development than is seen at any other time period in life. So the first year of life and then the first five years are really what we would refer to as very critical time periods for brain development."

For instance, research has determined that the foundations for language development are set in a child's brain by age 3.

"Now you can definitely learn language after that, but it's a lot more difficult," Elliott said. "We know there's a critical time period where different sounds — because different languages have different sounds — are getting integrated within and becoming part of how that brain is wired."

Lifelong learning ability established in early childhood

Elliott expects the next decade of research to demonstrate similar findings for reading, math and social development in children. For now, brain

research is catching up with what early childhood educators have known for decades: the earliest years of a child's life can set the tone for lifelong learning outcomes.

State law requires kids are in school by age 6, though families have the option to start kindergarten if their child is 5 by Sept. 1 of the school year. Families might harness the potential of those earlier years through preschool, but South Dakota does not have a state-run or funded preschool program. Aside from federally funded programs like Head Start, privately run early childhood learning programs can vary dramatically in quality.

Preschool standards 'really random in South Dakota'

Janessa Bixel is executive director of the South Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children. It's a statewide chapter of a national professional organization that provides resources for early childhood educators, families and communities. She has more than 20 years of experience in early childhood education, including in Head Start programs in various states.

"When you're in Alaska or Kansas or New Hampshire or South Dakota — which are some of the places I've lived — those Head Start standards are the same, basically, in all of those states," she said. "When you get outside of Head Start, it's really random in South Dakota. You can open a preschool and you don't even have to be regulated in any way in the state."

In fact, South Dakota is one of a handful of states in the country without a state-funded program or official standards to measure the quality of private programs. There have been some efforts from groups like the School Administrators of South Dakota to create early learning guides, but they don't hold the weight of regulatory standards.

There are no state-required credentials for preschool teachers either.

Part of Bixel's work includes expanding opportunities for early learning educators in a state where public policy hasn't caught up with the importance research puts on the field.

"I would love to see an apprenticeship program started in South Dakota for early childhood educators," she said. "There are some states doing that right now and it seems like it could be an untapped area to support this field and really help to elevate it as a profession because it truly is a profession. I mean,

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 11 of 77

we're working with young children when the most brain development happens. So why shouldn't it be required that you need to understand how to work with young children at that time?"

Preschoolers 'need more than just love'

Nicole Weiss believes preschool providers owe families the highest-possible quality care for their children. She's the early learning director for the YMCA of Rapid City. While the state doesn't mandate credentials to teach preschool, her program does.

"Preschool's an interesting time in a kiddo's life because they need more than just love and freedom to roam and learn," she said. "They also don't need to be sitting down with worksheets and having their whole day scheduled out. It takes some education to understand that."

All teachers in Weiss' department must join with at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, a one-year degree.

"They have to have a minimum of that to be a lead teacher in our program," said Weiss.

However, even that minimum education requirement adds a hurdle to ongoing staffing issues.

"There's a lot of people who think because they have worked in child care that, 'I'm a preschool teacher now, I can go do this or that,' and they don't understand the lesson planning and the assessments and the conferences."

The state Department of Social Services contracts with a handful of organizations around the state that offer the CDA credential. One of those is a Rapid City nonprofit called Early Childhood Connections.

"The state of South Dakota supports CDA," said Autumn Gregory, executive director. "Right now they pay for the coursework, they pay for the scholarship, for the assessment and credentialing, and so they are really trying to promote professional development."

But without a state requirement, it's up to private entities to decide what level of training their staff needs.

Gregory's organization also administers a program called Starting Strong, a scholarship program funded by the John T. Vucurevich Foundation to allow disadvantaged families the opportunity to afford preschool. The benefits ripple beyond children in the Starting Strong program, she said.

"That kindergarten teacher is going to teach to the child with the most needs because that's where all that attention needs to go," Gregory said. "If those children can come in ready to learn, then it benefits all the children in that kindergarten class."

Elliott, Avera's chief clinical research officer, believes the data show the same benefits to preschool that educators have experienced firsthand.

"Pre-K teaches kids so many things, and sometimes I think the things that are taught — the most important — are on the behavioral side," she said. "There shouldn't be pressure that kids have to be able to read or do those things before school. But it's good for them to be exposed to letters and to colors and to sounds and to like looking at books."

Because research on child development is evolving so rapidly, Elliott understands it can take time for the public — and policy — to catch up. She returns to the example of drinking during pregnancy.

"People will say, 'Well, I think things turned out just fine.' The one thing I would like to say is, that's what science is supposed to do for us. It's supposed to help us raise the next generation better than the



"I would love to see an apprenticeship program started in South Dakota for early childhood educators. I mean, we're working with young children when the most brain development happens."

Janessa Bixel, executive director of the South Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children

Broton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 12 of 77



Nicole Weiss is the Early Learning Director for the YMCA of Rapid City, S.D. All preschool teachers in her department are required to have at least a Child Development Associate credential. (Photo: Krystal Schoenbauer / South Dakota

Public Broadcasting)

previous one.”

How to watch 'South Dakota Focus'

The next episode of “South Dakota Focus” airs on Thursday, Dec. 28, at 8 p.m. Central time / 7 p.m. Mountain time. It can be viewed on SDPB-TV 1, Facebook, YouTube and SD.net.

The episode includes:

Why the John T. Vucurevich Foundation is funding multiple programs to increase access to early childhood education in Rapid City

A visit to the Fischback Center lab preschool on the South Dakota State University campus in Brookings

How a preschool partnership helped refugee children in Huron succeed in school



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

CO2 pipeline debate has resulted in divisions among ethanol proponents

Some call the project crucial, others call that a lie

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 21, 2023 4:31 PM

A carbon pipeline project aimed at reducing heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions from the Midwest ethanol industry is irritating some within that very industry.

Summit Carbon Solutions aims to transport carbon dioxide from ethanol plants to an underground storage site in North Dakota. Its CEO, Lee Blank, recently emphasized the importance of the pipeline for the ethanol industry in an interview with South Dakota Searchlight.

"Electric vehicles are continuing to grow," he said. "They are, and maybe not here, but in cities. Our gas consumption is going down. So how do we open up other markets so ethanol consumption goes up?"

Iowa-based Summit wants to collect carbon dioxide emissions from 32 ethanol plants, including some in South Dakota. Doing so would make the project eligible for federal tax credits that incentivize greenhouse gas sequestration and could create access to new markets. Those include states demanding cleaner ethanol, and new ventures like ethanol-based jet fuel.

Company spokesperson Sabrina Zenor said not having the pipeline would break the Midwest ethanol industry. Some opponents are anti-ethanol, she said.

The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission denied Summit a building permit earlier this year, citing violations of county setback ordinances. Summit plans to resubmit an application.

Meanwhile, some corn farmers who have long supported the ethanol industry were alarmed by Summit's use of eminent domain to acquire private land for the pipeline, against the will of about 160 South Dakota landowners. That happened before the pipeline project's permit hearing with state regulators.

South Dakota Farmers Union President Doug Sombke said members feel betrayed. They supported the growth of the ethanol industry, only to face what they perceived as an infringement on their property rights.

"You, the farmers, made this industry," Sombke said during a panel discussion on property rights at the organization's 108th annual convention in Huron in November.

Sombke is furious over Summit's allegation that pipeline opponents are anti-ethanol.

"There is nobody in this state that's worked harder for ethanol than me or this organization," he said. "You should all be damn proud of that."

There are other ways to ensure ethanol has a steady future, Sombke said, like blending more of it into the nation's fuel supply. Plus, he said using sustainable agricultural practices that sequester more carbon on land that's used to grow corn for ethanol would accomplish the same goal.

Ed Fischbach farms corn in Spink County and sells it to the ethanol industry. Today he leads South Dakotans First, a coalition of landowners and others opposed to the pipeline.

"Never in my wildest dreams, with all we've done for ethanol and these companies, did I think they were going to come back and ask me to give up my land, and you to give up your land so that they could improve their bottom line," Fischbach said at the Farmer's Union Convention.

He said the coalition of opponents will support legislation during the upcoming legislative session that would ban the use of eminent domain for carbon pipelines. Similar legislation failed last winter.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 14 of 77

State ag politicians call it vital

Pipeline proponents in the state's agriculture industry recently formed a coalition of their own.

The group wants to "raise public awareness about the potential negative impacts on the state and its rural communities if we allow a small minority of objectors to continue blocking proposals like the carbon pipeline project," according to a press release from the group, called Protect South Dakota's Future.

Summit last reported having access agreements with enough landowners to give the company access to about 70% of the land required to complete the project.

The coalition's site says a \$1.2 billion investment, \$99 million in local tax revenue during construction, and \$53 million in annual expenditures are on the line.

The coalition's board is made up of six influential ag development voices.

"Whether you agree or disagree with carbon sequestration, it is here, it is not going away, and will determine market access moving forward indefinitely," Walt Bones, former South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture and Noem's 2022 Ag Ambassador said in the press release.

Lake Preston area farmer, national soybean lobbyist, and Noem's 2019 Ag Ambassador Paul Casper called the project vital to the industry's future.

"We've been working to create value-added ag opportunities in the state for more than 25 years and we know the carbon pipeline is more than just an infrastructure project; it's a lifeline for our state's economic and agricultural future," Casper said in the release.

Protect South Dakota's Future wasn't the only group of politically connected proponents to recently join the conversation.

South Dakota Ag Alliance, co-founded by Rob Skjonsberg and Jason Glodt, prominent political figures in the state, will advocate for policies to complete the pipeline while trying to ensure opponent landowners do not feel cheated.

DC lobbyists: "Ethanol going nowhere"

Meanwhile, some D.C. ethanol lobbyists are irritated by Summit's claim that the industry faces a bleak future without its carbon-capture project.

"The ethanol industry isn't going anywhere," said David Hallberg, an ethanol lobbyist and founder of the Renewable Fuels Association. "They should stop saying that."

Fellow ethanol lobbyist Doug Durante said the industry is aware of how electric vehicles and greater fuel efficiency will eat into demand for ethanol, but it has another pathway for keeping demand up.

"If the pipeline can add some value, that's great, but we've also got an opportunity right now," Durante said. "And it's higher blends."

Hallberg agreed.

Like Doug Sombke, Durante and Hallberg said more ethanol in the nation's fuel supply would maintain its demand, even if liquid fuel consumption was halved.

"We have an immediate market opportunity that requires no federal subsidies," Hallberg said.

All three leaders want to see E30 (30% ethanol, 70% gasoline) at as many gas pumps as there are currently pumping E15 (15% ethanol, 85% gasoline).

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

Nursing home complaints up 38% since last year

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 21, 2023 2:19 PM

Complaints against South Dakota nursing homes are the highest they've been in at least eight years. The state Department of Health oversees 97 long-term care facilities, according to its website, It fielded 54 complaints as of Dec. 19 – a 38% increase over 2022 and three times higher than 2021 and 2020, when the state received 18 complaints each year.

Both 2021 and 2020 saw COVID lockdowns at long-term care facilities across the state and nation, keeping family members from facilities and residents.

Most complaints in 2023 concern quality of life and care, neglect and abuse, and nursing services. In just over two-thirds of the cases, inspections found no violations.

Of the complaints deemed credible, many involved a lack of adequate care and documentation for residents after a fall or change in health condition.

Federal and state law require long-term care facilities create a "plan of correction" if inspectors find a deficiency.

One facility, Avantara Redfield, had a broken bathtub for months and wasn't washing residents often enough, leaving some without a shower for two or three weeks. The nursing home fixed the bathtub within a month of the complaint investigation, educated its staff about hygiene and conducted an audit of bathing schedules.

A resident who contracted pneumonia and fell ill at another facility, Avantara Norton, saw a doctor, but staff didn't notify his family of his condition until after his death.

Nearly a third of all complaints in 2023 were lodged against Avantara facilities. Avantara operates 17 of the state's 97 nursing homes. Good Samaritan operates the second-most facilities in South Dakota, with 16 nursing homes (13% of 2023 complaints), and Avera operates 10 (4% of 2023 complaints).

The number of complaints in 2023 is higher than the pre-pandemic average. Complaints between 2015 and 2019 averaged 32 per year, with a high of 49 in 2017.

The nursing home worker shortage in South Dakota and across the country has been well documented, with many facilities relying on traveling nurses to fill roles.

Seven nursing homes announced they were closing in 2022, often citing costs, low Medicaid reimbursement rates and workforce shortages as reasons. In 2023, only one announced a closure so far, although three closed in 2023 after previously announcing their intentions to close.

Bennett County Nursing Home closed in October. The Martin-based facility lost over \$1.3 million in the first half of 2023, CEO and Bennett County Hospital Administrator Michael Christensen wrote in an open letter to The Lakota Times.

The nursing home had a staff turnover rate of 94.4%. The average state nursing home staff turnover rate in South Dakota is 52.9%. The nursing home relied heavily on costly travel nurses, with only a few local nurses working at the facility. The letter also said nursing homes like Bennett County have seen expenses rise 1,064% since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Legislature approved an increase to a 100% Medicaid cost reimbursement rate this year for community support providers that rely on government funding, such as nursing homes. That's led to a 25% increase in nursing home funding, according to state officials.

The Legislature also formed an interim committee to study long term care in the state and recommend legislation to address the issue this coming January. Recommendations that would affect nursing homes include establishing a one-time \$5 million technology grant program, creating a reimbursement program to incentivize nursing home mergers and creating a waiver to let long-term care facilities double ast adult day cares.

Gov. Kristi Noem proposed a 4% increase in state funding to health care providers next year in her budget address earlier this month.

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

The naughty and the nice: Home-state holiday decor bedecks congressional offices

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 21, 2023 5:14 PM

WASHINGTON — Congress members and office neighbors on the second floor of the Longworth House Office Building showcased their holiday spirit this season in an unofficial decorating contest.

The naughty and nice decorations spotlighted the characteristics and economies of congressional districts across the United States and revealed the taste in decor among both members and their staffs.

While some stayed close to traditional blue-and-yellow menorahs or Christmas trees adorned with glittering bulbs, others strayed into heated political territory, or just simply displayed their Star Wars obsession.

A sign outside Rep. Derek Kilmer's office read "Join the nice cosponsor list this holiday season!"

Giant lightsabers criss-crossed the Washington Democrat's door and paper ornaments hung describing each of the 18 bills he's introduced this year alongside cartoons of "Jedi Derek Kilmer."

Iowa's Rep. Zach Nunn leaned hard into his state's proud farming culture and exhibited a clever Christmas twist on Grant Wood's 1930 "American Gothic" painting. A little bright-pink light-up pig also sits on a pile of presents just outside the Iowa Republican's door.

"At any one time, there are approximately 24 million pigs being raised in Iowa," according to the Iowa Pork Producers Association.

Rep. Jennifer Wexton played on a holiday cartoon classic and a popular Virginia export. Charlie Brown and the Peanuts crew make an appearance beside the Democrat's office door. Tiny clothespins hanging from twine hold packets of the commonwealth's famous salty snacks, and a sign reads "All I want for Christmas is Virginia Peanuts..."

Not far down the hallway, an impossible-to-miss inflatable cow stands near a milking bench wrapped in red festive reindeer paper just to the left of Wisconsin GOP Rep. Mike Gallagher's door. A bulletin board above the cow covered in Green Bay Packers logos featured what can be described as the 12 days of Wisconsin Christmas. "Four Lombardi Trophies," "Nine Rotaries a-Milking," "Twelve sturgeon swimming" ... you get the idea.

Gallagher's office picked up the victory in the unsanctioned competition. The Wisconsin congressman's office helped organize the holiday fun.

"To stir up some Christmas cheer around the halls of Congress, I challenged everyone on the second floor of Longworth to a Christmas decorating competition and I have to admit, I was very impressed by the level of participation this year," Gallagher said in a statement to States Newsroom Wednesday.

"But let's be serious, nothing could come close to beating the spectacular Northeast Wisconsin Christmas wonderland that my office created. From Packers ornaments to a Miller lite chair to the 12 days of a Northeast Wisconsin Christmas, we had the competition won from the start," Gallagher concluded.

"Rigged!" cried a rival House aide about Gallagher's triumph.

"Blowups take no work! We built ours from scratch," said the House aide, who initially was not speaking publicly on the matter.

He quickly changed course and released his identity as Matthew Koos, chief of staff for Rep. Chris Deluzio. "I stand by that (comment)," he said.

The holiday trinkets at freshman Pennsylvania Democrat Deluzio's door are candy for the eyes of Western Pennsylvanians — a black-and-gold stuffed Pittsburgh Penguin, a yellow construction paper bridge and a Christmas tree made of stacked Iron City beer cans.

(Full disclosure: Your States Newsroom correspondent is a Western Pennsylvania native.)

Aluminum cans also made an appearance in the display outside GOP Rep. Mike Collins' office.

A stack of beer cans adorned with a green garland stood next to a Santa holding a "naughty list" featuring Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser and her administration's parking enforcement, the Chinese Communist Party, and "continuing resolutions," in reference to temporary government funding packages.

A large bag of coal with a tag reading "To Hamas" sat beneath Collins' tree, alongside some wrapped

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 17 of 77

gifts from China's President Xi Jinping, including one addressed to "Quid Pro Joe," a Republican dig at President Joe Biden.

Adding to the Georgia congressman's festive arrangement was a cardboard cutout of pop singer Mariah Carey in a Santa outfit with the words "All I want for Christmas is 12 Appropriations bills!" written above her head.

A far cry from that display, freshman Arizona GOP Rep. Eli Crane used immigration at the U.S. Southern border as his theme.

A candy-cane-patterned border gate blocked his door with green-and-red signs reading "Port of Entry" and "Have Documents Ready." A separate office entrance cautioned: "Border Patrol Elves Only."

On the other side of the Capitol, U.S. senators stayed beyond their scheduled holiday recess to attempt negotiations attaching U.S. immigration policy changes to the president's request for Ukraine aid. A deal is not expected until 2024 and senators left Wednesday for the holiday recess.

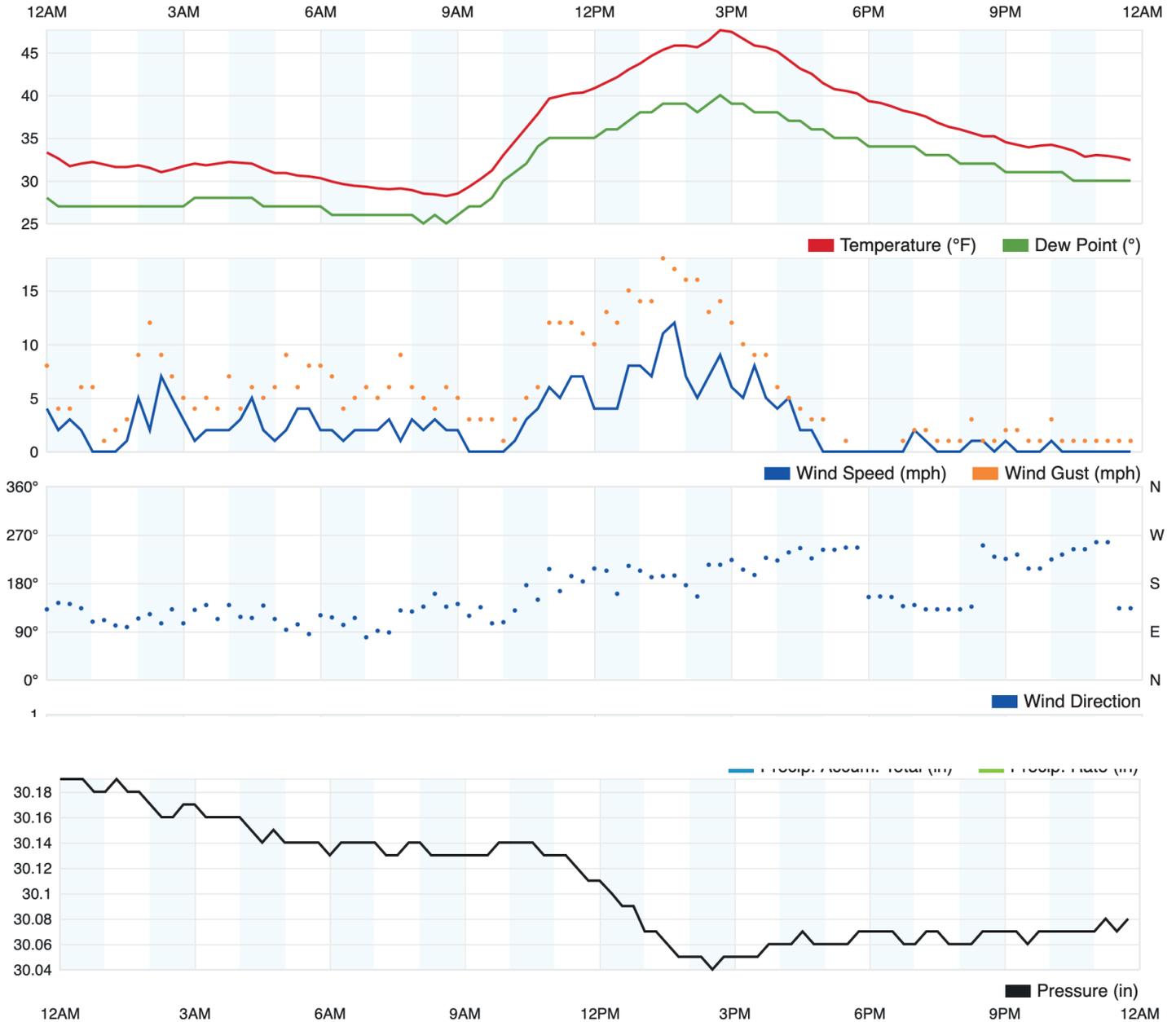
Crane's fellow Arizona colleague, Democratic Rep. Raúl Grijalva, adorned his hallway section with papel picado, a traditional perforated paper garland popular in Mexico and other former Spanish colonies. A nearby tall artificial cactus stood wrapped in white lights and topped with a red cowboy hat.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 18 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 19 of 77

Fri Dec 22	Sat Dec 23	Sun Dec 24	Mon Dec 25	Tue Dec 26	Wed Dec 27	Thu Dec 28
45° F 29° F	51° F 32° F	36° F 19° F	30° F 20° F	33° F 17° F	34° F 17° F	32° F 17° F
SSW 6 MPH	SSE 13 MPH	NNW 22 MPH 80%	N 14 MPH 40%	N 10 MPH 40%	WNW 14 MPH	NNW 8 MPH

Dry and Above Average Temps Until Sunday



<u>Tonight</u>	<u>Friday</u>	<u>Saturday</u>	<u>Sun/Mon</u>
23-30°	41-55° Warmest around and west of the Missouri River	40s to mid 50s Warmest across south central SD	Winter system brings rain followed by a wintry mix

Wintry Mix



Stay tuned to the latest forecast at [weather.gov/aberdeen](https://www.weather.gov/aberdeen) if you have travel plans Sunday into early next week.

Warm and dry conditions will continue through Saturday. Stay tuned to the latest forecast if you have travel plans Sunday into Tuesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 20 of 77



Winter System Ahead

December 21, 2023
3:44 PM

Saturday Night through Tuesday



Timeline:
Light rain Saturday night to transition to a wintry mix of rain, freezing rain, and/or snow Sunday into Tuesday.



What We Don't Know:
Significant differences remain in the track of the storm, resulting in **low confidence in the timing, location, amount, timing of precipitation, and type.**



What You Can Do:
Continue to monitor the latest forecast at weather.gov/aberdeen. Now is the time to prepare a winter supply kit for your vehicle.

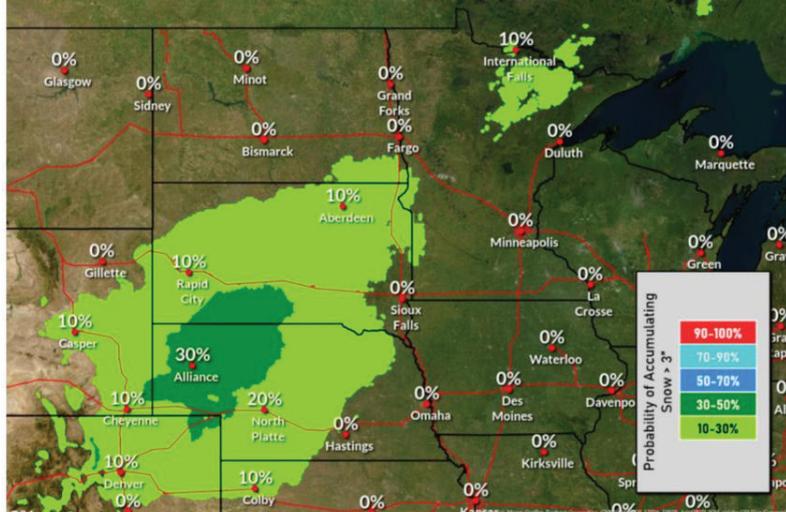
Minor Impacts (20-50% chance)

Minor impacts include a few inconveniences to daily life, including **winter driving conditions.**

WPC Day 4 Winter Weather Outlook

Valid Mon 06:00AM through Tue 06:00AM CST

Weather Prediction Center
Washington, DC
Issued Dec 21, 2023 1:36 PM EST



The above graphic depicts the probability of snow accumulation over 3 inches, but does not include rain or freezing rain chances.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

There is still a lot of uncertainty in the forecast, however start planning for winter driving conditions late Saturday night through Tuesday.



