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Friday, Dec. 29

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, buttered carrots, apricots, whole wheat bread.

No School - Christmas Break

Boys Basketball at Hoop City Classic in Mitchell: Groton Area vs. Pine Ridge at 12:30 p.m.

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Webster, 9:30 a.m.

Saturday, Dec. 30

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

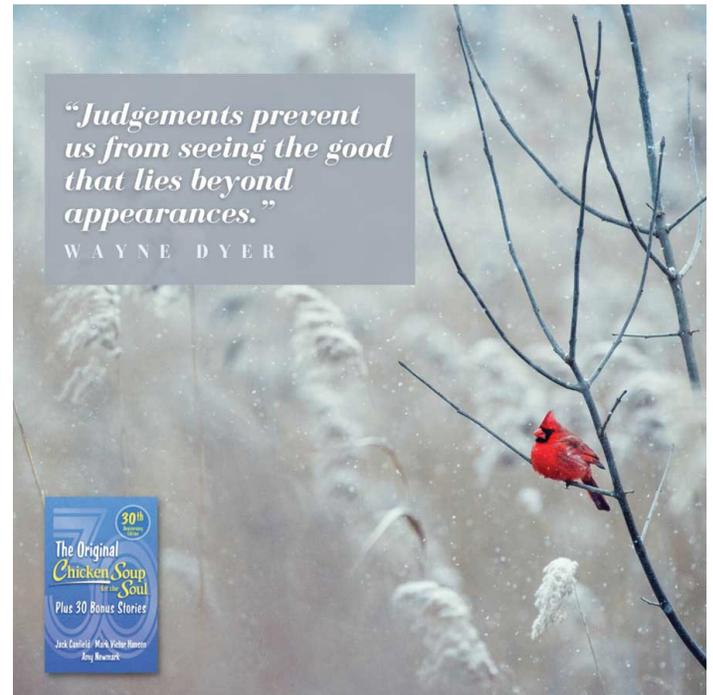
Sunday, Dec. 31

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

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

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

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



We will be unable to broadcast the Boys Game at Mitchell on today due to the Corn Palace having a contract for exclusive livestreaming.

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.

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

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

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

Monday, Jan. 1

No School

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1440

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Former President Donald Trump will not appear on the Republican ballot in Maine's presidential primary after Secretary of State Shenna Bellows (D) ruled his role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021, made him ineligible under a clause in the 14th Amendment. The decision follows a ruling with similar effect by Colorado's Supreme Court, and a decision by Michigan's Supreme Court leaving him eligible for the primary race.

US stock markets are on pace to wrap up the year with double-digit gains. The S&P 500, which is hovering near its all-time high, closed up 25% for the year yesterday. The technology-heavy Nasdaq closed up 45% for the year and is nearing its best year since 2003. The Dow closed up 14% for the year, setting a seventh record high for the month yesterday.

Gypsy Rose Blanchard, convicted of coordinating the 2015 murder of her abusive mother, was released from Missouri state prison yesterday after serving seven years of a 10-year sentence. The 32-year-old Blanchard's story garnered international attention via numerous documentaries, with a series of prison interviews set to air next week on Lifetime.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Chancellor Joe Gow fired after pornographic videos of Gow and his wife are uncovered.

College Football Playoff kicks off Monday with No. 1 Michigan taking on No. 4 Alabama (4 pm ET, ESPN) and No. 2 Washington against No. 3 Texas (8 pm ET, ESPN).

Mbongeni Ngema, iconic South African playwright and six-time Tony and Grammy Award nominee, dies in a car crash at 68.

Science & Technology

US military's X-37B space plane begins seventh mission; vehicle was launched via a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket, allowing it to reach as high as 22,000 miles above Earth.

Scientists discover source of mysterious type of immune system cells known as stem-like central memory T cells, which play a key role in remembering previously encountered pathogens.

Study suggests ultra-dense neutron stars contain quarks—fundamental particles that make up protons and neutrons, which help make up atoms—at their core. Learn more about neutron stars, collapsed super giant stars roughly 10 miles wide.

Business & Markets

Global mergers and acquisitions fell 17% to \$2.87T in 2023, the lowest level in more than 10 years and driven partly by tightening markets; Japan was the only country to see M&A growth at 32%.

Detroit-based General Motors sues San Francisco for \$121M refund, alleging the city miscalculated its tax bill for seven years by improperly including GM's separate San Francisco-based Cruise unit.

Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi unveils first electric vehicle in bid to compete with Tesla, Porsche.

Politics & World Affairs

An estimated 150,000 people forced to flee central Gaza as Israeli troops expand operations against Hamas to refugee camps.

Rep. Lauren Boebert (R, CO-3) to move residences, will run in Colorado's 4th District after facing tough reelection bid; former President Donald Trump won the 4th District by 16 points in 2020, current Rep. Ken Buck (R) is retiring.

US homicide rate dropped by as much as 12% between 2022 and 2023, but remained higher than 2008-20 period, according to preliminary data.

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

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**HERE'S TO THE BRIGHT
NEW YEAR, AND A
FOND FAREWELL TO THE
OLD; HERE'S TO THE
THINGS THAT
ARE YET TO COME,
AND TO THE
MEMORIES
THAT WE
HOLD.**

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

**Farmers
Union
CO-OP**



101 S 1st Ave., Ferney

**Trees
featured
at Wage
Memorial
Library**



Doug Abeln Seed Company

*Be rooted in
2024 with seeds
of success!*

2024

Doug Abeln ~ 605/380-0200

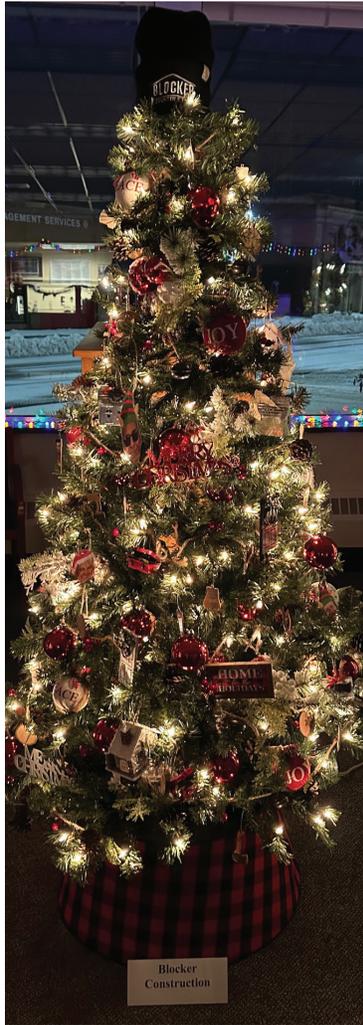
Latham
HI-TECH SEEDS

Limagrain

BECK'S

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**Come celebrate New Years Eve
with Josie!**



Dec. 31st
from
9 to 1

Groton American Legion Post #39

Lounge: 605-397-2603 ~ Downtown Groton

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**We are
excited to serve you in the
New Year!
605/380-7811**



Harry Implement

"Family Owned & Operated Since 1935!"

(605) 395-6421 ~ Ferney

Let there
be peace
on Earth in
2024 and
may peace
be with you
and your
family
throughout
the year!



GHS Girls' Basketball

Groton Area beats Aberdeen Christian

Groton Area's girls basketball teams posted wins over Aberdeen Christian in games played in Groton on Thursday.

The varsity team led at the quarter stops at 16-2, 27-5 and 34-10.

Brooklyn Hansen led the Tigers with 11 points, two rebounds, one assist and two steals. Jerica Locke had nine points, three rebounds, four assists and two steals. Jaedyn Penning had six points, four rebounds and one assist. Rylee Dunker had six points, three rebounds, two assists and four steals. Kennedy Hansen had five points, two rebounds, three assists and two steals. Taryn Traphagen had four points, seven rebounds, one assist and one steal. Faith Traphagen had two points, one rebound and one steal. Laila Roberts had three rebounds, Talli Wright had one rebound and Emily Clark had one assist.

Groton Area made 14 of 30 two-pointers for 47 percent, five of 15 three-pointers for 33 percent, had 28 rebounds, 12 turnovers, 13 assists, 12 steals, 14 team fouls and two blocks by Taryn Traphagen.

Sophia Fogarty led the Knights with nine points and Chloe Holt had five points. The Knights made four of 29 field goals for 14 percent and five of 10 free throws for 50 percent, had 16 turnovers and four team fouls.

Groton Area, now 3-3 on the season, will travel to Warner on Tuesday as part of a double header.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 47-0. Faith Traphagen led Groton Area with nine points followed by Mia Crank with eight, McKenna Tietz, Emerlee Jones, Taryn Traphagen and Talli Wright each had six points, Sydney Locke had four and Laila Roberts added two points.



Rylee Dunker sets a screen for Kennedy Hansen. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Jerica Locke brings the ball down the court in Groton's game with Aberdeen Christian.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

Both games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The varsity game was sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking. Dorene Nelson sponsored the junior varsity game. Shane Clark did the play-by-play of the games with Jeslyn Kosel running the camera.

- Paul Kosel



Emily Clark passes the ball off after being cut off by Chloe Holt.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #6 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus – 16, Coyotes – 15, Jackelopes – 15, Cheetahs – 11, Chipmunks – 10, Foxes – 5

Men's High Games: Brad Waage – 225, Tony Waage – 203, John Sippel – 199

Women's High Games: Emily Sternhagen – 180, Alexa Schuring – 174, Sue Stanley – 171

Men's High Series: Tony Waage – 564, Brad Waage – 546, Brad Larson – 514

Women's High Series: Alexa Schuring – 474, Sue Stanley – 458, Vicki Walter – 431

Fun Game - Least Strikes - Chipmunks with 18!

THE ROAD HOME FOR CHRISTMAS 1966.

by Jermitt Krage

It is always GREAT to be home for Christmas. I always made it home to spend the holidays with my Dad and Mom except while I was in the Army, Christmas was just two days away and we were on our way home to Columbia, South Dakota.

We wanted to leave earlier, but both Doris and I were teaching in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We were required to teach until the end of the day on December 22, 1966. So we still had two days to drive the six hundred miles. As always, you never knew what that weather might be like or how much snow there might be on the two-lane highways. Neither the weather nor the road forecasts were as accurate as they are nowadays. The Interstate Highway I-94 was not completed, so U.S. Highway 12 was the most direct route from Milwaukee to Columbia.

We had a very special present this year for our parents, relatives, and friends who lived in the Columbia area. Kristi Ann was born in October and was less than two months old. Karmen, who was just ten, was very excited about showing off her new little sister.

We were up early on the morning of December 23. The car was packed and ready to go, so we were on the road by 6:00 A.M. If all went all right and if we could average 50 miles per hour, we would be at our parents' home between 7:00 and 8:00 P.M. that same evening. It had been snowing some during the night and the roads had a slight covering of snow, so trying to maintain a 50-mile-per-hour average was going to be tough.

It took us nearly three hours to reach Madison, nearly twice as long as it should have taken us. Karmen was already asking us, "Are we there yet"? But Kristi, our newly born baby was sleeping well in the back seat, so we were doing the best we could under the conditions of the roads.

The road conditions became worse on Highway 12 traveling from Tomah to Eau Claire. Snow was getting deeper as it continued to snow. The road through those hills in that area was getting pretty treacherous. On occasion, the car was slipping and sliding near the edge of the highway. Our new snow tires on our three-year-old Plymouth were essential. Good snow tires helped to keep us on the highway. The radio playing Christmas music also kept us motivated, not that we needed more motivation.

We seem to be making better time between Eau Claire and Minneapolis as the road conditions have improved. However, it was past 5:00 P.M. and getting dark when we reached our mid-way point, Minneapolis. If we were going to reach home by Christmas Eve to participate in the Church activities, we would need to continue, especially if we had the kind of driving we had from Milwaukee to Eau Claire.

Doris and I talked about just getting a room at a motel in Minneapolis. After a brief discussion, we

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decided to call the Minnesota Highway Patrol to get a highway report. If U.S. Highway 12 was okay, we would continue to drive west, at least another 100 miles.

An officer from the Minnesota Highway Patrol told us that Highway 12 was badly snow-covered and very slow driving. "Rather than take Highway 12, I would suggest you stay further south as there was less snow and a lot less wind thirty to forty miles south of Highway 12". "I would urge you to take U.S. Highway 212 from Minneapolis to Watertown, SD. Once you reach Watertown, call the SD Patrol and ask them the best route from there to Aberdeen".

It was about 6:15 and we decided to leave Minneapolis. If the roads were good we would drive about 200 miles to Watertown S.D. U.S. Highway 212 was in pretty good shape. You could see however, the snow had been building up to the point where the ditches were full as we were driving west out of the city. The highway was great through Chaska and Glencoe. We were having a pretty good time, or at least compared to the first 300 miles. We decided we would stay in Granite Falls, about another ninety minutes away. About ten minutes out of Glencoe it began to snow, not too bad when it started, but soon it became heavier. By now it was nearly 9:00 P.M. and no traffic from either direction. It was snowing hard when we hit the next small town, Hector. But there was no motel or even a gas station. The next town was Olivia, just 12 miles away.

When we continued driving west toward Olivia, the snow became heavier and the wind was starting to blow. Wind was driving the snow from the open fields creating drifts across the road. Soon, we were in a total "whiteout". I had to stop the car on the road. There simply was no way to see where the road ended and the road ditches started. We were praying that no car or certainly a large semi would come crashing down on us. There was absolutely nothing we could do at that point; nowhere to drive and no place to stay except in the car. Fortunately, we had warm clothes, some food and water in the car, and food for the baby. We also had a candle that we carefully used for light and we had the flashlight. We had enough gasoline for the car to last throughout the night, but only if we ran the car sparingly. We could only hope no other vehicle would come barreling down the highway and crash into us from either direction.

We were dead-stopped on the highway for over an hour. The snowstorm began to lighten up, but hardly enough for us to see the road in front of us. We decided it was safer for us to move, if even so slowly than to be stopped on the highway. But there was no way to see where the road was by looking through the windshield. I could see the left edge of the road if I opened my window slightly, but I would be driving on the wrong side of the road. When we tried to open the window on the right side of the car, the north wind-driven snow was just too much for us to handle. We had to keep the windows on that side of the car closed.

We had no idea how far Olivia was at this point, nor did we know if there would be any place for us to stay. If nothing else, perhaps a family would take us in if we could get there. So looking out the right-side window to watch where the road was I began to drive very slowly on the left side of the highway. I checked the speedometer. The top speed is five miles per hour. At least we were moving.

Fifteen minutes passed. We are one mile further down the road. We continued, another fifteen minutes another mile. We still had no idea how far it was to Olivia. Another fifteen minutes and another mile. Shortly after the third mile, we see a light; but just barely. It appears the light is right along the highway. As we inch closer, we can see it is a very small country motel. It was hard to believe. Perhaps it was just our imagination. As I inched our way closer, there was a driveway leading to the motel. We narrowly missed getting stuck as we drove into their parking lot. Yes, there was a room at the inn.

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THE ROAD HOME FOR CHRISTMAS 1966. (final chapter)

The Christmas Angels were with us that night. It was unbelievable. Somehow, we had made it to this little motel in this little town in the middle of Minnesota in the middle of the night. We were extremely thankful for the safe harbor after a very tedious drive. Thinking back on the events of that day, we decided that even if we didn't reach our goal of "being home for Christmas", we still had the best Christmas ever, just being in that warm motel with our two very young daughters.

The wind continues to roar throughout the night as it continues to carry snow from the sky and across the fields. Early morning, the wind and the snow stopped as quickly as they seemed to start the evening before. Looking out the window that sunny morning, we saw snow drifts piled high from the front of the motel to the other side of the road. Nothing was moving, no cars, no trucks, and no people. Everything and everyone was staying in place. At this point, we didn't really care. Perhaps we knew there was no way the last 180 miles of highway could be cleared before the end of the day.

It was just before eight in the morning when we heard a gentle knock on our door. When I answered it, it was the same elderly gentleman who checked us in the night before. "Good morning. The Mrs. has some breakfast ready. We would like you to join us." I said we would be honored to join you for breakfast. What time would you like us to be there?" "How about 8:30," He said. "Be sure to bring the baby with you, the Mrs. really wants to see her". "Sure, we will bring her along and we will be there at 8:30.

When we went next door for breakfast, the Mrs. made a big fuss over the baby. I don't think she was too happy we were out in the bad weather the night before, and she was pretty blunt about it. The elderly man tried to smooth it over but then got a sharp stare from the Mrs. He went on to tell us that a local farmer would be over soon and have their parking area cleared of snow

It was nearly noon before the first snow plow came through, opening one lane of the road going east. We decided we would follow the snow plow west if it returned, hopefully, all the way to the SD state line. The farmer had cleared the motel parking lot with his front-end loader, so we were prepared to move just in case.

Two hours later the snow plow returned. But the snow plow didn't take us to the S.D. state line, it took us an additional 25 miles all the way to Watertown. We were there by 3:00 P.M. That was the good news, the bad news was Highway U.S 81 that connected us to U.S. Highway 12 was open but U.S. 12, the last 70 miles to Aberdeen was not only closed and wouldn't be open until the afternoon of the next day, Christmas Day. So we decided to find a motel for that night and to make the best of our Christmas Eve in Watertown, SD. When checking with the clerk at the local motel, he said they had no rooms available, but some folks were planning on check out shortly. He would save us their room. In the meantime, he suggested we get a bite to eat in their restaurant.

As Karmen was having cookie and a cup of hot chocolate and we were having a cup of coffee and a piece of pie, two semi-trucks pulled into the parking lot of the motel. They too, came into the restaurant. While having a cup of coffee at the counter. I overheard their conversation. They were talking about going to Aberdeen, which is just a short distance from Columbia. I asked them if they were going in the morning. They said, "No, we are leaving shortly, right after having a cup of coffee. We are taking a SD. State highway 20 which is open to Aberdeen". I asked if we could follow and they said "Sure". So I called my Dad to see if the road from Aberdeen to Columbia was open and Dad said, "Yes, the County had the roads plowed earlier that day, because of a medical emergency situation had occurred in Columbia." I said, "Dad, keep the road open, we are on our way".

The two semi drivers suggested we stay between the two trucks, and that we did. Just a little less than four hours later, we were "Home for Christmas". We were even able to attend children's Christmas Eve program at the Church.

Merry Christmas to all of you who have been following "The Road Home for Christmas 1966". Have a wonderful New Year.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Wounded Knee descendants group plans ceremony to burn returned artifacts

BY: AMELIA SCHAFER - DECEMBER 28, 2023 11:00 PM

Last November, more than 150 items stolen from mass graves of Wounded Knee massacre victims were returned to a group of descendants, the Si'Tanka Ta' Oyate O'mniceye (Descendants of the Si' Tanka Nation). Now, a year later, the group plans to burn the artifacts to mark the end of the one-year traditional bereavement period called wasigla.