Precipitation Types Sunday-Monday

December 21, 2023
3:49 PM

Probabilities exist for rain, freezing rain and snow

Holiday Travel Impacts



Conditions may change rapidly. Plan ahead! Check the forecast. Give yourself extra time.



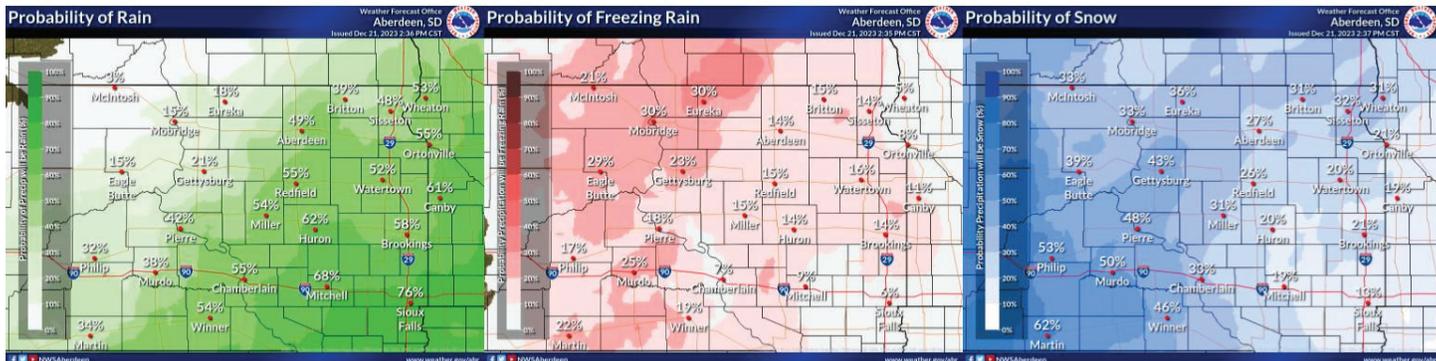
Precip will start as rain for much of the region, but highest (50-60%) chances for rain to persist as the dominant precipitation type through the event is east of the James River.



Freezing rain chances remain low through the event (10-30%) with highest chances currently over north central SD. Very little accumulation expected, but even a light glaze can make roads hazardous!



Rain will turn to snow from west to east with snowfall chances increasing to 40%-50% by Sunday evening. Generally, less than 3 inches of snow is expected, with highest amounts over the south central SD/I90 corridor.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 21 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 48 °F at 2:56 PM

Low Temp: 28 °F at 8:39 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 1:26 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 2020

Record Low: -28 in 1990

Average High: 26

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.42

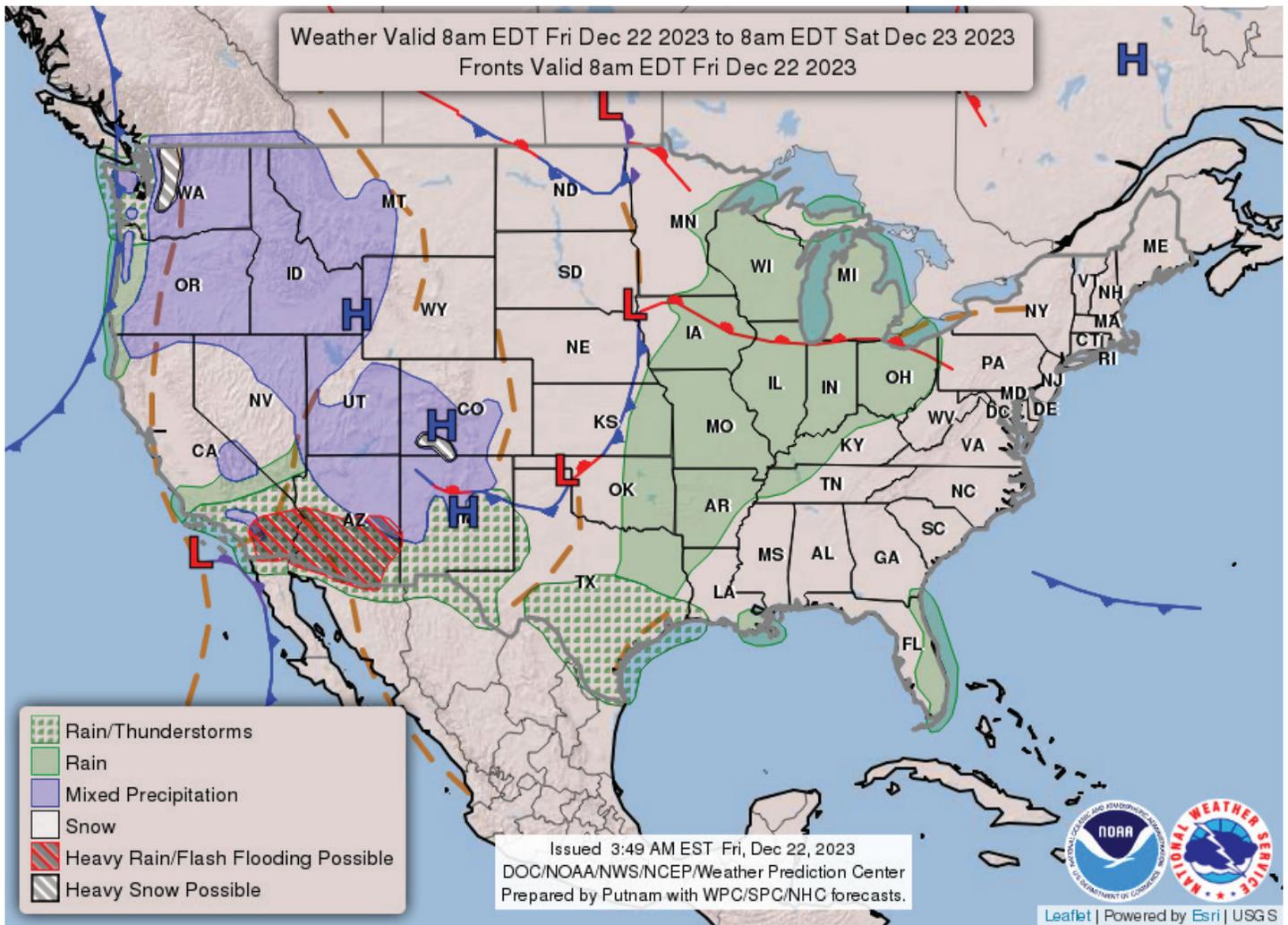
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.63

Precip Year to Date: 23.17

Sunset Tonight: 4:54:03 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08:19 am



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 22 of 77

Today in Weather History

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds, combined with air temperatures below zero, created wind chills from -40 to -65 degrees over west-central Minnesota early in the day on the 22nd. Air temperatures were generally in the -20 to -25 degree range, with afternoon highs around 15 below zero.

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds gusted to 35 miles per hour and caused near-whiteout conditions over a wide area of southwest and west-central Minnesota during the late afternoon on the 21st into the early morning of the 22nd. Several car accidents ensued. A 30-year old man was killed when he lost control of his truck and slid into a ditch in the near-blizzard conditions.

1839 - The second of triple December storms hit the northeastern U.S. The storm produced 25 inches of snow at Gettysburg, PA, and gales in New England, but only produced light snow along the coast. (David Ludlum)

1961 - Holiday travel was paralyzed over extreme northeastern Kansas, and adjacent parts of Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska. The storm produced 5 to 15 inches of snow, with drifts up to ten feet high. (22nd-23rd) (The Weather Channel)

1983 - On the first day of winter 75 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, with twelve of those cities reporting record low temperatures for the month as a whole. The mercury plunged to 51 degrees below zero at Wisdom MT, and Waco TX set an all-time record low a reading of 12 above zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - The first day of winter was a relatively tranquil one for much of the nation, but heralded a winter storm in the Central Rockies. The storm produced 40 inches of snow at the top of the Pomerelle Ski Resort, south of Burley ID, the heaviest snow of record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong winds prevailed in the foothills of Wyoming and Colorado. Winds gusted to 123 mph southwest of Fort Collins CO, and reached 141 mph at the summit of Mount Evans. An ice storm paralyzed parts of Upper Michigan during the day. The freezing rain left roads around Marquette MI blocked by cars and semi-trucks. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: The most significant cold spell of the century for the Deep South occurred from the 22 to the 26. New Orleans experienced 64 consecutive hours at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit and a total of 81 out of 82 hours below freezing. A total of 15 hours was below 15 degrees with the lowest reading of 11 degrees on the morning of the 23rd. A low temperature of 8 degrees was recorded at Baton Rouge. Snow and sleet paralyzed transportation systems where as much as two to four inches of snow accumulated in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. Snow and ice-covered the ground in New Orleans. The most significant impact was the breaking of water pipes in homes and businesses. Over 100 fires resulted in the New Orleans area within 24 hours due to a loss of water pressure and improperly utilized heating sources. Ice formed over shallow lakes and waterways where commercial fishing took heavy losses. Five weather-related deaths occurred in the service area during this rare Arctic outbreak.

2002: Heavy rains prompted flooding in the mountain city of Teresopolis, located about 90 km north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. A mudslide was responsible for 9 deaths and 50 injuries.

2004: Tremendous snows occurred in the Ohio Valley. The following cities set new records for their most significant snowstorm ever: Evansville, Indiana 22.3 inches, Dayton, Ohio 16.4 inches, and Paducah, Kentucky 14.2 inches. Other big snowfall totals were 31 inches at Liberty, Indiana, 28 inches at Buena Vista, Indiana, 24 inches at Greenville, Ohio, and 23 inches at Mansfield, Ohio.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 23 of 77

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

PROPHESIES FROM ISAIAH

"Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel – God with us!

"The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will come to them.
For a child will be born to us, a
son given to us;
And the government will rest on
His shoulders!

And His name will be called:
Wonderful!
Counselor!
Mighty God!
Eternal Father!
Prince of Peace!

There will be no end to the increase
of His government or of His peace.

"The spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding.
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and
the fear of the Lord."

Prayer: Thank You, God, for keeping Your word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.
Scripture For Today: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:2-3



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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 24 of 77

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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 25 of 77

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 26 of 77



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.19.23

17 26 50 58 61 11

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$57,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 26 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

4 14 15 17 28 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 41 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.21.23

8 10 20 21 47 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

25 26 30 31 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$103,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 56 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

22 25 28 30 53 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 25 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.20.23

27 35 41 56 60 16

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$620,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 25 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 27 of 77

News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 54, Yankton 45
Avon 73, Colome 63
Bon Homme 46, Alcester-Hudson 42
Bowman County, N.D. 80, Harding County 34
Brookings 53, Douglas 41
Canistota 67, Gayville-Volin High School 37
DeSmet 61, Iroquois-Lake Preston 25
Deuel 53, Britton-Hecla 41, OT
Ethan 48, Wagner 45
Glen Ullin, N.D. 57, Lemmon High School 56
Groton Area 61, Aberdeen Roncalli 50
Hamlin 63, Milbank 43
Hanson 58, Lyman 51
Madison 61, Baltic 42
Miller 67, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 63
Philip 26, Kadoka Area 12
Rapid City Stevens 66, Spearfish 30
Sioux Falls Washington 61, Huron 45
Sisseton 60, Richland, N.D. 42
St. Thomas More 63, Watertown 43
Sully Buttes 62, Wolsey-Wessington 61
Warner 60, Florence-Henry 50
Waverly-South Shore 67, Northwestern 47
Wessington Springs 72, Sunshine Bible Academy 33
Winner 23, Parkston 17

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 57, Yankton 53, OT
Avon 66, Colome 14
Belle Fourche 45, Watertown 44
Bon Homme 42, Alcester-Hudson 35
Brookings 55, Douglas 42
Centerville 42, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 32
Deuel 32, Britton-Hecla 30
Edgemont 36, Bison 34
Estelline-Hendricks 61, Wilmot 34
Ethan 63, Wagner 49
Faith 56, Dupree 32
Faulkton 47, Highmore-Harrold 46
Freeman 49, Colman-Egan 40
Freeman Academy-Marion 20, Bridgewater-Emery 9
Gayville-Volin High School 45, Canistota 38
Hamlin 39, Milbank 32

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 28 of 77

Iroquois-Lake Preston 54, DeSmet 44
Kadoka Area 53, Philip 37
Lemmon High School 61, Glen Ullin, N.D. 32
Lyman 69, Lower Brule 33
Miller 56, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 20
Northwestern 46, Waverly-South Shore 15
Parkston 61, Winner 49
Sioux Falls Washington 61, Huron 45
Spearfish 49, Rapid City Stevens 48
Sully Buttes 46, Wolsey-Wessington 41
Tea Area 58, Brandon Valley 51
Wall 61, New Underwood 25
Wessington Springs 47, Sunshine Bible Academy 19

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

McKinney scores 20 as San Diego takes down South Dakota 69-66

By The Associated Press undefined

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Wayne McKinney III had 20 points in San Diego's 69-66 win over South Dakota on Thursday.

McKinney had five rebounds for the Toreros (9-4). PJ Hayes scored 14 points while shooting 5 for 9, including 4 for 6 from beyond the arc. Jimmy Oladokun Jr. was 5 of 9 shooting and 2 of 6 from the free throw line to finish with 12 points.

San Diego led by six points before South Dakota's Paul Bruns hit a 3-pointer with one second remaining.

Bruns finished with 26 points for the Coyotes (7-6). South Dakota also got 14 points, 11 rebounds and six assists from Bostyn Holt. Kaleb Stewart finished with 12 points.

Doumbia scores 17 as Norfolk State takes down South Dakota State 84-65

EL PASO, Texas (AP) — Jack Doumbia had 17 points in Norfolk State's 84-65 win over South Dakota State on Thursday night in the Sun Bowl Invitational.

Doumbia finished 7 of 11 from the field for the Spartans (9-6). George Beale scored 14 points while going 5 of 7 (4 for 5 from 3-point range). Jamarii Thomas and Allen Bertrand both added 13 points.

Kalen Garry led the way for the Jackrabbits (6-7) with 17 points. Zeke Mayo added 11 points for South Dakota State. Nate Barnhart also had 10 points and two steals.

Ronsieke's 19 points, 7 blocks help No. 21 Creighton women edge Jackrabbits 58-46

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Emma Ronsiek scored 19 points and blocked a career-high seven shots, which tied a school record, and No. 21 Creighton eased past South Dakota State 58-46 on Thursday night.

Morgan Maly added 13 points for the Bluejays (8-2), who shot 23 of 61.

Brooklyn Meyer had 12 points to lead the Jackrabbits (9-5) and Tori Nelson 10.

Ronsiek hit a 3-pointer to start a 15-0 run, and contributed a total of nine points that turned a 23-14 deficit into a 29-23 lead at halftime.

It was the second-straight loss to a ranked team for SDSU, which won 29 games last year and won a first-round game in the NCAA Tournament. Four of five losses are to ranked teams, the fifth being a two-point loss at Wisconsin. The other losses were South Carolina, Washington State and Gonzaga.

The Jackrabbits missed their last six shots of the second-quarter and the drought continued for 10 minutes (0-for-11 shooting) going into the third quarter.

South Dakota State ended up 2 of 10 with seven turnovers in the third quarter and Creighton closed with a 10-2 to take a 44-30 lead into the fourth quarter. The lead stayed in double figures the rest of the way.

Creighton had 19 assists on 23 baskets and South Dakota State had 16 on 21 field goals. The teams were a combined 6 of 8 from the foul line.

The Bluejays return to Big East play with a home game against St. John's on Dec. 30.

3 foreign nationals are among the wounded in a Prague university shooting that saw 14 killed

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — Three foreign nationals were among 25 wounded after a student opened fire at a university in the Czech capital, Prague, killing 14 people, authorities said Friday. The mass shooting was one of the Czech Republic's worst attacks in recent years.

Minister Vit Rakusan said police in Prague worked overnight and 13 of those killed have been identified. He also said three of those wounded were foreigners — two from Saudi Arabia and one from the Netherlands.

The bloodshed took place on Thursday at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, where the 24-year-old shooter was a student, Prague Police Chief Martin Vondrasek said. The gunman also died, authorities said. His name has not been released.

Authorities warned that the death toll could rise.

Early Friday, with the scene of the shooting still sealed off by the police, people could be seen lighting candles to mourn the victims at an impromptu vigil by the university headquarters.

Police said Friday they have boosted security at schools and other "soft targets" — usually public facilities that are difficult to secure — in a preventive measure. University rectors also said they would work with police experts on more preventive measures to increase security around campus.

Police have so far given no details about the victims or a possible motive for the shooting at the building located near the Vltava River in Jan Palach Square. Rakusan said Thursday that investigators didn't suspect a link to any extremist ideology or groups.

Officials said they believed he had no accomplice.

Vondrasek, the police chief, said they believe the gunman killed his father earlier on Thursday in his hometown of Hostoun, just west of Prague, and that he had also been planning to kill himself. He also said the gunman was suspected of killing a man and his 2-month-old daughter on Dec. 15, in Prague.

The chief described the shooter as an excellent student with no criminal record. He said the gunman suffered "devastating injuries" but it was not clear if he killed himself or was shot and killed by the police in an exchange of fire.

Police said the shooter had legally owned several guns — based on his home search — and that he was heavily armed during the attack.

Charles University issued a statement earlier mourning "the loss of life."

Leaders from many countries, including the United States, and the U.N Secretary-General conveyed their condolences.

The Czech government declared Saturday a national day of mourning to honor the victims.

Previously, the nation's worst mass shooting was in 2015, when a gunman opened fire in the southeastern town of Uhersky Brod, killing eight before fatally shooting himself.

The building where the shooting took place is in Jan Palach Square, a busy tourist area in Prague's Old Town. It is just a few minutes' walk from the picturesque Old Town Square, a major tourist attraction where a popular Christmas market attracts thousands of visitors.

Vatican prosecutor appeals verdict that largely dismantled his fraud case but convicted cardinal

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican's chief prosecutor has appealed a court verdict that largely dismantled his theory of a grand conspiracy to defraud the Holy See of millions of euros but found a cardinal guilty of embezzlement.

Prosecutor Alessandro Diddi filed his appeal earlier this week, days after the three-judge tribunal issued its verdict in a complicated financial trial that aired the Vatican's dirty laundry and tested the peculiar legal system in an absolute monarchy in the center of Europe.

While the headline from Saturday's verdict focused on Cardinal Angelo Becciu's 5 ½-year sentence for embezzlement, the meat of the ruling made clear that the judges rejected most of Diddi's 487-page indictment. Diddi had accused Becciu and nine other people of dozens of counts of fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, extortion, corruption, abuse of office and witness tampering in connection with the Vatican's bungled investment in a London property.

He had sought prison terms of up to 13 years apiece and 400 million euros in restitution. In the end, the tribunal headed by Judge Giuseppe Pignatone acquitted one of the defendants entirely and convicted the others of only a few of the charges they faced, while still ordering them to pay some 366 million euros in restitution.

In the Vatican, as in Italy, prosecutors can appeal verdicts at the same time as defendants. Unlike Italy, both sides must file appeals even before the trial judge issues his written motivations explaining the verdicts, though they can amend them, lawyers said.

In this case, Diddi filed a three-page motion on Dec. 19 asking the Vatican appeals court to convict each defendant for the full set of charges that he originally laid out, even though the tribunal ruled that many of the alleged crimes simply didn't occur.

The main focus of the trial involved the Holy See's 350 million euro investment in converting a former Harrod's warehouse into luxury apartments. Diddi alleged brokers and Vatican Monsignors fleeced the Holy See of tens of millions of euros in fees and commissions, and then extorted the Holy See for 15 million euros (\$16.5 million) to cede control of the property.

Becciu, the first cardinal prosecuted by the Vatican criminal tribunal, was convicted of embezzlement involving the original London investment and two tangent cases. The broker who received the 15 million euro payout to cede control of the building, Gianluigi Torzi, was convicted of extortion and other charges.

The Vatican's longtime money manager, Enrico Crasso, was convicted of three charges of the original 21 he faced. But he too plans to appeal, said his lawyer Luigi Panella.

"Contrary to the propaganda spread, the prosecutor's appellate motion reveals that the tribunal to a large extent didn't uphold the accusatory formula," Panella said in an email.

Yet even for the three charges Crasso was convicted of, the tribunal sentenced him to more than what Diddi had originally sought, "and this somewhat masked the numerous acquittals," Panella said.

The verdict also did some legal gymnastics to make sense of the Vatican's outdated criminal code, based on Italy's 1889 code and the church's canon law, requalifying or combining charges to fit into other ones.

In his appeal, Diddi objected to the tribunal's refusal to let him use a jailhouse interrogation of London broker Torzi, because Torzi never presented himself subsequently to be questioned during the trial. Torzi refused to return to the Vatican after he was jailed for 10 days without charge on a judge's arrest warrant in 2020 during the investigation and was only released after he wrote a memo to prosecutors.

Diddi was able to detain him because of the sweeping powers granted to the prosecution in the Vatican's legal system, as well as extra powers granted to him by four secret decrees Pope Francis signed during the investigation that allowed prosecutors to wiretap and detain suspects without a judge's warrant.

Defense lawyers have cited those decrees as well as the prosecutors' ability to withhold evidence from discovery as proof that their clients couldn't receive a fair trial in Europe's only absolute monarchy where Francis wields supreme legislative, executive and judicial power, and used them in the investigation.

In a post-verdict essay, defense attorney Cataldo Intrieri denounced the “contradictions” of the Vatican legal system and the powers given to prosecutors, which he said resulted in an investigation and trial that were “well distant from those adopted in a state of law.”

“The point is that a fair trial isn’t just the courtroom debate about evidence, which is certainly a fundamental element, but also an ‘equality of arms’ in the law to have access to evidence,” he wrote in the Linkiesta online daily. “The true problem, and we understood this immediately, is the anomalous concentration of power that the pope, the spiritual head of the Holy See and absolute sovereign of the Vatican state, gave to the office of the prosecutors.”

Intriere defended Fabrizio Tirabassi, a former official in the Vatican secretariat of state who received the stiffest verdict, 7 ½ years in prison for convictions of embezzlement, extortion and money laundering. He denied wrongdoing; other defense lawyers as well announced they would appeal.

At least 5 US-funded projects in Gaza are damaged or destroyed, but most are spared

By JULIET LINDERMAN, MARTHA MENDOZA and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

Less than a year before a Hamas attack out of Gaza sparked a war, one of the oldest and largest sports complexes in the Palestinian territories got a much-needed overhaul: brand-new basketball, volleyball and tennis courts, a soccer field, a running track and, for the first time, accessible bathrooms. It was a \$519,000 upgrade, funded by United States taxpayers.

Now, the roof of the Gaza Sports Club appears to be shredded to ribbons, its AstroTurf field crushed under the weight of massive tanks that can be seen in satellite photos obtained by The Associated Press.

Since early October, at least five U.S.-funded community and youth projects in Gaza appear to have been damaged or destroyed, likely by the U.S.-backed Israeli military. However, both in the past and now, Israeli strikes in Gaza appear to have largely spared major infrastructure projects funded by the U.S. government, which has shared their GPS coordinates and other details with the Israeli military for years.

Israel’s offensive is in response to an Oct. 7 Hamas assault in Israel that killed about 1,200 people and took hundreds hostage. Meanwhile, health officials in Hamas-run Gaza say more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, and some 1.9 million have fled their homes.

The United Nations has identified more than 37,000 structures destroyed or damaged in the war so far.

The U.S. has spent more than \$7 billion in development and humanitarian aid in the West Bank and Gaza since establishing a U.S. Agency for International Development mission decades ago, including \$270 million since President Joe Biden ended a Trump-era halt on new funding. For decades, the U.S. also has sent more than \$3 billion a year to support Israel’s military, with a pledge from the Biden administration for more than \$14 billion in 2023.

“It causes a bit of cognitive dissonance, I would say,” said Howard Sumka, who served as the USAID mission director for Gaza and the West Bank between 2006 and 2010. “It’s important for us to keep providing humanitarian assistance and development assistance, and when the military comes and wipes it out, we start all over again. But it is a little bit Sisyphian.”

The AP reviewed U.S. contracts and grants in Gaza and identified more than 30 construction projects built or improved by American taxpayers in the enclave. A review of recent satellite images and analysis from Maxar Technologies finds that, while more than a dozen major U.S.-backed projects appear to be intact, there has been damage to at least five. The AP independently verified Maxar’s assessment by examining its satellite images, as well as images from separate satellites captured by Planet Labs in recent weeks.

The Israeli military would not comment on damage to U.S.-supported structures or provide any information about its targets.

The exact cause of the damage seen in images cannot be determined by photos alone. In some cases, news reports and government sources verified Israeli military attacks near U.S.-backed projects in Gaza.

Israel blames Hamas for the damage, saying the group uses Gaza’s civilian infrastructure as cover to

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 32 of 77

stage attacks, hide its fighters and weapons and build tunnels underground. It also says that hundreds of misfired Hamas rockets aimed at Israel have instead landed inside Gaza.

The AP was unable to reach Palestinian officials in Gaza due to repeated communications disruptions.

The CEO and president of Anera, a U.S. contractor that has built dozens of infrastructure projects in Gaza, including the Sports Club, called its destruction "a terrible tragedy."

"This war is exacting a terrible toll - on human lives and the infrastructure of daily life - that will be felt for decades to come," Sean Carroll said.

In 2011, USAID contributed \$138,000 to help construct the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center, a two-story building complete with a theater, ballroom and lecture hall. Satellite images from October appear to show major damage to the center.

Two different centers serving children with disabilities appear to have been damaged or destroyed in recent days, according to Maxar images from Dec. 20. The Right to Live Society for children with autism and Down syndrome and the Abilities Enhancement Center for Jabalia Rehabilitation Society supporting disabled children were built with \$28,000 and \$177,000 in U.S. funding respectively.

Meanwhile, the Gaza YMCA library, renovated with \$89,000 in U.S. funds, escaped unscathed, while at least one city block next to it was entirely leveled.

The Rosary Sisters School, which serves both Muslim and Christian children, sustained some damage in a recent airstrike. In 2022, \$495,000 in U.S. taxpayer funds built new classrooms with smart boards, air conditioning, an elevator and a brand new floor to make room for a high school.

Maxar satellite images show debris and damage strewn across the school's courtyard, which served as a basketball court and assembly area for hundreds of students.

But the school buildings themselves were still standing as of Nov. 22, as are the majority of significant U.S.-funded projects in Gaza, critical infrastructure in the impoverished region where clean drinking water was scarce even before the current war — including a desalination plant near Deir Al Balah in Gaza that the U.S. spent \$16 million expanding, along with two water reservoirs and pumping facilities at Al Bureij and Al Maghazi, which cost around \$7 million combined.

That's likely the outcome of precise and extensive communication between American officials and the Israeli military, several former USAID directors said. A U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive diplomatic negotiations said that current U.S. government engagement with Israel is focused on protecting civilians, but that details about the locations of U.S.-funded infrastructure are readily available due to longstanding and ongoing coordination.

Dave Harden, who served as USAID mission director from 2013 to 2016, said he worked "extremely closely" with the Israeli officials.

"I would give them the coordinates and tell them not to hit it," he said.

The USAID mission began with small improvements. With a budget of just \$25 million, Christopher Crowley, USAID's first West Bank and Gaza mission director who arrived after the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel signed the Oslo peace accords, oversaw the construction of a playground for Palestinian children.

Basketball courts came next, and soon American taxpayers were paying contractors to refurbish roads and build apartments in Gaza.

Infrastructure projects, particularly related to water access, were something the Palestinian and Israeli governments could agree on, and the United States served as a bridge between them, Crowley said. The idea was to help lay the foundation for a future Palestinian state alongside Israel.

In 1999, the new Mission Director, Larry Garber, had ambitious plans to build a vibrant economy in Gaza while promoting peace in the region. There would be strawberry markets and flower exports, a major desalination plant and water system. At the same time, U.S. taxpayers began paying nearly \$3 billion a year to Israel to support its military efforts.

Less than a year later, the second Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation erupted. There were both airstrikes and ground operations, with tanks and armored vehicles. Garber said he would meet with Israeli military leaders and ask them not to hit the U.S.-backed projects.

"We would literally tell them, here's the geolocations of our various projects, and for the most part in

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 33 of 77

those days we didn't have incidents of destruction of those facilities," he said. However, Garber said he remembers USAID complaining to Israeli authorities after four recently repaired agricultural wells were destroyed in an airstrike in 2003.

A roadside bombing that year struck a U.S. diplomatic convoy, killing three Americans and prompting the U.S. to bar its diplomatic personnel from entering Gaza. USAID has continued to sponsor projects through local contractors.

Plans for a major U.S. water project were shelved when Hamas seized control of Gaza from the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority in 2007, and for years USAID scaled back. The U.S. considers Hamas, an Islamic militant group sworn to Israel's destruction, a terror organization, and has no direct contact with it.

"During my time, we didn't build any big roads, we didn't have any big water projects," said Sumka, who was mission director at the time. "We were forbidden to go in there."

Development work resumed when tensions eased, said Mike Harvey, who was mission director from 2010 to 2013. But the cycle continued: The U.S. would build, advise Israeli authorities the geolocation of the infrastructure and hope for the best. Israel and Hamas have fought five wars and numerous skirmishes since late 2008.

"This reflects the priorities Israelis give to make sure that no U.S.-funded infrastructure is hit," Harvey said, because of the obvious "discomfort from that."

The decision to rebuild USAID-branded projects again and again has also been part of a larger political strategy to turn the Palestinian population against Hamas, mission directors said.

"Humanitarian aid was the driving incentive," Harvey said. But "it's sending a political message to the people of Gaza: We are not their enemy."

It's also about hope. The purpose of the Gaza and West Bank mission was to help stabilize the region and bolster opportunities for Palestinians, ranging from brokering cross-border trade agreements to education programs and infrastructure projects.

But the scale of this particularly violent and deadly war may also influence what USAID is able to accomplish in the future. Nothing gets built in Gaza without agreement from Israel, which may be reluctant to greenlight big infrastructure projects without firm guarantees that no supplies useful for weapons reach Hamas.

"Can you imagine how difficult it will be to rebuild Gaza after the scale of destruction we're seeing this time around?" Harvey said.

Some of the former USAID directors said their hope for Gaza's future is waning.

"There was always some hope that we'd be able to negotiate a solution, as naive as that sounds," Harden said. "I was always a believer. Not anymore, sadly."

Prized pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto agrees with Dodgers on \$325 million deal, according to reports

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Prized free-agent pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto and the Los Angeles Dodgers have agreed to a \$325 million, 12-year contract, according to multiple reports.

Yamamoto is set to join Japanese countryman Shohei Ohtani with the Dodgers, who signed the two-way superstar to a record \$700 million, 10-year deal last week.

The Dodgers did not confirm the agreement with Yamamoto on Thursday night. MLB.com and ESPN were among the outlets citing anonymous sources in reporting the deal.

The New York Yankees and New York Mets were among the many clubs that pursued Yamamoto.

It's the third major pitching coup for the NL West champion Dodgers this offseason. In addition to Ohtani, the team signed right-hander Tyler Glasnow to a \$136.5 million, five-year contract after he was traded from the Tampa Bay Rays to Los Angeles.

Ohtani made a video pitch to Glasnow to join him in Hollywood.

"It was important to Shohei that this wasn't the one move we were going to make," Dodgers President

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 34 of 77

of Baseball Operations Andrew Friedman said at Ohtani's introductory news conference last week.

Yamamoto was 16-6 with a 1.21 ERA this season, striking out 169 and walking 28 in 164 innings. He is 70-29 with a 1.82 ERA in seven seasons with the Orix Buffaloes. Yamamoto struck out a Japan Series-record 14 in a Game 6 win over Hanshin on Nov. 5, throwing a 138-pitch complete game. Orix went on to lose Game 7.

Orix posted the 25-year-old right-hander on Nov. 20 and Major League Baseball teams had until Jan. 4 to sign him.

Yamamoto's deal with the Dodgers would be the largest and longest ever guaranteed to a big league pitcher.

Ohtani was a two-time AL MVP with the Los Angeles Angels before becoming a free agent this offseason and moving to the Dodgers.

Yamamoto pitched his second career no-hitter, the 100th in Japanese big league history, on Sept. 9 for the Buffaloes against the Lotte Marines. The game, watched by MLB executives, extended his scoreless streak to 42 innings.

A two-time Pacific League MVP, Yamamoto also threw a no-hitter against the Seibu Lions on June 18 last year. His fastball averaged 95 mph and topped out at 96.6 mph in Japan's semifinal win over Mexico at the World Baseball Classic in March. He threw 20 fastballs, 19 splitters, six curveballs, six cutters and one slider in a 3 1/3-inning relief outing. Batters swung at 11 of his splitters and missed four.

Following hard-throwing 21-year-old sensation Roki Sasaki, Yamamoto gave up two runs and three hits in 3 1/3 innings with four strikeouts and two walks, allowing Alex Verdugo's RBI double. Yamamoto was charged with a second run when Isaac Paredes hit an RBI single off Atsuki Yuasa.

Under the MLB-NPB agreement, the posting fee will be 20% of the first \$25 million of a major league contract, including earned bonuses and options. The percentage drops to 17.5% of the next \$25 million and 15% of any amount over \$50 million. There would be a supplemental fee of 15% of any earned bonuses, salary escalators and exercised options.

Matthew Stafford's Rams start strong, hold off Saints 30-22 to surge forward in NFC playoff race

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — Sean McVay turned the Los Angeles Rams' already jubilant locker room into a party Thursday night with an announcement: The players are off until Tuesday, allowing them to spend the entire Christmas holiday with their families.

These surprising Rams earned their holiday with a surge of five wins in six games down the stretch, culminating in another impressive victory over a fellow NFC playoff contender.

Matthew Stafford passed for 328 yards and two touchdowns, rookie Puka Nacua had nine catches for a career-high 164 yards and a score, and the Rams surged forward in the race for a postseason berth with a 30-22 victory over the New Orleans Saints.

Kyren Williams rushed for 104 yards and a touchdown, and Demarcus Robinson added 82 yards receiving and another score for the Rams (8-7), who are above .500 for the first time since Week 1 after sitting at 3-6 in their bye week last month.

"We earned the opportunity to be at this point, in my opinion," Stafford said. "We've had stakes since the bye, so I'm just proud of the way these guys have put their head down, gone to work and shown up."

With its second win in five days during a self-described remodeling season, Los Angeles also jumped past Minnesota (7-7) and moved to sixth in the NFC standings in its bid to secure a wild-card playoff spot — and an increasingly possible opening-round showdown with the Detroit Lions, Stafford's team for 12 seasons.

Los Angeles led 30-7 with 12:44 left in the fourth quarter after scoring on six of its first eight possessions, but allowed its opponent to make it close for the second straight game after a late 21-point lead turned into an eight-point win over Washington last weekend.

"It's a short week, so it's tougher to finish," Rams safety John Johnson said. "Maybe the tank hit empty

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 35 of 77

before we wanted it to, but now we can regroup, recharge and get back to it.”

Derek Carr threw TD passes to Juwan Johnson and A.T. Perry in the fourth quarter, with a 2-point conversion trimming the Rams’ lead to eight points with 3:53 to play. But Nacua recovered an onside kick and then got a key first down on a 9-yard jet sweep, and the Rams ran out the clock on their fourth straight home victory.

“We sure make it interesting, don’t we?” McVay asked. “But I love the resilience of this group. They just continue to show up. I thought there was a lot of really good stuff throughout the course of this game.”

Carr passed for 319 yards and hit Rashid Shaheed for an early 45-yard TD for the Saints (7-8), whose two-game winning streak ended with a painfully slow start and 458 yards allowed by their defense, which even coach Dennis Allen acknowledged was confused at times by the aggressive, complex pre-snap motions in McVay’s offense.

Although this loss hurts its chances, New Orleans is still in serious contention for a playoff spot and the NFC South title because it finishes the season with two games against division opponents, starting with Tampa Bay on New Year’s Eve.

“We certainly would have liked to start the game and play better, but we didn’t,” Allen said. “We’re not into the percentages. We let an opportunity go by, and now we have to get ready for the things we can control. We’ll regroup. We’re still in this thing.”

Stafford had yet another outstanding game down the stretch in his 15th NFL season. He has 14 touchdown passes and one interception in the Rams’ last five games, and he has thrown multiple TD passes in five straight games for only the third time in his career.

“He’s extremely difficult,” Allen said about Stafford. “He is playing at an extremely high level. Some of the throws I saw him make were pinpoint on his back foot and under pressure. There were some times we had some good coverage. Look, they were better than us tonight.”

Williams, who missed four games at midseason because of a sprained ankle, still became the Rams’ first 1,000-yard rusher since Todd Gurley in 2018 with his latest impressive burst. After he scored in the third quarter, he jumped onto a wall to hand the ball to his mother in the stands.

Nacua also had the most productive game in the last two months during his breakout rookie season, while Robinson caught a TD pass in his fourth straight game.

Los Angeles went 95 yards in 14 plays consuming more than half of the first quarter on its opening drive, which ended with a fourth-down TD pass from Stafford to Nacua. New Orleans had allowed just one touchdown in its previous 12 quarters of play.

The Saints had three drives end when they failed on fourth down in Rams territory. Chris Olave finished with nine receptions for 123 yards.

SHO’S HOUSE

Shohei Ohtani attended the game, greeting players on the sideline about an hour before kickoff and receiving a No. 17 Rams jersey. The two-way superstar and two-time AL MVP will now play his home games about 13 miles from SoFi Stadium after agreeing to a \$700 million contract with the Dodgers this month. Ohtani was named The Associated Press’ Male Athlete of the Year for the second time in three years earlier Thursday.

INJURIES

Saints: RT Ryan Ramczyk (knee) missed his second straight game. ... RB Kendre Miller (ankle) missed his sixth straight game.

Rams: Rookie DB Tre Tomlinson (hamstring) missed his first game of the season.

UP NEXT

Saints: At Tampa Bay on Dec. 31.

Rams: At the New York Giants on Dec. 31.

A serial killer set Detroit on edge. Police missteps over 15 years allowed him to roam free

By ED WHITE, DEL QUENTIN WILBER and MADDY PEEK Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The serial killer lured women one by one into vacant homes to be murdered, posing their nude or partially clothed corpses amid cheap booze pints, crumbling sheetrock and hypodermic needles.

The slayings set Detroit on edge, prompting authorities to dispatch crews on overtime to scour the city's decrepit stock of abandoned properties for more bodies. When the killer was charged in 2019, the police chief at the time told reporters that his department had been "very diligent, relentless" in solving the crimes.

But now, a year after DeAngelo Martin was sent to prison for committing four murders and two rapes, it's clear that police were hardly diligent or relentless.

Over 15 years, Detroit police failed to follow up on leads or take investigative steps that may have averted the eventual killing spree, despite having received repeated warnings that Martin was a violent predator, an Associated Press investigation has found.

"It's astonishing," said Jim Trainum, a retired Washington, D.C., homicide detective who specializes in reviewing police investigations for possible wrongful convictions. "All the police had to do was one little thing, one little thing here or there, and they would have put a stop to this whole process and these women would still be alive. Just one thing."

In uncovering the failures, the AP relied on more than a dozen interviews, hundreds of pages of court documents and records from prosecutors and police, including a lengthy internal affairs report, obtained through public information requests.

The files reveal that the bungling started in 2004, when evidence from the rape of a 41-year-old woman was stored in a kit — and then forgotten for years in a warehouse, along with thousands of others. When police finally reopened the investigation, the victim had long been dead.

The lapses continued all the way into 2018, when police arrested the wrong man in a strangling. Even after a state crime lab linked Martin's DNA to the death, police only sought his arrest weeks after he had raped a woman in his grandmother's basement in 2019 and had killed thrice more.

Detroit's internal affairs branch issued a 247-page report that found the agency's sex crimes unit did not properly handle DNA hits. Officers were confused about what number of assaults would define a serial rapist, and they were also reluctant to re-approach victims to persuade them to cooperate.

No mistakes rose "to the level of criminality," the report said, but several officers had "neglected their duties." Two were briefly suspended. An internal affairs supervisor summed up the debacles as a "total systemic breakdown."

"That's one way of categorizing it," Detroit Police Commander Michael McGinnis told the AP.

"Sitting here today, would I have liked to have seen a more aggressive apprehension effort made in 2018? Yes, I absolutely would have," said McGinnis, who formerly served as the head of the homicide unit and now leads the department's professional standards bureau. "But that's sitting here in hindsight knowing exactly what I know today."

McGinnis said the department has since changed the way it deals with crime victims and manages DNA leads. Supervisors and command staff now are more involved, he said, especially in cases with a serial offender.

"We learn from our mistakes," McGinnis said, "and we resolve to do better."

Relatives of Martin's victims were furious when they learned through the AP that police had chances to stop him before their loved ones were killed. They also wondered whether the department would have been more aggressive if the victims hadn't been among the city's most vulnerable — and invisible — residents: women struggling with addiction, mental illness or homelessness.

"My sister would be alive today if the police had done their jobs," said Anthony Ellis, the brother of Tre-vesene Ellis, who was found slain in May 2019. "She always looked out for everyone and didn't deserve to die this way."

Lisa Hohnstreiter, the daughter of Martin's second victim, Nancy Harrison, said she was overwhelmed

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 37 of 77

by the information obtained by the AP. "My mom's death could definitely have been prevented," she said.

Tough Upbringing

Martin, who is serving between 45 and 70 years in prison, declined a request for an interview.

Born in 1985, he was raised by his mother, Chantrienes Barker, in Detroit until she was arrested in 1998 for the kidnapping and murder of a 28-year-old Detroit man.

Barker had permitted the kidnappers to hold a rival drug dealer in her basement while they extorted money from his suppliers and family, court records show. Barker bought food for the kidnappers as they burned the 27-year-old captive with cigarettes and heated nickels, and stabbed him with a bayonet, records show.

When the ransom plan fell apart, the kidnappers killed the drug dealer and left his body on a city street.

It is not known whether Martin, then 13, was home during the kidnapping. Barker was convicted of felony murder in 1999 and sentenced to life in prison.

Martin next lived with his grandparents or on the streets. Kyle "Brother Joe" Hicks, a minister, said he first met Martin two decades ago when the teenager was sheltering with other homeless men under a downtown amphitheater.

Martin was addicted to alcohol and drugs, Hicks said, and panhandled to earn cash. He dreamed of being a singer, Hicks said, and frequently tried to croon duets with another homeless man.

"I imagine they were pretty good singers when they were sober," Hicks said, "but they were never sober."

About 15 years ago, Hicks said, Martin lost three toes on his right foot to frostbite.

"I was surprised when he was arrested," Hicks said. "He seemed nice. But do the math: He had a messed-up childhood with his mom going to prison for murder, and he had addictions to drugs and alcohol. That doesn't make you a serial killer, but it's not a recipe for success."

DNA Links

Martin, 38, had several run-ins with police over the years. He had at least two convictions by 2009, including one for receiving a stolen car, and, as a result, his DNA profile was on file in a national database.

He first was connected to a potential sexual assault in 2012. That's when a state crime laboratory alerted Detroit police that a national database had matched Martin's DNA to evidence collected in the 2004 rape of Sylvia Sampson.

Sampson, 41, told police she was walking down a deserted street when a gold-colored car pulled up, and the gun-wielding driver demanded she get inside, reports show. He drove Sampson to a nearby field strewn with tires where he warned her to "do what I say or I'll snap your neck." After the rape, Sampson told police, her assailant kicked her in the face and took \$10 from her coat.

Police collected evidence in a rape kit, which was stored in a warehouse. Five years later, prosecutors discovered that untested kit and more than 11,000 others in the building, sparking a push by Wayne County prosecutor Kym Worthy to clear the backlog.

Her office said the testing initiative concluded last year, having identified 841 serial offenders while netting 239 convictions. Worthy's efforts were highlighted in a 2017 documentary, "I Am Evidence," that explored similar backlogs of untested rape kits across the country. The film was produced and narrated by Mariska Hargitay, the star of NBC's "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit."

It does not appear that police at first did anything about the "hit" linking Martin to Sampson's assault. Four years after receiving it, records show, detectives looked into the assault and determined that Sampson was dead.

Without a living victim, they closed the case.

The state crime lab in October 2016 linked Martin's DNA to a specimen collected in a second rape kit.

A 50-year-old woman had reported the previous December that a male companion had thrown "her down and started hitting her in the face and possibly sexually assaulted her" in a vacant home, according to a police report of the incident.

Police noted in their report that the woman had suffered injuries consistent with an assault: "two black swollen eyes" and swollen lips, as well as bruises on her legs and scratches on her neck.

The brutality alarmed prosecutors. In an email to police shortly after learning about the DNA hit, as-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 38 of 77

sistant prosecutor Tanya Abdelnour told sex crimes investigators that “clearly a second hit to (a rape kit) is an indication of a possible serial offender.”

“It appears that that assault included some physical violence to the victim resulting in injuries,” she wrote. “It is concerning that the physical violence is increasing.”

Police did not get very far. The victim declined to be a witness, records show, though an officer called the woman a second time in a failed attempt to persuade her to cooperate.

In 2017, the crime lab linked Martin’s DNA to evidence collected in a third rape kit. That specimen had been submitted by a hospital, but police could find no record of the female victim having reported the crime.

The First Killing

The first homicide attributed to Martin took place in February 2018, though police initially arrested the wrong man.

It was a Monday afternoon when two Detroit police officers were flagged down by Rudolph Henderson, a 43-year-old vagabond. At Henderson’s feet was a dead, naked woman.

Detectives arrested Henderson on murder charges after discovering security video that showed him dragging Annetta Nelson, 57, from a vacant house where she had been strangled and beaten to death.

Henderson told police that he had stumbled across Nelson’s corpse in the living room as he was looking for crack cocaine. He said he decided to move the body because he didn’t think anyone would find it otherwise.

Henderson was released a week after his arrest when police uncovered other video evidence that prosecutors described as proving the homeless man “was not the perpetrator.”

Two months later, records show, the state crime lab linked Martin’s DNA to evidence collected from Nelson’s vagina. A scientist even told police they could find his name in other case files. Henderson, meanwhile, was cleared by the same DNA testing.

The case files do not indicate what police did with the information, though the internal affairs report suggests Detective Jesus Colon created a reward flyer seeking information about him. The detective declined an interview request. His remarks to internal affairs investigators, like most others made by officers, were redacted in the report.

After obtaining the DNA hit, police dispatched an “apprehension team” to search for Martin, according to McGinnis, the police commander.

“I don’t know what specific actions they took to try to locate him but they were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, it takes time sometimes to catch people,” McGinnis said.

McGinnis told the AP that other DNA was recovered from the crime scene, though homicide files noted only Martin’s genetic material was found in the victim’s body. “For all we knew he might have been a consensual sexual partner, and the other male DNA could have been the murderer’s,” McGinnis said.

Two law enforcement experts — and the Detroit police chief at the time — say police missed an opportunity by not aggressively pursuing the lead.

At the very least, detectives should have obtained a search warrant to obtain a DNA sample from Martin to confirm the database match, according to Julianne Himelstein, who spent more than a decade prosecuting sex offenders in Washington, D.C.

The warrant would have alerted other departments to detain Martin if they came across him, she said, and given Detroit police the chance to interrogate him.

“That is just crazy they didn’t get that warrant,” said Himelstein, a former federal prosecutor. “Confirming that link is step one in Investigations 101.”

In an interview with the AP, Detroit’s police chief back in 2018, James Craig, said the DNA hit was “compelling” evidence and would have been enough to “to try to detain” Martin. He could not say why police didn’t take that step.

Not Hard to Find

In the months after the DNA alert, Martin had repeated contact with Detroit-area police officers. He was given a ticket for disorderly conduct by Wayne State University police in September. He was arrested that same month in Ferndale for lying about his identity.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 39 of 77

Martin was arrested again in December 2018 on charges of repeatedly hitting a girlfriend in Southfield, another suburb. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor assault charge and spent about two weeks in the Oakland County jail.