In 1890, more than 300 Lakota men, women and children were killed by the United States military. The military had been sent to Pine Ridge to stop a potential "Indian uprising." Instead, they encountered a band of Mniconju Lakota led by Chief Spotted Elk (nicknamed Big Foot by the military). The military misinterpreted the group's ghost dance songs as an intent to attack and opened fire on the band. Now 133 years later, the descendants of those who survived the massacre are working to preserve the memory of what happened that day.

A majority of the items are clothing, mostly moccasins and ghost dance shirts. All of the clothes had been removed from the victims of the massacre by grave robbers. Some moccasins have blood splatters on them. The rest are peace pipes, dolls, two tomahawks, a bow and arrows and a few beaded lizard and turtle amulets/pouches containing umbilical cords.

Mixed in amongst the artifacts are items from other tribes, Ojibwe moccasins, Dakota and Cheyenne beadwork and other items from other tribes were scattered in. Those items will also be burned.

All repatriated items came from the Woods Memorial Library's Founders Museum Collection in Barre, Massachusetts. The museum qualifies as a private collection.

The Founders Museum did not respond to a request for comment. It is unclear if the museum's entire "Native American Collection" was given to the Wounded Knee descendants or just the Wounded Knee-related items.

Out of fear for the items being stolen in the future and a desire to honor Lakota traditions, the group is choosing to burn all artifacts except for the peace pipes, on the 133rd anniversary of the massacre.

The group's leader Cedric Broken Nose, Oglala Lakota and a descendant of Chief Spotted Elk, said burying them wouldn't successfully return the items to the ancestors, rather the smoke created from the fire would carry the items up. The group has been advised by a medicine man as to what they should do with the artifacts.

"We don't want these items to end up in a museum, they don't belong in there," Broken Nose said. "If we were to bury them the grave robbers would steal them, that's how they ended up in a museum in the first place."

Broken Nose said all groups that had been gathering seasonally since the initial repatriation had all agreed to burn the items by October 2023.

"Every year the ancestors come back for their items, but since they can't take the items they take relatives," Broken Nose said. "One hundred and thirty-three years later we need to give those items back to them. They're trying to come back for the items but they can't, so they take a spirit, they take a life, that's how powerful they are."

The group has been working with Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out on how to properly handle the objects and ceremony.

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"These items don't belong to us, they belong to the ancestors," Broken Nose said.

Despite the group's plans, some Wounded Knee survivor descendants claim they were left out of the process. The group said there are more than 500 descendants of Wounded Knee survivor James Pipe on Head alone, the grandson of Chief Spotted Elk.

Broken Nose said just in Oglala, South Dakota over 30 families descend from Spotted Elk. This specific group is comprised of descendants who have met since 1980.

Calvin Spotted Elk, a citizen of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, said he feels the descendants have not been properly included in the decision-making process, especially those who live out of state. Spotted Elk lives in California.

"What really matters is that one family is making the decisions," he said. "It is not our way for one family to make the decisions."

Spotted Elk said he feels burying the items is more in line with Lakota tradition.

Broken Nose said out of respect for maintaining good intentions around the items during the mourning period, the group will not be commenting on the claims made by Spotted Elk.

Spotted Elk also alleged the group has not followed guidelines set out by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Under the 1990 legislation, museums or other institutions that accept federal funding must compile an inventory of Indigenous cultural items and initiate repatriation of the collections and remains to tribes or family members.

While the act does set guidelines for the repatriation of Native American items, including remains and funerary objects, it does have its limitations. It only applies to museums or other institutions that accept federal funding, including the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act). Private collections are not subject to the federal legislation.

In a typical NAGPRA-guided repatriation, items would be returned to direct descendants or the tribe from which the items came.

A press release from the Founders Museum dated April 2022 stated the items were repatriated in "the Spirit of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act," not under NAGPRA. In January 2022 the museum began to take steps to repatriate the library's Native American collection.

In the meantime, the survivors' descendants group has discussed sending the items to the Oglala Lakota College, Red Cloud Museum and Crazy Horse Memorial. Currently, the items are on a loan to the college. The Crazy Horse Memorial is too far from the reservation and community members couldn't easily access items to pray, Broken Nose said.

The group said the Red Cloud Museum doesn't have an adequate temperature-controlled climate the items require but will reconsider once the Heritage Museum is constructed.

For now, the peace pipes will remain at Oglala Lakota College, as will the other items until they're burned.

This story was originally co-published by the Rapid City Journal and ICT, through a news partnership that covers Indigenous communities in the South Dakota area.

Amelia Schafer covers Indigenous communities in the South Dakota area as part of a partnership between the Rapid City Journal and ICT, an independent, nonprofit news enterprise that covers Indigenous peoples.

'Governor's Cup' rodeo among recipients of millions from public fund controlled by Noem

Future Fund also used for workforce ad campaign, Trump fireworks and other purposes

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 28, 2023 3:30 PM

In September, Gov. Kristi Noem carried the American flag on horseback into a Sioux Falls arena full of fans.

It was the Cinch Playoffs Governor's Cup, advertised as "the richest rodeo in South Dakota history," with \$1 million in prize money. Noem handed out awards, posed for photos with the winners, and shared the images with thousands of followers on her social media accounts.

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Several months earlier, Noem had decided to use tax dollars from South Dakota employers to help pay for the event.

In June, the Governor's Office of Economic Development awarded a three-year contract worth up to \$2.5 million to rodeo announcer Rorey Lemmel's Dean Entertainment Group, to promote and conduct the annual event. The contract said Sioux Falls would contribute additional matching funds.

The state money is from a special fund under the exclusive control of the governor. It's called the Future Fund. Legislators created it in 1987 at the behest of then-Gov. George Mickelson, "for purposes related to research and economic development for the state," according to the brief, two-sentence text of the law.

Unlike other funds administered by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Future Fund expenses don't have to go through a board of citizen appointees for vetting or approval. And while Noem has publicized some Future Fund awards, she hasn't publicized others, such as the rodeo contract. That's in contrast to awards from other economic development funds, which are routinely announced in news releases.

Where the money comes from

The Future Fund gets its money from South Dakota employers, whose payments to the fund are tied to payroll taxes for unemployment benefits. The unemployment payroll tax is calculated by a complex set of formulas that includes a percentage of the first \$15,000 of some employees' annual earnings. The Future Fund receives a fraction of an additional percent on top of that, which the state describes as an "investment fee."

According to the state Department of Labor and Regulation, 28,261 employers paid \$23 million into the Future Fund in 2022, which equated to an average of \$814 per employer. Governors can spend as much or as little from the fund as they want, and legislators have altered the contribution rates over the years, so the balance fluctuates. Noem has distributed \$30.34 million from the fund this year.

Since the fund's inception 36 years ago, governors have awarded a total of about \$300 million from it, according to an estimate by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, which said it does not have complete historical records. Utilizing government reports and newspaper archives, South Dakota Searchlight was able to document \$302.5 million in total spending. Nearly two-thirds of it happened under the last two governors.

Noem has spent a total of \$57 million from the fund since she took office in 2019, and her predecessor Dennis Daugaard spent \$163 million during his eight years in office.

Legislators react, Noem spokesman responds

State Representative Scott Odenbach, a Republican from Spearfish, said he is unsettled by governors spending so much taxpayer money without oversight. He said economic development too often involves the government picking winners and losers.

"Like so much of government, a well-intentioned program has expanded far beyond its original purpose," Odenbach said.

The fund's expenditures are sometimes scrutinized by legislators, but not on a regular basis. Representative Linda Duba, a Democrat from Sioux Falls who's a member of the Legislature's budget committee, was unaware of the rodeo contract.

"I understand using it to find new trade partners, investing in our tech schools. Stuff like that is legitimate," Duba said. "But promoting a rodeo? Give me a break."

Noem's use of the fund previously came under scrutiny from the media when she used \$350,000 to pay for a fireworks show in 2020 at Mount Rushmore where she and then-President Donald Trump spoke. Noem is now routinely mentioned as a potential running mate for Trump in the 2024 presidential race.

More recently, Noem used \$5 million from the Future Fund for a workforce recruitment advertising campaign starring herself, with plans for a \$1.5 million second phase. The Legislature's Executive Board plans to review that spending next month after questions arose about its effectiveness and the process used by the Noem administration to select an advertising firm to create the campaign.

Duba said legislators should demand more accountability.

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"These workforce recruitment commercials look more like campaign commercials to me," she said.

Representative Jean Hunhoff, a Yankton Republican, is lead co-chair of the Legislature's budget committee and has served during multiple governors' administrations. She's waiting until she gets "all the facts" before forming an opinion on Noem's use of the fund.

"But I'll be candid with you, I don't recall the fund ever resulting in this much questioning," she said.

Noem's chief of communications, Ian Fury, replied via email to South Dakota Searchlight questions about the fund. He said the workforce ads are "the most successful workforce recruitment campaign in South Dakota history," the rodeo showcases the official state sport "like never before," and the fireworks show was "the single biggest one-day advertisement our state has ever had."

"I can't think of better ways that Future Funds could be invested to generate a strong ROI for South Dakota," Fury said, using the abbreviation for "return on investment." "Yes, some of this is new and innovative. That's the point — it's working."

Original Future Fund intentions

When Mickelson persuaded legislators to create the fund in 1987, the state had recently suffered the effects of a national recession and a farm economy crisis.

Mickelson told legislators during his State of the State speech that year that South Dakota needed a fund "for long-term investments, for building the infrastructure."

"Too often, politicians are attracted to short-term programs so that by the next election they might be able to point back and look at benefits or look at results," Mickelson said. "The courageous politicians are people who are willing to look at the long term and make a long-term investment in what we believe is right."

He said the money would be used for purposes including libraries, scholarships, vocational education, tourism development, and scientific research. Legislators joined him to create the fund, officially named the Employer's Investment in South Dakota's Future Fund.

Lobbyist Julie Johnson was the secretary of labor at the time and helped write the law. She said the Mickelson administration "deliberately tried not to" narrowly define what the fund was for.

"You'll know it when you see it," Johnson said, referring to the law's use of the broad term "economic development" and what it's meant to different governors over the years. Mickelson chose to focus on investments in research, scholarships and programs on university campuses.

How other governors used the fund

Archived news stories and other historical sources indicate former governor Mickelson and his successor, Walter Dale Miller, spent at least a combined \$22.5 million from the year of the fund's creation in 1987 through 1994. Bill Janklow spent at least \$5 million, and Mike Rounds spent about \$55 million.

Mickelson focused on research, lab equipment and university programs. By the end of 1990, he was touting in a newspaper column that his administration had funded over 80 research- and business-linked ventures through the fund.

Miller kept a similar focus after Mickelson died in a plane crash, using \$500,000 per year from the fund for a scholarship program started by Mickelson.

By 1994, during Miller's administration, the fund was being credited for improving the University of South Dakota Medical School, and for funding research into a swine disease that saved producers \$4 million a year.

Then Janklow became governor for the second time.

In 1995, Janklow ended the use of Future Fund dollars for the Mickelson scholarship program, deeming it an improper use of a fund intended by law for research and economic development. He was criticized by Democrats for taking the definition of the fund too literally.

"It's not a proper transfer," Janklow told the Argus Leader at the time. "It's not a legitimate use of those funds. I have no choice. It's not my money. It's the public's money."

In 2003, Rounds became governor and began using the fund to help businesses and train employees, and for research and job creation.

Rounds referred to the Future Fund as being for "economic development," and by the second half of his

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administration, descriptions of the fund said its awards were used "mostly as incentives for new businesses."

The Future Fund was also at the heart of a controversy during Rounds' administration.

After the death of former state economic development director Richard Benda in 2013, which was officially ruled a suicide, it was revealed that he was about to be charged with a crime. As he left state government at the end of the Rounds administration, Benda allegedly pressured the recipient of a \$1 million Future Fund grant to redirect about half of the money to help Benda's new employer cover Benda's salary.

Daugaard became governor in 2011. He used the fund for everything from railroad improvements to scholarships. He awarded \$51 million in 2014 alone, with recipients ranging from tech schools and economic development corporations to a trailer manufacturer in Mitchell.

Noem's expenditures

Some of Noem's Future Fund spending has been similar to Daugaard's.

This year, she gave \$1.6 million to help establish and grow the South Dakota Trade Association (run by U.S. Sen. John Thune's son-in-law, Luke Lindberg), \$3 million to the North Sioux City Economic Development Corporation for an industrial park, and \$7.94 million to the Department of Labor and Regulation to expand apprenticeship programs, among other awards.

Noem's \$5 million workforce recruitment campaign, financed by the Future Fund, features her in commercials filling the roles of plumbers and welders and other high-need jobs. She's touted the campaign as a success.

"We are building a winning workforce and ensuring that our state's economy will continue to thrive for generations to come," she said in a news release about the campaign.

But some lawmakers have expressed frustration about what they've described as a lack of clarity about the campaign's results.

For example, the Governor's Office has said "over 2,000 applicants have advanced to the final stages of moving" through the Freedom Works Here campaign. But under questioning from lawmakers, administration officials said that's the number of out-of-state people who have asked for a state-assigned job adviser to help them find work in South Dakota, and the administration does not know how many of those people are directly attributable to the campaign.

Reporting by Sioux Falls Live has also revealed political connections between Noem and the Ohio-based firm that her administration chose to carry out the campaign, and has raised questions about how the firm was chosen.

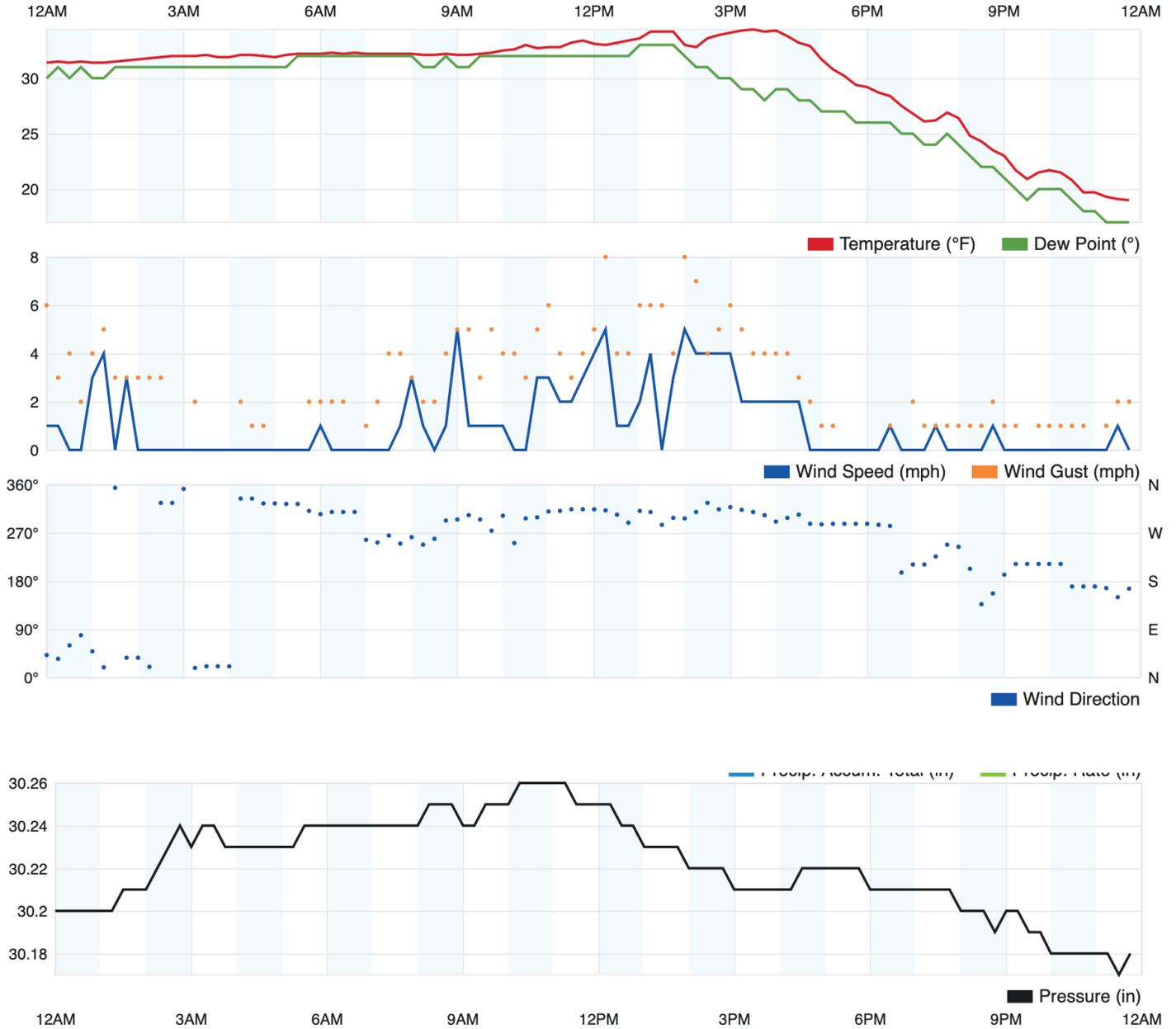
The Legislature's Executive Board will review questions and concerns about the workforce campaign on Jan. 8, the day before the start of the 2024 legislative session.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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| Fri Dec 29 | Sat Dec 30 | Sun Dec 31 | Mon Jan 1 | Tue Jan 2 | Wed Jan 3 | Thu Jan 4 |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | | | | | |
| 38° F 21° F | 28° F 17° F | 25° F 13° F | 29° F 21° F | 31° F 19° F | 26° F 15° F | 26° F 13° F |
| SSW 8 MPH | NW 18 MPH | N 11 MPH | S 15 MPH | WNW 12 MPH | NNW 8 MPH | SW 14 MPH |



Mild Today Then Turning Colder

December 29, 2023
4:33 AM

- Quiet weather expected today
- Slight chance of light snow (15-20%) over the Sisseton Hills/Prairie Coteau Saturday
- Flurries possible (10%) across parts of northeastern SD Saturday evening



| | High Temperatures | | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | Fri | Sat | Sun | Mon | Tue |
| Aberdeen | 40° | 28° | 24° | 27° | 33° |
| Watertown | 37° | 28° | 24° | 29° | 32° |
| Britton | 37° | 27° | 23° | 29° | 32° |
| Milbank | 42° | 30° | 26° | 34° | 34° |
| Redfield | 37° | 28° | 23° | 26° | 31° |
| Pierre | 40° | 32° | 25° | 31° | 34° |
| Eagle Butte | 39° | 31° | 23° | 31° | 33° |
| Kennebec | 38° | 32° | 24° | 30° | 33° |
| Gettysburg | 38° | 28° | 22° | 27° | 31° |
| Sisseton | 40° | 28° | 25° | 34° | 33° |
| Mobridge | 41° | 30° | 25° | 31° | 33° |
| Wheaton | 39° | 28° | 24° | 33° | 33° |



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Enjoy today as highs will reach the upper 30s to the lower 40s across the area with sunny skies! A cold front will pass over the region, bringing a slight chance of light snow/flurries (15-20%) over parts of northeastern SD into west central MN. No accumulation expected. Temps for the weekend will be around average/slightly above for this time of year.