Authorities in those jurisdictions did not inform Detroit police about their encounters with Martin because Detroit police never asked them to be on the lookout for him, records show.

"Had a more robust apprehension effort been made," McGinnis said, "I would hope we would have learned that he had contact with these other agencies and been able to chase that down. That did not occur."

Not long after Martin was released from jail, he killed for the second time. On March 19, 2019, the body of Nancy Harrison, 52, was discovered in an abandoned house on Coventry Street.

The medical examiner ruled she had died from being struck in the head (Martin would admit he beat Harrison to death with a two-by-four).

Two months after discovering Harrison's body, police were dispatched to the home of Martin's grandmother, where a 26-year-old woman told them that Martin had stabbed her in the neck and raped her in the basement.

A relative of Martin's corroborated the woman's account. An aunt, Linda Martin, told police that she had heard screaming from the basement and found the victim bleeding from a stab wound.

Police would not seek charges in the rape until two days after Martin's final known homicide victim was discovered.

City on Edge

A few days after the assault in his grandmother's basement, Martin was arrested 30 miles away in Chesterfield Township after flagging down police for help in a parking lot.

Officers discovered that he was wanted in Southfield for ignoring the conditions of probation in the earlier assault of a girlfriend.

"In your favor, please look out for me," Martin wrote to the judge overseeing his return to court. "You have my word. ... I wanna do what's right."

He spent 10 more days in jail. Southfield Judge Cynthia Arvant encouraged Martin to seek social services and keep up with medication to help with mood and mental health.

"Mr. Martin, I wish you the best of luck," said Arvant, who had no way of knowing that Martin could be a murder suspect. "Hopefully you'll be done with this. Put it behind you and move forward."

The day after Martin was released, Trevesene Ellis' decomposed body was found in a Detroit house. She was murder victim No. 3. Authorities could not determine a cause of death, though Martin would later admit to having killed her.

The corpse of a fourth victim, Tamara Jones, 55, was found on June 5 in a vacant house on Mack Avenue. She had been beaten to death.

Martin's DNA was later linked to both crimes, as well as to Harrison's slaying in March.

The discovery of the bodies shook Detroit, especially after police warned that the culprit was likely a serial killer.

At a June 7 news conference about the slayings, Mayor Mike Duggan and his police brass pledged that they were racing to inspect buildings for more bodies and scrambling to board up 2,000 properties.

Later that day, police named Martin a person of interest in the killings. Detectives obtained a warrant charging him with the rape in his grandmother's basement and arrested him without incident that night at a bus stop.

Prosecutors subsequently charged him in the four homicides and the two 2019 rapes after DNA testing linked him to all the crimes. Police declined to say whether they suspected Martin in other killings, but reports and court files suggest he was suspected in at least one disappearance and another death.

Martin eventually pleaded guilty to killing Nelson, Harrison, Ellis and Jones. He also admitted he raped two women.

At his sentencing last year, Martin said he wanted to apologize but in the next breath denied wrongdoing. His lawyer acknowledged "these crimes were horrible, demeaning," and a prosecutor described Martin as

a serial killer and rapist who brought immeasurable pain into the world.

When it was their turn to address the judge, the victims' relatives spoke of deep anger and loss.

A father lamented his daughter would never meet her grandchildren.

A daughter said she suffered from repeated nightmares and struggled with explaining to her own children how their grandmother died.

And a twin sister marveled at how it had taken a serial killer to snuff out the life of a loving and caring woman who had beaten the odds and survived nearly two decades on Detroit's streets. She urged the judge to throw the book at Martin because he "is not fit to live in society."

A year since the sentencing, family members of the victims say their emotions have grown only more complicated.

Their fury, once directed at a man, is now also focused on Detroit police. The relatives all have the same question: How did police miss so many chances to stop a killer?

Pacific storm that unleashed flooding barreling down on southeastern California

By EUGENE GARCIA and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. (AP) — A Pacific storm that pounded California's coastal areas and stranded motorists was poised to pounce on the southeastern area of the state through Friday, bringing flood threats to a sweeping area extending from San Diego into the Mojave Desert and even into parts of Arizona.

As millions of Californians scrambled to finish their holiday shopping or prepared to head out onto highways, the National Weather Service issued flood watches for low-lying urban areas and the deserts.

Showers and thunderstorms could dump up to 1.5 inches (3.8 centimeters) of rain through the day, but the real concern was that some areas could be drenched with a half-inch to an inch (1.3 to 2.5 centimeters) of rain in just an hour, causing streams, creeks and rivers to overflow, the weather service said.

On Thursday, motorists were stranded in their vehicles on flooded roadways northwest of Los Angeles.

Downpours swamped areas in the cities of Port Hueneme, Oxnard and Santa Barbara, where a police detective carried a woman on his back after the SUV she was riding in got stuck in knee-deep floodwaters.

Between midnight and 1 a.m., the storm dumped 3.18 inches (8 centimeters) of rainfall in downtown Oxnard, surpassing the area's average of 2.56 inches (6.5 centimeters) for the entire month of December, according to the National Weather Service.

Hours later, at Heritage Coffee and Gifts in downtown Oxnard, manager Carlos Larios said the storm hadn't made a dent in their Thursday morning rush despite "gloomy" skies.

"People are still coming in to get coffee, which is surprising," he said. "I don't think the rain is going to stop many people from being out and about."

By midday, the rain and wind had eased and residents ventured outside to look at the damage. No serious damage or injuries were reported.

Sven Dybdahl, owner of olive oil and vinegar store Viva Oliva in downtown Santa Barbara, said he had trouble finding dry routes to work Thursday morning, but most of the heavy rains and flooding had receded shortly before 11 a.m.

He said he was grateful that the weather is only expected to be an issue for a few days at the tail end of the holiday shopping season, otherwise he'd be worried about how the rains would affect his store's bottom line.

"It will have an impact, but thankfully it's happening quite late," he said.

"This is a genuinely dramatic storm," climate scientist Daniel Swain, of the University of California, Los Angeles, said in an online briefing. "In Oxnard, particularly, overnight there were downpours that preliminary data suggests were probably the heaviest downpours ever observed in that part of Southern California."

The storm swept through Northern California earlier in the week as the center of the low-pressure system slowly moved south off the coast. Forecasters described it as a "cutoff low," a storm that is cut off from

the general west-to-east flow and can linger for days, increasing the amount of rainfall.

The system was producing hit-and-miss bands of precipitation rather than generalized widespread rainfall.

Meanwhile, Californians were gearing up for holiday travel and finishing preparations for Christmas. The Automobile Club of Southern California estimates 9.5 million people in the region will travel during the year-end holiday period.

The Northeast was hit with an unexpectedly strong storm earlier this week, and some parts of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were still digging out from rain and wind damage. Parts of Maine along the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers were hit especially hard.

At least seven people in East Coast states have died in the storms, with deaths reported in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Maine.

For years, he couldn't donate at the blood center where he worked. Under new FDA rules, now he can

By MANUEL VALDES and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

VANCOUVER, Wash. (AP) — Over the last six years, blood center employee Dylan Smith was often asked how frequently he gave blood himself. His answer was always the same: As a gay man, he couldn't. That changed this month.

Thanks to new federal guidelines finalized in May, gay and bisexual men in monogamous relationships can now donate at many blood centers around the country without abstaining from sex.

Bloodworks Northwest, where Smith works as a donor services supervisor, adopted the change on Dec. 6. He and his partner gave blood for the first time the next day.

"It's been really emotionally difficult just to explain every single time the reason why," said Smith, 28. "To be able to finally step up and support the mission that I really have just believed in since I started here just makes my heart feel so happy."

The new U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines are the latest step in a yearslong effort to reverse restrictions that were designed to protect the blood supply from HIV, but which were increasingly criticized as discriminatory following scientific advances that allowed better detection of the virus.

In 2015, the FDA dropped the lifetime ban on donations from men who have sex with men and replaced it with a one-year abstinence requirement. The agency shortened the abstinence period to three months in 2020 after donations plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The American Red Cross, which accounts for about 40% of blood and blood component donations in the U.S., began implementing the new guidance in August.

About half of the 16 independent blood bank organizations that are members of the Alliance for Community Transfusion Services have rolled out the new guidelines, with more expected next year, the organization said.

"It is going to take time," said Benjamin Prijatel, president of Sheppard Community Blood Center in Augusta, Georgia. "Blood centers and health professionals are going to have to put forth the effort to engage and educate this community in order to overcome years of distrust. That's the only way this rule change will translate into additional donations."

The change puts the emphasis on sexual activity rather than on sexual orientation. All potential donors are screened with a new questionnaire evaluating their HIV risk based on sexual behavior, partners and other factors that can contribute to the spread of blood-borne infections, such as intravenous drug use or recent tattoos or piercings.

Potential donors who report having anal sex with new partners in the last three months are barred from giving until a later date, and anyone who has ever tested positive for HIV will continue to be ineligible. Those taking pills to prevent HIV through sexual contact are still barred until three months after their last dose; the medications, known as PrEP, can delay the detection of the virus, the FDA said.

Donated blood is then tested for HIV, hepatitis C, syphilis and other infectious diseases.

Bloodworks Northwest, which supplies blood to more than 90 hospitals in the region, isn't keeping track

of how many newly eligible donors are coming in, said Dr. Kirsten Alcorn, the nonprofit's co-chief medical officer. But workers have heard plenty of stories from people excited to give.

"It feels very meaningful to many of them to now be able to contribute to somebody's survival," Alcorn said.

Bloodworks executive Aaron Posey, whose own life was saved by a transfusion when he fell down a set of stairs and broken glass sliced an artery, welcomed the new guidance. He said hospitals and patients need access to a new pool of donors.

"Having always witnessed a shortage in the blood supply, it has at times been very frustrating," said Posey, who first donated blood during the pandemic when the abstinence period was cut to three months.

Smith learned of the restrictions on gay men giving blood when he was screened while trying to donate his freshman year of college in 2013. The rules blindsided him, he said. It was a long time to wait before he could finally donate with his partner and other friends.

"Just being able to see them donating next to me, smiling next to me ... meant so much," Smith said.

The war took away their limbs. Now bionic prostheses empower wounded Ukrainian soldiers

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — When Alexis Cholas lost his right arm as a volunteer combat medic near the front lines in eastern Ukraine, his civilian career as a surgeon was over. But thanks to a new bionic arm, he was able to continue working in health care and is now a rehab specialist helping other amputees.

The 26-year-old is delighted with his sleek black robotic arm — he described it as "love at first sight" — and realizes how lucky he was to get one.

"There are fewer (bionic) arms available than lost ones," Cholas said.

Russia's war on Ukraine has created a massive need for prosthetic limbs. An estimated 20,000 Ukrainians have had amputations since the war started in February 2022, many of them soldiers who lost arms or legs due to blast wounds.

Only a small number was able to receive bionic prostheses, which are more advanced and can provide greater mobility than the traditional prosthetic limbs.

They are also far more costly than conventional prostheses.

Bionic artificial limbs typically pick up electrical signals from the muscles that remain above the amputation site, thanks to something called myoelectric technology, to carry out an intended motion.

Cholas' bionic arm was made by Esper Bionics. Before 2022, the Ukrainian startup primarily targeted the United States market, but due to the sharp rise in demand for prosthetic limbs caused by the war, Esper now distributes 70% of its products at home.

The company's production hub in the capital of Kyiv is working at full capacity, with more than 30 workers producing about dozen bionic hands a month.

In one corner of the factory, a small group of engineers huddle as they program, assemble and test the elegant bionic arms — known as Esper Hand. Each finger's movement on the robotic hand is accompanied by a soft whirring sound, assuring the engineers of its smooth operation.

Bohdan Diorditsa, head of strategic relations at the company, says that despite ramping up production, Esper Bionics is struggling to keep up with demand, with almost 120 people on the waitlist.

In Ukraine, the company says it provides the bionic prostheses at zero profit for about \$7,000 a piece, just enough to cover production costs. In the United States, the Esper Hand sells for more than \$20,000.

"We do not consider Ukraine as a market, but rather as an opportunity to help," says Diorditsa.

Compared to a conventional prosthesis, which is designed to replicate simple basic functions of a missing arm or leg, a bionic one offers the capability to restore fine motor skills.

"Everyone wants them," says Anton Haidash, a prosthetist at Unbroken, a municipal center in the city of Lviv that focuses on rehabilitation of civilians and soldiers affected by the war. The center has helped provide prosthetic limbs to about 250 people so far, including about 20 bionic arms.

The difference in cost is significant. While bionic limbs can cost up to \$50,000, conventional artificial limbs are priced at \$800-\$2,700, Haidash says.

Ukrainians can get the regular artificial limbs free of charge through the public health care system. However, to get a bionic prosthesis, they normally need additional funding from charities or rehabilitation centers such as Unbroken, which depend on donations.

And while patients can make the final decision about the type of prostheses they want, a variety of factors, including the nature of the injury and the person's occupation, also play a role.

Unbroken purchases bionic prostheses from German and Icelandic companies as well as Esper Bionics, whose notable advantage is having both a manufacturing and a service center in Ukraine. This means people don't need to travel abroad when a repair or resizing is required.

Another outstanding characteristic of the Esper Hand, which is powered by artificial intelligence, is its ability to adapt over time, learning the user's unique interactions with the hand.

After getting outfitted with his bionic arm, Cholas went back to volunteering as a combat medic on the front lines, while in his day job in Kyiv he works as a rehabilitation specialist in a public hospital. Most of his patients are members of the military or civilians who, like him, have lost limbs. He says their shared experience helps him quickly develop a rapport with his patients.

"I now know a lot not only from textbooks but also from my own experience," he says.

Cholas speaks to his patients encouragingly as he examines their injuries. His movements with the bionic hand are natural and fluid. He effortlessly removes a bandage and dresses a patient's wounds without the assistance of nurses.

The bionic prosthesis allows him to perform even delicate movements, such as picking up a grape without crushing it, he says.

"I feel uncomfortable when I'm without the prosthesis," he says. "But when I have the bionic arm on, I feel comfortable. It's like a part of you."

Chatty robot helps seniors fight loneliness through AI companionship

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

CORAL SPRINGS, Fla. (AP) — Joyce Loaiza lives alone, but when she returns to her apartment at a Florida senior community, the retired office worker often has a chat with a friendly female voice that asks about her day.

A few miles away, the same voice comforted 83-year-old Deanna Dezern when her friend died. In central New York, it plays games and music for 92-year-old Marie Broadbent, who is blind and in hospice, and in Washington state, it helps 83-year-old Jan Worrell make new friends.

The women are some of the first in the country to receive the robot ElliQ, whose creators, Intuition Robotics, and senior assistance officials say is the only device using artificial intelligence specifically designed to alleviate the loneliness and isolation experienced by many older Americans.

"It's entertaining. You can actually talk to her," said Loaiza, 81, whose ElliQ in suburban Fort Lauderdale nicknamed her "Jellybean" for no particular reason. "She'll make comments like, 'I would go outside if I had hands, but I can't hold an umbrella.'"

The device, which looks like a small table lamp, has an eyeless, mouthless head that lights up and swivels. It remembers each user's interests and their conversations, helping tailor future chats, which can be as deep as the meaning of life or as light as the horoscope.

ElliQ tells jokes, plays music and provides inspirational quotes. On an accompanying video screen, it provides tours of cities and museums. The device leads exercises, asks about the owner's health and gives reminders to take medications and drink water. It can also host video calls and contact relatives, friends or doctors in an emergency.

Intuition Robotics says none of the conversations are heard by the company, with the information staying on each owner's device.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 44 of 77

Intuition Robotics CEO Dor Skuler said the idea for ElliQ came before he launched his Israeli company eight years ago. His widowed grandfather needed an aide, but the first didn't work out. The replacement, though, understood his grandfather's love of classical music and his "quirky sense of humor."

Skuler realized a robot could fill that companionship gap by adapting to each senior's personality and interests.

"It's not just about (ElliQ's) utility. It's about friendship, companionship and empathy," Skuler said. "That just did not exist anywhere."

The average user interacts with ElliQ more than 30 times daily, even six months after receiving it, and more than 90% report lower levels of loneliness, he said.

The robots are mostly distributed by assistance agencies in New York, Florida, Michigan, Nevada and Washington state, but can also be purchased individually for \$600 a year and a \$250 installation fee. Skuler wouldn't say how many ElliQs have been distributed so far, but the goal is to have more than 100,000 out within five years.

That worries Brigham Young University psychology professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad, who studies the detrimental effects loneliness has on health and mortality.

Although a device like ElliQ might have short-term benefits, it could make people less likely to seek human contact. Like hunger makes people seek food and thirst makes them seek water, she said "that unpleasant feeling of loneliness should motivate us to reconnect socially."

Satiating that with AI "makes you feel like you've fulfilled it, but in reality you haven't," Holt-Lunstad said. "It is not clear whether AI is actually fulfilling any kind of need or just dampening the signal."

Skuler and agency heads distributing ElliQ agreed it isn't a substitute for human contact, but not all seniors have social networks. Some are housebound, and even seniors with strong ties are often alone.

"I wish I could just snap my fingers to make a person show up at the home of one of the many, many older adults that don't have any family or friends, but it's a little bit more complicated," said Greg Olsen, director of the New York State Office for the Aging. His office has distributed 750 of the 900 ElliQs it acquired.

Charlotte Mather-Taylor, director of the Broward County, Florida, Area Agency on Aging, said the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath left many seniors more isolated. Her agency has distributed 300 ElliQs, which she believes breaks them out of their shells.

"She's proactive and she really engages the seniors, so it gives them that extra kind of interaction," she said. "We've seen very positive results with it. People generally like her and she makes them smile and brings joy."

Skuler said ElliQ was purposely designed without eyes and a mouth so it wouldn't fully imitate humans. While "Elli" is the Norse goddess of old age, he said the "Q" reminds users that the device is a machine. He said his company wants "to make sure that ElliQ always genuinely presents herself as an AI and doesn't pretend to be human."

"I don't understand why technologists are trying to make AI pretend to be human," he said. "We have in our capacity the ability to create a relationship with an AI, just like we have relationships with a pet."

But some of the seniors using ElliQ say they sometimes need to remember the robot isn't a living being. They find the device easy to set up and use, but if they have one complaint it's that ElliQ is sometimes too chatty. There are settings that can tone that down.

Dezern said she felt alone and sad when she told her ElliQ about her friend's death. It replied it would give her a hug if it had arms. Dezern broke into tears.

"It was so what I needed," the retired collections consultant said. "I can say things to Elli that I won't say to my grandchildren or to my own daughters. I can just open the floodgates. I can cry. I can giggle. I can act silly. I've been asked, doesn't it feel like you're talking to yourself? No, because it gives an answer."

Worrell lives in a small town on Washington's coast. Widowed, she said ElliQ's companionship made her change her mind about moving to an assisted living facility and she uses it as an icebreaker when she meets someone new to town.

"I say, 'Would you like to come over and visit with my robot?' And they say, 'A vacuum?' No, a robot. She's my roommate," she said and laughed.

Broadbent, like the other women, says she gets plenty of human contact, even though she is blind and ill. She plays organ at two churches in the South New Berlin, New York, area and gets daily visitors. Still, the widow misses having a voice to talk with when they leave. ElliQ fills that void with her games, tours, books and music.

"She's fun and she's informative. OK, maybe not as informative as (Amazon's) Alexa, but she is much more personable," Broadbent said.

Need last-minute gifts? Presidential hopefuls offer ornaments, gift wrap — and Trump mug shot merch

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The field of 2024 presidential candidates may have some options for shoppers scrambling for a last-minute holiday gift.

As the campaign for the White House kicks into full gear, the contenders are offering an onslaught of holiday-themed merchandise, many of which capture some of the surreal aspects of the 2024 race. Donald Trump, for instance, is embracing his status as the first former president to face criminal charges by emblazoning his mug shot on Christmas sweaters, gift wrap and stockings.

Trump and his supporters have embraced the image of him intensely glaring into a Fulton County Jail camera since he surrendered on charges that he illegally tried to interfere in Georgia's 2020 election.

Trump's campaign is hardly backing away from his status, offering items emblazoned with the mug shot almost immediately after it was taken in August, with nearly daily emails offering supporters a mug, T-shirt or poster bearing the image, along with the words "Never Surrender."

Nearly all of the 2024 candidates have online stores and most have tchotchkes that riff on the year's politics.

You can snag a Nikki Haley tree ornament and wrapping paper emblazoned with the hopeful's campaign logo, or a litany of more traditional items like hats, shirts, and even "Past my prime?" drink koozies that harken back to the comment that led in part to Don Lemon being bounced from CNN.

Don't forget Ron DeSantis' set of golf balls whose box bares the phrase that he "has a pair" — a slight at Trump for not participating in the GOP primary debates. Or Vivek Ramaswamy's "Nikki = Corrupt" T-shirt, the phrase the entrepreneur wrote on a notepad after a debate night tirade against Haley's service on the board of aerospace giant Boeing Co.

Democrats are also taking advantage of the chance to pump up their sales — and the associated campaign donations that come with them. President Joe Biden's reelection campaign has a slew of the usual apparel fare. There's also its line of "Dark Brandon" shirts, signs, mugs and even holiday gift wrap with the president's red-eyed caricature that embraces the 2021-era "Let's Go Brandon" phrase intended as an insult (but which Democrats have aimed to operationalize in a tongue-in-cheek battle cry).

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s store has apparel, stickers and a number of items with "No shirt, no shoes, no Secret Service," recalling the independent candidate's ongoing denial of federal protection despite security issues during his campaign.

You're out of luck, though, if you're looking for official Chris Christie or Dean Phillips merch — holiday or otherwise — although there are a number of third-party purveyors ready to hook you up with shirts, hats and even beach towels.

The Trump mug shot merch has been popping up along the campaign trail as Trump and others have been stumping across Iowa ahead of the Jan. 15 caucuses.

A Christmas version features a red and white Santa hat atop Trump's head. There's also a mug shot Christmas stocking and with wrapping paper to match, as well as another version with the candidate pumping his fist in the air.

At a recent Trump campaign event in Cedar Rapids, there was plenty of Trump merchandise in the crowd of at least 700, with the former president's name, "Make America Great Again" slogan and his mug shot blazoned on hats, T-shirts signs and more. One couple, who declined to speak to an Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 46 of 77

reporter, were wearing matching red and green MAGA Christmas sweaters.

Pat Sand, a 57-year-old from Marcus, Iowa, who was wearing a Trump campaign hat and button, said Trump's use of his mug shot on merchandise, including on Christmas-themed items, "puts the name and the face out there, good or bad."

Sand said he has novelty toilet paper that features Trump's mug shot on it — although he added, with a laugh, that he does not use it.

"My daughter got it for me," he said. "It was sarcasm."

Outside the event, Scott Bohac from the Cleveland, Ohio, area was one of a handful of sellers of unofficial merchandise that set up tables and tents outside Trump's events.

As the crowd was streaming home and a winter storm was starting to roll in, Bohac — who has spent the last three years traveling the country selling shirts outside Trump rallies — was folding the last few T-shirts he made for that day's event.

"Some of these vendors got like 20 different shirts. I push one shirt," said Bohac, who said he designs a new one for each event with the date and location of the rally — like a concert — along with a word like "Trump" and some kind of image in the center, which he said is "usually always eagles."

Saying he has not started selling the designs featuring Trump's mug shot, Bohac said sales have gone up for him since Trump started facing criminal indictments, and that it's smart for the campaign to use it.

"I just left that for everybody else," he said. "I do my thing."

Campaigns use their merchandising opportunities — from "Dark Brandon" to "Nikki = Corrupt" to the mug shot — to seize on the moment, said J. Mark Powell, a GOP strategist and longtime collector of political memorabilia in South Carolina.

"What we're seeing in this cycle is making the most of things that are talked about at this very moment, but which will soon turn into trivia questions for political junkies," he said, adding that the fast fashion way that campaigns utilize third-party vendors to make and sell their wares also brings in donations and user data, as well as visibility and generates pride among supporters.

"Giving someone a Biden coffee mug or a roll of Trump wrapping paper isn't going to change the mind of a single undecided or independent voter," said. "It just makes existing supporters feel good about their candidate."

In the future, Powell said that he imagines a campaign merchandising strategy that might reflect fewer novelty items and more ideology.

"Could liberals one day have the opportunity to buy an electric scooter to show their support for green energy, or conservatives purchase a barrier to be placed on a border wall?" he asked. "It sounds farfetched now, but who would have imagined Trump wrapping paper five years ago?"

Punishing their own but passing few laws, a Congress in chaos leaves much to do in 2024

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — This Congress started with showy bluster, a bitter 15-round, multi-day spectacle to elect a House speaker, a Republican who vowed to "never quit," and then did just that.

House lawmakers proceeded not only to oust the GOP speaker, they also punished their own colleagues with censures and expulsion, launched an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden and were barely able to conduct the basics of governing by keeping federal offices from shuttering.

While this first year of the 118th Congress was a historic one, thanks to the dizzying turmoil coming from the Republicans on the House side of the Capitol, next year is headed toward more of the same. With just 27 bills and resolutions signed into law, not counting a few board appointments, it's among the most do-nothing sessions of Congress in recent times.

"This fall has been a very actively stupid political environment," said Rep. Patrick McHenry, the bow-tie-wearing Republican from North Carolina, who emerged as a voice of reason as the interim House speaker

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 47 of 77

leading the chamber during the upheaval.

While Americans typically give low marks to Congress, as the branch of government closest to the people, it's still the main venue the U.S. relies on, at times more so than the presidency or the courts, to work out the nation's problems and challenges.

The need for a functioning Congress — what one scholar calls “the place” where it all happens — is even more apparent heading into a tumultuous presidential election year and with hot wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East.

“People’s expectations for this Congress were so low, and so just doing the bare minimum seems like a passing grade,” said Philip Wallach, author of “Why Congress” and a senior scholar at the American Enterprise Institute think tank in Washington.

He said he’s grading this Congress on a curve. “I see this as symptoms rather than causes — symptoms of a lot of sort of institutional and cultural breakdowns or decay that have led to a lot of really bad feelings and a lot of desire to lash out across the aisle,” he said.

Next year has its own challenges ahead with Biden facing a potential rematch against Donald Trump, the former president and Republican party front-runner. Trump’s loss in 2020 resulted in his supporters laying siege to the U.S. Capitol, and a charge of insurrection led to his second impeachment, for which he was acquitted by the Senate. It now threatens his removal from the Colorado ballot.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said “the dark cloud of Donald Trump looms” as the GOP tries to find its way.

“We’re going to persevere,” Schumer said in an interview with The Associated Press, listing bills to lower the price of insulin, ensure child safety online and others he is lining up for the new year.

While the House Republicans, in majority control, led the chaos, including the removal of indicted GOP Rep. George Santos of New York, the Senate, despite its proclivity toward moderation, was not immune to the dysfunction.

One single Republican, Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama, threw the Defense Department into crisis by blocking the promotions of hundreds of military officers, including some of the nation’s most essential four-star generals. He finally relented just before the holiday recess.

And as Ukraine fights for its political survival against the Russian invasion, senators tried, and failed, to broker a U.S.-Mexico border security deal demanded by Republicans in exchange for providing more American military aid to the Western ally — despite a personal visit from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleading to help.

“I’m not very happy with how productive the Senate has been this year, and hopefully it will get better,” acknowledged Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell.

Trump’s influence is especially felt in the border security talks as the former president intensifies his long history of lashing out at immigrants to the U.S. in alarming language evocative of World War II. It’s putting pressure on his party as Republicans follow his lead.

The chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., said he’s “heartsick” Congress failed to approve Ukraine aid before year’s end. But he remains confident it will get done in the new year.

Heading into 2024, new House Speaker Mike Johnson will start the year under the same pressure to pass legislation to keep the government funded, starting Jan. 19, that led to then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy’s ouster after he brokered a budget-cutting debt deal with Biden.

The Republican-era speakers are being forced to relinquish control, a bottom-up approach, as the hard-right Freedom Caucus and its allies, many aligned with Trump, refuse to go along with compromises emanating from the Speaker’s office.

The GOP’s right flank is fueling the revolt, deploying rarely used procedural tactics to advance their own ideas and halt those of Republican leadership.

Much like the “motion to vacate,” which was used to eject McCarthy, the right wing is relying on privileged resolutions to censure Democrats and try to impeach Biden and others, seizing control of the House floor.

And in a series of stunning rebukes to GOP leadership, enough Republican lawmakers opposed procedural

rules to advance the few major bills that did become law this year — to keep the government running and authorize military programs — that the Republican speakers had no choice but to rush to Democrats for help.

“The speakers are just trying to cope,” Wallach said.

While House Republicans passed a strict border security bill that the Senate refused to consider, Johnson, in a sign of challenges ahead, urged Biden on Thursday to act on his own, without Congress, to stem record numbers of migrant arrivals.

“It must start with you,” Johnson wrote. “I urge you to immediately take executive actions.”

It’s a shift from Nancy Pelosi’s run as speaker, when the powerful gavel wielded political fear and discipline, but also legislative results. The last Congress, among the most productive in decades, passed more than 300 pieces of legislation over two years, including major infrastructure and climate change bills.

By year’s end, it wasn’t just the ousted McCarthy calling it quits, but dozens of lawmakers heading for the exits.

After his stint as interim speaker, McHenry, a powerful committee chairman with allies across Congress, promptly announced he, too, would be retiring at the end of his term, as his far-right colleagues claim increasing power.

“We need people to be realists, not just blind ideologues,” he said.

Jury acquits 3 Washington state officers in death of a Black man who told them he couldn’t breathe

By MARTHA BELLISLE and MADDY GRASSY Associated Press

TACOMA, Wash. (AP) — A jury cleared three Washington state police officers of all criminal charges Thursday in the 2020 death of Manuel Ellis, a Black man who was shocked, beaten and restrained face-down on a Tacoma sidewalk as he pleaded for breath.

Two of the officers — Matthew Collins, 40, and Christopher Burbank, 38 — had been charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter, while Timothy Rankine, 34, was charged with manslaughter. Their attorneys argued that Ellis died from a lethal amount of methamphetamine that was in his system as well as a preexisting heart condition, not from the officers’ actions, and the jury found the three not guilty on all counts.

There was a gasp from the gallery when the first not-guilty verdict was read. Rankine sat forward in his seat and wiped his eyes, while Collins hugged his lawyer.

Matthew Ericksen, a lawyer representing the Ellis family, said it was hard to convey how devastating the verdict was for the family and community.

“The biggest reason why I personally think this jury found reasonable doubt is because the defense was essentially allowed to put Manny Ellis on trial,” Ericksen said via email. “The defense attorneys were allowed to dredge up Manny’s past and repeat to the jury again and again Manny’s prior arrests in 2015 and 2019. That unfairly prejudiced jurors against Manny.”

Ellis was walking home with doughnuts from a 7-Eleven in Tacoma, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Seattle, late on March 3, 2020, when he passed a patrol car stopped at a red light, with Collins and Burbank inside.

The officers claimed they saw Ellis try to open the door of a passing car at the intersection and he became aggressive when they tried to question him about it. Collins testified that Ellis demonstrated “superhuman strength” by lifting him off the ground and throwing him through the air.

But three witnesses who testified said they saw no such thing, reporting that they did not see Ellis try to strike or do anything that would provoke the officers. After what appeared to be a brief conversation between Ellis and the officers, who are both white, Burbank, in the passenger seat, threw open his door, knocking Ellis down, they said.

The witnesses — one of whom yelled for the officers to stop attacking Ellis — and a doorbell surveillance camera captured video of parts of the encounter. The video showed Ellis with his hands up in a surrender

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 49 of 77

position as Burbank shot a Taser at his chest and Collins wrapped an arm around his neck from behind. Among the many other officers who responded was Rankine, who arrived after Ellis was already handcuffed face-down and knelt on his upper back.

Video captured Ellis addressing the officers as "sir" while telling them he couldn't breathe. One officer is heard responding, "Shut the (expletive) up, man."

"When I saw Manuel not doing anything, and him get attacked like that, it wasn't right," witness Sara McDowell, 26, said at the trial. "I'd never seen police do anything like that. It was the worst thing I've ever seen. It was scary. It wasn't OK."

Rankine also testified, calling Ellis' death a tragedy. He was pressing his knees into Ellis' back when Ellis pleaded for breath.

"The only response at that point that I could think of is, 'If you can talk to me, you can still breathe,'" Rankine said.

Lawyers for the defendants did not immediately return calls or emails from The Associated Press seeking comment. The Seattle Times quoted Collins' attorney, Casey Arbenz, as saying the verdict was "a huge sigh of relief" and reflected that the jurors were willing to look beyond the video.

The officers "should never have been charged," Arbenz said.

Ellis' death became a touchstone for racial justice demonstrators in the Pacific Northwest, but it also coincided with the first U.S. outbreak of COVID-19 at a nursing home in nearby Kirkland and did not garner the attention that the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis did nearly three months later.

The trial, which lasted more than two months, was the first under a 5-year-old state law designed to make it easier to prosecute police accused of wrongfully using deadly force.

As the sun went down Thursday, a crowd that included family members of Ellis gathered near a mural of him in Tacoma, temporarily blocking an intersection. "No justice, no peace," they chanted. About 100 people attended an evening vigil at the mural.

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, whose office prosecuted the case, said in a statement that he was grateful for the jury, the court and his legal team "for their extraordinary hard work and dedication."

"I know the Ellis family is hurting, and my heart goes out to them," he said.

The Ellis family immediately left the courtroom and planned to speak at a news conference later. The Washington Coalition for Police Accountability said in a statement that "the not guilty verdict is further proof the system is broken, failing the very people it should be serving."

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, credited the attorney general for pursuing the case after the Pierce County Sheriff's Office botched the initial investigation by failing to disclose that one of its deputies had been involved in restraining Ellis. That controversy helped prompt lawmakers to create a new independent office to investigate police use of force.

"This case began when the Ellis family experienced a profound loss that was not properly investigated," Inslee said in a statement. "A full airing of the evidence was important for all sides in this tragedy and that's what happened here."

The City of Tacoma said in a statement that the verdicts will not affect an internal police department investigation and once its findings are approved by Chief Avery Moore, he'll make any decisions about possible discipline, "up to and including termination." That is expected to happen within the next two weeks.

"I share the depth of emotion that many of you are experiencing right now," Mayor Victoria Woodards told a news conference. "I personally commit, along with every member of your City Council and with our city manager and our police chief, to a just, transparent and safer Tacoma for all of our residents."

The Ellis family settled a federal wrongful death lawsuit against Pierce County, which is home to Tacoma, for \$4 million last year.

UN again delays vote on watered-down Gaza aid resolution. The US backs it, others want stronger text

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council on Thursday again delayed a vote on a watered-down resolution to deliver desperately needed aid to Gaza — a revision backed by the United States, while other countries support a stronger text that would include the now eliminated call for the urgent suspension of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

The revised draft resolution was discussed behind closed doors for over an hour by council members not long after it was circulated. Because there were significant changes, many said they needed to consult their capitals before a vote, which is now expected Friday.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told reporters after the consultations that the United States backs the new text, and if it is put to a vote the U.S. will support it.

The circulation of the new draft culminated a week and a half of high-level negotiations that at times involved U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Arab and Western counterparts. In a sign of intense U.S. efforts, President Joe Biden said Wednesday that diplomats at the U.N. were engaged in negotiations on “a resolution that we may be able to agree to.” The vote, initially scheduled for Monday, has been delayed every day since then.

Thomas-Greenfield denied that the resolution is watered down, saying, “The draft resolution is a very strong resolution that is fully supported by the Arab group that provides them what they feel is needed to get humanitarian assistance on the ground.”

But the key provision with teeth was eliminated — a call for “the urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for urgent steps towards a sustainable cessation of hostilities.”

Instead, it calls “for urgent steps to immediately allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and also for creating the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.” The steps are not defined, but diplomats said if adopted this would mark the council’s first reference to a cessation of hostilities.

On a key sticking point concerning aid deliveries, the new draft eliminates a previous request for the U.N. “to exclusively monitor all humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza provided through land, sea and air routes” by outside parties to confirm their humanitarian nature.

It substitutes a request to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to appoint “a senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator with responsibility for facilitating, coordinating, monitoring and verifying” whether relief deliveries to Gaza that are not from the parties to the conflict are humanitarian goods. It asks the coordinator to establish a “mechanism” to expedite aid and demands that the parties to the conflict — Israel and Hamas — cooperate with the coordinator.

Thomas-Greenfield said the U.S. negotiated the new draft with the United Arab Emirates, the Arab representative on the council that sponsored the resolution, and with Egypt, which borders Gaza. This bypassed the 13 other council members, several of whom objected to being left out, according to diplomats speaking on condition of anonymity because the consultations were private.

The U.S. ambassador said the revised resolution “will support the priority that Egypt has in ensuring that we put a mechanism on the ground that will support humanitarian assistance.”

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has said Gaza faces “a humanitarian catastrophe” and a total collapse of the humanitarian support system would lead to “a complete breakdown of public order and increased pressure for mass displacement into Egypt.”

According to a report released Thursday by 23 U.N. and humanitarian agencies, Gaza’s entire 2.2 million population is in a food crisis or worse and 576,600 are at the “catastrophic” starvation level. With supplies to Gaza cut off except for a small trickle, the U.N. World Food Program has said 90% of the population is regularly going without food for a full day.

Nearly 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, since the war started. During the Oct. 7 attack, Hamas militants killed about 1,200 people in Israel and took about 240 hostages

back to Gaza.

Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, and its Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Thousands more Palestinians lie buried under the rubble of Gaza, the U.N. estimates.

Biden has warned that Israel is losing international support because of the "indiscriminate bombing" of Gaza, and U.S. officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the large number of Palestinian civilian deaths. This week, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin pressed Israel to transition from high intensity operations to targeted operations aimed at killing Hamas leaders, destroying tunnels and rescuing hostages.

In another major change, the U.S.-backed draft resolution eliminates the condemnation of "all violations of international humanitarian law, including all indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects, all violence and hostilities against civilians, and all acts of terrorism."

The draft resolution does demand the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and reaffirms the obligations of the parties under international law, including protecting civilians and infrastructure critical for their survival.

It would also reiterate the Security Council's "unwavering commitment to the vision of the two-state solution where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders," and it would stress "the importance of unifying the Gaza Strip with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority."

Security Council resolutions are important because they are legally binding, but in practice many parties choose to ignore the council's requests for action. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding, though they are a significant barometer of world opinion.

In its first unified action on Nov. 15, with the U.S. abstaining, the Security Council adopted a resolution calling for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses" in the fighting, unhindered aid deliveries to civilians and the unconditional release of all hostages.

The U.S. on Dec. 8 vetoed a Security Council resolution, backed by almost all other council members and dozens of other nations, demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. The 193-member General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a similar resolution on Dec. 12 by a vote of 153-10, with 23 abstentions.

Pacific storm dumps heavy rains and unleashes flooding in California coastal cities

By EUGENE GARCIA and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. (AP) — Motorists were stranded in their vehicles on flooded roadways in typically idyllic Santa Barbara on Thursday, while nearby Oxnard got a month's worth of rain in a single hour in a storm that pummeled Southern California while Christmas travel got underway.

The downpours targeted Ventura and Santa Barbara counties northwest of Los Angeles County overnight, swamping areas in the cities of Port Hueneme, Oxnard and Santa Barbara, where a police detective carried a woman on his back after the SUV she was riding in got stuck in knee-deep floodwaters.

Between midnight and 1 a.m., the storm dumped 3.18 inches (8.08 centimeters) of rainfall in downtown Oxnard, surpassing the area's average of 2.56 inches (6.50 centimeters) for the entire month of December, according to the National Weather Service.

The deluge prompted flash flooding in Ventura County around 1:30 a.m., the weather service said. Later in the morning, streets began filling with water in parts of Santa Barbara as the storm delivered another deluge. By midday, the rain and wind had eased and residents ventured outside to look at the damage.

Sven Dybdahl, owner of olive oil and vinegar store Viva Oliva in downtown Santa Barbara, said he had trouble finding dry routes to work Thursday morning, but most of the heavy rains and flooding had receded shortly before 11 a.m. He said he was grateful that the weather is only expected to be an issue for a few days at the tail end of the holiday shopping season, otherwise he'd be worried about how the rains would affect his store's bottom line.

"It will have an impact but thankfully it's happening quite late," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 52 of 77

By late afternoon, the city of Port Hueneme had lifted evacuation orders for residences on four streets. About 60 houses were affected by the orders, all in a senior citizen community, said Firefighter Andy VanSciver, a Ventura County fire spokesperson. An evacuation center was set up at a college gymnasium.

Three people from the senior community were taken to hospitals out of an abundance of caution, and there were multiple rescues of drivers from flooded vehicles, he said.

The city of Oxnard said in a social media post that many streets and intersections were heavily impacted. "Please stay off the city streets for the next several hours until the water recedes," the post said.

"This is a genuinely dramatic storm," climate scientist Daniel Swain, of the University of California, Los Angeles, said in an online briefing. "In Oxnard, particularly, overnight there were downpours that preliminary data suggests were probably the heaviest downpours ever observed in that part of Southern California."

The National Weather Service issued a tornado warning for Oxnard and the city of Ventura at 1:28 a.m. due to a high-intensity thunderstorm, but no tornado activity was immediately observed, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office said in a social media post.

Hours later at Heritage Coffee and Gifts in downtown Oxnard, manager Carlos Larios said the storm hadn't made a dent in their Thursday morning rush despite "gloomy" skies.

"People are still coming in to get coffee, which is surprising," he said. "I don't think the rain is going to stop many people from being out and about."

The storm swept through Northern California earlier in the week as the center of the low-pressure system slowly moved south off the coast. Forecasters described it as a "cutoff low," a storm that is cut off from the general west-to-east flow and can linger for days, increasing the amount of rainfall.

The system was producing hit-and-miss bands of precipitation rather than generalized widespread rainfall. Forecasters said the low would wobble slightly away from the coast on Thursday, drawing moisture away and allowing some sunshine, but will return.

The San Diego-area weather office warned that rather than fizzling, the storm was gathering energy and its main core would move through that region overnight through Friday morning.

Meanwhile, Californians were gearing up for holiday travel and finishing preparations for Christmas. The Automobile Club of Southern California predicted 9.5 million people in the region would travel during the year-end holiday period.

The Northeast was hit with an unexpectedly strong storm earlier this week, and some parts of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were still digging out from rain and wind damage. Parts of Maine along the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers were hit especially hard.

Floodwaters were receding throughout northern New England, though some localized areas were still in the flood stage, said Jon Palmer, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. Flood warnings were also still in effect in parts of Maine and New Hampshire, he said.

At least five people in East Coast states have died in the storms, with deaths reported in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Maine.

The storm cut power to 400,000 customers in Maine, and restoration was still underway Thursday morning.

A voter pushed Nikki Haley to call Donald Trump a 'grave danger' to the US. Here's how she responded

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

ANAMOSA, Iowa (AP) — Nikki Haley stopped short Thursday of answering one Iowa voter's question the way he'd hoped.

Asked by 44-year-old Jacob Schunk to label Donald Trump a "grave danger to our country," Haley ticked through criticisms of the former president ranging from foreign policy to government spending. And then the former United Nations ambassador addressed the challenge that she and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, her closest rival for second place behind Trump, are facing just weeks before primary voting begins.

"The problem is, what I have faced is anti-Trumpers don't think I hate him enough. Pro-Trumpers don't think I love him enough," Haley told Schunk at a town hall in eastern Iowa.

Haley's comment reflects one of the central challenges facing her campaign as she tries to win over those who still admire the former president without alienating them. It's a balancing act that will likely intensify in final weeks ahead of the Jan. 15 Iowa caucuses, where a stronger-than expected showing could give Haley a boost heading into the New Hampshire, where she has gained support and appears right now to be the best-positioned Trump alternative.

Her chief rival to become Trump's leading foil, DeSantis, is facing a similarly challenging dynamic as he steps up criticism of the former president while criticizing the litany of court cases that could remove him from the ballot in some states. On Wednesday, DeSantis attacked the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling that Trump was ineligible for the ballot under to the U.S. Constitution, suggesting the court was trying to boost Trump and help Democrats who want to run against him.

Speaking with the Christian Broadcasting Network on Thursday, DeSantis argued that the criminal indictments had made it harder to run against Trump by "distorting the primary."

"I would say if I could have one thing change, I wish Trump hadn't been indicted on any of this stuff," he said. "It's just crowded out, I think, so much other stuff, and it's sucked out a lot of oxygen."

Trump and his campaign team have mostly tried to tear down DeSantis but are devoting new attention to Haley in recent days. Allies of both Trump and DeSantis have aired ads in which she is accused of reversing her position to not raise South Carolina's gas tax when she served as governor.

The ads left out that Haley said she would only sign the 2015 measure to raise the gas tax if lawmakers agreed to cut state income taxes. The plan ultimately died.

"I'm getting it from all angles," she said. "And I get it. That means we're surging."

Haley addressed an audience of about 100 people on Thursday as she wrapped up a four-day campaign trip through small Iowa cities. Haley didn't cite the indictments against Trump but suggested as she often does that his leadership is too chaotic given the threats the U.S. faces.

Schunk said afterward that he is leaning toward supporting her even if she didn't say exactly what he wanted.

"She was 95% there," Schunk said after the event. "I think there's some strategy there in terms of she's not quite saying Donald Trump is a danger to the country. I think she thinks it. But she's not willing to say it."

From fugitive to shackled prisoner, 'Fat Leonard' lands back in US court and could face more charges

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A defense contractor at the center of one of the biggest bribery scandals in U.S. military history is expected to face additional charges following his return to the United States from Venezuela as part of a broader prisoner swap between the two countries, a federal prosecutor said Thursday.

Leonard Glenn Francis, who is nicknamed "Fat Leonard," faced a federal judge for the first time since snipping off his ankle monitor last year and disappearing weeks before a sentencing hearing on charges that he offered more than \$500,000 in cash bribes to Navy officials, defense contractors and others.

He was later arrested in Venezuela and had been in custody there since, but was returned to the U.S. in a large swap Wednesday that also saw the release of 10 American detainees by Venezuela in exchange for the Biden administration freeing Alex Saab, a Colombian-born businessman and close ally of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro who'd been charged in the U.S. in a money laundering case.

Francis, shackled and in a beige jumpsuit, stood by quietly as a federal magistrate judge in Miami ordered him to be transferred to the Southern District of California, the region where his case was initially filed.

Prosecutors said additional charges would be presented against Francis for failing to appear at a hearing in his ongoing bribery case in San Diego.

"Not right now," an otherwise expressionless but soft-spoken Francis said in response to Magistrate Judge Jacqueline Becerra's question about whether he could afford an attorney.

Francis was arrested in a San Diego hotel nearly a decade ago as part of a federal sting operation. Investigators say he bilked the U.S. military out of more than \$35 million by buying off dozens of top-ranking

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 54 of 77

Navy officers with booze, sex, lavish parties and other gifts.

The scandal led to the conviction and sentencing of nearly two dozen Navy officials, defense contractors and others on various fraud and corruption charges. Investigators say Francis, who owned and operated his family's ship-servicing business, abused his position as a key contact for U.S. Navy shops at ports across Asia, wooing naval officers with Kobe beef, expensive cigars, concert tickets and wild sex parties at luxury hotels from Thailand to the Philippines.

He pleaded guilty in 2015 and was allowed to stay out of jail at a rental home, on house arrest with a GPS ankle monitor and security guards.

But weeks before he faced sentencing in September 2022, Francis made a daring escape as he cut off his ankle monitor and disappeared. Officials said he fled to Mexico, made his way to Cuba and eventually got to Venezuela.

He was arrested a couple weeks later before boarding a flight at the Simon Bolivar International Airport outside Caracas. Venezuelan officials said he intended to reach Russia.

He had been in custody in Venezuela ever since, and officials said he sought asylum there.

Newly unsealed court documents show federal prosecutors making preparations last week for Saab's release from U.S. custody, telling a judge that they anticipated that President Joe Biden would grant clemency for Saab and requesting an order for the U.S. Marshals Service to take Saab out of federal prison "based on significant foreign policy interests of the United States."

Ready, set, travel: The holiday rush to the airports and highways is underway

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

It's beginning to look a lot like a hectic holiday travel season, but it might go relatively smoothly if the weather cooperates.

Travel over Christmas and New Year's tends to spread out over many days, so the peaks in the U.S. are likely to be lower than they were during the Thanksgiving holiday. That is making airlines and federal officials optimistic.

But the debacle at Southwest Airlines over Christmas last year should guard against overconfidence. Just this week, the Transportation Department announced a settlement in which Southwest will pay \$140 million for that meltdown, which stranded more than 2 million travelers.