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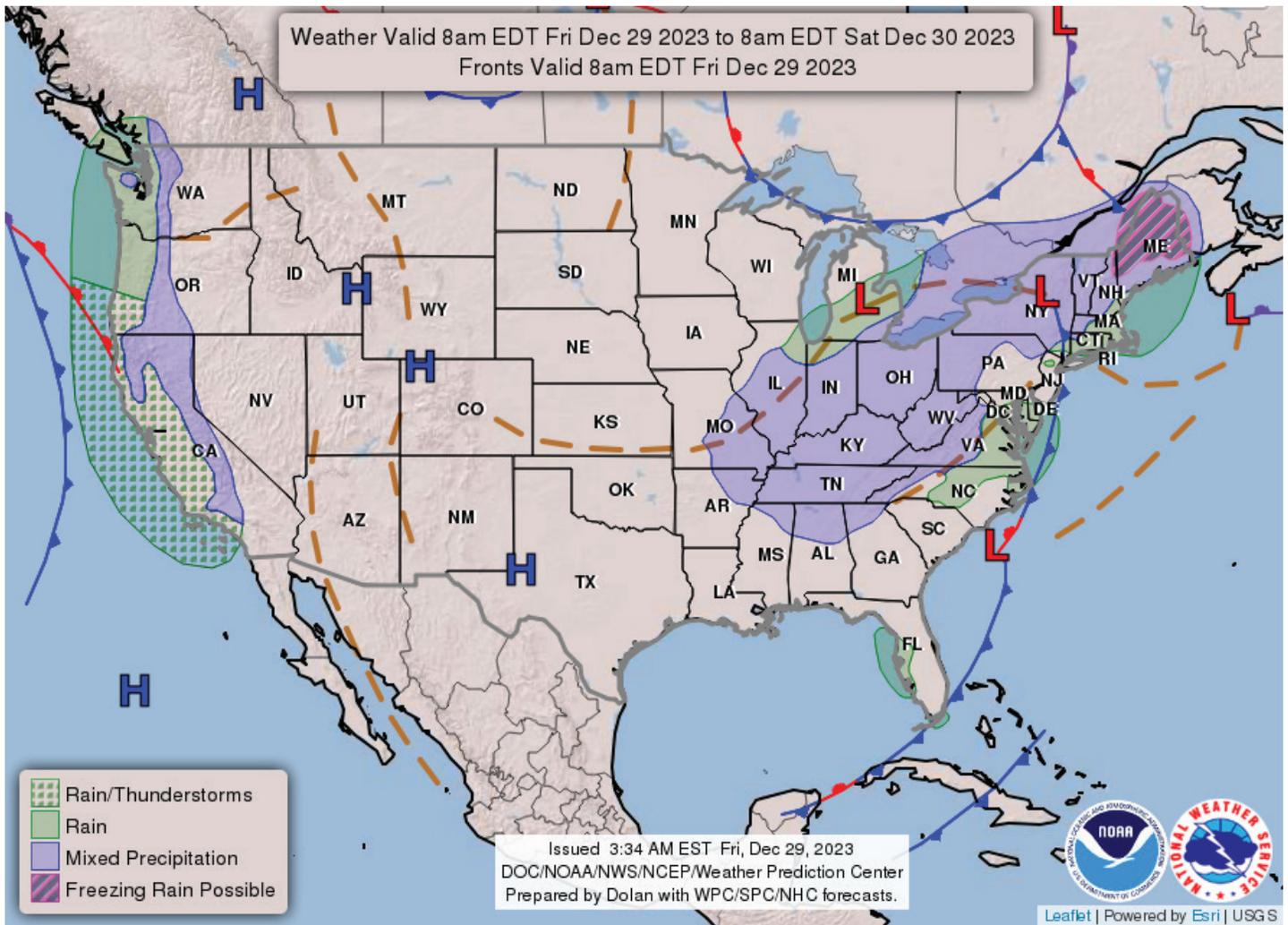
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 3:06 PM
Low Temp: 19 °F at 11:22 PM
Wind: 8 mph at 12:10 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1999
Record Low: -35 in 1917
Average High: 25
Average Low: 4
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.57
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85
Average Precip to date: 21.78
Precip Year to Date: 25.02
Sunset Tonight: 4:58:41 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:17 am



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Today in Weather History

December 29, 2005: Heavy snow of 6 to 14 inches fell across parts of north-central and most of north-east South Dakota from the morning of the 29th through the early afternoon of the 30th. Big Stone and Traverse counties in west-central Minnesota had 7 to 8 inches of snow the evening of the 29th through the early afternoon of the 30th. Light rain and freezing rain fell before the snow, creating some slick roads which resulted in some accidents. Some snowfall amounts included 7 inches at Watertown, Big Stone City, and Artichoke Lake; 8 inches at Waubay, Browns Valley, and Wheaton; 9 inches northeast of Isabel and Hecla; 10 inches at Wilmot and Clear Lake; 12 inches at Milbank; and 14 inches at Summit.

1830 - A very heavy snowstorm ushered in the "winter of the deep snow." The storm produced 30 inches of snow at Peoria IL and 36 inches at Kansas City MO. Cold and snow continued until the middle of February causing great suffering among pioneers. (David Ludlum)

1876: The Pacific Express train was crossing the Ashtabula River in Ohio when the bridge collapsed. The bridge collapsed at 7:28 PM, during a snowstorm that left two feet of snow and produced 40 mph winds. The only railcar not to fall into the icy river below was the first locomotive.

1894: Express A severe freeze hit Florida destroying fruit and causing considerable damage to trees.

1954 - Fort Scott, KS, was buried under 26 inches of snow in 24 hours to establish a state record. (28th-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1984 - One hundred cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures. Kansas City, MO, experienced its warmest December day of record with a morning low of 60 degrees and an afternoon high of 71 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - A storm off the Middle Atlantic Coast produced heavy snow in the Appalachians and the north-eastern U.S. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in southeastern Massachusetts. Cape Cod received thirteen inches of snow, and snow drifts three feet deep were reported around Chatham MA. Strong winds produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in southwestern New England. In the western U.S., a Pacific coast storm produced heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, with 24 inches reported at Mammoth Mountain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front brought rain and snow to the northwestern U.S. The rainfall total of 2.70 inches at Astoria OR was a record for the date. High winds along the eastern slopes of the Northern Rockies gusted to 81 mph at Livingston MT. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Snow and ice prevailed from the southwestern U.S. to the Great Lakes Region. Flagstaff, AZ, received nine inches of snow in just six hours. Bitter cold weather continued over Maine. Portland ME reported a record twenty-two straight days with highs 32 degrees or colder. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHY PARENTING MATTERS

There is limited information in Scripture that describes the home life of Jesus. Every now and then we get a glimpse of something. But there can be little doubt that God and His teachings were at the center of everything.

We read that "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." No doubt His knowledge of and reverence for the Law and Prophets shaped His life and His reverence and relationship with His Heavenly Father and others.

Luke's Gospel tells us about a family trip to the temple. On the way home, they noticed that He was not with them. When they returned to the temple they found Him listening to and answering questions of the learned teachers. At the tender age of twelve Jesus demonstrated to others the deep understanding of God's Word that obviously came from His parents.

Mary and Joseph realized that they were obligated to God for the welfare and wellbeing of His one and only Son. While He was waiting to begin His public ministry He listened to their teachings and followed their examples of godly living.

Parents can never overlook or underestimate the influence and impact they have on their children. Parents must follow the example of Joseph and Mary in raising their children.

Prayer: We pray, Father, that parents will realize the important gift of a child and the trust You place in them to raise them to know, love, trust, obey and serve You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.



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

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.26.23

8 10 22 58 64 21

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$92,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

3 10 36 47 52 10

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 15
Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.28.23

12 18 31 36 46 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 42
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

11 14 15 19 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 30
Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

14 29 39 66 67 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

4 11 38 51 68 5

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$760,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Bon Homme 64, Gayville-Volin High School 36
Bridgewater-Emery 63, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 39
Burke 58, Jones County 36
Campbell County, Wyo. 62, Viborg-Hurley 23
Ethan 54, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 17
Flandreau 66, Dell Rapids 26
Florence-Henry 61, Milbank 39
Groton Area 43, Aberdeen Christian 14
Kadoka Area 65, Viborg-Hurley 49
Lemmon High School 61, Langford 21
North Central Co-Op 39, Timber Lake 37
Philip 56, Edgemont 28
Pine Ridge 78, White Shield, N.D. 17
Sioux Falls Christian 78, Pipestone, Minn. 58
White River 47, Hitchcock-Tulare 45
Wolsey-Wessington 60, Waverly-South Shore 25
Southwest Minnesota State Tournament=
Marshall, Minn. 71, Hamlin 39

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 67, Webster 58
Bon Homme 60, Gayville-Volin High School 55
Campbell County, Wyo. 77, Elk Point-Jefferson 53
Cordova, Tenn. 56, Harrisburg 55
Dell Rapids St. Mary 66, Chester 39
Ethan 52, McCook Central-Montrose 42
Howard 33, Gregory 28
Jones County 61, Burke 53
Lemmon High School 55, Langford 19
McLaughlin 69, Mandaree, N.D. 34
Milbank 57, Lac qui Parle Valley, Minn. 46
North Border 68, Warwick, N.D. 51
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 61, Tea Area 39
Sioux Valley 56, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 50
Timber Lake 69, North Central Co-Op 26
Tri-Valley 65, Freeman Academy-Marion 33
Viborg-Hurley 66, Corsica/Stickney 44
Waubay/Summit 53, Wilmot 35
White River 58, Bridgewater-Emery 42
White Shield, N.D. 57, Wakpala 52

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

Palestinians stream into a southern Gaza town as Israel expands its offensive in the center

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed into an already crowded town at the southernmost end of Gaza in recent days, according to the United Nations, fleeing Israel's bombardment of the center of the strip, where hospital officials said dozens were killed Friday.

Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive against Hamas has displaced some 85% of the Gaza Strip's 2.3 million residents, sending swells of people seeking shelter in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless also bombed. That has left Palestinians with a harrowing sense that nowhere is safe in the tiny enclave.

People arrived in Rafah in trucks, in carts and on foot. Those who haven't found space in the already overwhelmed shelters have built tents on the roadsides.

"People are using any empty space to build shacks," said Juliette Touma, director of communications at UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. "Some are sleeping in their cars, and others are sleeping in the open."

Israel's widening campaign, which has already flattened much of the north, is now focused on the urban refugee camps of Bureij, Nuseirat and Maghazi in central Gaza, where Israeli warplanes and artillery have leveled buildings.

But fighting has not abated in the north, and the city of Khan Younis in the south, where Israel believes Hamas' leaders are hiding, is also a smoldering battleground. Militants have continued to fire rockets, mostly at Israel's south.

The war has already killed over 21,300 Palestinians, most of them women and children, and sparked a humanitarian crisis that has left a quarter of Gaza's population starving. The death toll from the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas, which the military has promised to dismantle. It has also vowed to bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war. The assault killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

The military says 168 of its soldiers have been killed since the ground offensive began.

A STREAM OF DISPLACED PEOPLE

The U.N. said late Thursday that around 100,000 people have arrived in Rafah, along the border with Egypt, in recent days. The influx crams even more people into one of Gaza's most densely populated areas.

Israel has told residents of central Gaza to head south, but even as the displaced have poured in, Rafah has not been spared.

A strike Thursday evening destroyed a residential building, killing at least 23 people, according to the media office of the nearby Al-Kuwaiti Hospital.

At the hospital, residents rushed in a baby whose face was flecked with dust and who wailed as doctors tore open a Mickey Mouse onesie to check for injuries.

Shorouq Abu Oun fled the fighting in northern Gaza a month ago and sheltered at her sister's house, which is located near Thursday's strike

"We were displaced from the north and came here as they (the Israeli military) said it is safe," said Abu Oun, speaking at the hospital where the dead and wounded were taken. "I wish we were martyred there (in northern Gaza) and didn't come here."

STRIKES IN CENTRAL GAZA

Residents said Friday many houses were hit overnight in Nuseirat and Maghazi and that heavy fighting took place in Bureij. The al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir al-Balah said it received the bodies of 40 people, including 28 women, who were killed in strikes.

"They are hitting everywhere," Saeed Moustafa, a Palestinian man from Nuseirat, said. "Families are killed inside their homes and the streets. They are killed everywhere."

Israel said this week it was expanding its ground offensive into central Gaza, targeting a belt of crowded neighborhoods that were built to house some of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

Israel blames the high death toll on Hamas, which it accuses of embedding inside the civilian population, saying that its forces have uncovered weapons troves and underground tunnel shafts in residential buildings, schools and mosques.

But even Israel's closest ally, the United States, has urged it to take more precautions to spare civilians and allow in more aid. Israel says it warns civilians to leave areas that it is targeting in multiple ways and that it has worked to be more precise in its evacuation orders.

ISRAEL REVIEWS STRIKE ON REFUGEE CAMP

Civilians are bearing a staggering toll in the fighting. On Sunday, an Israeli strike on the Maghazi camp killed at least 106 people, according to hospital records, one of the war's deadliest.

In a preliminary review of the strike, the Israeli military said that buildings near the target were also hit, and that "likely caused unintended harm to additional uninvolved civilians." In a statement Thursday, the military said it regretted the harm to civilians and said it would learn from the incident.

Eylon Levy, a government spokesman, told Britain's Sky News that the wrong munition was used in the strike, leading to "a regrettable mistake."

"This should not have happened," he said.

Israel seldom comments on specific strikes and has rarely acknowledged any fault even when civilians are killed.

Russia fires 122 missiles and 36 drones in what Ukraine calls the biggest aerial barrage of the war

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched 122 missiles and 36 drones against Ukrainian targets, officials said Friday, killing at least 18 civilians across the country in what an air force official said was the biggest aerial barrage of the 22-month war.

The Ukrainian air force intercepted 87 of the missiles and 27 of the Shahed-type drones overnight, Ukraine's military chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi said.

Air Force commander Mykola Oleshchuk wrote on his official Telegram channel: "The most massive aerial attack" since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

According to the Ukrainian air force, the previous biggest assault was in November 2022 when Russia launched 96 missiles against Ukraine. This year, the biggest was 81 missiles on March 9, air force records show.

Fighting along the front line is largely bogged down by winter weather after Ukraine's summer counter-offensive failed to make a significant breakthrough along the roughly 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) line of contact.

Ukrainian officials have urged the country's Western allies to provide it with more air defenses to protect itself against aerial attacks like Friday's one. Their appeals have come as signs of war fatigue strain efforts to keep support in place.

Western officials and analysts have warned that Russia had limited its cruise missile strikes in recent months in an apparent effort to build up stockpiles for massive strikes during the winter, hoping to break the Ukrainians' spirit.

At least 86 people were injured and an unknown number were buried under rubble during the roughly 18-hour onslaught, Ukrainian officials said. Among the buildings reported to be damaged across Ukraine were a maternity hospital, apartment blocks and schools.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the Kremlin's forces used a wide variety of weapons, including ballistic and cruise missiles.

"Today, Russia used nearly every type of weapon in its arsenal," Zelenskyy said on social media platform

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X, formerly Twitter.

Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said Russia "apparently launched everything they have," except for submarine-launched Kalibr missiles, in the attack.

The aerial attack that began Thursday and continued through the night hit six cities, including the capital, Kyiv, and other areas from east to west and north to south Ukraine, according to authorities.

Reports of deaths and damage came in from across the country.

In Odesa, on the southern coast, falling drone wreckage started a fire at a multi-story residential building, according to the regional head, Oleh Kiper. Two people were killed and 15, including two children, were injured in the course of the Odesa attack, he said.

The mayor of the western city of Lviv, Andrii Sadovyi, said one person was killed and eight injured and three schools and a kindergarten were damaged in a drone attack in the region.

Several dozen missiles were launched towards Kyiv during the night, with more than 30 of them intercepted, said Serhii Poplo, head of the Kyiv military administration. The attack started a fire at a warehouse in the capital's Podil district where five people reportedly were pulled from the rubble.

In northeastern Ukraine, Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov said the city was subjected to at least three waves of aerial attacks overnight that included S-300 and Kh-21 missile launches. One person was killed and at least nine injured, officials said.

Perspective: Children born poor have little margin for mistakes or bad decisions, regardless of race

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, La. (AP) —

Alfred King was lying in the parking lot of a small apartment building, mortally wounded when police in Alexandria, Louisiana, got to the intersection of 12th and Magnolia streets shortly before 1:30 a.m., Jan. 20.

The 34-year-old was the first fatal shooting of the year in the small city where I grew up and a large portion of my family lives.

Alfred's death was similar to some I have covered since my first in 1985, a 38-year period when hundreds of thousands of people of all races and ethnicities have died violently in the U.S.

I know the details of too many of those incidents, from school shootings to a drug hit in a phone booth. I've heard the scream of a mom coming home from work and seeing her son in the street, encircled by yellow police tape. I've watched more than one mother gently touch the face of her teen-age son then close the lid on the casket.

Some stories are burned into memory, like the Washington, D.C., teenager who asked his mom to send him out of the region to escape the violence. He spent years away only to come home one weekend to plan his high school graduation party and be randomly stabbed to death by a stranger.

While I know some of those back stories, Alfred's is the one I can personally trace from a decision made years ago by adults to gunshots near the end of a rundown street.

Alfred is my first cousin.

When he was 13 my wife and I tried to get legal custody of him after his mom was murdered, but his guardian said no.

I think about him often and the decision that kept him from reaching escape velocity, the things you need to go right to lift the weight of your birth circumstances off of you. Those include family, education, jobs, friends, neighborhoods, adult interventions, hard work and good luck.

We say people can be whatever they want to be. To a degree that is true, but moving through the socioeconomic levels of America's economics-based caste system is like the Apollo moon missions of my youth. Millions of parts have to work perfectly to get you there, and back.

According to "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," part of the groundbreaking Opportunity Insights project based at Harvard, only 2.5% of Black kids born to a parent or parents in the bottom quintile move to the top quintile of household income. For white kids,

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the figure is 10.6%. What is more likely for both is they will stay in the poorest quintile or at best, move up one level to lower middle class. For white kids, that figure is 53.4% and for Black kids, 75.4%.

The focus on the statistics tends to be on the racial disparity. I see the disparity, but what I also see is that Black or white, less than half of the kids born poor move up much. Even if they make it one step, a car repair, a missed day at work or a high utility bill can begin a downward spiral.

And there are millions born into that world, although we treat it like a moral failing. One measure of Census data shows more than 10.7 million children younger than 18 lived below the poverty level in 2022, and that figure is undoubtedly higher because millions more lived in places where the incomes couldn't be determined.

Millions of young people live in homes where social security payments, WIC, SNAP and TANF, various food, nutrition and income assistance programs, are the order of the day.

Poverty isn't the purview of one race. Neither is violent death. Socioeconomics is a good predictor for victimhood and criminal justice involvement, as well as deficient healthcare and educational outcomes.

Alfred came into the world on the bottom economic rung and when he was 13 the critical decision was made that likely kept him there. His mom had been shot to death months before in Alexandria. My uncle, his dad, had done what he could but was broken down from working hard labor jobs, usually several at once and was living on limited income himself. He couldn't promise his son much future.

The first time I met him Alfred was a thin, gangly, very shy kid who kept his head down, avoiding eye contact. He spoke softly and slowly and was the target of bullies.

I don't remember him smiling — ever. Around me, at least, his nature was melancholy.

For Alfred, I was the cousin who had a charmed life. The truth is, for reasons I will never comprehend, I had nearly everything go right.

We love to talk about people pulling themselves up by their boot straps. A lot of people contributed to my boots and showed me how to use the straps. There were teachers, friends, family, neighbors and luck stirred together. That mixture was added to the foundation, a ninth-grade drop out unwed mom who truly valued education who married a good man who helped her raise me.

Alfred's grades were not good. Something about the way he looked at me made me ask when he'd last had an eye exam. One optometrist visit and a pair of glasses later he could see the blackboard.

My wife and I decided then. We wanted to bring him back to Maryland where we live. We wanted legal custody so my work benefits could cover him. We also wanted to be able to make decisions on his behalf without unforeseen bureaucratic or legal barriers that might arise.

My now dead uncle said yes but his message to me was Alfred's now late-grandmother said no. Alfred was getting a government check of some sort. I don't know how much it paid or what program it was. This year I asked the Social Security Administration what it might have been and there were a couple possibilities. As a minor he could have been eligible for benefits because of his dead mom. It also might have been Supplemental Security Income for some health problem he had.

In a place where minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour at the time and people lived on the edge financial ruin, it did not matter how much, or for what. If you are born into a certain economic class everything goes towards basics: food, rent, utilities, clothing.

Alfred stayed in Louisiana.

Over the years he reached adulthood and when I came home I would give him what cash I had, especially when he had kids of his own. By then he had a criminal record but he treated me the same and he checked on my mom: Aunt Shirley.

I can't and won't judge the decision that was made for the 13-year-old. I sadly understand the necessity of it. But, I can wonder what would have happened if we had gotten him. I can't say for certain everything would have been okay but I believe we could have given him more options to a different path. What I want remembered is changing his path would also have changed the lives of anyone he may have wronged too.

There are abandoned houses and empty lots in the neighborhood where he lived and died. I have been there multiple times this year.

I have seen a few young kids there, born into circumstances they didn't ask for, lives without margin for errors or bad luck. I pray for them and the millions of kids like them, regardless of race or ethnicity, that everything goes right and they reach escape velocity.

Joe Flacco throws 3 TD passes and Browns clinch unlikely spot in playoffs with 37-20 win over Jets

By TOM WITHERS AP Sports Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Joe Flacco has turned a seemingly cursed season into a charmed one.

Cleveland's quarterback for just over a month, Flacco passed for 309 yards and three touchdowns and the Browns clinched an unlikely playoff berth — just their second since 2002 — despite numerous injuries this season with a 37-20 win over the New York Jets on Thursday night.

The Browns (11-5) are assured of a wild-card spot and still have a chance to win the AFC North and maybe the conference's No. 1 overall seed, something that seemed unfathomable just weeks ago as major injuries piled up.

But things have changed since Flacco arrived.

The 38-year-old quarterback improved to 4-1 as a starter with the Browns, who plucked the Super Bowl 47 MVP off his couch in New Jersey last month to hopefully rescue their season. He's done that and more.

In the final minutes, Browns fans chanted "Flac-co! Flac-co!" to a quarterback they once reviled with Baltimore and now revere.

"You don't know how many of these moments you're going to get," Flacco said. "I'm going to remember this for the rest of my life."

Flacco threw two TD passes to Jerome Ford in the first half as the Browns built a 20-point lead over the Jets (6-10), who chose not to re-sign the 15-year veteran after he spent three seasons with them — and after Aaron Rodgers tore his left Achilles tendon in Week 1.

Flacco torched New York for 296 yards in the first half and became the first QB in 34 games to go over 300 yards against the Jets. He's also the first Cleveland quarterback to pass for more than 300 in four straight.

While Flacco insisted revenge wasn't on his mind, but Jets receiver Garrett Wilson said the QB was out to prove something.

"He's wound like that," Wilson said. "He told me at the end of last season, he wasn't going to be a backup. He was going to play and he held to that. Joe's a great guy. The type of teammate you want. He deserves everything."

The atmosphere was electric from the start inside Cleveland Browns Stadium as fans who have felt mostly heartbreak for decades got a chance to celebrate.

"It was special," Flacco said. "This is obviously a unique situation for me, so I've got a lot of different emotions running through my head."

The Jets were forced to start Trevor Siemian for the second week in a row with Zach Wilson sidelined by a concussion.

Siemian had some nice moments, but an overthrow late in first quarter was returned 30 yards for a TD by safety Ronnie Hickman to put the Browns up 20-7.

New York allowed a season-high in points and yards (428). Although the Jets gave up just 61 yards in the second half, they dug themselves too big a hole.

Jets linebacker Jermaine Johnson had a pick-6 in the second quarter when he beautifully deflected Flacco's pass to himself and returned it 37 yards.

Nothing has been easy this season for the Browns, who have continued to win despite being overrun by injuries since the opener. Flacco is their fourth starting quarterback, they're missing both first-team offensive tackles and 12 players — including QB Deshaun Watson and running back Nick Chubb — are on injured reserve.

So, it was fitting they went into their biggest game this season missing their starting kicker, punter and

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wide receiver Amari Cooper, who was coming off a franchise record-setting 265-yard performance on Sunday in Houston.

NEW GUYS

The Browns got their first looks at kicker Riley Patterson and punter Matt Haack, both signed earlier this week.

Patterson, filling in for an injured Dustin Hopkins, went 4 of 5 on extra points and made a 33-yard field goal with 2:54 left.

Haack averaged 51.7 yards on three punts.

GARRETT & GARRETT

Browns star defensive end Myles Garrett ended a five-game streak without a sack by taking down Siemian in the first half.

Garrett played with a heavy heart, disclosing after the game that his uncle, Chris Johnson, died on Christmas.

"Still hard to believe," he said. "I was speechless then. I really just don't know how to put it into words now. I've had headaches just daily just because I don't know how to handle it emotionally. So it just comes out in different ways, like just pains. I feel like sometime in a fog."

Wilson went over 1,000 yards receiving for the second straight season. He also did it as a rookie in 2022 and is one of 10 active players with two 1,000-yard seasons to start their career.

SCARY MOMENT

Browns wide receiver Elijah Moore suffered a head injury in the second quarter.

After catching a 22-yard pass from Flacco, Moore's helmet was driven into the turf as he went down. He rolled onto his back and appeared to twitch as teammates quickly called for medical personnel.

Moore, who spent the past two seasons with the Jets, was helped off the field and escorted to Cleveland's locker room.

INJURIES

Jets: WR Allen Lazard (illness) was among the team's inactives. ... RG Jacob Hanson suffered a concussion and was replaced by Xavier Newman, who was helped off the fourth quarter with an unspecified injury.

Browns: Cooper came in listed questionable, but was expected to play. However, after he tested a heel injury during an on-field workout, the Browns opted to have him sit rather than risk more damage. ... CB Mike Ford Jr. (calf) got hurt covering a kick in the first quarter.

UP NEXT

Jets: At New England on Jan. 7.

Browns: At Cincinnati on Jan. 7.

Maui's economy needs tourists. Can they visit without compounding wildfire trauma?

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

LAHAINA, Hawaii (AP) — The restaurant where Katie Austin was a server burned in the wildfire that devastated Hawaii's historic town of Lahaina this summer.

Two months later, as travelers began to trickle back to nearby beach resorts, she went to work at a different eatery. But she soon quit, worn down by constant questions from diners: Was she affected by the fire? Did she know anyone who died?

"You're at work for eight hours and every 15 minutes you have a new stranger ask you about the most traumatic day of your life," Austin said. "It was soul-sucking."

Hawaii's governor and mayor invited tourists back to the west side of Maui months after the Aug. 8 fire killed at least 100 people and destroyed more than 2,000 buildings. They wanted the economic boost tourists would bring, particularly heading into the year-end holidays.

But some residents are struggling with the return of an industry requiring workers to be attentive and hospitable even though they are trying to care for themselves after losing their loved ones, friends, homes

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and community.

Maui is a large island. Many parts, like the ritzy resorts in Wailea, 30 miles (48 kilometers) south of Lahaina — where the first season of the HBO hit “The White Lotus” was filmed — are eagerly welcoming travelers and their dollars.

Things are more complicated in west Maui. Lahaina is still a mess of charred rubble. Efforts to clean up toxic debris are painstakingly slow. It’s off-limits to everyone except residents.

Tensions are peaking over the lack of long-term, affordable housing for wildfire evacuees, many of whom work in tourism. Dozens have been camping out in protest around the clock on a popular tourist beach at Kaanapali, a few miles north of Lahaina. Last week, hundreds marched between two large hotels waving signs reading, “We need housing now!” and “Short-term rentals gotta go!”

Hotels at Kaanapali are still housing about 6,000 fire evacuees unable to find long-term shelter in Maui’s tight and expensive housing market. But some have started to bring back tourists, and owners of timeshare condos have returned. At a shopping mall, visitors stroll past shops and dine at open-air oceanfront restaurants.

Austin took a job at a restaurant in Kaanapali after the fire, but quit after five weeks. It was a strain to serve mai tais to people staying in a hotel or vacation rental while her friends were leaving the island because they lacked housing, she said.

Servers and many others in the tourism industry often work for tips, which puts them in a difficult position when a customer prods them with questions they don’t want to answer. Even after Austin’s restaurant posted a sign asking customers to respect employees’ privacy, the queries continued.

“I started telling people, ‘Unless you’re a therapist, I don’t want to talk to you about it,’” she said.

Austin now plans to work for a nonprofit organization that advocates for housing.

Erin Kelley didn’t lose her home or workplace but has been laid off as a bartender at Sheraton Maui Resort since the fire. The hotel reopened to visitors in late December, but she doesn’t expect to get called back to work until business picks up.

She has mixed feelings. Workers should have a place to live before tourists are welcome in west Maui, she said, but residents are so dependent on the industry that many will remain jobless without those same visitors.

“I’m really sad for friends and empathetic towards their situation,” she said. “But we also need to make money,”

When she does return to work, Kelley said she won’t want to “talk about anything that happened for the past few months.”

More travel destinations will likely have to navigate these dilemmas as climate change increases the frequency and intensity of natural disasters.

There is no manual for doing so, said Chekitan Dev, a tourism professor at Cornell University. Handling disasters — natural and manmade — will have to be part of their business planning.

Andreas Neef, a development professor and tourism researcher at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, suggested one solution might be to promote organized “voluntourism.” Instead of sunbathing, tourists could visit part of west Maui that didn’t burn and enlist in an effort to help the community.

“Bringing tourists for relaxation back is just at this time a little bit unrealistic,” Neef said. “I couldn’t imagine relaxing in a place where you still feel the trauma that has affected the place overall.”

Many travelers have been canceling holiday trips to Maui out of respect, said Lisa Paulson, the executive director of the Maui Hotel and Lodging Association. Visitation is down about 20% from December of 2022, according to state data.

Cancellations are affecting hotels all over the island, not just in west Maui.

Paulson attributes some of this to confusing messages in national and social media about whether visitors should come. Many people don’t understand the island’s geography or that there are places people can visit outside west Maui, she said.

One way visitors can help is to remember they’re traveling to a place that recently experienced significant trauma, said Amory Mowrey, the executive director of Maui Recovery, a mental health and substance

abuse residential treatment center.

"Am I being driven by compassion and empathy or am I just here to take, take, take?" he said.

That's the approach honeymooners Jordan and Carter Prechel of Phoenix adopted. They kept their reservations in Kihei, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of Lahaina, vowing to be respectful and to support local businesses.

"Don't bombard them with questions," Jordan said recently while eating an afternoon snack in Kaanapali with her husband. "Be conscious of what they've gone through."

The Air Force said its nuclear missile capsules were safe. But toxins lurked, documents show

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A large pool of dark liquid festering on the floor. No fresh air. Computer displays that would overheat and ooze out a fishy-smelling gel that nauseated the crew. Asbestos readings 50 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's safety standards.

These are just some of the past toxic risks that were in the underground capsules and silos where Air Force nuclear missile crews have worked since the 1960s. Now many of those service members have cancer.

The toxins were recorded in hundreds of pages of documents dating back to the 1980s that were obtained by The Associated Press through Freedom of Information Act requests. They tell a far different story from what Air Force leadership told the nuclear missile community decades ago, when the first reports of cancer among service members began to surface:

"The workplace is free of health hazards," a Dec. 30, 2001, Air Force investigation found.

"Sometimes, illnesses tend to occur by chance alone," a follow-up 2005 Air Force review found.

The capsules are again under scrutiny.

The AP reported in January that at least nine current or former nuclear missile officers, or missileers, had been diagnosed with the blood cancer non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Then hundreds more came forward self-reporting cancer diagnoses. In response the Air Force launched its most sweeping review to date and tested thousands of air, water, soil and surface samples in all of the facilities where the service members worked. Four current samples have come back with unsafe levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a known carcinogen used in electrical wiring.

In early 2024, more data is expected, and the Air Force is working on an official count of how many current or former missile community service members have cancer.

Some current missileers told the AP they were concerned by the new reports but believe the Air Force is being transparent in its current search for toxins. Many of them take some of the same precautions missileers have for generations, such as having "capsule clothes," the civilian attire they change into once inside the capsule to work the 24-hour shift. The clothes go straight into the laundry after a shift because they end up smelling metallic.

"Whenever you hear 'cancer' it's a little concerning," said Lt. Joy Hawkins, 23, a missileer at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. To Hawkins and fellow missileer Lt. Samantha McGlinchey, who spoke to a visiting AP reporter as they completed an underground shift at launch control capsule Charlie, the news meant they would need to be diligent about medical checkups. "There's more testing, things to come, cleanup efforts," McGlinchey, 28, said. "For us early in our careers, it's better to be caught so early."

Others worry the dangers will again be played down.

When the latest rounds of test results were released, the Air Force did not initially reveal that samples showing contamination had critically higher PCB levels than EPA standards allow — and dozens of other areas tested were just below the EPA's threshold, said Steven Mayne, a former senior enlisted nuclear missile facility supervisor at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota who now runs a Facebook group that is dedicated to posting Air Force news or internal memos.

"At this point the EPA, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and senators from North

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Dakota and Montana need to look into this matter," Mayne said.

In December 2022, former Malmstrom missileers Jackie Perdue and Monte Watts, both of whom have been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, asked the Defense Department's inspector general to investigate.

"I believe health and safety standards have been violated, or not considered, and should be investigated," said Perdue, who served as a nuclear missile combat crew commander at Malmstrom from 1999 to 2006, in an inspector general complaint obtained by the AP.

PAST EXPOSURES

There are currently three nuclear missile bases in the United States: F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Minot and Malmstrom. Each base has 15 underground launch control capsules that act as hubs for fields of 10 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile silos each. The capsules are manned around the clock, 365 days a year. Missileers spend 24 hours or more each shift working underground in those capsules monitoring the ICBMs, ready to launch them if directed by the president.

The Air Force acknowledges the current review can't provide full answers on what past missileers were exposed to, but the data will establish a health profile likely to help them apply for veterans benefits.

However, there are plenty of warning signs about past toxic risks in the documents obtained by AP.

"Type and content of asbestos, please phone ASAP," a handwritten note reads on memo dated Nov. 9, 1992. All of the documents obtained by the AP have been redacted to have the names blocked out, but the urgency was evident. "PRIORITY," the handwritten note says, in all caps.

An environmental team at Malmstrom capsules Hotel and Juliet got worrisome asbestos readings from underneath a generator in the capsule equipment rooms. The equipment room is also underground, contained within the same, sealed-in workspace. The EPA's threshold for asbestos exposure is 1% for an eight-hour workday. But missileers were locked in there for 24 hours at a time, at least. If the weather was bad and the replacement crew couldn't make the drive to the site, a team could be stuck underground for as long as 72 hours. Hotel and Juliet recorded solid samples of chrysotile asbestos — a white asbestos that can be inhaled — between 15% to 30%.

In the official report published just seven days later, however, the risks were downplayed.

"Asbestos presents a health hazard only when it is crushed (able to be crushed or pulverized by hand pressure.) All suspect (asbestos) was found to be in good condition," the annual review on Hotel said.

At missile silo Quebec-12 in 1989 it found levels of up to 50% amosite asbestos, a brown asbestos found in cement and insulation. And a team looking at Malmstrom's Bravo capsule that same year had warned that even if it was left undisturbed, it could be dangerous. "Diesel room — when running leaks asbestos," it warned.

In his inspector general complaint, former Malmstrom missileer Watts said there was asbestos in the floor tile as well, and that missileers also "routinely removed, handled and replaced these tiles as part of required survival equipment inventories."

The documents also reveal multiple PCB spills throughout the decades. A 1987 report talks about a missileer calling his commander to report a severe headache and lightheadedness. The crew finds a clear, sticky syrup leaking under the capsule's power panel. "I suggested the blast door be opened for more ventilation and no contact with the substance be made," a bioenvironmental engineer documents. "All the team needed to do was open the blast door and stay away from the spill. There was no need to close the capsule."

"It's frustrating to know they had thought of this back then," said Doreen Jenness, whose husband, Jason Jenness, was a Malmstrom missileer who died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2001 at the age of 31. "It makes me frustrated and angry that they can keep telling these young men and women that they are not finding anything — knowing that back in 2001, 2003 and the early 2000s that there was something going on there."

CAPSULE SIERRA

Doreen and Jason Jenness met while he was assigned to Malmstrom. They married and lived on base in the mid-1990s. Their missileer friends used to tease them because they had a golden Labrador named

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Sierra, the same name as one of the capsules that Jason's squadron operated.

The environmental reports from Malmstrom when Jason was assigned there show Sierra had a long list of hazards. In 1996, a medical team reported there were more than 25 gallons of fluid overrun with biological growth festering on Sierra's capsule floor. An intake that collected outside air for Sierra was located by the parking lot, and the team watched a running car idle near it for 20 minutes. The team documented that a fan needed to pull clean air down into Sierra had been broken for at least six months, so the only way crews could get fresh air was if they left the capsule's steel vault door open.

At the other capsules, the team said the air quality was "marginal, but should not cause serious health problems." Sierra was dangerous. In March of 1996, the medical team measured carbon dioxide levels of 1,700 parts per million in the air. "At these levels you can expect complaints of headache, drowsiness, fatigue and/or difficulty concentrating from a majority of the occupants. Worker removal should be considered."

Nothing changed. That May the medical team again recorded exposure levels of 1,800 ppm, and advised again that the missileers should be removed.

LEAKING COMPUTER CONSOLES

By the mid-1990s a new missile targeting system was needed, and each capsule began a refurbishment to install a wall-sized computer console called REACT, for Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting System. The new system would allow the U.S. more quickly to reprogram and retarget its nuclear missiles in case of war. Demolition of the old computer and construction of REACT began inside each of the 15 Malmstrom capsules.