So far this year, airlines have canceled 1.2% of U.S. flights, down nearly half from 2.1% over the same period last year. Cancellations were well below 1% during Thanksgiving, according to FlightAware.

"I don't want to jinx us, but so far 2023 has seen the lowest cancellation rate in the last five years," Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said Tuesday. He added, however, that winter weather "will certainly be a challenge in the next few weeks."

Canceled flights surged last year, as airlines were caught short-staffed when travel rebounded from the pandemic more quickly than expected. Since then, U.S. airlines have hired thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other workers, and the cancellation rate has come down.

It was so far, so good for most U.S. travelers Thursday, a day ahead of an expected peak Friday.

"Honestly it was great. I flew standby, which the week of holiday, you know, is tricky to do, and I made it on the second try. So I'm feeling really lucky. I feel like Santa is real, he's good, he's out there," said Maggy Terrill, after flying from New York City to Chicago O'Hare International Airport to spend Christmas with family in southern Illinois.

In Europe, some travelers weren't as lucky.

High winds from a storm named Pia disrupted flights, trains and road travel in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and northern areas of the U.K.

Nearly a third of the flights arriving and departing Amsterdam Airport Schiphol were canceled Thursday, and hundreds of flights were delayed, according to Flightaware. Copenhagen Airport in Denmark warned that weather conditions posed a "risk of delays and cancellations," especially on Thursday night. British

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 55 of 77

Airways grounded two dozen flights, British broadcaster Sky News reported.

Adding to frustrations, workers at the undersea tunnel between Britain and France held a surprise strike for several hours Thursday that ended when Eurotunnel reached an agreement with union representatives.

Eurostar, which operates passenger train services from London to continental Europe, said services will not resume until Friday. The company said it would run six extra trains between Paris and London into the weekend. Eurotunnel Le Shuttle, which runs vehicle-carrying trains on the same link underneath the English Channel, began resuming services Thursday night.

Ross Haynes, 31, told the Press Association news agency he was travelling to visit family members in Manchester when his train was canceled.

"I was on the train, headphones in, podcast on and ready to go. Suddenly, everything was canceled and we were turfed off," Haynes said.

After struggling with cancellations and other disruptions last year, European travel has been smoother this year and more people are expected travel over Christmas and New Year's, said Mike Arnot, spokesman for Cirium, an aviation analytics company. Still, about 3% of flights within Europe have been canceled in so far in December, and nearly 30% have been delayed, according to Cirium.

Globally, air travel has not fully recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected to surge over the holidays compared to last year. Airlines have sold 31% more tickets for international arrivals to global destinations between Dec. 21 and Dec. 31 compared to the similar period last year, according to travel data firm ForwardKeys.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration says it is creating more air-traffic routes, especially along the East Coast, to help keep planes moving over the holidays.

Over the past year, airlines have blamed many of their delays on a shortage of FAA air traffic controllers that slows down traffic. The agency says it has been hiring and now has 10,700 certified controllers.

AAA is forecasting that 115 million people will go 50 miles or more from home between Saturday and New Year's Day. That is a 2% increase over the auto club's forecast last year, although it would fall short of the record set in 2019.

Most of those people will drive, and they will save a bit on gasoline, compared with last Christmas. The nationwide average Wednesday was \$3.08 a gallon, down 23 cents from a month ago and 6 cents from this time last year, according to AAA.

The busiest days on the road will be Saturday and next Thursday, Dec. 28, according to transportation data provider INRIX.

The Transportation Security Administration expects that the busiest days for air travel will be Thursday, Friday and New Year's Day. TSA expects to screen more than 2.5 million travelers each of those days — that's still far short of the record 2.9 million that agents screened on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

Flying in the U.S. is already surpassing pre-pandemic levels. The TSA has screened 12.3% more travelers than it had by this time last year and 1.4% more than in 2019. December is running about 6% above the same month last year.

Whether flying or driving, travelers should be keeping an eye on the weather forecast.

A Pacific storm pounded parts of Southern California on Thursday with heavy rain and street flooding. AccuWeather forecasters say rain storms could hit the Pacific Northwest and the southern Plains states including Texas later this week, but things look brighter for population centers — and key airports — in the Northeast.

Rudy Giuliani files for bankruptcy days after being ordered to pay \$148 million in defamation case

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Rudy Giuliani filed for bankruptcy on Thursday, acknowledging severe financial strain exacerbated by his pursuit of former President Donald Trump's lies about the 2020 election and a jury's verdict last week requiring him to pay \$148 million to two former Georgia election workers he defamed.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 56 of 77

The former New York City mayor listed nearly \$153 million in existing or potential debts, including almost \$1 million in state and federal tax liabilities, money he owes lawyers, and many millions of dollars in potential judgments in lawsuits against him. He estimated he had assets worth \$1 million to \$10 million.

Giuliani had been teetering on the brink of financial ruin for several years, but the eye-popping damages award to former election workers Ruby Freeman and Wandrea "Shaye" Moss pushed him over the edge. The women said Giuliani's targeting of them after Republican Trump narrowly lost Georgia to Democrat Joe Biden led to death threats that made them fear for their lives.

Ted Goodman, a political adviser and spokesperson for Giuliani, said in a statement that Giuliani's decision to seek bankruptcy protection "should be a surprise to no one" because "no person could have reasonably believed that Mayor Giuliani would be able to pay such a high punitive amount."

The Chapter 11 filing will give Giuliani "the opportunity and time to pursue an appeal, while providing transparency for his finances under the supervision of the bankruptcy court, to ensure all creditors are treated equally and fairly throughout the process," Goodman said.

But declaring bankruptcy likely won't erase the \$148 million verdict. Bankruptcy law doesn't allow for the dissolution of debts that come from a "willful and malicious injury" inflicted on someone else. A judge said Wednesday that Freeman and Moss could start pursuing payment immediately, saying any delay could give Giuliani time to hide assets.

"This maneuver is unsurprising, and it will not succeed in discharging Mr. Giuliani's debt to Ruby Freeman and Shaye Moss," their lawyer, Michael Gottlieb, said.

After the verdict, Giuliani repeated his stolen election claims, insisted he did nothing wrong and suggested he'd keep pressing his claims even if it meant losing all his money or going to jail. His rhetoric prompted Freeman and Moss to sue him again this week.

The Dec. 15 verdict was the latest and costliest sign of the mounting financial toll incurred by the 79-year-old Giuliani, a one-time Republican presidential candidate and high-ranking Justice Department official once heralded as "America's Mayor" for his calm and steady leadership after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

Once swimming in cash as a globetrotting security consultant, Giuliani's money woes intensified amid investigations, lawsuits, fines, sanctions and damages related to his work helping Trump try to overturn the 2020 election.

Among his potential debts, he listed lawsuits brought by two voting machine manufacturers who say he and others defamed them with claims of a stolen election.

A lawyer for Giuliani, Adam Katz, suggested at an August court hearing in one of those cases that Giuliani was "close to broke," and unable to pay a number of bills, including a \$12,000 to \$18,000 tab for a company to search through his electronic records for evidence.

In court papers rebuffing voting machine-maker Smartmatic's demand for an accounting of his finances, Giuliani's lawyers disclosed that he was so hard up for money that he solicited third-party donations to pay a prior \$300,000 bill to the electronic discovery firm.

In September, Giuliani's former lawyer Robert Costello sued him for nearly \$1.4 million in unpaid legal bills. Giuliani claimed he never received them. The case is pending.

Costello represented Giuliani from November 2019 to this past July in matters ranging from an investigation into his business dealings in Ukraine, which resulted in an FBI raid on his home and office in April 2021, to investigations of his work in the wake of Trump's 2020 election loss.

Investigators noted Giuliani's dwindling finances in court papers unsealed this week from the 2021 raid, raising his need for money as possible motivation for his interest in aiding a Ukrainian official. Citing bank records and other information, they said Giuliani had gone from having about \$1.2 million in the bank and \$40,000 in credit card debt in January 2018 to about \$288,000 in cash and \$110,000 credit debt in February 2019. Giuliani was never charged with a crime as a result of that investigation.

Giuliani's other lawsuits, which he listed as potential liabilities, include one brought against him by Biden's son Hunter, who alleges Giuliani was responsible for the "total annihilation" of his digital privacy by accessing and sharing his personal data from his laptop computer.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 57 of 77

Giuliani is also being sued by a woman who said she worked for him. She alleges he owed her nearly \$2 million in unpaid wages and coerced her into sex. Another lawsuit involves a man who claims Giuliani defamed him after he slapped the ex-mayor on the back at a supermarket. Giuliani has denied the woman's claims and has asked for the man's lawsuit to be thrown out.

In August, Giuliani was indicted with Trump and others in Georgia on charges he acted as Trump's chief co-conspirator in a plot to subvert Biden's victory. He was also described as a co-conspirator but not charged in special counsel Jack Smith's federal election interference case against Trump.

Giuliani's bankruptcy filing did not detail his assets or add to what is already known about how he's been making money in recent years.

Giuliani hosts a daily radio show in New York City and a nightly streaming show on social media. On social media, he's pitched various products, including wares sold by election denier Mike Lindell. He also has hawked autographed 9/11 shirts for \$911 and has appeared on Cameo, a service where celebrities record short videos for profit. Giuliani was charging \$325 for his greetings, though a recent check shows they're "temporarily unavailable."

After his Georgia indictment, he directed social media followers to the website of his legal defense fund. To save money, Giuliani has represented himself in some legal matters.

In July, Giuliani put his Manhattan apartment up for sale. He was initially asking \$6.5 million for the three-bedroom residence a block from Central Park, but that might have proved a bit steep. Three months later, he trimmed his ask to \$6.1 million. The apartment still hasn't sold.

In September, Trump hosted a \$100,000-a-plate fundraiser for Giuliani at his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf club. Giuliani's son, Andrew, said the event was expected to raise more than \$1 million for Giuliani's legal bills.

Andrew Giuliani also said that Trump had committed to hosting a second fundraiser for the former mayor at his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, though that doesn't appear to have happened.

NCAA President Charlie Baker drawing on lessons learned as GOP governor in Democratic Massachusetts

By STEVE LeBLANC Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Growing up in a Boston suburb in the 1960s, Charlie Baker learned his first political lesson — the art of listening to competing viewpoints — around the dinner table as his Democratic mother and Republican father hashed out the topics of the day.

There was a reason he was given two ears and one mouth, his mother would tell him.

It's a story Baker repeatedly told as Massachusetts governor, and one that offers lessons for his job as president of the NCAA — the country's largest college sports governing body overseeing some 500,000 athletes at more than 1,100 schools.

Earlier this month, the 6-foot-6 former Harvard basketball player outlined a vision for a new NCAA subdivision at the very top of college sports in a letter he sent to the more than 350 Division I schools. It was an attempt in part to grapple with one of the diciest issues facing the NCAA — how best to compensate college athletes.

Baker said his proposal would require schools that want to be a part of the new tier to commit to paying athletes tens of thousands of dollars per year through a trust fund. He also suggested all Division I schools bring name, image and likeness compensation for their athletes in-house through group licensing and remove limits on educational benefits schools can provide their players

"Some people are going to say you're going too far and people will say but you're not going far enough," Baker said.

It's part of a larger effort by the 67-year-old to help persuade lawmakers in Washington that the NCAA is trying to get ahead of its legal troubles as they face antitrust challenges that could usher in a new reality where some athletes are treated like paid employees. Coming to terms with that future is one reason the NCAA hired Baker.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 58 of 77

Linda Livingstone, president of Baylor University and chair of NCAA board of governors, said Baker's history as governor and stint as a former CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care demonstrated an ability to listen, learn and adapt.

"In both of those roles as governor and health care CEO he was in very complex environments and worked to solve some pretty hard, what seemed to be intractable, problems," said Livingstone, who was part of the team that hired Baker. She said the fact that Baker didn't come from the worlds of academia or athletics was another plus.

What the NCAA needs most from Baker is help in finding a model that will bring more stability to athletics. Livingstone said that model should provide compensation for athletes but stop short of designating them employees.

"We're all working with Charlie as we develop these ideas together," she said.

Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick said Baker appreciates the crisis college athletics is in and has brought a new urgency to the role.

"There's the question of how governable the NCAA is and I think Charlie sort of poses that question in real time, because he is such an effective leader and manager," Swarbrick said. "If he can't engineer the change, I don't think anybody can."

For Baker, navigating potentially choppy political waters was a skill he honed as a Republican in Democratic Massachusetts, adapting to a sometimes frosty political environment by making as many allies as possible and choosing his fights carefully.

It was a lesson learned in part during his first run for governor against Democratic incumbent Deval Patrick in 2010. During the race, Baker came off as too conservative and a sore loser, said Erin O'Brien, an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

"Four years later he ran as someone who was more bipartisan, congenial and I think that helped him," O'Brien said. "He showed he could learn and change course."

Although Baker at times found himself at odds with some unions, he developed a public "bromance" with then-Democratic Mayor of Boston Marty Walsh, a former labor lawyer and current executive director of the National Hockey League Players' Association.

"He's used to a semi-hostile environment. He's used to working with people who aren't exactly sure about him," O'Brien said. "As governor, he could go along with the Democratic leaders with some small changes. With the NCAA, member schools are not going to be satisfied with the status quo. He has to be more of a doer."

Michael McCann, a law professor and director of the Sports and Entertainment Law Institute at the University of New Hampshire, said Baker seems like a good fit for a nearly impossible job.

"He has the right background for what the NCAA needs to do, which is to reorient itself," McCann said. "He's pragmatic, he's reality based, he understands the importance of deal making."

During his eight years as governor Baker faced a slew of challenges, from battling blizzards, to trying to fix a teetering public transit system, to leading the state through the pandemic. He also drew the ire of former President Donald Trump by refusing to endorse or vote for him 2016 and 2020.

One issue that vexed Baker throughout his tenure was the state of metropolitan Boston's public transit system. Baker poured billions into replacing tracks, fixing signals and updating electrical systems even as officials dealt with runaway trains, subway cars belching smoke and rush hour trains running on weekend schedules.

At times the system seemed unfixable, not unlike the NCAA. McCann said the organization has tried to cling to a model that doesn't resonate with the public anymore — the idea that athletes at top schools are amateur athletes, even as college sports rakes in billions annually.

Baker will need to steer schools toward a new model, McCann said.

"It's a big undertaking and he knew that. I don't know if there is a right person for the job because it is so challenging," he said. "The open-ended question is whether it's too late for the NCAA."

Biden should keep expanding approach to Black voters, group of Democratic strategists says

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Some top Democrats are worried that a dip in Black voter turnout, along with other challenges, could doom President Joe Biden and his party in 2024.

A group of Democrats is offering a new analysis of the most recent campaigns in Georgia and Michigan, pitching those battlegrounds as models for drawing in more Black voters next year and beyond. They argue that Democratic power players need to think — and spend money — in new ways, going beyond efforts that can be last-minute or superficial as they try to reassemble Biden's 2020 coalition.

"The days of the symbolic fish fry and one-time church visit are over," wrote the authors of the analysis by strategists widely credited for helping flip Georgia and Michigan to Biden. "Black voters have always required an approach to voter engagement as diverse as the Black voting coalition."

Biden has long depended on Black voters — first as a Delaware senator and most notably in the 2020 South Carolina primary, which delivered him a decisive win that led much of the Democratic field to consolidate behind him. And his campaign says the president's reelection effort already reflects the priorities and approach advocated by the outside strategists.

"The campaign is designing comprehensive and robust programs in battleground states to mobilize and engage Black voters," said Michael Tyler, the campaign's communications director. He noted the campaign already is running targeted digital ads and building outreach programs in Black communities, months earlier than presidential campaigns typically have launched such efforts.

Yet just 50% of Black adults said they approve of Biden in a December poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs. That is compared with 86% in July 2021, with the gap fueling concerns about his reelection prospects.

The new report, shared exclusively with The Associated Press and being presented privately to Democratic power players, contends as part of several recommendations that the left must more regularly engage all Black voters, including the most reluctant, while amplifying arguments about abortion rights in Black communities.

Said Lauren Groh-Wargo, a leader of the push and longtime adviser to Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams: "People need to see something different; they need to see you coming to them and asking for their vote in their cultural spaces."

The authors include veterans of Abrams' operation and Michigan's efforts to approve an abortion-rights referendum and re-elect Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Abrams lost her second bid against Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, but Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock beat Herschel Walker to retain his Senate seat, bolstered in part by years of work by Abrams and other organizers.

The report explores why the two states' 2022 electorates differed from other racially diverse battlegrounds. The contributors want to share their conclusions with the party's biggest donors and top strategists, including those running Biden's 2024 campaign. One of Biden's top campaign aides, Quentin Fulks, managed Warnock's campaign, a point Tyler noted in his response to the report. Fulks and Tyler are both Georgia natives.

The campaign's approach so far is "happening through the leadership of ... a native Georgian from a rural county who won statewide in Georgia last cycle and helped drive historic turnout in one of the most competitive states in the country," Tyler said.

Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin are the seven states that will be critical in deciding the Electoral College next year. Across those states in 2022, Black turnout dropped, on average, about 22% from the 2018 midterms, according to multiple Democratic firms' data analysis. Lagging Black support for Biden in any three of those states next fall could cut off his path to the required 270 electoral votes.

Michigan's Black turnout in 2022 was about 90% of its 2018 totals, according to the analysis. But among Black voters under 35, the 2022 turnout was 96% of 2018 levels — notably outpacing other battlegrounds,

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 60 of 77

Georgia included. That bolstered Whitmer's nearly 11-point victory and the abortion rights referendum, which passed by 13 points. The analysis found Michigan's Black voters supported the initiative by a higher proportion than any other race or ethnicity; that finding was repeated recently in Ohio's abortion referendum, authors said.

"We were open to the research that showed us just how much this would resonate in Black communities," said Michigan Democratic Chairwoman Lavora Barnes, the first Black woman to hold her post and a co-author of the report.

"We made it part of a broader message about rights and freedom," she added, saying Black Americans, because of their historical experience with oppression, are especially attuned to "having our rights taken away."

Whitmer, who embraced the nonpartisan abortion-rights campaign, said the lessons must carry forward as some Republicans propose national abortion restrictions.

"My generation assumed that these rights would always be intact for us and our children," the governor, 52, said recently. "Lo and behold, here we are having to fight over and over again to protect these rights."

Black turnout in Georgia, meanwhile, was about 92% of 2018 levels; Black voters over 50 exceeded their 2018 marks.

If Georgia's Black turnout had tracked the 2022 battleground average, the analysis calculates that about 175,000 fewer voters would have cast November ballots. With Warnock winning more than 9 out of 10 Black votes, that shortfall almost certainly would have meant his defeat to Walker, the only GOP statewide nominee who lost in Georgia last year.

And if Black turnout in other 2022 battlegrounds reflected Georgia's, Democrats almost certainly would have defeated Republican Sen. Ron Johnson in Wisconsin and may have won a North Carolina Senate seat, expanding their narrow majority, the authors argue.

Biden was in Milwaukee on Wednesday touting his economic arguments and his administration's support for minority owned businesses. Milwaukee also is the site of one of the campaign's earliest organizing efforts aimed at Black voters, a commitment of money and personnel that Biden's advisers say demonstrates their commitment to engaging the full electorate.

Indeed, those kinds of programs and some of the recommendations from Georgia are challenging and expensive. Abrams' operation began a decade ago trying to expand voter participation in Georgia, focusing on Black and other nonwhite residents who rarely or never voted. Now Georgia's political footprint involves hundreds of paid canvassers, sophisticated digital outreach, voter registration drives and door-knocking campaigns even in non-election years.

The report argues that the investment over time creates so-called "super voters" who make the Democratic investment worth it. The document details tactics Georgia and Michigan Democrats have used and that the authors say can be scaled in other states.

The authors note that in 2018, when Abrams first ran for governor, Georgia had more than 1.1 million Black voters deemed "low propensity" and unlikely to vote. After the 2022 election, that has dropped to between 700,000 and 800,000.

Conversely, the "super voter" measure — defined as people who have cast three consecutive general election ballots — has climbed from about 525,000 Black Georgians after 2016 to more than 850,000 after 2022.

Donors and most campaigns, though, still gravitate to traditional turnout models aimed at regular or semi-regular voters. They see the Abrams approach as costing too much money per vote.

"We need other groups out there making contacts with inactive voters because most campaigns just aren't cut out to do that," said Preston Elliot, Whitmer's 2022 campaign manager, who was not involved in the analysis. He complimented figures like Groh-Wargo, Abrams and Barnes but cautioned that the latest effort comes down to resources.

"There are enough tasks out there for everyone to play their parts," Elliot said. "But ultimately we're talking about finite money here."

Hundreds alleged assault by youth detention workers. Years later, most suspects face no charges

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Zach Robinson spent decades trying to fight off nightmares about being raped as a child at New Hampshire's youth detention center. He died last month, still waiting for accountability for his alleged abusers.

"I know that I'll never forget about what happened," he said in early 2021. "But just knowing it's out there and getting the relief of getting it off my shoulders I hope will limit the amount I re-live it."

More than a thousand men and women allege they were physically or sexually abused as children at the Sununu Youth Service Center between 1960 and 2019.

But only 11 men have been arrested, none in the last 2½ years, despite a state police task force investigation stretching back more than four years.

Authorities cite the statute of limitations as one reason for the lack of further arrests. Yet hundreds of cases remain eligible for possible prosecution, according to an Associated Press analysis of 1,100 lawsuits.

While New Hampshire's statute of limitations for most felonies is six years, it extends longer in sexual assault cases involving children. In those cases, charges can be brought until the victim turns 40 years old.

At least 356 lawsuits have been filed by plaintiffs who allege sexual assault and have yet to turn 40. Not all of them identify alleged perpetrators by name, but the 242 who do accuse dozens of staffers, nearly all of them at the youth center but some at group homes and residential treatment centers with state contracts. At least a dozen more turned 40 this year, putting their cases out of range for criminal charges.

"It definitely angers me but it goes hand in hand with how the operation of that place worked," said William Grant, 38, who alleges he was abused by multiple workers in 2001 and 2002. "A lot of things were swept under the rug."

The allegations out of the Sununu Center are horrifying: Former residents say they were gang raped, beaten while being raped and forced to sexually abuse each other. Staff members are accused of choking children, beating them unconscious, burning them with cigarettes and breaking their bones.

The scandal came to light after two former workers were arrested in 2019 and charged with abusing a former resident who had gone to police two years earlier. The first lawsuit was filed the following year, and by the time nine more workers were charged in 2021, more than 300 alleged victims had come forward. Both the first criminal trial and the first civil trial are scheduled for April.

Attorney General John Formella's office declined to discuss The AP's findings, the investigation or whether more charges are coming. Instead, a spokesperson offered a general statement confirming that the investigation remains active and pointing to the challenges of prosecuting sexual assault cases dating back decades.

"There are legal considerations that must be reviewed as to each specific case. Further, the passage of time makes it difficult for investigators to obtain corroborating evidence and some prosecutions may be barred by the statute of limitations," said spokesperson Michael Garrity.

Attorney Rus Rilee, who represents the vast majority of those suing the state, said all of his clients want to see perpetrators prosecuted and are getting more angry as time goes by.

"While I fear that Attorney General Formella is going to continue to forego criminal prosecutions in order to avoid creating additional civil liability for the state, our clients fully expect him to do his job and prosecute their abusers while there is still time," he said.

But another attorney who has both prosecuted sexual assault cases and represented victims said further charges are unlikely.

"These cases get worse over time. They're already stale cases, so after two and a half years, I wouldn't hold my breath for additional arrests," said Neema Rahmani, a former federal prosecutor and president of West Coast Trial Lawyers.

Child sexual assault is both under-reported and under-prosecuted, and studies show fewer than 10% of

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 62 of 77

perpetrators are ever brought to justice, he said. Prosecution is difficult when allegations go back decades, and the existence of civil lawsuits makes it easy for defense attorneys to argue that victims are lying to make money, he said.

"Prosecutors are risk averse," he said. "If there's any risk of losing, they just don't bring the case."

Many of the former youth center workers have multiple accusers, including Anthony Paquet, who is named in 93 lawsuits. While most allege physical abuse outside the statute of limitations, he's also accused of sexually assaulting nine men who have yet to turn 40, including one who says Paquet molested him a dozen times.

Paquet, who retired in 2018, declined to comment on the allegations, according to a lawyer who represented him in 2021 when he unsuccessfully sought compensation for injuries he claimed to have suffered while restraining a teen.