Missileers wonder if the REACT refurbishment further disturbed asbestos and PCBs that were still in the capsules. But once installed, the new console also exposed missileers to a new toxin.

"Crew members reported a malfunctioning video display characterized by a clicking sound," a report on a May 1995 incident at Malmstrom's Bravo capsule said. "After the click, the video display shut down with only a white line visible to crew members."

A clear liquid began to leak, followed by a fishy, ammonia-like smell. The crew began to complain of headaches and nausea, and the capsule was evacuated two hours later.

Malmstrom's team learned that the liquid was dimethylformamide, an electrolyte used in REACT's video display unit capacitors, because F.E. Warren, the Wyoming base, had recently reported similar leaks.

"The capacitors overheat and vent into the capsule in lieu of catastrophic failure," a 1996 memo found after a second dimethylformamide leak at Bravo. "To date, we have no idea how much of this material is contained in the capsules nor do we have any idea of the relative hazard to missile crews and maintenance personnel who come in contact with this material."

Medical studies on dimethylformamide's link to cancer are split; some report a clear tie to liver cancer, others say more study is needed.

CHANGES COMING

All of the capsules will be closed down in a few years, as the military's new ICBM, the Sentinel, comes online. As part of the modernization, the old capsules will be demolished. A new, modern underground control center will be built on top of them. Air Force teams working on the new designs are aware of the cancer reports and are applying modern environmental health standards in the new centers — requirements that did not exist when the Minuteman capsules were first built, said Maj. Gen. John Newberry, commander of the Air Force's nuclear weapons center.

"We are absolutely learning from or understanding what's going on with Minuteman III, and if there's something that we need to look at from a Sentinel side," Newberry said.

The old capsules will remain in use until then, though, which makes it even more important that the Air Force is completely open with its missileers now, Doreen Jenness said.

Because they were so young, neither she nor Jason suspected cancer when he started to feel fatigued in the fall of 2000. Nor when his hip started to ache that December.

When he finally gave in and saw a doctor in February 2001, he was admitted to the hospital the same day. By March, Jason and Doreen knew his lymphoma was untreatable. He died that July.

"We can all pretend to not know, because knowing is really hard," Doreen Jenness said. "Knowing and doing something about it is even harder. Now, 23 years after Jason's been gone there's a whole bunch of young men and women that are having to go through the same things that we had to go through. They have to live the same lives and maybe have the same future as me, and it's just sad. Really sad."

A frantic push to safeguard the Paris Olympics promises thousands of jobs and new starts after riots

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — With a name that doesn't ring old-school French like Jean, Pierre or Jacques, and a home address in a tough suburb of Paris where riots flared, Salah Benkadir is discovering how hard it can be to make prospective employers in France see beyond their prejudices.

Despite having a high school diploma in sales and work experience as a vendor on his resume, the 19-year-old job seeker says that when he sends it to stores making hires, often no one calls him back.

"I feel like I've got a label stuck to me. It is very unpleasant," he says.

But with the Olympic Games soon to hit Paris, Benkadir thinks his fortunes may be about to improve. Organizers urgently need thousands of security guards to help keep athletes and spectators safe and reduce the likelihood of another deadly extremist attack in the French capital.

Demand for people at checkpoints, to scan tickets and help manage crowds is so great that France's state employment agency is offering free and expedited security guard training courses, with no specialist qualifications required.

The "We need you!" approach and promises of plentiful paid work from July to September during the Summer Games and Paralympics are a welcome change for job seekers who feel ostracized from the labor market. Benkadir hopes that by training for and then working in the huge Olympic security operation, his skills afterward will be more evident to employers in the retail industry than his mix of French-North African roots and his post code: 92000 Nanterre.

Nanterre was the epicenter of rioting that spread across France over the summer after a police officer shot and killed a 17-year-old in the town just west of Paris. The death of Nahel Merzouk during a traffic stop hit Benkadir close to home: Some of his brothers were friends with the youngster, he says.

Like other suburbs of Paris with large immigrant populations, Nanterre is blighted by inequality, disadvantaged housing projects and young people who feel the odds are stacked against them, in part because they're Black and brown. Benkadir hopes to bust through those obstacles with an Olympics security job that will "show we are versatile, that we invest ourselves in different projects, that we don't just stay in one place, that we really want to succeed."

Proof of that: He and about 30 other young men from Nanterre invested a morning of their time earlier in December to attend an Olympic jobs presentation in Paris. Benkadir and his friends got a ride there from one of their dads. Others traveled by public transportation. Gathering in a semicircle, they listened intently as an introductory speaker explained: "The Olympic Games are coming and there's a huge lack of personnel."

In the Paris region alone, state employment agency Pole Emploi is looking for at least 6,000 people in the next four months to take a free three-week training course that will qualify them to work as security stewards at the Olympics and other public events like concerts. That's on top of the 14,000 security workers who have already been newly trained.

"It's rare to have so much work all at one time," said Najat Semdani, in charge of the recruitment drive. She said it will "benefit people who have been left by the wayside a bit" and those who have experienced "the accidents of life" — including people who left school with no qualifications, youngsters from underprivileged neighborhoods and those who have long been unemployed.

After more than 20 years of living on the streets and in assisted housing, Starsky-Aldo Fandio thinks an Olympics security job might be his ticket to longer-term work afterward. A Pole Emploi adviser wearing a "We are here for you!" badge on his lapel walked the 45-year-old Fandio through how to apply for the

training.

"Then you'll get job offers and be asked if you're interested in working for the Olympic Games," the adviser, Stephane Lange, explained.

The Olympic security operation will be unprecedented in scale for France, with tens of thousands of police officers and thousands of soldiers to be bolstered by an additional 17,000 private security guards, rising to 22,000 on the Games' busiest days.

Bruno Le Ray, the organizing committee's security director, said he can't yet gauge whether they'll fall short and, if so, by how many. In an interview, he described the security operation as "colossal." If private stewards can't be recruited in sufficient numbers, the military could be called upon to provide additional resources.

Mourad Kassir, who runs one of the private security firms that has contracted with the Paris Games' organizers, is confident that he will find the 1,000 stewards he needs for a half-dozen of the Olympic venues. He already has more than that number of candidates signed up to WhatsApp groups that he's set up in preparation.

The training for new recruits includes how to pat people down and how to react if they're armed, how to interact with crowds, some first aid and the legal do's and don'ts of security work, Kassir said. He expects the layers of security will be so dense that Olympic sites will be practically impregnable.

"For someone with a knife, a gun, a grenade, to get to a venue, well, bravo," he said.

SmileDirectClub is shutting down. Where does that leave its customers?

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Just months after filing for bankruptcy, SmileDirectClub announced it was shutting down its global operations and halting its teeth-aligner treatments.

That leaves existing SmileDirectClub customers with a lot of questions and few available answers. The company is offering no more customer care support and few details about possible refunds are available yet. Multiple dental organizations and orthodontists also caution patients about safety concerns arising from "direct-to-consumer" dentistry.

Here's what you need to know.

WHAT IS THE COMPANY AND WHY IS IT CLOSING SHOP?

SmileDirectClub — which served over 2 million people since its 2014 founding — once promised to revolutionize the oral-care industry by selling clear dental aligners that were marketed as a faster and more affordable alternative to braces. It sold its aligners directly to consumers by mail and in major retailers.

When SmileDirectClub's stock began trading on the stock market in 2019, the company was valued at about \$8.9 billion. But the stock plummeted in value over time as the company proved to be unprofitable year after year. In 2022, SmileDirectClub lost \$86.4 million.

With its stock price tumbling, SmileDirectClub was pressured to spend on acquiring customers to demonstrate its business could grow, said Eric Snyder, chairman of bankruptcy at the Wilk Auslander law firm.

"And then you combine that with the legal battles they had (and pushback) from orthodontics industry ... all those things together just made it really hard for them to stay competitive," he added. "They've been losing just tremendous amounts of money over the last couple of years."

SmileDirectClub filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in September while reporting nearly \$900 million in debt. And at the end of last week, it confirmed it was shutting down operations after being unable to find a partner willing to bring in enough capital to keep the company afloat.

WHAT ABOUT EXISTING CUSTOMERS?

In a Friday FAQ about it shutting down operations, SmileDirectClub confirmed that its telehealth aligner treatment is no longer available.

That leaves existing customers in limbo. Customer orders that haven't shipped yet have been canceled

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and "Lifetime Smile Guarantee" no longer exists, the company said. SmileDirectClub added that Smile Pay customers are expected to continue to make payments, leading to further confusion and frustration online.

Customer-care support has also ceased. SmileDirectClub apologized and urged consumers to consult their local dentist or orthodontist for further treatments. The Nashville, Tennessee, company said that more details about refund requests will arrive "once the bankruptcy process determines next steps and additional measures customers can take."

When contacted by The Associated Press for additional information, a spokesperson said the company couldn't comment further.

Now that SmileDirectClub is out of business it must liquidate, Snyder noted. He said he's skeptical about compensation making its way to customers — but notes that people who signed up or made payments after the company's September bankruptcy filing will likely be prioritized.

"Unfortunately, I think they're going to be out of luck. ... (But) if there's any money, it'll go to the newest customers," Snyder said. And even when a company goes out of business, consumers still paying off services they already received will still owe that amount, he noted.

Snyder also doesn't expect there to be further legal implications around the end of the "Lifetime Smile Guarantee," for example, noting that such warranties are "only as good as the life of the company offering it."

It's unclear how many active customers SmileDirectClub had before shutting down, but American Association of Orthodontists President Dr. Myron Guymon speculates that tens of thousands of people could be affected.

"That's got to be very frustrating for them to have spent time and money in a treatment, and then all of a sudden the rug gets shoved out underneath their feet," Guymon said.

He and others advised those people to seek the care of a professionally trained orthodontic specialist, such as those listed on AAO's website.

WHAT ARE ORTHODONTISTS SAYING?

Over the years, dental associations around the world have been urging caution or expressing opposition to direct-to-consumer aligners — what some call "DIY" dentistry.

These types of aligner treatments don't require in-person visits to a dentist or orthodontist, but typically ask consumers to take molds of their teeth or a digital scan instead. This can lead to key aspects of a patient's oral condition being overlooked and potentially lead to health consequences, some experts say.

"It's very easy to cause harm if you're not properly monitoring the case," Dr. Thikriat Al-Jewair, chair of the Department of Orthodontics at the University at Buffalo, said. "I cannot overstate the importance of seeing an orthodontist to monitor the care. (Moving teeth) is a very complex process and also very individualized."

Al-Jewair added that many former direct-to-consumer aligner patients end up coming to orthodontic practices for reevaluation. In these cases, she said, gum disease, bite problems and other issues often arise.

It's important to note that SmileDirectClub isn't the only direct-to-consumer aligner provider on the market today. The treatment's appeal and perceived benefits boil down to convenience and affordability — still, Al-Jewair notes, past demographic research has found that the majority of patients seeking direct-to-consumer aligners came from higher economic backgrounds.

SmileDirectClub has previously specified that each of its customers' treatment plans and health histories were reviewed by licensed doctors, who could also request additional information or reject some applications for the company's teledentistry care. But this kind of business model, which is not unique to the company, still brings up concerns for the AAO, Guymon noted. Apart from not requiring an initial in-person evaluation, he said, supervising doctors are not always identified to patients.

"Our concern has always been that the lack of direct supervision, the lack of a patient-doctor relationship (and the fact) that the patient didn't know who to call if they had problems, was not in the public's best health and interests," he said.

That doesn't mean there isn't a place for telehealth in the dental world, Guymon and others said. Remote

monitoring between treatments, for example, can be convenient and can alleviate some cost barriers of orthodontic care.

"We absolutely support teledentistry and many of our members use it, but just within certain safety guidelines," said Trey Lawrence, AAO's VP, general counsel and head of the association's advocacy team. "Patients can check in with their dentist (remotely), but also maintain knowing who your dentist is and being seen in-person before you start something more permanent, like orthodontic treatment."

Trump is blocked from the GOP primary ballot in two states. Can he still run for president?

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — First, Colorado's Supreme Court ruled that former President Donald Trump wasn't eligible to run for his old job in that state. Then, Maine's Democratic secretary of state ruled the same for her state. Who's next?

Both decisions are historic. The Colorado court was the first court to apply to a presidential candidate a rarely used constitutional ban against those who "engaged in insurrection." Maine's secretary of state was the first top election official to unilaterally strike a presidential candidate from the ballot under that provision.

But both decisions are on hold while the legal process plays out.

That means that Trump remains on the ballot in Colorado and Maine and that his political fate is now in the hands of the U.S. Supreme Court. The Maine ruling will likely never take effect on its own. Its central impact is increasing pressure on the nation's highest court to say clearly: Can Trump still run for president after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol?

WHAT'S THE LEGAL ISSUE?

After the Civil War, the U.S. ratified the 14th Amendment to guarantee rights to former slaves and more. It also included a two-sentence clause called Section 3, designed to keep former Confederates from regaining government power after the war.

The measure reads:

"No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability."

Congress did remove that disability from most Confederates in 1872, and the provision fell into disuse. But it was rediscovered after Jan. 6.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO TRUMP?

Trump is already being prosecuted for the attempt to overturn his 2020 loss that culminated with Jan. 6, but Section 3 doesn't require a criminal conviction to take effect. Dozens of lawsuits have been filed to disqualify Trump, claiming he engaged in insurrection on Jan. 6 and is no longer qualified to run for office.

All the suits failed until the Colorado ruling. And dozens of secretaries of state have been asked to remove him from the ballot. All said they didn't have the authority to do so without a court order — until Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows' decision.

The Supreme Court has never ruled on Section 3. It's likely to do so in considering appeals of the Colorado decision — the state Republican Party has already appealed, and Trump is expected to file his own shortly. Bellows' ruling cannot be appealed straight to the U.S. Supreme Court — it has to be appealed up the judicial chain first, starting with a trial court in Maine.

The Maine decision does force the high court's hand, though. It was already highly likely the justices would hear the Colorado case, but Maine removes any doubt.

Trump lost Colorado in 2020, and he doesn't need to win it again to garner an Electoral College major-

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ity next year. But he won one of Maine's four Electoral College votes in 2020 by winning the state's 2nd Congressional District, so Bellows' decision would have a direct impact on his odds next November.

Until the high court rules, any state could adopt its own standard on whether Trump, or anyone else, can be on the ballot. That's the sort of legal chaos the court is supposed to prevent.

WHAT ARE THE ARGUMENTS IN THE CASE?

Trump's lawyers have several arguments against the push to disqualify him. First, it's not clear Section 3 applies to the president — an early draft mentioned the office, but it was taken out, and the language "an officer of the United States" elsewhere in the Constitution doesn't mean the president, they contend.

Second, even if it does apply to the presidency, they say, this is a "political" question best decided by voters, not unelected judges. Third, if judges do want to get involved, the lawyers assert, they're violating Trump's rights to a fair legal procedure by flatly ruling he's ineligible without some sort of fact-finding process like a lengthy criminal trial. Fourth, they argue, Jan. 6 wasn't an insurrection under the meaning of Section 3 — it was more like a riot. Finally, even if it was an insurrection, they say, Trump wasn't involved in it — he was merely using his free speech rights.

Of course, the lawyers who want to disqualify Trump have arguments, too. The main one is that the case is actually very simple: Jan. 6 was an insurrection, Trump incited it, and he's disqualified.

WHAT'S TAKEN SO LONG?

The attack was three years ago, but the challenges weren't "ripe," to use the legal term, until Trump petitioned to get onto state ballots this fall.

But the length of time also gets at another issue — no one has really wanted to rule on the merits of the case. Most judges have dismissed the lawsuits because of technical issues, including that courts don't have the authority to tell parties whom to put on their primary ballots. Secretaries of state have dodged, too, usually telling those who ask them to ban Trump that they don't have the authority to do so unless ordered by a court.

No one can dodge anymore. Legal experts have cautioned that, if the Supreme Court doesn't clearly resolve the issue, it could lead to chaos in November — or in January 2025, if Trump wins the election. Imagine, they say, if the high court ducks the issue or says it's not a decision for the courts to make, and Democrats win a narrow majority in Congress. Would they seat Trump or declare he's ineligible under Section 3?

WHY DID MAINE DO THIS?

Maine has an unusual process in which a secretary of state is required to hold a public hearing on challenges to politicians' spots on the ballot and then issue a ruling. Multiple groups of Maine voters, including a bipartisan clutch of former state lawmakers, filed such a challenge, triggering Bellows' decision.

Bellows is a Democrat, the former head of the Maine chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, and has a long trail of criticism of Trump on social media. Trump's attorneys asked her to recuse herself from the case, citing posts calling Jan. 6 an "insurrection" and bemoaning Trump's acquittal in his impeachment trial over the attack.

She refused, saying she wasn't ruling based on personal opinions. But the precedent she sets is notable, critics say. In theory, election officials in every state could decide a candidate is ineligible based on a novel legal theory about Section 3 and end their candidacies.

Conservatives argue that Section 3 could apply to Vice President Kamala Harris, for example — it was used to block from office even those who donated small sums to individual Confederates. Couldn't it be used against Harris, they say, because she raised money for those arrested in the unrest after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020?

IS THIS A PARTISAN ISSUE?

Well, of course it is. Bellows is a Democrat, and all the justices on the Colorado Supreme Court were appointed by Democrats. Six of the 9 U.S. Supreme Court justices were appointed by Republicans, three by Trump himself.

But courts don't always split on predictable partisan lines. The Colorado ruling was 4-3 — so three Democratic appointees disagreed with barring Trump. Several prominent legal conservatives have championed

the use of Section 3 against the former president.

Now we'll see how the high court handles it.

Maine bars Trump from ballot as US Supreme Court weighs states' authority to block former president

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's Democratic secretary of state on Thursday removed former President Donald Trump from the state's presidential primary ballot under the Constitution's insurrection clause, becoming the first election official to take action unilaterally as the U.S. Supreme Court is poised to decide whether Trump remains eligible to return to the White House.

The decision by Secretary of State Shenna Bellows follows a ruling earlier this month by the Colorado Supreme Court that booted Trump from the ballot there under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. That decision has been stayed until the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether Trump is barred by the Civil War-era provision, which prohibits those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

The Trump campaign said it would appeal Bellows' decision to Maine's state courts, and Bellows suspended her ruling until that court system rules on the case. In the end, it is likely that the nation's highest court will have the final say on whether Trump appears on the ballot in Maine and in the other states.

Bellows found that Trump could no longer run for his prior job because his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol violated Section 3, which bans from office those who "engaged in insurrection." Bellows made the ruling after some state residents, including a bipartisan group of former lawmakers, challenged Trump's position on the ballot.

"I do not reach this conclusion lightly," Bellows wrote in her 34-page decision. "I am mindful that no Secretary of State has ever deprived a presidential candidate of ballot access based on Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment. I am also mindful, however, that no presidential candidate has ever before engaged in insurrection."

The Trump campaign immediately slammed the ruling. "We are witnessing, in real-time, the attempted theft of an election and the disenfranchisement of the American voter," campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement.

Legal experts said that Thursday's ruling demonstrates the need for the nation's highest court, which has never ruled on Section 3, to clarify what states can do.

"It is clear that these decisions are going to keep popping up, and inconsistent decisions reached (like the many states keeping Trump on the ballot over challenges) until there is final and decisive guidance from the U.S. Supreme Court," Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, wrote in response to the Maine decision. "It seems a certainty that SCOTUS will have to address the merits sooner or later."

While Maine has just four electoral votes, it's one of two states to split them. Trump won one of Maine's electors in 2020, so having him off the ballot there, should he emerge as the Republican general election candidate, could have outsized implications in a race that is expected to be narrowly decided.

That's in contrast to Colorado, which Trump lost by 13 percentage points in 2020 and where he wasn't expected to compete in November if he wins the Republican presidential nomination.

In her decision, Bellows acknowledged that the U.S. Supreme Court will probably have the final word but said it was important she did her official duty.

That won her praise from the former state lawmakers who filed one of the petitions forcing her to consider the case.

"Secretary Bellows showed great courage in her ruling, and we look forward to helping her defend her judicious and correct decision in court. No elected official is above the law or our constitution, and today's ruling reaffirms this most important of American principles," Republican Kimberley Rosen, independent Thomas Saviello and Democrat Ethan Strimling said in a statement.

But other Republicans in the state were outraged.

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"The Secretary of State's decision would deny thousands of Mainers the opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choice, and it should be overturned," U.S. Sen. Susan Collins wrote on the social media site X.

"This is a sham decision that mimics Third World dictatorships," Maine's House Republican leader, Billy Bob Faulkingham, said in a statement. "It will not stand legal scrutiny. People have a right to choose their leaders devoid of mindless decisions by partisan hacks."

The criticism wasn't just along normal partisan lines, though. Rep. Jared Golden, a Democrat who represents Maine's 2nd congressional district that Trump won in 2020, noted on X that he'd voted to impeach Trump for the Jan. 6 attack and doesn't believe he should win next year's election.

"However, we are a nation of laws, and therefore until he is actually found guilty of the crime of insurrection, he should be allowed on the ballot," Golden wrote.

The Trump campaign on Tuesday requested that Bellows disqualify herself from the case because she'd previously tweeted that Jan. 6 was an "insurrection" and bemoaned that Trump was acquitted in his impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate after the capitol attack. She refused to step aside.

"My decision was based exclusively on the record presented to me at the hearing and was in no way influenced by my political affiliation or personal views about the events of Jan. 6, 2021," Bellows told the Associated Press Thursday night.

Bellows is a former head of the Maine chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. All seven of the justices of the Colorado Supreme Court, which split 4-3 on whether to become the first court in history to declare a presidential candidate ineligible under Section 3, were appointed by Democrats. Two Washington, D.C.-based liberal groups have launched the most serious prior challenges to Trump, in Colorado and a handful of other states.

That's led Trump to contend the dozens of lawsuits nationwide seeking to remove him from the ballot under Section 3 are a Democratic plot to end his campaign. But some of the most prominent advocates have been conservative legal theorists who argue that the text of the Constitution makes the former president ineligible to run again, just as if he failed to clear the document's age threshold — 35 years old — for the office.

Likewise, until Bellows' decision, every top state election official, whether Democrat or Republican, had rejected requests to bar Trump from the ballot, saying they didn't have the power to remove him unless ordered to do so by a court.

In California, which has the largest trove of delegates in the 2024 presidential contest, Trump was included on the certified list of candidates released Thursday for the state's March 5 primary.

Secretary of State Shirley Weber faced political pressure to reject Trump's candidacy in the state, including from Lt. Gov. Eleni Kounalakis, a fellow Democrat who urged her in a Dec. 20 letter to "explore every legal option" to remove the former president from the California ballot. Weber later responded that she was guided by "the rule of law," and indicated the proper venue to resolve ballot challenges was in the courts.

The timing on the U.S. Supreme Court's decision is unclear, but both sides want it fast. Colorado's Republican Party appealed the Colorado high court decision on Wednesday, urging an expedited schedule, and Trump is also expected to file an appeal within the week. The petitioners in the Colorado case on Thursday urged the nation's highest court to adopt an even faster schedule so it could rule before March 5, known as Super Tuesday, when 16 states, including Colorado and Maine, are scheduled to vote in the Republican presidential nominating process.

The high court needs to formally accept the case first, but legal experts consider that a certainty. The Section 3 cases seem tailor-made for the Supreme Court, addressing an area of U.S. governance where there's scant judicial guidance.

The clause was added in 1868 to keep defeated Confederates from returning to their former positions of power in local and federal government. It prohibits anyone who broke an oath to "support" the Constitution from holding office. The provision was used to bar a wide range of ex-Confederates from positions ranging from local sheriff to Congress, but fell into disuse after an 1872 congressional amnesty for most former Confederates.

Legal historians believe the only time the provision was used in the 20th Century was in 1919, when it

was cited to deny a House seat to a socialist who had opposed U.S. involvement in World War I. But since the Jan. 6 attack, it has been revived.

Last year, it was cited by a court to remove a rural New Mexico County Commissioner who had entered the Capitol on Jan. 6. One liberal group tried to remove Republican Reps. Madison Cawthorn and Marjorie Taylor Greene from the 2022 ballot under the provision, but Cawthorn lost his primary so his case was thrown out, and a judge ruled for Greene.

For transgender youth in crisis, hospitals sometimes compound the trauma

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) — Four days of waiting under the flickering fluorescent lights of UNC Hospitals' emergency room left Callum Bradford desperate for an answer to one key question.

The transgender teen from Chapel Hill needed mental health care after overdosing on prescription drugs. He was about to be transferred to another hospital because the UNC system was short on beds.

With knots in his stomach, he asked, "Will I be placed in a girls' unit?"

Yes, he would.

The answer provoked one of the worst anxiety attacks he had ever experienced. Sobbing into the hospital phone, he informed his parents, who fought for days to reverse the decision they warned would cause their already vulnerable son greater harm.

Although they initially succeeded in blocking the transfer, the family had few remaining options when a second overdose landed Callum back in UNC's emergency room a few months later. When the 17-year-old learned he was again scheduled to be sent to an inpatient ward inconsistent with his gender identity, he told doctors his urge to hurt himself was becoming uncontrollable, according to hospital records given by the family to The Associated Press.

"I had an immense amount of regret that I had even come to that hospital, because I knew that I wasn't going to get the treatment that I needed," Callum said. "That moment of crisis and shock and fear, I would wish anything that that hadn't happened, because I truly think that I took a step backwards from where I was before in terms of my mental health."

As the political debate over health care for transgender youth has intensified across the U.S., elected officials and advocates who favor withholding gender-affirming medical procedures for minors have often said parents are not acting in their children's best interest when they seek such treatment.

Major medical associations say the treatments are safe and warn of grave mental health consequences for children forced to wait until adulthood to access puberty-blocking drugs, hormones and, in rare cases, surgeries.

Youth and young adults ages 10–24 account for about 15% of all suicides, and research shows LGBTQ+ high school students have higher rates of attempted suicide than their peers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some transgender teens say the negative rhetoric popularized by many Republican politicians in recent years has become too much to bear. In North Carolina, legislators enacted new limits to gender-affirming care for trans youth this year while barely discussing flaws in the psychiatric care system. It's one of at least 22 states that have passed laws restricting or banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors. Most face legal challenges.

North Carolina lacks uniform treatment standards across hospitals and runs low on money and staff with proper training to treat transgender kids in crisis. That means the last-resort measures to support patients like Callum often fail to help them, and sometimes make things worse.

Sending a transgender child to a unit that does not align with their gender identity should be out of the question, no matter a hospital's constraints, said Dr. Jack Turban, director of the gender psychiatry program at the University of California, San Francisco, and a researcher of quality care barriers for trans youth in inpatient facilities.

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"If you don't validate the trans identity from day one, their mental health's going to get worse," Turban said. "Potentially, you're sending them out at a higher suicide risk than they came in."

When North Carolina lawmakers allocated \$835 million to shore up mental health infrastructure earlier this year, none of the money was specifically allocated to the treatment needs of trans patients. Though the funding may benefit everyone, a lack of direct action has left trans youth at the mercy of a system ill-equipped to help them when they need it most.

A nationwide dearth of pediatric psychiatric beds was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw an unprecedented number of people seeking emergency mental health services, according to a report by the American Psychiatric Association. Demand has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

A "dire shortage" of at least 400 inpatient psychiatric beds for North Carolina youth has left UNC with no choice but to send patients to other facilities, even those that cannot accommodate specific needs, said Dr. Samantha Meltzer-Brody, chair of the UNC Department of Psychiatry.

Emergency rooms are not designed for boarding, nor can they provide comprehensive mental health treatment. That creates an immediate need to place patients left waiting in the ER for days or even weeks before a bed opens up, Meltzer-Brody said.

While UNC's own inpatient program assigns all children to individual rooms on co-ed floors, it sends overflow patients to some hospitals that don't make such accommodations.

"We have no choice but to refer people to the next available bed," Meltzer-Brody said of the University of North Carolina-affiliated hospital. "If you're talking about the LGBTQ+ community and seeking trans care, you may be sent to a place that is not providing care in a way that is going to be most optimal."

Callum exploded when he was told about plans to place him in a unit for girls, his records note. He shouted and cried hysterically until he ended up in an isolation room. Doctors later found him banging his head against the wall in a trance-like state.

"It was almost as if sort of my brain had turned off because of such a shock," he recalled. "I had never acted on such severe self-harm without even realizing that I was doing it."

UNC declined to comment on Callum's case, despite the family's willingness to waive its privacy rights. But Meltzer-Brody did broadly address barriers to gender-affirming treatment for all psychiatric patients.

The public hospital system's policy on gender-designated facilities recommends inpatient assignments based on a patient's "self-identified gender when feasible." But with the ER overrun in recent years, Meltzer-Brody said meeting that goal is a challenge.

The issue extends beyond transgender youth, affecting patients with autism, addiction and acute psychiatric disorders who are sometimes sent to facilities unfit to provide specialized care.

It doesn't help, she said, that there is no national standard for how psychiatric hospitals must cater to transgender patients.

The LGBTQ+ civil rights organization Lambda Legal has outlined best practices for hospitals treating transgender patients under the Affordable Care Act. The organization says denying someone access to a gender-affirming room assignment is identity-based discrimination, based on its interpretation of the law.

But such cases rarely end up in court, because the burden falls on families to advocate for their rights while supporting a child in crisis, said Casey Pick, law and policy director at The Trevor Project, a nonprofit focused on LGBTQ+ suicide prevention.

"These are circumstances that are themselves often inherently traumatic, and adding a layer of trauma on top of that in the form of discrimination based on an individual's gender identity just compounds the issue," Pick said. "The last thing we should have to do is then add the additional trauma of going to court."

Parents including Callum's father, Dan Bradford, describe feeling helpless while their children are receiving psychiatric care involuntarily, which isn't uncommon after attempted suicide. Callum's involuntary commitment designation also temporarily stripped his mother and father of many parental rights to make medical decisions for their son.

A psychiatrist himself, Dan Bradford always has supported his son's medical transition, which began with puberty-blocking drugs, followed by a low dose of testosterone that he still takes. Eventually, Callum

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underwent top surgery to remove his breasts. Irreversible procedures like surgery are rarely performed on minors, and only when doctors determine it's necessary.

"In Callum's case, the gender dysphoria was so strong that not pursuing gender-affirming medical treatments, like pretty quickly, was going to be life-threatening," his father said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Any risk that might be associated with the treatments seemed trivial, quite frankly, because we were afraid we're going to lose our kid if we didn't."

North Carolina law bars medical professionals from providing hormones, puberty blockers and gender-transition surgeries to anyone under 18. But some kids like Callum, who began treatment before an August cut-off date, can continue if their doctors deem it medically necessary.

Although he retained access to hormones, Callum said it has been brutal seeing the General Assembly block his transgender friends from receiving the treatments he credits as life-saving.

"When these public policies are discussed or passed, that sends a really strong message to these kids that their government, their society and their community either accepts them and validates them or doesn't," said Turban, the researcher at UC San Francisco.

His research has found that many medical providers still lack training about LGBTQ+ identities and make common mistakes, such as printing the wrong gender designation on a hospital wristband or placing a transgender patient in a single-occupancy room when everyone else has a roommate.

Fearing the plan to place his son in a girls' ward would be deeply traumatizing, Dan Bradford secured a spot at a residential treatment center in Georgia. He pleaded with UNC to release Callum early and convinced the North Carolina hospital that was supposed to take him to reject the transfer.

The teen then spent 17 weeks in an individualized treatment program in Atlanta, recovering from the circumstances that landed him in the ER and the added trauma he endured there. He has since returned home and is taking care of his mental health by playing keyboard and rowing with his co-ed team on the calm waters of Jordan Lake. For the first time in years, Callum said he's thinking about his future.

There are some positive developments on the horizon for North Carolina youth facing mental health crises.

The new state funding for mental health services approved in October has enabled UNC Hospitals to open a 54-bed youth behavioral health facility in Butner, 28 miles (45 kilometers) north of Raleigh. State Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kody Kinsley said the facility should alleviate some barriers to individualized care, including for transgender patients. And UNC has announced plans to open a freestanding children's hospital within the next decade.

Leaders of the Butner facility, which began its phased opening this month, have promised to take a whole-family approach so parents are not shut out of their child's treatment plan. Nearly every patient will be placed in an individual room on a co-ed floor.

The new facility and funding will allow more patients to stay in single-occupancy rooms at UNC, but overflow patients may still be sent elsewhere, Meltzer-Brody said. The hospital system has not changed its policies on transgender patient referrals, and other facilities across the state that receive those patients still lack uniform standards for treating them.

Although Callum said his experiences eroded his trust in the state's inpatient care network, he is optimistic that the new resources could give others a more gender-affirming treatment experience, if they are paired with policy changes.

"I'm still here, and I'm happy to be here," he said. "That's all I want for all my trans friends."

A tax increase, LGBTQ+ youth protections and more sick leave highlight California's new laws in 2024

By SOPHIE AUSTIN, TRAN NGUYEN and ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Doctors in California who mail abortion pills to patients in other states will be protected from prosecution. Workers will receive more paid sick leave on the heels of a big year for labor. And companies can't fire employees for using marijuana outside of work.

These are among the hundreds of laws that take effect Jan. 1 in the nation's most populous state.

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Each year, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signs hundreds of laws passed by the state Legislature. Most take effect Jan. 1 the following year. But sometimes lawmakers will delay a law's effective date for a variety of reasons, including giving people more time to prepare for the new rules.

Some of the highest-profile bills passed by the Legislature in 2023 will not take effect until later. Fast food workers will get a minimum wage increase to \$20 per hour on April 1. Health care workers are scheduled to see the first increases in their minimum wage on June 1. Laws requiring businesses to report their emissions and financial risks from climate change won't take effect until 2026.

A law banning people from carrying guns in most public places was blocked by a federal judge just days before it was set to take effect.

In 2023, the California Legislature passed 1,046 bills. Newsom signed 890 of those bills into law. He vetoed 156 bills, or 14.9%, according to statistics compiled by veteran lobbyist Chris Micheli.

Here is a look at some of the new laws Californians face:

YOU CAN'T GET FIRED FOR SMOKING POT AT HOME

Some drug tests don't determine if a person is high, but only if that person has used marijuana at all in recent days. California lawmakers thought it wasn't fair for companies to punish workers for failing these drug tests, especially since recreational marijuana has been legal in the state since 2016. A new law, which was passed in 2022 but takes effect this year, says companies can't punish workers for failing these types of drug tests. There are exceptions for construction workers and companies that must conduct drug tests as part of federal contracts.

A TAX INCREASE FOR HIGHER WAGE EARNERS

California has a short-term disability program that pays people who cannot work because of a non-work related illness, injury or pregnancy. The program is funded by a 1.1% tax on wages. In the past, this tax only applied to wages below a certain amount, about \$153,000 in 2023. But starting Jan. 1, a new law, which was passed in 2022 but takes effect this year, eliminates the wage cap. People who make more than \$153,000 per year subsequently will pay a 1.1% tax on those wages.

PROTECTIONS FOR ABORTION PILLS

Abortion is now illegal in 14 states after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade. But doctors and pharmacists in California who mail abortion pills to patients in those states will be shielded from prosecution or fines. The law bans bounty hunters or bail agents from apprehending California doctors and taking them to another state to stand trial. It even prohibits state-based social media companies, such as Facebook, from complying with out-of-state subpoenas, warrants or other requests for records to discover the identity of patients seeking abortion pills.

MORE SICK LEAVE

Workers in California will receive a minimum of five days of sick leave annually, instead of three, which they will accrue once they have been employed for 200 days. Labor advocates say the increase will curb the spread of disease by preventing employees from working when they are sick. But opponents say the law will be another financial burden for employers and claim some workers request sick leave when they are not ill.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TUITION

Low-income Mexican residents who live within 45 miles (72 kilometers) of the California-Mexico border will be eligible for in-state tuition rates at participating Southern California community colleges under a new law signed by Newsom. The measure will lower a burden for students to receive education and training to help prepare them for the workforce, advocates say. It resembles another program in the state allowing up to 200 Nevada residents who live in certain areas near the California-Nevada border to receive in-state tuition rates at Lake Tahoe Community College.

LGBTQ+ FOSTER YOUTH

Foster families will be required to demonstrate their ability to meet the health and safety needs of children regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. It was one of several bills the Legislature passed this year to expand protections for LGBTQ+ youth. Newsom vetoed another high-profile bill that would

have required courts to consider whether a parent affirms their child's gender identity in custody and visitation proceedings.

LOW-INCOME HOUSING ON CHURCH LAND

Religious institutions and nonprofit colleges in California can now turn their parking lots and other properties into affordable housing. The new law, which helps these institutions bypass most local permitting and environmental review rules, was among several initiatives attempting to address the homelessness crisis in California. Supporters of the law said it will serve as another tool to build much-needed housing in the state, but opponents said the law takes away local control over housing developments.

HARSHER PENALTIES FOR FENTANYL DEALERS

California lawmakers introduced a slew of bills last year aimed at addressing fentanyl overdoses, which are killing roughly 110 Californians each week. Only one measure cracking down on dealers reached Newsom's desk. The new law increases penalties for dealers who possess more than 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of fentanyl. Newsom also signed bills requiring stadiums and amusement parks to stock overdose reversal drugs and community colleges and California State University campuses to provide fentanyl test strips.

Celtics send Detroit to NBA record-tying 28th straight loss, beating Pistons 128-122 in OT

By JIMMY GOLEN AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — The Pistons' 28th loss in a row was unlike any of the many, many other defeats that came before it in what is now tied for the longest losing streak in NBA history.

The result was the same.