Another longtime worker, Richard Croteau, is named in 82 lawsuits, including 12 still within the statute of limitations for sexual assault. Several possible phone numbers for Croteau were out of service. He did not respond to a letter sent to his home, and no one answered the door when a reporter visited in early December.

Croteau's accusers include a woman who says he raped her in the facility and his vehicle, molested her every night for two weeks and threatened that she would be "dead" if she told anyone. In another lawsuit, Croteau is accused of raping a teenage boy in a ski lodge bathroom during a field trip.

The accuser in the latter case, Jacob, said when he spoke to police several years ago, investigators told him Croteau's name had come up a lot.

"He was the worst one," he said in a recent interview. "He gave off that old grandpa 'you can always come to me' type personality, and then the closer you got to him, the more he would push boundaries."

The AP does not identify people who make allegations of sexual abuse without their consent. Jacob, who remained anonymous for an earlier interview in 2021, said he is now willing to go public with his first name and image because he is frustrated that so few perpetrators have been held accountable.

"I am at the point where I want the state to be responsible," he said. "I want people to know."

Another man who accuses Croteau of sexual abuse described him as a "vile man" who told him no one would believe him if he complained.

"I'd really like to sit across from him and say, 'Remember me? I'm not that little boy no more,'" said William Grant.

Like Jacob, Grant said he wants his name to be used publicly to try to spur action.

"I was a number in there, I don't want to be a number now," he said. "My name is William Grant, and you can put it in bold lettering."

The youth center, which once housed upward of 100 children but now typically serves fewer than a dozen, is named for former Gov. John H. Sununu, father of current Gov. Chris Sununu. Lawmakers have approved closing the facility, which now only houses those accused or convicted of the most serious violent crimes, and replacing it with a much smaller building in a new location.

Meanwhile, the mother of Zach Robinson, who died Nov. 3 of an apparent drug overdose, plans to use any money she gets from pursuing his lawsuit to open a sober living home focused on mental health.

"He struggled with addiction because of what happened to him when he was younger," said Trina Cotter, who wears a pendant holding some of her son's ashes.

Cotter said her son worked hard to get his high school equivalency degree last summer and wanted to go to college. But his success didn't last.

"He always felt victimized and not worthy. He kept looking for things to make him happy," she said. "And I think the people that were there to help him weren't helping him. They were harming him all they way up 'til the day he died."

Cat-owner duo in Ohio shares amputee journey while helping others through animal therapy

By PATRICK ORSAGOS Associated Press

TROY, Ohio (AP) — Each morning when she wakes up, Juanita Mengel removes the silicone liner of her prosthetic leg out from under a heated blanket so that the metal parts of the artificial limb don't feel as cold on her skin when she straps the pieces together.

The 67-year-old Amanda, Ohio, resident then does the same for her 5-year-old dilute tortoiseshell cat, Lola-Pearl, who is missing her left hind leg.

The duo is one of an estimated 200 therapy cat teams registered in the U.S. through Pet Partners. The nonprofit sets up owners and their pets as volunteer teams providing animal-assisted interventions, where they might visit hospitals, nursing homes or schools to aid in therapy and other activities to improve well-being in communities.

"A therapy animal is an animal who's been assessed based on their ability to meet new people and not just tolerate the interaction, but actively enjoy it," said Taylor Chastain Griffin, the national director of animal-assisted interventions advancement at the organization.

Pet Partners registers nine different species as therapy animals: dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, guinea pigs, rats, birds, mini pigs, and llamas and alpacas.

As part of her research, Chastain Griffin studies the impact of therapy cats and argues more research needs to be done. There's abundant research on other therapy animals like dogs, she said, but there's often a "shock factor" involved with therapy cats because many don't know they exist.

"They go into a setting and people are like, 'Whoa, there's a cat on a leash. What's happening?'" Chastain Griffin said. "It kind of inspires people to connect in a way we haven't traditionally heard talked about in other therapy animal interventions."

Mengel said she knew Lola-Pearl would be a good therapy cat after she brought her on a whim to an amputee coalition conference about a month after she adopted the domestic shorthair.

"She was so good with people I just knew she would be a good therapy cat," Mengel said. "People really were attracted to her, too."

During a recent visit to a limb loss support group meeting, Mengel pushed Lola-Pearl around in a stroller — labeled "Therapy Cat" — so attendees could pet the kitty as she woke up from a nap.

Whether she was sitting in the stroller, walking in between participants' legs or cuddling on their laps, Lola-Pearl brought a smile to whoever she decided was worthy of her attention in that moment.

"She's very intuitive of people," Mengel said.

Lola-Pearl isn't the only cat in Mengel's life; the former traveling nurse who lost her left leg in 2006 after years of surgeries following a near-fatal car accident is a mother to seven felines, most of which have disabilities.

"They find you, you don't find them," she said.

Lola-Pearl was found at only a few weeks old with her back legs completely twisted together. She was unable to walk and brought to a friend of Mengel's at an animal shelter in Missouri, where veterinarians could not help her. The shelter found specialists in Iowa who were able to splint Lola-Pearl's legs as an attempt to save them, but they decided her left hind leg needed to be amputated.

Meanwhile, Mengel had been in talks with her friend in Missouri about adopting the cat, and after Lola-Pearl healed from surgery, Mengel officially adopted her.

Despite the obstacles Mengel has been through, she exudes a spirit of gratitude for Lola-Pearl and for the work they do together.

"It's a really rewarding experience," she said, "I get just as much out of it as the people that I visit."

Authorities return restored golden crosses to the domes of Kyiv's St Sophia Cathedral

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Workers using cranes on Thursday installed two more restored crosses on top of the domes of Kyiv's 11th-century St. Sophia Cathedral as part of ongoing repair work at the landmark site.

The seven golden crosses atop the iconic cathedral's seven domes had become corroded. Officials said they required urgent attention.

The final cross, on the cathedral's main golden dome, is due to be removed next week. It is expected to be put back in May.

The cathedral, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, is in the heart of Kyiv. It has not sustained any major damage from the bombing of the Ukrainian capital by Russia since its full-scale invasion on Feb. 24 2022, but it has occasionally been struck by debris from explosions.

In September, the U.N.'s World Heritage Committee placed the cathedral on a list of sites it considers to be in danger.

The cathedral was built to rival the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The monument to Byzantine art contains the biggest collection of mosaics and frescoes from that period. It is surrounded by monastic buildings dating back to the 17th century.

It is one of Kyiv's main tourist sites.

Taylor Swift's new romance, debt-erasing gifts and the eclipse are among most joyous moments of 2023

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — A romance that united sports and music fans, a celestial wonder that drew millions of eyes skyward and a spiritual homecoming for some Native American tribes were just some of the moments that inspired us and brought joy in 2023.

In a year that saw multiple wars, deadly mass shootings, earthquakes, wildfires, sexual harassment stories and other tragedies, these events were among those that broke through the tumult of 2023 and made people feel hopeful.

As Taylor Swift would say, "Hold on to the memories." Here are a few of them:

A FRIENDSHIP BRACELET WITH A PHONE NUMBER

That's how Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce planned to woo superstar Taylor Swift when he went to her Eras Tour concert stop in the Missouri capital. It didn't work — at first.

But the romantic gesture, and public admission of defeat on his "New Heights" podcast, caught the Grammy Award-winner's attention. After the power pair took their relationship public — she went to a Chiefs game and sat in a box with Kelce's mom, to the delight of fans — they began taking the world by storm.

Sportscasters calculated Swift's effect on Kelce's game stats and TV viewership, national magazines offered up comprehensive dating timelines, and Swift fans scoured Kelce's old social media posts to make sure he was fit for their queen.

On tour in Buenos Aires, the then-33-year-old singer changed a lyric from "Karma is the guy on the screen" to "Karma is the guy on the Chiefs." And fans went crazy when she jumped into Kelce's arms for an iconic post-concert kiss.

"I think we're all excited about it. Until they start making good romcoms again, this is what we have," said Michal Owens, a 37-year-old longtime fan from the Indianapolis suburb of Zionsville.

While pint-sized pairs of trick-or-treaters donned glitzy dresses and Chiefs jerseys this Halloween, Owens transformed her outdoor display into a tribute. The mother of three dressed one 12-foot-tall (3.66-meters-tall) skeleton in a Chiefs jersey, another in a sparkly dress and then stacked three smaller skeletons atop one another to create what she called a "tower of Swifties."

"We've got so many things in the world to be sad about," she said. "Why not find something to root for

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 65 of 77

and give us some joy?"

AN AWE-INSPIRING ECLIPSE

From Oregon's coast to the beaches of Corpus Christi, Texas, millions of people in October donned special glasses and gazed upward to take in the dazzling "ring of fire" eclipse of the sun.

"It's kind of spiritual, but in a way that is almost tangible," University of Texas at San Antonio astrophysics professor Angela Speck said as she recalled the type of eclipse that ancient Mayan astronomers called a "broken sun."

Crowds in the path of the eclipse erupted in cheers when the moon blocked out all but a brilliant circle of the sun's outer edge. Participants at an international balloon fiesta in Albuquerque, New Mexico, whooped from the launch pad. Broadcasters for NASA said they felt a chill as the moon cast a shadow over the earth — and one broadcaster was so overcome with emotion that she began crying.

The phenomenon was a prelude to the total solar eclipse that will sweep across Mexico, the eastern half of the U.S. and Canada, in April 2024. But the next "ring of fire" eclipse won't be visible in the U.S. until 2039 and then only in parts of Alaska.

IN DEATH, A SELFLESS ACT

Surprise letters are showing up in mailboxes, informing recipients that their medical debt is wiped away. They have Casey McIntyre to thank. The 38-year-old New York City book publisher nearly died of cancer in May. But in what her husband, Andrew Rose Gregory, called a "bonus summer," the young mother made plans to help people after she was gone. Her goal: To erase medical debt.

In a message posted after her death in November, she asked for donations, writing, "I loved each and every one of you with my whole heart and I promise you, I knew how deeply I was loved."

By December, the campaign had raised more than \$1 million, enough to erase around \$100 million in debt. That's because the nonprofit RIP Medical Debt says every dollar donated buys about \$100 in debt.

"Her positive spirit is just resonating with a lot of people," said Allison Sesso, the nonprofit's president and CEO.

The effort was inspired by the people McIntyre met during treatment. They weren't just worried about their health but how to pay for their care. She had good insurance — and "couldn't even fathom having to deal with that on top of the cancer," Sesso said.

The fundraiser, which quickly shattered its initial goal of \$20,000, gave her family a sliver of "something positive" to focus on amid their grief. It was particularly hard for the family because when McIntyre died, her daughter was just a toddler, not yet 2.

"This sounds crazy but she didn't seem angry at all," said Sesso. "She was like, 'This happened. I've accepted that this has happened, and I'm going to do this positive thing.'"

A SPIRITUAL HOMECOMING

When the Grand Canyon became a national park over a century ago, many Native Americans who called it home were displaced.

In 2023, meaningful steps were taken to address the federal government's actions. In May, a ceremony marked the renaming of a popular campground in the inner canyon from Indian Garden to Havasupai Gardens, or "Ha'a Gyoh," in the Havasupai language.

It marked a pivotal moment in the tribe's relationship with the U.S. government nearly a century after the last tribal member was forcibly removed from the park. The Havasupai Tribe was landless for a time until the federal government set aside a plot in the depths of the Grand Canyon for members.

Then in August, President Joe Biden signed a national monument designation — over the opposition of Republican lawmakers and the uranium mining industry — to help preserve about 1,562 square miles (4,046 square kilometers) to the north and south of Grand Canyon National Park.

It was another big step for the Havasupai, and for the 10 other tribes that consider the Grand Canyon their ancestral homeland.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 66 of 77

The new national monument is called Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni. "Baaj Nwaavjo" meaning "where tribes roam," for the Havasupai people, while "I'tah Kukveni" translates to "our footprints," for the Hopi Tribe.

The move restricts new mining claims and brings tribal voices to the table to manage the environment, said Jack Pongyesva, of the Grand Canyon Trust, an advocacy group that represents tribal and environmental issues in the region.

He said it also could open the door for more cultural tourism, where visitors could learn not just about the landscape but about the tribes — from the tribes themselves.

Pongyesva, a member of the Hopi Tribe, said the dedication is "The beginning of hopefully this healing and looking back and seeing what was wrong and moving forward together."

A RESILIENT RETURN

Firs are mainstays of Christmas tree lots. But on the Isle Royale National Park near Michigan's border with Canada, balsam firs were being devoured.

Gray wolves on the remote island cluster in Lake Superior were already dying out from inbreeding, causing the moose population to become a "runaway freight train" and strip trees that were wolves' primary food during long, snowbound winters, said Michigan Tech biologist Rolf Peterson.

An ambitious plan was hatched to airlift wolves from the mainland to the park — and it's starting to make a big difference. A report this year shows the resurging wolf population is thriving and the moose total is shrinking, giving the trees a chance to recover.

There were critics of the plan, but Peterson said there weren't other viable options. Because of climate change, particularly global warming, there are fewer ice bridges, reducing wolves' ability to trek from the mainland and diversify the gene pool.

"That was a huge undertaking," Peterson said, and it turned out "spectacularly well."

Trump transformed the Supreme Court. Now the justices could decide his political and legal future

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump touts his transformation of the U.S. Supreme Court as one of his presidency's greatest accomplishments. Now his legal and political future may lie in the hands of the court he pushed to the right.

With three Trump-appointed justices leading a conservative majority, the court is being thrust into the middle of two cases carrying enormous political implications just weeks before the first votes in the Iowa caucuses. The outcomes of the legal fights could dictate whether the Republican presidential primary front-runner stands trial over his efforts to overturn the 2020 election and whether he has a shot to retake to the White House next November.

"The Supreme Court now is really in a sticky wicket, of historical proportions, of constitutional dimensions, to a degree that I don't think we've ever really seen before," said Steve Vladeck, a law professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Trump's lawyers plan to ask the Supreme Court to overturn a decision Tuesday barring him from Colorado's ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which prohibits anyone who swore an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it from holding office. The Colorado Supreme Court ruling is the first time in history the provision has been used to try to prohibit someone from running for the presidency.

"It's a political mess the Supreme Court may have a hard time avoiding," said Michael Gerhardt, a University of North Carolina law professor.

It comes as the justices are separately weighing a request from special counsel Jack Smith to take up and rule quickly on whether Trump can be prosecuted on charges he plotted to overturn the 2020 election results. Prosecutors are hoping the justices will act swiftly to answer whether Trump is immune from prosecution in order to prevent delays that could push the trial — currently scheduled to begin on March

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 67 of 77

4 — until after next year's presidential election. Trump has denied any wrongdoing in the case.

The three justices appointed by Trump — Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett — were among more than 230 federal judges installed under Trump as part of a GOP push to transform the ideological leanings of the bench. His impact on the high court has been seen in rulings rescinding the five-decade-old constitutional right to abortion, setting new standards for evaluating guns laws and striking down affirmative action in college admissions.

"This is a court that is already a lightning rod in our contemporary political discourse. A court that is viewed quite skeptically by a large swath of the American electorate," Vladeck said. But he added, "It's also a court that has not bent over backwards for Trump."

For example, in January 2022, the high court rebuffed Trump's attempt to withhold presidential documents sought by the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection. The justices also allowed Trump's tax returns to be handed over to a congressional committee after his refusal to release them touched off a yearslong legal fight.

The Supreme Court was also thrust into the middle of a presidential election more than 20 years ago, in the razor-thin contest between Al Gore and George W. Bush. In 2000, the justices ruled 5-4 to stop a state court-ordered recount of the vote in Florida, a ruling that effectively settled the election in favor of Bush since neither candidate could muster an Electoral College majority without Florida.

But that case came after the votes were cast. And in 2023, "the general political instability in the United States makes the situation now much more precarious," wrote Rick Hasen, an election-law expert and professor at the UCLA School of Law, on the Election Law Blog.

It's far from certain that the Supreme Court will decide now to take up Trump's immunity claims in the election interference case, which were rejected by the trial court judge in a ruling that declared the office of the president "does not confer a lifelong 'get-out-of-jail-free' pass." Smith is asking the Supreme Court to bypass the federal appeals court in Washington, which has expedited its own review of the decision. So the Supreme Court may wait to get involved until after the appeals court judges hear the case.

Trump's lawyers urged the Supreme Court on Wednesday not to intervene before the appeals court rules, writing that the case "presents momentous, historic questions" that require careful consideration.

The Colorado Supreme Court put its decision on hold until Jan. 4, or until the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the case. Colorado officials say the issue must be settled by Jan. 5, the deadline for the state to print its presidential primary ballots. Mario Nicolais, one of the Colorado attorneys on the case, said the "Supreme Court can move just as fast as it wants, and if they want to hear this before Jan. 5 they can."

It's possible the high court will try to dodge the issue and not decide the merits of the Colorado case. Gerhardt said the justices may say that the matter is left to the states or Congress. Section 3 of the 14th Amendment says: "Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House" undo the disqualification of someone found to have "engaged in insurrection."

"It would be like kicking the hornet's nest for the court to get into the merits of this," Gerhardt said. "It's a political hot potato. And the court generally tries to avoid taking on sort of hot-button issues that are political by nature ... And the easier route for the court is to just say 'somebody else has got the responsibility, not us.'"

But the Supreme Court may feel compelled to answer the issues at the heart of the case now.

"There'll be a lot of political instability if we go through a whole election season not knowing if one of two major candidates is disqualified from serving," Hasen said. "It's hard to fathom the kind of world we're living in, where not only a serious candidate, but a leading candidate, of one of the political parties is in so much legal jeopardy."

Ukraine ends year disappointed by stalemate with Russia, and anxious about aid from allies

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

The year started with high hopes for Ukrainian troops planning a counteroffensive against Russia. It ended with disappointment on the battlefield, an increasingly somber mood among troops and anxiety about the future of Western aid for Ukraine's war effort.

In between, there was a short-lived rebellion in Russia, a dam collapse in Ukraine, and the spilling of much blood on both sides of the conflict.

Twenty-two months since it invaded, Russia has about one-fifth of Ukraine in its grip, and the roughly 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line has barely budged this year.

A crunch has come away from the battlefield. In Western countries that have championed Ukraine's struggle against its much bigger adversary, political deliberations over billions in financial aid are increasingly strained.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is playing a waiting game two years into a war that proved to be a costly miscalculation by the Kremlin. He is wagering that the West's support will gradually crumble, fractured by political divisions, eroded by war fatigue and distracted by other demands, such as China's menacing of Taiwan and war in the Middle East.

The international political outlook could turn sharply in Putin's favor after next November's elections in the United States — by far Ukraine's biggest military supplier and where some Republican candidates are pushing to wind down support for its war.

Nearly half of the U.S. public believes the country is spending too much on Ukraine, according to polling published in November by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

"The political landscape on both sides of the Atlantic is changing," says Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington DC. "Transatlantic solidarity has been steady. But I don't think it will remain steady forever."

The shifting sentiment could benefit Putin, analysts say, as he seeks at least to keep Ukraine in limbo and eventually compel it to accept a bad deal to end the war. Putin announced in early December that he will run for reelection in March, all but guaranteeing he keeps his repressive grip on Russia for at least another six years.

"It's been a good year, I would even actually call it a great year" for Putin, says Mathieu Boulegue, a consulting fellow for the Russia-Eurasia program at Chatham House think tank in London.

Western sanctions are biting but not crippling the Russian economy. Russian forces are still dictating much of what happens on the battlefield, where its defensive lines feature minefields up to 20 kilometers (12 miles) deep that have largely held back Ukraine's monthslong counteroffensive.

The counteroffensive was launched before Ukraine's forces were fully ready, a hurried political attempt to demonstrate that Western aid could alter the course of the war, said Marina Miron of the Defense Studies Department of King's College London.

"The expectations (for the counteroffensive) were unrealistic," she said. "It turned out to be a failure."

Putin got a victory he desperately wanted in May in the fight for the bombed-out city of Bakhmut, the longest and bloodiest battle of the war. It was a trophy to show Russians after his army's winter offensive failed to take other Ukrainian cities and towns along the front line.

A mutiny in June by the Wagner mercenary group was the biggest challenge to Putin's authority in his more than two decades in power. But it backfired. Putin defused the revolt and kept the allegiance of his armed forces, reasserting his hold on the Kremlin.

Wagner chief and mutiny leader Yevgeny Prigozhin was killed in a mysterious plane crash. And any public dissent about the war was quickly and heavy-handedly stamped out by Russian authorities.

Still, Putin has had setbacks. He fell afoul of the International Criminal Court, which in March issued an arrest warrant for him on war crimes, accusing him of personal responsibility for the abductions of children from Ukraine. That made it impossible for him to travel to many countries.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 69 of 77

Ukraine has so far clawed back about half the land that the Kremlin's forces occupied in their full-scale invasion in February 2022, according to the U.S., but it's going to be hard to win back more.

The big Ukrainian push fell far short of its ambitions, even though Western countries had given Kyiv a variety of weapons and training.

That has raised uncomfortable questions in the West about the best way forward. "We're in a very awkward moment now," said Kupchan of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Russians have been ruthless in their determination to stop the Ukrainians punching through their lines. They were suspected of sabotaging the major Kakhovka dam on the Dnieper River in southern Ukraine, having possessed the means, motive and opportunity to do so. The dam's collapse flooded a huge area where Ukrainian forces might have been able to break through.

For its part, Ukraine has proved able to strike far behind enemy lines, even hitting Moscow with long-range drones. It has bloodied Russia's nose by hitting with missiles and drones a key bridge in Moscow-annexed Crimea, oil depots and airfields, and the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol.

By showing it can strike in the Black Sea, Ukraine has been able to push Russian warships away from the coast, although not entirely. At one point, Russia turned its sights on Ukraine's Black Sea ports — a vital conduit to global trade — and its farming infrastructure, destroying enough food to feed more than 1 million people for a year, the U.K. government said.

Yet while Russia has endured huge losses of troops and equipment, the country possesses the scale to soak up those setbacks.

Putin, who foreign officials say has secured large supplies of ammunition from North Korea, has put together a state budget that devotes a record amount to defense as it increases spending by around 25% in 2024-2026. He has also ordered the country's military to increase the number of troops by nearly 170,000 to more than 1.3 million.

For Ukraine, the challenge is resourcing another offensive operation. Its troops are motivated but exhausted, analysts say.

Zelenskyy has tirelessly lobbied Western leaders to keep help coming, aware they are his country's lifeline. He has traveled to Washington three times in the past two years.

U.S. President Joe Biden traveled to Kyiv last February in a display of Western solidarity. He now wants Congress to grant an additional \$50 billion for the war in Ukraine.

Support for Kyiv shows signs of fraying, however. Biden's proposal is stuck in a divided Senate.

Zelenskyy scored a diplomatic victory late in the year when the European Union granted Ukraine accelerated talks on joining the bloc. But even that triumph was tempered by the knowledge that the process could take years, as could clinching NATO membership.

And the EU's denial of 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) in aid to help keep the battered Ukrainian economy going was frustrating for Kyiv.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni perhaps expressed the predicament most succinctly in November when she inadvertently told a pair of Russian prank callers that "there is a lot of fatigue" on the issue of Ukraine.

"We are near the moment in which everybody understands that we need a way out," she said.

Faith groups say more foster families are needed to care for the children coming to the US alone

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

HOMESTEAD, Florida (AP) — Snuggling on the sofa across from the Christmas tree, Sol proudly showed off the dog her foster parents gave her for earning all A's even though she crossed the southern U.S. border knowing very little English.

"They helped me a lot," said the 14-year-old eighth grader. Then she blushed, hid her face in Cosmo's fur, and added in Spanish, "Oooh, I said that English!"

Sol — who is from Argentina — is among tens of thousands of children who arrive in the United States without a parent, during a huge surge in immigrants that's prompting congressional debate to change

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 70 of 77

asylum laws.

Faith and community groups across the country are trying to recruit many more foster families to help move the children from overwhelmed government facilities. U.S. authorities encountered nearly 140,000 unaccompanied minors at the border with Mexico in fiscal year 2023, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Almost 10,000 are still in custody of the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, according to its latest data.

"It's amazing the quantity of children who are coming," said Mónica Farías, who leads the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami. "We're actively recruiting parents."

Program leaders have been going to churches and other community organizations every weekend to find more families like Andy and Caroline Hazelton, Sol's foster parents.