Detroit opened a 21-point lead against the league-best Boston Celtics on Thursday night and then rallied from a six-point deficit in the final minutes to force overtime before the Celtics recovered to win 128-122. It was the first time all season the Pistons led by more than 20 points, and the first time they had gotten to overtime in the two months since their last win.

"I'm unbelievably proud of the group, the way they bring it," Pistons coach Monty Williams said. "They've heard all the stuff about our team and they just keep bringing it. I know it's going to pay off."

Detroit fell to 2-29 and matched the "Trust the Process" Philadelphia 76ers with 28 consecutive losses; the Pistons need a victory at home against Toronto on Saturday night to avoid breaking the NBA record for longest losing streak.

In major North American sports, only the NFL's Chicago Cardinals, who lost 29 straight from 1942-45, have had a longer losing streak.

"I'm not interested in just winning one more game this year -- you know what I mean? To stop this. That would be soft, in my opinion," said Pistons guard Cade Cunningham, who scored 22 points in the first half but missed a potential-winning 3-pointer with seven seconds left in regulation.

"Our goals are a lot higher than that. We have what it takes to win a game, that's nothing. But to put games together, to find our system, find what's clicking and allow us to sustain winning. That's all we're looking for."

Boston erased a 66-45, second-quarter lead with a 19-5 run in the third that turned a 15-point deficit into a 77-76 game. Kristaps Porzingis had eight of his season-high 35 points in a 10-0 run that turned a four-point deficit into a 106-100 Boston lead in the final two minutes of regulation.

Jaden Ivey scored six straight points for Detroit to tie it and then, after Jayson Tatum was credited with a layup on a replay-confirmed goaltending call, Bojan Bogdanovic made a putback on Cunningham's missed 3 to send it to OT.

But Derrick White scored 10 of his 23 points in the extra period and Porzingis had six in the overtime — dunking after a full-court pass from Tatum and then sinking a pair of free throws to make it 125-117.

"As bad as they hurt right now, I hurt for them," Williams said. "But I told them: 'If we bring that kind of toughness and execution — minus the turnovers — we're not just going to win one game. We're going to put something together.'"

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Tatum had 31 points and 10 assists for Boston, which won its fourth straight and its ninth in the last 10 games. The Celtics, who were without Jaylen Brown, are 15-0 at home this season and have the league's best record, 24-6.

"We're on the same level as all these teams were playing against," said Cunningham, who had 31 points and nine assists. "There's no team that I've ever come across in the NBA where I felt like I was going into a slaughterhouse. I've never felt like that in my life, going into a basketball game.

"So every game we should be able to fight teams and impose our will on them. We did that early on. We kind of let go of the rope a little bit in the third quarter. But there's a lot of growth, and something we can learn from and definitely take to the next game."

Ivey had 22 points and 10 rebounds, Jalen Duren had 15 points and 14 rebounds and Bogdanovich had 17 points and 12 boards.

The Pistons set the NBA record for most consecutive losses in a season Tuesday night with their 27th in a row, a 118-112 loss to Brooklyn. The Sixers' streak stretched over two seasons, 2014-15 and 2015-16.

UP NEXT

Pistons: Host Toronto on Saturday night before a four-game trip.

Celtics: Host Toronto on Friday night.

US military space plane blasts off on another secretive mission expected to last years

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

The U.S. military's X-37B space plane blasted off Thursday on another secretive mission that's expected to last at least a couple of years.

Like previous missions, the reusable plane resembling a mini space shuttle carried classified experiments. There's no one on board.

The space plane took off aboard SpaceX's Falcon Heavy rocket from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at night, more than two weeks late because of technical issues.

It marked the seventh flight of an X-37B, which has logged more than 10 years in orbit since its debut in 2010.

The last flight, the longest one yet, lasted 2 1/2 years before ending on a runway at Kennedy a year ago.

Space Force officials would not say how long this orbital test vehicle would remain aloft or what's on board other than a NASA experiment to gauge the effects of radiation on materials.

Built by Boeing, the X-37B resembles NASA's retired space shuttles. But they're just one-fourth the size at 29 feet (9 meters) long. No astronauts are needed; the X-37B has an autonomous landing system.

They take off vertically like rockets but land horizontally like planes, and are designed to orbit between 150 miles and 500 miles (240 kilometers and 800 kilometers) high. There are two X-37Bs based in a former shuttle hangar at Kennedy.

Venezuela will hold military exercises off its shores as a British warship heads to Guyana

By MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — President Nicolás Maduro ordered Venezuela's armed forces to conduct defensive exercises in the Eastern Caribbean after the United Kingdom sent a warship toward Guyana's territorial waters as the South American neighbors dispute a large border region.

In a nationally televised address Thursday, Maduro said that 6,000 Venezuelan troops — including air and naval forces — will conduct joint operations off the nation's eastern coast near the border with Guyana.

Maduro described the impending arrival of British ship HMS Trent to Guyana's shores as a threat to his country. He argued the ship's deployment violates a recent agreement between the South American nations.

"We believe in diplomacy, in dialogue and in peace, but no one is going to threaten Venezuela," Maduro

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said in a room where he was accompanied by a dozen military commanders. "This is an unacceptable threat to any sovereign country in Latin America."

Venezuela and Guyana are currently involved in a border dispute over the Essequibo, a sparsely populated region the size of Florida with vast oil deposits off its shores.

The region has been under Guyana's control for decades, but in December, Venezuela relaunched its historical claim to the Essequibo through a referendum in which it asked voters in the country whether the Essequibo should be turned into a Venezuelan state.

As tensions over the region escalated, the leaders of both countries met in the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, and signed an agreement which said they would solve their dispute through nonviolent means.

During the talks, however, Guyana's President Irfaan Ali said his nation reserved its right to work with its partners to ensure the defense of his country.

On Thursday, Guyanese officials described the visit of HMS Trent as a planned activity aimed at improving the nation's defense capabilities and said the ship's visit will continue as scheduled.

"Nothing that we do or have done is threatening Venezuela," Guyana's Vice President Bharrat Jagdeo told reporters in Georgetown, the nation's capital.

HMS Trent is a patrol and rescue ship that was recently used to intercept drug traffickers off the West Coast of Africa. It can accommodate up to 30 sailors and a contingent of 18 marines, and is equipped with 30 mm cannons and a landing pad for helicopters and drones.

The ship had been sent to Barbados in early December to intercept drug traffickers, but its mission was changed on Dec. 24, when it was sent to Guyana. Authorities did not specify when it was expected to arrive off Guyana's shores.

The United Kingdom's Defense Ministry said the ship would be conducting joint operations with Guyana's defense forces.

The nation of 800,000 people has a small military that is made up of 3,000 soldiers, 200 sailors and four small patrol boats known as Barracudas.

Venezuela says it was the victim of a land theft conspiracy in 1899, when Guyana was a British colony and arbitrators from Britain, Russia and the United States decided the boundary. The U.S. represented Venezuela in part because the Venezuelan government had broken off diplomatic relations with Britain.

Venezuelan officials contend Americans and Europeans colluded to cheat their country out of the land. They also argue that an agreement among Venezuela, Britain and the colony of British Guiana signed in 1966 to resolve the dispute effectively nullified the original arbitration.

Guyana maintains the initial accord is legal and binding and asked the United Nations' top court in 2018 to rule it as such, but a decision is years away. The century-old dispute was recently reignited with the discovery of oil in Guyana.

Hit-Boy enters Grammys with producer nod while helping father navigate music industry after prison

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When Hit-Boy walks the Grammy red carpet, he expects to proudly strut into the Feb. 4 awards ceremony with his father beside him for the first time.

For three decades, Hit-Boy's dad was in-and-out of prison, with his recent stint lasting nine years until his release several months ago. With his father's newfound freedom, the super producer — who has worked with music heavyweights from Jay-Z, Nas and Kanye West — is focused on strengthening their father-son bond while navigating the music industry together.

Hit-Boy has the Grammys and a producer of the year, non-classical nomination in his sights. He's had three songs involving Brent Faiyaz, Blxst and The Alchemist. He also produced three Nas albums, including "King's Disease III," which is up for best rap album; one with Musiq Soulchild; and his two "Surf or Down" albums, which featured the producer as a rapper and his father on several tracks under the stage name Big Hit.

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When Hit-Boy first heard about being a nominee again, he felt an instant “wave of emotions.” He was one of the most productive producers this past year compared to others in his category - which includes Jack Antonoff, Metro Boomin, Dernst “D’Mile” Emile II and Daniel Nigro.

“I literally broke down in tears,” said Hit-Boy, a three-time Grammy winner through Jay-Z and Kanye West’s “... In Paris,” Nipsey Hussle’s “Racks in the Middle” and Nas’ album “King Disease.” He’s worked with top performers including Beyoncé, Mary J. Blige, Drake, Mariah Carey, Ariana Grande and Jennifer Lopez.

But for Hit-Boy, this past year was different.

“When I really look back and had that moment to reflect, I was like ‘Wow, I didn’t have the biggest artists in the world that’s going to stream,’” he said. “They are going to make it work. I was working with artists that don’t have million-dollar budgets behind them.”

Throughout the year, Hit-Boy said he worked mostly with Nas and his father, Big Hit, who recorded his lyrics for the intro on “Surf or Down Vol. 1” while incarcerated. After his father’s release, Hit-Boy took him directly to the studio — where they both laid down tracks.

This month, Big Hit, 52, released his debut album “The Truth is in My Eyes,” which features Snoop Dogg, Benny The Butcher, Musiq Soulchild, Dom Kennedy, The Alchemist and Mozzy. He said it was tough being away from his son and watching his success from afar.

“It was torture just knowing the kind of impact I could’ve had and what I missed in his life,” said the rapper, who was arrested during a traffic stop in Illinois in 2014. Turns out, he had an outstanding warrant, which stemmed from a hit-and-run accident in Los Angeles that left several people injured.

At the time, Hit-Boy said his father was gaining positive momentum and made good impressions with the likes of Jay-Z and 50 Cent before his arrest, which the producer called devastating.

“I thought about how I could have shaped and molded him,” Big Hit said. “Being a wonderful addition. Instead of bringing him down, I could have tightened him up. But I still did my best in the situation where I was at. But we’re pushing full speed ahead. We’re bridging that gap.”

Since Big Hit’s release, Hit-Boy has been laser-focused on keeping his father busy and spending time with him almost daily while creating an independent lane for their careers. The producer said he’s funded “every single thing since he touched down.”

“It’s bigger than just doing the music,” Hit-Boy said. “I’m creating that network, helping them to have a workflow. I’m spending money on these marketing plans. I’m coming with all the best ideas I can. Every day is an adventure. My whole life, he’s got out and went back in. Stressed out that he might do something to jeopardize it again. It’s part of that brainwork where you just got to hold it down and financially. I wanted to build, put together pieces that would bring people completely into his world.”

Hit-Boy said several labels have offered Big Hit deals, but they turned them down. The producer said they’ll be better off on their own for now.

“They wanted to put some cool money in his pocket,” Hit-Boy said. “But I’ve been in the game since I was 19. He got locked up at 19 until he was in his 30s. Now, I’m in my 30s and I’m locked up in the industry, because I’m still to this day in a bad publishing deal with Universal Music Publishing Group. I would feel so crazy to let my dad get caught up with these same systems, the same ways and ideologies that I’ve been fed since I was a kid. I just can’t go for it.”

Hit-Boy, 36, and his team decided against releasing Big Hit’s new album on digital stream platforms. He wants people to buy directly from them, which according to his team has so far worked out.

“We got physical CDs. We’re not going to do any DSPs, no streaming,” the producer said. “I’ve been seeing a lot of people complain about that. Snoop just went on a platform and talked about how he got a billion streams, but only earned about \$40,000 or \$45,000. I feel like if we sell 10,000 CDs, we’re going to blow that out the water. We’re going to start small. We don’t need to have a billion streams, because that might only equate to 10,000. We’re going to let people buy the music directly from us.”

Hit-Boy said he and his father are making music, doing business together like he always wanted. If he could win a Grammy with his dad, mother and young son in attendance, it would mean the world to him.

“Every time I won a Grammy, he was locked up,” he said. “That would be dope to win. I’m going to speak it into existence.”

World population up 75 million this year, standing at 8 billion on Jan. 1

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The world population grew by 75 million people over the past year and on New Year's Day it will stand at more than 8 billion people, according to figures released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Thursday.

The worldwide growth rate in the past year was just under 1%. At the start of 2024, 4.3 births and two deaths are expected worldwide every second, according to the Census Bureau figures.

The growth rate for the United States in the past year was 0.53%, about half the worldwide figure. The U.S. added 1.7 million people and will have a population on New Year's Day of 335.8 million people.

If the current pace continues through the end of the decade, the 2020s could be the slowest-growing decade in U.S. history, yielding a growth rate of less than 4% over the 10-year-period from 2020 to 2030, said William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution.

The slowest-growing decade currently was in the aftermath of the Great Depression in the 1930s, when the growth rate was 7.3%.

"Of course growth may tick up a bit as we leave the pandemic years. But it would still be difficult to get to 7.3%," Frey said.

At the start of 2024, the United States is expected to experience one birth every nine seconds and one death every 9.5 seconds. However, immigration will keep the population from dropping. Net international migration is expected to add one person to the U.S. population every 28.3 seconds. This combination of births, deaths and net international migration will increase the U.S. population by one person every 24.2 seconds.

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill dozens of Palestinians, even in largely emptied north

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli forces bombarded cities, towns and refugee camps across Gaza on Thursday, killing dozens of people in a widening air and ground offensive against Hamas that has forced thousands more to flee from homes and shelters in recent days.

The war has already killed over 20,000 Palestinians and driven around 85% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Much of northern Gaza has been leveled, and it has been largely depopulated and isolated from the rest of the territory for weeks. Many fear a similar fate awaits the south as Israel expands its offensive to most of the tiny enclave.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas — which is still putting up stiff resistance, even in the north — and bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel. The assault killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas.

The United States — while providing crucial support for the offensive — has urged Israel to take greater measures to spare civilians and allow in more aid. But humanitarian workers say the amount of food, fuel and medical supplies entering is still far below what is needed, and 1 in 4 Palestinians in Gaza is starving, according to U.N. officials.

STRIKES FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

An Israeli airstrike on a home in the northern town of Beit Lahiyeh — one of the first targets of the ground invasion that began in October — buried at least 21 people, including women and children, according to a family member.

Bassel Kheir al-Din, a journalist with a local TV station, said the strike flattened his family house and severely damaged three neighboring homes. He said 12 members of his family — including three children

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ages 2, 7 and 8 — were buried and presumed dead, and that nine neighbors were missing.

In central Gaza, Israeli warplanes and artillery pounded the built-up Bureij and Nuseirat refugee camps, leveling buildings, residents said. Israel said this week it would expand its ground offensive into central Gaza. The Israeli military typically launches waves of airstrikes and shelling before troops and tanks move in.

A hospital in the nearby town of Deir al-Balah received the bodies of 25 people killed overnight, including five children and seven women, hospital records showed Thursday. Nonstop explosions could be heard throughout the night in the town where hundreds of thousands of people have sought shelter, with many spending cold nights sleeping on sidewalks.

"It was another night of killing and massacres," said Saeed Moustafa, a resident of the Nuseirat camp. He said people were still crying out from the rubble of a house hit Wednesday by an airstrike.

"We are unable to get them out. We hear their screams, but we don't have equipment," he said.

Farther south, in Khan Younis, the Palestinian Red Crescent said a strike near its Al-Amal Hospital killed at least 10 people and wounded another 12. Much of the city's population has left, but many are sheltering near Al-Amal and another hospital, hoping they will be spared from the bombardment.

A strike Thursday evening destroyed a residential building in the town of Rafah, at the southernmost end of Gaza, killing at least 23 people, according to the media office of the nearby Al-Kuwaiti Hospital said.

Outside of Gaza, Israeli security forces shot and killed a Palestinian man who they say got out of his car and stabbed two security workers at a checkpoint between the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

The security workers were in moderate condition, according to the Magen David Adom rescue service.

The occupied West Bank has experienced a surge in violence since Oct. 7, with more than 300 Palestinians killed in unrest and clashes with Israeli forces.

ANOTHER WAVE OF DISPLACEMENT

Rami Abu Mosab, who lives in the Bureij refugee camp, said thousands of people have fled their homes in recent days because of the intense bombardment. He plans to remain there because nowhere in Gaza is safe.

"Here is death and there is death," he said, "To die in your home is better."

Bureij and Nuseirat are among several camps across the region that were built to house hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation. They have since grown into crowded residential neighborhoods.

Some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes during that conflict, an exodus the Palestinians refer to as the Nakba, or catastrophe. Some 1.9 million have been displaced within Gaza since Oct. 7.

As Israel has broadened its offensive, fleeing Palestinians have packed into areas along the Egyptian border and the southern Mediterranean coastline, where shelters and tent camps are overflowing. Even in those areas, Israel continues to strike what it says are militant targets.

The U.N. humanitarian office said the scale and intensity of the fighting impedes its aid deliveries. The office, known as OCHA, cited blocked roads, a scarcity of fuel and telecommunications blackouts as some of the obstacles hampering the humanitarian response.

Still, it said the U.N. World Food Program provided food parcels to about a half-million people in U.N. shelters in southern and central Gaza since Saturday.

The Israeli military blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas, which positions fighters, tunnels and rocket launchers in dense residential areas. But the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

Israel's offensive in Gaza has already been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than 21,300 Palestinians, most of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza. Another 55,600 have been wounded, it says. Those counts do not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

The military says it has killed thousands of militants, without presenting evidence, and that 167 of its soldiers have been killed and hundreds wounded in the ground offensive.

2023's problems and peeves are bid a symbolic farewell at pre-New Year's Times Square event

By ROBERT BUMSTED Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — One person wanted to get past anger issues. Others sought to turn the page on medical bills, work stress, insecurities, taxes, regrets, bad habits, bad hair days, COVID-19, worrying about what other people think, and “all negativity of 2023.”

People hoping to shed those and other problems converged on Times Square Thursday for “Good Riddance Day,” a promotional pre-New Year's Eve event that offers a chance to, at least symbolically, cast away burdens, peeves and bad memories.

“The whole world is going through this. There's lots of people going through bad experiences. Wars, inflation, life has been rough. I'm just hoping for 2024 to just give everyone a break from those terrible things,” Angel Villaneuva of Washington said after watching his personal banes — bad relationships and negative energy and experiences — go up in smoke.

Previous iterations of “Good Riddance Day” have involved shredders and a dumpster. But this year, magician Devonte Rosero used a grill lighter and a flourish of his hand to quickly incinerate pieces of paper on which Villaneuva and others had written down what they wanted to put behind them.

For Carol Vera, that's fast food and unhealthy snacks, now that she's learned she has high cholesterol levels. But on a broader level, the New Yorker is sad about conflict around the world.

“We should be focusing on humanity, instead of fighting with each other,” Vera said.

Natasha Naheir was keen to be done with college applications, school, bad hair and makeup days, and fake friends. Naheir, who was visiting from North Carolina, is excited for 2024: “There's a lot we can improve from this year,” she said.