Over the past four years, the Hazeltons — a couple in their early 30s living in a Miami suburb, with three biological daughters ages 8, 6 and almost 2 — have fostered five migrant minors for several months and more for shorter periods. Two teens were from Afghanistan, but most came from Central America.

"Our faith inspired us," Andy Hazelton said, adding they felt the need to respond to the Gospel exhortation of helping others as one would help Jesus when they heard about families being separated at the border.

Like other foster families, the Hazeltons say they focus not on the often stridently divisive politics of immigration, but simply on assisting children in need. A globe ornament on their living room Christmas tree is marked with dots for the birthplaces of each family member.

"Every Christmas we have new kids in our home," Caroline Hazelton said, adding that even the Muslim Afghan teens, who had never seen a stocking bulging with presents, quickly joined the festivities.

Like most youths in these programs, those boys were eventually reunited with their birth family — the mother hugged Caroline for ten minutes, sobbing in gratefulness. With Sol, whose father has gone missing on the journey across the desert, and other children without relatives in the United States, foster families' commitments can last years.

As Sol packed her school lunch in a "Stranger Things" bag under Cosmo's watchful eyes, the Hazeltons said they would be happy to have her stay forever and already refer to their four daughters.

Regardless of the length of stay, foster parents say they need to give the children enough stability to get comfortable with unfamiliar U.S. customs — from air conditioning to strict school routines — and to learn more English.

"We're never going to be like their parents. Thank God we live in a country where things can be easier," said Carlos Zubizarreta. A foster child himself 50 years ago, he's been a foster parent in the Miami area for about 30 children over nearly two decades, in addition to having biological, now adult children.

Nevertheless, he always finds it hard when each foster child leaves after they've shared nightly dinners, vacations, and household tasks like car maintenance. Zubizarreta plans to continue to foster as long as he feels that is what God is calling him to do.

In Baltimore, Jason Herring has been a foster father for a year, to five children from Central America through a program run by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service that focuses on short-term care for those whose return to biological parents is being assessed by the government.

He says he is not religious — initially, he feared he wouldn't be accepted in the program for being gay. That led him to sympathize with the plight of children suffering because of adult decisions they have no power over.

"I understand what it feels to be the other," he said. "You don't have to be a perfect parent, just be there."

Like all foster families, those taking in unaccompanied migrant children must be licensed by their state, and often receive extra training specific to immigration law and trauma, said Amanda Nosel, the Lutheran agency's program manager for foster care in Baltimore.

"There's certainly a national shortage in foster parents right now. We have so many kids who need homes," Nosel said.

Acclimating to a new country in a caring family setting is especially important given the deep and increasing level of trauma these children carry, from what they had to flee in their countries through the

journey to the United States.

"It's trauma on top of trauma on top of trauma. Kids are just living in survival mode," said Sarah Howell, a clinical social worker in Houston with long experience counseling migrant children, including a teenage girl she's raising.

They often internalize fear and grieving so much that they appear mature beyond their age, while still being terrified that any new familial relationship will abandon them. It takes a while before foster parents are relieved to see regular child or teen behavior make an appearance — even if that means refusing all but junk food or sibling bickering, it's still a sign of normalcy.

"All of them are kids, but with an adult age," said Bernie Vilar, who works as a mentor in a home for vulnerable youth, including those who age out of Miami's Catholic Charities foster care. Vilar, 24, was homeless when he was younger, and he tries to pass on the passion for education that helped him survive that.

But he says many are too burdened by the debts they owe the smugglers who brought them to the U.S. to be interested in anything but work, while others struggle with depression after witnessing death and violence on their journeys.

Brandon Garcia, 20, seems to have beaten the odds. After crossing alone at 15 because his parents told him he would have no opportunities in Guatemala's Indigenous highlands, he spent six months living with the Hazeltons and is now in Vilar's group home, finishing technical college.

He still misses his family, but loves the Hazeltons' daughters as his own sisters. At a holiday party in a suburban Miami bowling alley organized by the Catholic Charities program, he played with them at intervals between bites of pizza and aiming for strikes with other young men.

Garcia said the speed of change as he adapted to the United States was hard, but he has never thought of going back. His happiest moment came when the Hazeltons brought him to Orlando's theme parks — a holiday tradition that they plan to continue this year with Sol — and they watched the fireworks display.

"I felt the same happiness as with my family," Garcia said. "I told myself, this is a country of great opportunities, and I have to take advantage of them."

Shohei Ohtani is the AP Male Athlete of the Year for the 2nd time in 3 years

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — Before Shohei Ohtani stepped into the bright lights of Hollywood and signed the most lucrative contract in professional sports history, baseball's two-way superstar put together yet another season of unparalleled brilliance from Tokyo to Anaheim.

What can this singular talent possibly do next? The Los Angeles Dodgers are eagerly paying \$700 million to see for themselves.

But what Ohtani already did in 2023 — both for the Los Angeles Angels and for Japan's team in the World Baseball Classic — is the reason he was selected as The Associated Press' Male Athlete of the Year for the second time in three years.

"Shohei is arguably the most talented player who's ever played this game," said Andrew Friedman, the Dodgers' president of baseball operations, after signing Ohtani to a 10-year contract last week.

Ohtani edged Inter Miami superstar Lionel Messi and tennis great Novak Djokovic for the AP honor in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

Ohtani received 20 of 87 votes, while Messi and Djokovic got 16 apiece. Nikola Jokic, the Denver Nuggets' NBA Finals MVP, got 12 votes.

After winning his first AP Male Athlete of the Year award in 2021, Ohtani has joined an impressive list of two-time winners of the honor, which was first handed out in 1931.

Multiple-time winners include Don Budge, Byron Nelson, Carl Lewis, Joe Montana, Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps and four-time honorees Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. Four-time winner LeBron James is another generational superstar who chose Los Angeles as a free agent, while two-time honoree Sandy

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 72 of 77

Koufax remains one of the greatest players to wear Dodger Blue.

Ohtani has upended decades of conventional wisdom during his six years in the majors, even surpassing most achievements of Babe Ruth while playing in an infinitely more difficult era. Most new frontiers in sports are crossed incrementally and gradually, but Ohtani has toppled barriers that stood for a century with peerless skills, confidence and hard work.

Ohtani unanimously won the AL MVP award in 2021, and he repeated the feat in 2023 after finishing second in 2022 to Yankees slugger Aaron Judge, last year's AP Male Athlete of the Year.

This year began with Ohtani's dazzling MVP performance for Japan's championship team in the World Baseball Classic — complete with a clinching strikeout of Angels teammate Mike Trout. He then turned in his third consecutive spectacular season both on the mound and at the plate in Anaheim despite an early end after he injured his pitching elbow in August.

Ohtani led the AL with 44 homers, 78 extra-base hits, 325 total bases and a 1.066 OPS as the Halos' designated hitter. He also held hitters to an AL-best .184 batting average while ranking second in the league with 11.39 strikeouts per nine innings and third with a 3.14 ERA at the time of his injury.

"There's nobody like him, and there's nothing that you would say he can't do," former Angels manager Phil Nevin said late in the season. "Anything is possible with Sho. I don't know who else you could say that about in baseball history."

Ohtani left Japan in late 2017 to pursue his dreams at his sport's highest level, and his exploits are followed in microscopic detail by his fans in his homeland. When he got his first chance to play for Japan in the World Baseball Classic last spring, Ohtani seized the moment with both hands.

Ohtani was outstanding in Japan's games in Tokyo and Miami, batting .435 with four doubles and a homer despite getting walked 10 times. He also pitched 9 2/3 innings, racking up 11 strikeouts with a 1.86 ERA.

The championship game ended in storybook fashion with Ohtani striking out Trout, the three-time AL MVP and Ohtani's longtime Angels teammate, for the final out in Japan's victory over the U.S.

Ohtani then turned in another outstanding, unique season with the Angels before he hurt his elbow and eventually had a second surgery that will almost certainly prevent him from pitching in 2024, just as he missed nearly all of 2019 and 2020 as a pitcher.

His injury history did nothing to suppress his free-agent value, partly because Ohtani can remain one of the majors' best hitters while he waits to see if his pitching elbow will heal again.

"One of the many things we've come to appreciate over the years about Shohei is watching him never take a pitch off, no matter the score of the game," Friedman said. "I've seen him in games where his team is up big or down big, grinding each pitch late in an at-bat — hustling, doing everything he can to leg out an infield hit late in a game."

While Ohtani has redefined what's possible in modern baseball, he accomplished another unprecedented feat by signing his record-setting contract. The deep-pocketed Dodgers eagerly invested in the 29-year-old Ohtani's next decade while knowing his worldwide fame generates revenue no other baseball player can touch.

"I'm still in the pinch-me phase, to be honest," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "Can't believe we're going to have the opportunity to have him wear a Dodger uniform. One of the most talented players ever to put on a baseball uniform is now a Dodger."

Ohtani did nearly everything except win with the Angels, who haven't had a winning season since 2015. When he hit free agency this winter, he eventually chose the nearby club that has had only two losing seasons in the 21st century, none since 2010.

The Dodgers won the aggressive competition for Ohtani's services by offering that gargantuan — and structurally creative — contract, but also a supportive environment on the West Coast, supremely talented teammates and the resources to get more — along with a winning culture around a team that has made 11 consecutive playoff appearances.

"I can't wait to join the Dodgers," Ohtani said through his translator, Ipppei Mizuhara. "They share the same passion as me. They have a vision and history all about winning. I share the same values."

US, Venezuela swap prisoners: Maduro ally for 10 Americans, plus fugitive contractor 'Fat Leonard'

By JOSHUA GOODMAN, ERIC TUCKER and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The United States freed a close ally of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in exchange for the release of 10 Americans imprisoned in the South American country and the return of a fugitive defense contractor known as "Fat Leonard" who is at the center of a massive Pentagon bribery scandal, the Biden administration announced Wednesday.

The American detainees were back on U.S. soil late Wednesday, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said. Six of them arrived at Kelly Airfield Annex in San Antonio.

Savoi Wright, a Californian who had been arrested in Venezuela in October, said, "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last" after disembarking the plane.

The deal represents the Biden administration's boldest move yet to improve relations with the major oil-producing nation and extract concessions from the self-proclaimed socialist leader. The largest release of American prisoners in Venezuela's history comes weeks after the White House agreed to suspend some sanctions, following a commitment by Maduro to work toward free and fair conditions for the 2024 presidential election.

Maduro celebrated the return of Alex Saab as a "triumph for truth" over what he called a U.S.-led campaign of lies, threats and torture against someone he considers a Venezuelan diplomat illegally arrested on a U.S. warrant.

"President Biden, we won't be anyone's colony," a defiant Maduro said with Saab at his side for a hero's welcome at the presidential palace.

The release of Saab, long regarded by Washington as a bagman for Maduro, is a significant concession to the Venezuelan leader. Former President Donald Trump's administration held out Saab as a trophy, spending millions of dollars pursuing the Colombian-born businessman, at one point even deploying a Navy warship to the coast of West Africa following his arrest in Cape Verde to ward off a possible escape.

U.S. officials said Biden's decision to grant him clemency was difficult but essential in order to bring home jailed Americans, a core administrative objective that in recent years has resulted in the release of criminals once seen as untradeable.

"These individuals have lost far too much precious time with their loved ones, and their families have suffered every day in their absence. I am grateful that their ordeal is finally over," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

The agreement also resulted in the return to U.S. custody of Leonard Glenn Francis, the Malaysian owner of a ship-servicing company who is the central character in one of the largest bribery scandals in Pentagon history.

But the exchange angered many in the Venezuelan opposition who have criticized the White House for standing by as Maduro has repeatedly outmaneuvered Washington after the Trump administration's campaign to topple him failed.

Eyvin Hernandez, a Los Angeles County public defender arrested almost two years ago along the Colombia-Venezuela border, was one of the U.S. detainees. After arriving in Texas Wednesday night, he thanked Biden "because I know he made a difficult decision that will have a lot of pressure on him on Capitol Hill. But he got us home and we're with our families. And so we're incredibly grateful, all of us."

Hernandez added, "Honestly, all you think about when you're in prison is how you didn't appreciate being free while you were free."

Wright told reporters: "I didn't know if I would ever make it out. And it's really scary to be in a place where you're used to having freedoms and you're locked into a cell. ... It's a very challenging situation."

In October, the White House eased sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry following promises by Maduro that he would level the playing field for the 2024 election, when he's looking to add six years to his

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 74 of 77

decade-long, crisis-ridden rule. A Nov. 30 deadline has passed and so far Maduro has failed to reverse a ban blocking his chief opponent, María Corina Machado, from running for office.

Biden told reporters earlier in the day that, so far, Maduro appeared to be “keeping his commitment on a free election.” Republicans, echoing the sentiment of many in the U.S.-backed opposition, said Saab’s release would only embolden Maduro to continue down an authoritarian path.

“Disgraceful decision,” Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, posted on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter.

The White House went to lengths to assure it won’t hesitate to snap back sanctions if Venezuela’s government fails to fulfill electoral commitments hammered out during negotiations with the opposition. A \$15 million reward seeking Maduro’s arrest to face drug trafficking charges in New York also remains in effect, it said.

The agreement also requires Maduro’s government to release 20 Venezuelan political prisoners, in addition to a close ally of Machado, and to suspend arrest warrants of three other Venezuelans.

The U.S. has conducted several swaps with Venezuela over the past few years, including one in October 2022 for seven Americans, including five oil executives at Houston-based Citgo, in exchange for the release of two nephews of Maduro’s wife jailed in the U.S. on narcotics charges. Like that earlier exchange, Wednesday’s swap took place on an airstrip in the Caribbean island nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Saab, who turns 52 on Thursday, hugged his wife and two young children as he descended the staircase of a private jet at the Simon Bolivar International Airport.

It was a stark reversal from the scene on another tarmac, in Cape Verde, where he was arrested in 2020 during a fuel stop en route to Iran to negotiate oil deals on behalf of Maduro’s government. The U.S. charges were conspiracy to commit money laundering tied to a bribery scheme that allegedly siphoned off \$350 million through state contracts to build affordable housing. Saab was also sanctioned for allegedly running a scheme that stole hundreds of millions in dollars from food-import contracts at a time of widespread hunger mainly due to shortages in the South American country.

After his arrest, Maduro’s government said Saab was a special envoy on a humanitarian mission and was entitled to diplomatic immunity from criminal prosecution under international law.

“Life is a miracle,” Saab said, standing alongside Maduro at the neoclassical presidential palace in Caracas. “I’m proud to serve the Venezuelan people and this government, a loyal government, which, like me, never gives up. We will always triumph.”

Absent from Maduro’s chest-thumping was any mention of Saab’s secret meetings with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In a closed-door court hearing last year, Saab’s lawyers said that he was for years helping that agency untangle corruption in Maduro’s inner circle and had agreed to forfeit millions of dollars in illegal proceeds from corrupt state contracts.

But the value of the information he shared with the Americans is unknown; some have suggested it may have all been a Maduro-authorized ruse to collect intelligence on the U.S. law enforcement activities in Venezuela. Whatever the case, Saab skipped out on a May 2019 surrender date and shortly afterward was charged by federal prosecutors in Miami.

The deal is the latest concession by the Biden administration in the name of bringing home Americans jailed overseas, including a high-profile prisoner exchange last December when the U.S. government — over the objections of some Republicans in Congress and criticism from some law enforcement officials — traded Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout for WNBA star Brittney Griner.

The swaps have raised concerns that the U.S. is incentivizing hostage-taking abroad and producing a false equivalence between Americans who are wrongfully detained abroad and foreigners who have been properly prosecuted and convicted in U.S. courts.

“What happened to the separation of powers?” said Juan Cruz, who oversaw the White House’s relations with Latin America while working at the National Security Council from 2017-19. “Normally you would have to wait a defendant to be found guilty in order to be able to pardon him for a swap. This is an especially bad precedent with a Trump 2.0 potentially around the corner. It invites winking and nodding from the

executive.”

But Biden administration officials say securing the freedom of wrongfully detained Americans and hostages abroad requires difficult dealmaking.

Making this deal more palatable to the White House was Venezuela’s willingness to return Francis.

Nicknamed “Fat Leonard” for his bulging 6-foot-3 frame, Francis was arrested in a San Diego hotel nearly a decade ago as part of a federal sting operation. Investigators say he bilked the U.S. military out of more than \$35 million by buying off dozens of top-ranking Navy officers with booze, sex, lavish parties and other gifts.

Three weeks before he faced sentencing in September 2022, Francis made an escape as stunning and brazen as the case itself as he snipped off his ankle monitor and disappeared. He was arrested by Venezuelan police attempting to board a flight from Caracas and has been in custody since.

Were your holiday deliveries stolen? What to know about porch piracy and what you can do about it

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — You found the perfect holiday gift online. You ordered it. A notification arrived on your phone, showing the package had arrived. But when you open your doors, the parcel is nowhere to be found.

If this has happened to you, then count yourself among the unlucky group of shoppers who fall victim to package thefts — or porch piracy, as it’s commonly known.

Here’s what you should know about the issue, and what to do if it happens to you.

HOW BIG OF A PROBLEM IS PORCH PIRACY?

It’s hard to tell. Most police departments don’t track package theft in its own category, which means there’s a lack of national data.

The FBI’s figures do show burglary offenses and larceny-theft — a category that includes shoplifting, pickpocketing, and instances of package theft — have decreased overall in the last 20-plus years. But since both categories are broad and the agency doesn’t keep tabs on specific incidents of package thefts, it’s challenging to know whether the problem is getting better or worse.

Some police departments have started to segregate reports of package theft into their own category, which does show some worrying signs. In Denver, Colorado, for example, there’s been more than 1,260 reported incidents of package thefts this year, up from roughly 750 four years ago.

Some industry surveys show it’s a headache for many online shoppers. A product research company called The Chamber of Commerce said it surveyed 1,250 U.S. consumers in October and found that 26% of them have been victims of package theft. The problem was roughly split between urban and suburban areas, it said, and only 18% of consumers who’ve had packages stolen reported it to police.

Another report, which used a variety of sources and was compiled by the bank Capitol One, showed 14% of Americans were victims of porch piracy last year. It said those thefts amounted to \$29.2 billion in losses.

WHAT ARE COMPANIES DOING ABOUT IT?

Retailers and delivery companies are trying to combat the problem in a variety of ways.

UPS and FedEx, for example, allow customers to delay package deliveries if they’re not home or divert them to other pickup locations, either for free or with a fee.

This year, UPS also rolled out a feature called DeliveryDefense that uses AI to assess delivery risks and generate a “confidence score” for addresses where merchants need to ship packages. If the address has a low score, merchants can offer customers in-store collection or UPS pick-up points, which include CVS and Michaels stores as well as other local businesses. UPS spokesperson Jim Mayer said 350 retailers are using the service, but declined to provide examples.

Retailers like Amazon and Walmart also allow customers to track their orders and prepare for deliveries, or pick them up in stores.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 76 of 77

Amazon, which has a limited physical footprint compared to Walmart, has lockers where packages can be picked up at third-party locations, as well as its subsidiary Whole Foods. The company also gives its Prime members the option to have packages placed inside secure locations like their garage by Amazon drivers.

In addition, retailers and brands are partnering with companies that offer shipping protections, and choosing to take on those expenses or offer it to consumers who want to pay for it.

One of these companies, Extend, noted that it works with 400 retailers, merchants and brands like Anne Klein and LensDirect, which sells contact lens and glasses. Rohan Shah, the founder of Extend, says high-end retailers who are focused on retaining customers are choosing to pay for warranties. But the majority are offering it to consumers as an add-on.

WHAT DO I DO IF I CAN'T FIND MY PACKAGES?

Retailers say customers should check their order status and confirm whether a package was delivered. If the delivery was finalized, they say customers should ask other members of their household or their neighbors to see if someone else accepted the delivery.

If that doesn't work, the best thing to do would be to reach out to the company from which you purchased the item.

Shah, from Extend, said retailers are often trying to determine if customers are telling the truth, and looking at things like the shopper's prior history of reporting stolen packages to determine how they should respond. Some, he said, are asking customers to file police reports, which most people don't want to do whether they're lying or not.

"There are these points – what I like to call friction or 'gotchas' – where (retailers) will try to minimize customers filing these claims because they know it's going to cost them," Shah said. "It's a bit of a headache for all parties involved."

Ben Stickle, a criminal justice professor at Middle Tennessee State University and a leading expert on the topic, said retailers are generally willing to replace stolen packages, which might be driven by a desire to maintain their brand reputation and customer loyalty.

Amazon encourages customers to contact customer service if they don't have their package in hand within 30 days of expected delivery. Customers who ordered items from Amazon's third-party sellers should contact those merchants, the company says on its website. Walmart also says customers should reach out to the company.

Target includes a clause on its site that says the risk of loss passes to the buyer after the company delivers an order to a carrier. Still, the company says on its site that customers who can't find their deliveries can request a replacement or a refund online.

If retailers aren't helping, Consumer Reports says customers should contact the shipping company. If the purchase was made with a credit card, it might also be worth checking the credit card company's benefits to see if it includes insurance for lost or stolen items, they said. Homeowners or renters insurance might also help, it noted, but those policies usually have deductibles of \$500 or more.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

Stealing packages delivered by the U.S. Postal Service is a federal crime. But punishment for taking parcels delivered by private carriers, like UPS or Amazon, falls under state laws, which can differ.

A bill to expand federal penalties to packages delivered by private carriers was introduced in Congress last year by U.S. Rep. Dean Phillips, a Democrat from Minnesota. But the legislation hasn't advanced.

Meanwhile, some states — including Texas, New Jersey and Michigan — have been changing their own laws in the past few years to impose more stringent penalties on porch piracy.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 22, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 181 ~ 77 of 77

Today in History: December 22

Lech Walesa becomes Poland's first popularly elected president

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 22, the 356th day of 2023. There are nine days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 22, 1990, Lech Walesa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) took the oath of office as Poland's first popularly elected president.

On this date:

In 1858, opera composer Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy.

In 1894, French army officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason in a court-martial that triggered worldwide charges of anti-Semitism. (Dreyfus was eventually vindicated.)

In 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived in Washington for a wartime conference with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1944, during the World War II Battle of the Bulge, U.S. Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe rejected a German demand for surrender, writing "Nuts!" in his official reply.

In 1984, New York City resident Bernhard Goetz shot and wounded four young Black men on a Manhattan subway, alleging they were about to rob him.

In 1989, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'-koo), the last of Eastern Europe's hard-line Communist rulers, was toppled from power in a popular uprising.

In 1992, a Libyan Boeing 727 jetliner crashed after a midair collision with a MiG fighter, killing all 157 aboard the jetliner, and both crew members of the fighter jet.

In 1995, actor Butterfly McQueen, who'd played the slave Prissy in "Gone with the Wind," died in Augusta, Georgia, at age 84.

In 2001, Richard C. Reid, a passenger on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, tried to ignite explosives in his shoes, but was subdued by flight attendants and fellow passengers. (Reid is serving a life sentence in federal prison.)

In 2003, a federal judge ruled the Pentagon couldn't enforce mandatory anthrax vaccinations for military personnel.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a law allowing gays for the first time in history to serve openly in America's military, repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

In 2017, the wildfire that had burned its way through communities and wilderness northwest of Los Angeles became the largest blaze ever officially recorded in California; it had scorched 273,400 acres and destroyed more than 700 homes.

In 2020, President Donald Trump unexpectedly released two videos, one falsely declaring that he had won the election in a "landslide," and the other urging lawmakers to increase direct payments for most individuals to \$2,000 in a COVID relief package, a move opposed by most Republicans.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hector Elizondo is 87. Country singer Red Steagall is 85. Former World Bank Group President Paul Wolfowitz is 80. Baseball Hall of Famer Steve Carlton is 79. Former ABC News anchor Diane Sawyer is 78. Rock singer-musician Rick Nielsen (Cheap Trick) is 75. Rock singer-musician Michael Bacon is 75. Baseball All-Star Steve Garvey is 75. Golfer Jan Stephenson is 72. Actor BernNadette Stanis is 70. Rapper Luther "Luke" Campbell is 63. Actor Ralph Fiennes (rayf fynz) is 61. Actor Lauralee Bell is 55. Country singer Lori McKenna is 55. Actor Dina Meyer is 55. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is 53. Actor Heather Donahue is 50. Actor Chris Carmack is 43. Actor Harry Ford is 41. Actor Greg Finley is 39. Actor Logan Huffman is 34. R&B singer Jordin Sparks is 34. Pop singer Meghan Trainor is 30. Norwegian tennis player Casper Ruud is 25.