Despite all the troubles of 2023, Villaneuva is optimistic, too.

“Some people might think it's too good to be true to be hopeful or to wish for something, but I like to stay hopeful and positive,” he said.

New weight loss drugs are out of reach for millions of older Americans because Medicare won't pay

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — New obesity drugs are showing promising results in helping some people shed pounds but the injections will remain out of reach for millions of older Americans because Medicare is forbidden to cover such medications.

Drugmakers and a wide-ranging and growing bipartisan coalition of lawmakers are gearing up to push for that to change next year.

As obesity rates rise among older adults, some lawmakers say the United States cannot afford to keep a decades-old law that prohibits Medicare from paying for new weight loss drugs, including Wegovy and Zepbound. But research shows the initial price tag of covering those drugs is so steep it could drain Medicare's already shaky bank account.

A look at the debate around if — and how — Medicare should cover obesity drugs:

WHAT OBESITY DRUGS ARE ON THE MARKET AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

The Food and Drug Administration has in recent years approved a new class of weekly injectables, Novo Nordisk's Wegovy and Eli Lilly's Zepbound, to treat obesity.

People can lose as much as 15% to 25% of their body weight on the drugs, which imitate the hormones that regulate appetites by communicating fullness between the gut and brain when people eat.

The cost of the drugs, beloved by celebrities, has largely limited them to the wealthy. A monthly supply of Wegovy rings up at \$1,300 and Zepbound will put you out \$1,000. Shortages for the drugs have also limited the supplies. Private insurers often do not cover the medications or place strict restrictions on who can access them.

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Last month, a large, international study found a 20% reduced risk of serious heart problems such as heart attacks in patients who took Wegovy.

WHY DOESN'T MEDICARE COVER THE DRUGS?

Long before Oprah Winfrey and TikTok influencers alike gushed about the benefits of these weight loss drugs, Congress made a rule: Medicare Part D, the health insurance plan for older Americans to get prescriptions, could not cover medications used to help gain or lose weight. Medicare will cover obesity screening and behavioral treatment if a person has a body mass index over 30. People with BMIs over 30 are considered obese.

The rule was tacked onto legislation passed by Congress in 2003 that overhauled Medicare's prescription drug benefits.

Lawmakers balked at paying high costs for drugs to treat a condition that was historically regarded as cosmetic. Safety problems in the 1990s with the anti-obesity treatment known as fen-phen, which had to be withdrawn from the market, were also fresh in their minds.

Medicaid, the state and federal partnership program for low-income people, does cover the drugs in some areas, but access is fragmented.

THE CONVERSATION IS SHIFTING

New studies are showing the drugs do more than help patients slim down.

Rep. Brad Wenstrup, R-Ohio, introduced legislation with Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Calif., this year that would allow Medicare to cover the now-forbidden anti-obesity drugs, therapy, nutritionists and dietitians.

"For years there was a stigma against these people, then there was a stigma about talking about obesity," Wenstrup said in an interview with The Associated Press. "Now we're in a place where we're saying this is a health problem we need to deal with this."

He believes the intervention could alleviate all sorts of ailments associated with obesity that cost the system money.

"The problem is so prevalent," Wenstrup said. "People are starting to realize you have to take into consideration the savings that comes with better health."

Last year, about 40% of the nearly 66 million people enrolled in Medicare had obesity. That roughly mirrors the larger U.S. population, where 42% of adults struggle with obesity, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Notably, Medicare does cover certain surgical procedures to treat medical complications of obesity in people with a BMI of 35 and at least one related condition. Congress approved the exception in 2006, noted Mark McClellan, a former head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the FDA.

The 17-year-old law may provide a blueprint for expanding coverage of the new drugs, which mirror the results of bariatric surgery in some cases, McClellan said. Evidence showed that the surgery reduced the risks of death and serious illness from conditions related to obesity.

"And that's been the basis for coverage all this time," McClellan said.

COST IS NOW THE ISSUE

Still, the upfront price tag for lifting the rule remains a challenge.

Some research shows offering weight loss drugs would assure Medicare's impending bankruptcy. A Vanderbilt University analysis this year put an annual price of about \$26 billion on anti-obesity drugs for Medicare if just 10% of the system's enrollees were prescribed the medication.

Other research, however, shows it could also save the government billions, even trillions over many years, because it would reduce some of the chronic conditions and problems that stem from obesity.

An analysis this year from the University of Southern California's Schaeffer Center estimated the government could save as much as \$245 billion in a decade, with the majority of savings coming from reducing hospitalizations and other care.

"What we did is we looked at the long-term health consequences of treating obesity in the Medicare population," said the study's co-author, Darius Lakdawalla, the director of research at the center. The Schaeffer Center receives funding from pharmaceutical companies, including Eli Lilly.

Lakdawalla said it's nearly impossible to put a cost on covering the drugs because no one knows how

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many people will end up taking them or what the drugs will be priced at.

The Congressional Budget Office, which is tasked with pricing out legislative proposals, acknowledged this difficulty in an October blog post, with the director calling for more research on the topic.

Overall, the agency "expects that the drug's net cost to the Medicare program would be significant over the next 10 years."

The cost of the legislation is the biggest hang up in getting support, Ruiz said.

"When we talk about the initial cost, I often have to educate the members that the CBO does not take into account cost savings in their cost benefit analysis," Ruiz told the AP. "Taking that number in isolation, one does not get the full picture of the full economies of reducing obesity and all of its comorbidities in our patients."

WHO WANTS MEDICARE TO COVER THE DRUGS?

Doctors say weight loss drugs are only a part of the most effective strategies to treat a patient with obesity.

When Dr. Andrew Kraftson develops a plan with his patients at the University of Michigan's Weight Navigator program, it involves a "perfect marriage" of behavioral intervention, health and diet education, and possibly anti-obesity medication.

But with Medicare patients, he is limited in what he can prescribe.

"A blanket prohibition for use of anti-obesity medication is an antiquated way of thinking and does not recognize obesity as a disease and is perpetuating health disparities," Kraftson said. "I'm not so ignorant to think that Medicare should just start covering expensive treatments for everyone. But there is something between all or nothing."

Lawmakers have introduced some variation of legislation that would permit Medicare coverage of weight loss drugs over the last decade. But this year's bill has garnered interest from more than 60 lawmakers, from self-proclaimed budget hawk Rep. David Schweikert, R-Ariz., to progressive Rep. Judy Chu, D-Calif.

Passage is a top priority for two lawmakers, Wenstrup and Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., before they retire next year.

Pharmaceutical companies also are readying for a lobbying blitz next year with the drugs getting the OK from the FDA to be used for weight loss.

"Americans should have access to the medicines that their doctors believe they should have," Stephen Ubl, the president of the lobbying group, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said on a call with reporters last week. "We would call on Medicare to cover these medicines."

Already, Novo Nordisk has employed eight separate firms and spent nearly \$20 million on lobbying the federal government on issues, including the Treat & Reduce Obesity Act, since 2020, disclosures show. Eli Lilly has spent roughly \$2.4 million lobbying since 2021.

Advocates for groups such as the Obesity Society have been pushing for Medicare coverage of the medications for years. But the momentum may be shifting, thanks to the growing evidence that the obesity drugs can prevent strokes, heart attacks, even death, said Ted Kyle, a policy advisor.

"The conversation has shifted from debating whether obesity treatment is worthwhile to figuring out how to make the economics work," he said. "This is why I now believe the change is inevitable."

Federal judge accepts redrawn Georgia congressional and legislative districts that will favor GOP

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday accepted new Georgia congressional and legislative voting districts that protect Republican partisan advantages, saying the creation of new majority-Black voting districts solved the illegal minority vote dilution that led him to order maps to be redrawn.

U.S. District Judge Steve Jones, in three separate but similarly worded orders, rejected claims that the new maps don't do enough to help Black voters. Jones said he can't interfere with legislative choices, even if Republicans moved to protect their power. The maps were redrawn in a recent special legislative

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session after Jones in October ruled that maps drawn in 2021 illegally harmed Black voters.

The maps added Black-majority districts that Jones ordered, including one in Congress, two in the state Senate and five in the state House. But in some Democratic-held districts without Black majorities, Republicans redrew the maps to favor themselves. One of those is Democratic U.S. Rep. Lucy McBath's 7th Congressional District in suburban Atlanta.

McBath said she would seek reelection in 2024 in the new 6th Congressional District in Fulton, Cobb, Douglas and Fayette counties if the current congressional map is not overturned on appeal. It would be the second election in a row that she has had to run in a new district. The first, in 2022, was after the district she originally won was redrawn to favor Republicans.

McBath said in a statement that she wouldn't "allow an extremist few Republicans" to "decide when my work in Congress is finished."

The redrawing of the districts this year was among numerous redistricting actions that took place across the South after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the 1964 Voting Rights Act in June, clearing the way for Black voters to win changes from courts. But while a case in Alabama will almost certainly result in another Democrat joining its congressional delegation, the Georgia case has played out differently.

That's because Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act protects minority voters, but doesn't stop Republicans from tinkering with Democratic-held districts with white majorities or where no ethnic group is in the majority. So, Georgia Republicans redrew maps while giving up few seats to Democrats.

The judge's approval of Georgia's redrawn maps sets the stage for their use in 2024 elections. Their implementation is likely to reproduce the current 9-5 Republican majority among Georgia's 14 congressional seats and a 33-23 GOP margin in the Senate. Democrats are likely to gain one or two seats in a state House that now has a 102-78 Republican margin.

Plaintiffs and allied Democrats denounced the ruling, but none immediately said they would appeal. Time for an appeal is short because the 2024 elections are near.

"The Republican maps are an ongoing Voting Rights Act violation. Period," state Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler, a Stone Mountain Democrat, said in a written statement.

American Civil Liberties Union lawyer Ari Savitsky, who represents challengers to state legislative maps, said the new maps "don't provide a complete fix for the injuries to Black voters that we proved in court."

"Federal law requires an end to vote dilution everywhere and a real change for injured voters, not re-shuffling the same deck," Savitsky said.

Republicans said the ruling proves they could comply with the order to draw more majority-Black districts while preserving their power. In a written statement, House Speaker Jon Burns, a Newington Republican, called the ruling "a validation of what we put forward."

The voters and civic groups who sued to overturn the 2021 maps claimed the new ones didn't fix problems in districts Jones had labeled as illegal. But Jones said lawmakers weren't confined to reworking only those districts, and that plaintiffs' objections weren't enough for him to reject the maps. If he had, he could have adopted maps offered by the plaintiffs or drawn his own.

Jones echoed the state's claim that approving redrawn maps was not a beauty contest.

"To put it more starkly, plaintiffs contend that their illustrative plans are better remedies than the state's remedial plans," he wrote. "Because this court cannot intrude upon the domain of the General Assembly, however, it declines plaintiffs invitation to compare the 2023 remedial plans with plans preferred by plaintiffs and crown the illustrative plans the winners."

Arguments on the congressional map focused on whether it was legal for lawmakers to dissolve McBath's district in Gwinnett and Fulton counties — while at the same time drawing a new Black-majority 6th District west of downtown Atlanta. The plaintiffs argue that the state, by dissolving the current 7th District, is newly violating the guarantee of opportunities for minority voters spelled out in Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act. The 7th District is majority nonwhite, but not majority Black, with substantial shares of Hispanic and Asian voters as well.

Jones said he didn't have the evidence needed to act on a Voting Rights Act claim: that Black, Hispanic and

Asian voters in the 7th District act as a coalition to elect their choices. He told the plaintiffs they'd have to file a new lawsuit to pursue claims that wiping out McBath's current district illegally harms minority voters.

As Gaza war grinds on, tensions soar along Israel's volatile northern border with Lebanon

By TIA GOLDENBERG and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israeli officials are stepping up threats against the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, warning that Israel is running out of patience as the two sides continue to trade fire along Israel's volatile northern border.

Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's War Cabinet, said Wednesday that if the international community and the Lebanese government don't restrain Hezbollah, Israel will. Israel's army chief, Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi, said the military is in a state of high readiness and has approved plans in case it decides to open a second front in the north.

The fighting along Israel's northern border broke out when Hezbollah began firing rockets shortly after the Oct. 7 cross-border attack by Hamas triggered the war in Gaza.

While at a lower intensity than the battle in Gaza, the simultaneous fighting has caused destruction, displacement and death on both sides and raised fears of a wider regional war.

Here is a look at the battle between Israel and Hezbollah:

WHAT DOES THE FIGHTING INVOLVE?

Hezbollah fighters have been attacking Israeli posts and villages along the border, and the group has launched rockets and drones toward Israeli targets. Israeli tanks, artillery and aircraft have been striking areas on the Lebanese side of the border. The fighting has been mostly brief, but almost daily.

The Israeli military says more than 1,700 rockets have been fired from Lebanon toward Israel, killing 15 Israelis, including nine soldiers, and injuring more than 150 people.

Israel has evacuated about 60,000 people from more than 40 northern communities, including the main city of Kiryat Shemona, which has 22,000 residents. Israeli media outlets have aired footage of battered homes and barren communities, with Israeli soldiers guarding empty streets.

On the Lebanese side, around 74,500 people have been displaced by the fighting, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Nearly 160 people have been killed by Israeli airstrikes and shelling in Lebanon, according to an Associated Press tally. Most of those were fighters with Hezbollah and allied groups, but at least 19 civilians have also been killed, including journalists and children.

Human rights groups and local officials have also accused Israel of hitting Lebanese border areas with shells containing white phosphorus, a controversial incendiary munition. The strikes have burned hundreds of hectares (acres) of farm and woodland and injured civilians. Israel says all its actions conform with international law.

WHY ARE THEY FIGHTING?

Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah are longtime bitter enemies, dating back to Israel's occupation of parts of south Lebanon from 1982 to 2000.

After Hezbollah fighters ambushed an Israeli patrol in 2006 and took two Israeli soldiers hostage, the sides fought a vicious monthlong war that ended in a draw — but not before Israeli bombardment wreaked widespread destruction in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut.

The border area had largely been quiet since that war, aside from sparse skirmishes and sporadic tensions. Israel estimates that Hezbollah has some 150,000 rockets and missiles in its arsenal, many of which can strike virtually anywhere in Israel, including the economic capital, Tel Aviv.

Hezbollah says its attacks aim to ease pressure on the Gaza Strip, where Israel is fighting an unprecedented ground, air and sea offensive meant to topple Hamas and return some 129 people held captive in the territory.

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THE IRAN CONNECTION

Although there has been no proof that Iran, Israel's archenemy, ordered the Oct. 7 attack, its fingerprints have been visible throughout the ensuing conflict.

In addition to Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran-backed groups in Yemen, Syria and Iraq have launched attacks on Israel and its allies in support of Hamas.

In the Red Sea, attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen against ships they believe to be connected to Israel have disrupted trade and prompted the launch of a U.S.-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping routes.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq have also launched dozens of attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, which they have said are in retaliation for Washington's support of Israel.

And on Monday, Iranian state media blamed Israel for a strike on a Damascus neighborhood that killed a high-ranking Iranian general.

Amos Harel, a military commentator for the daily Haaretz newspaper, wrote Wednesday that the general's killing was a message to Iran that it can no longer enjoy immunity while its proxies attack Israel.

"It also brings us closer to the possibility of a growing escalation against Hezbollah, and even against the Iranians, on the northern front," he wrote.

WHAT IS HEZBOLLAH'S ROLE?

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, faces a risky balancing act.

Joining Hamas would risk dragging Lebanon — beset by economic calamity and internal political tensions — into a conflict it can ill afford, fueling domestic opposition to the group. The World Bank has already said the clashes are likely to harm Lebanon's economy.

Lebanon is in the fourth year of a crippling economic crisis and is bitterly divided between Hezbollah and its allies and opponents, paralyzing the political system.

But staying entirely on the sidelines as Israeli troops battle in the Gaza Strip could compromise Hezbollah's credibility, and a Hamas defeat would be a blow to Iran.

Hezbollah has been careful to limit its attacks on Israel, while keeping open the threat of a broader escalation.

"If Israel goes too far, we will retaliate twice as much," Hezbollah's deputy leader, Sheikh Naim Kassem, said Thursday. "We will not fear either Israeli or American threats or intimidation."

A NEW FRONT FOR ISRAEL?

With its soldiers bogged down in Gaza, Israel has mostly sought to limit the fighting in its north. Hezbollah's military capabilities are far superior to those of Hamas.

Still, Israeli officials are increasingly warning that the country is prepared to expand the fighting and that Hezbollah should be prepared to pay a price for the damage it has wrought over the past three months.

Israel already has bolstered forces in the north and could well turn its sights on Hezbollah once it scales down or wraps up the war in Gaza.

Israel's top ally, the U.S, which has sent military reinforcements to the region, says it prefers to see a negotiated solution to the mounting tensions rather than a second war front.

Israel also wants Hezbollah to abide by a 2006 U.N. cease-fire agreement that states the border area in southern Lebanon must be "free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons" other than Lebanese government forces and U.N. peacekeepers. Under the resolution, Hezbollah should not have military presence in the border region.

Lebanon, meanwhile, argues that Israel violates the resolution with its air force's frequent entry into Lebanese airspace and by its presence in Chebaa Farms, a disputed area along the country's border with the Golan Heights, an area seized by Israel from Syria in 1967.

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said Wednesday that Hezbollah must respect the 2006 cease-fire. Otherwise, he warned, Nasrallah "must understand that he's next."

Nikki Haley doesn't mention slavery when asked what caused the Civil War. She later walks that back

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley was asked at a New Hampshire town hall about the reason for the Civil War, and she didn't mention slavery in her response. She walked back her comments hours later.

Asked during Wednesday night's town hall in Berlin what she believed had caused the war — the first shots of which were fired in her home state of South Carolina — Haley talked about the role of government, replying that it involved "the freedoms of what people could and couldn't do."

She then turned the question back to the man who had asked it. He replied that he was not the one running for president and wished instead to know her answer.

After Haley went into a lengthier explanation about the role of government, individual freedom and capitalism, the questioner seemed to admonish Haley, saying, "In the year 2023, it's astonishing to me that you answer that question without mentioning the word 'slavery.'"

"What do you want me to say about slavery?" Haley retorted before abruptly moving on to the next question.

Haley, the former United Nations ambassador and South Carolina governor, has been working to become the leading alternative to Donald Trump for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination. It's unclear whether her comments will have a long-term political impact, particularly among the independent voters who are crucial to her campaign.

She backpedaled on her Civil War comments 12 hours later, with her campaign disseminating a Thursday morning radio interview in which she said, "Of course the Civil War was about slavery," something she called "a stain on America." She went on to reiterate that "freedom matters. And individual rights and liberties matter for all people."

Her GOP rivals quickly jumped on her original comments, even though most of them have been accused of downplaying the effects of slavery themselves.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' campaign recirculated video of the original exchange on social media, adding the comment, "Yikes." Campaigning in Iowa on Thursday, DeSantis said that Haley "has had some problems with some basic American history" and that it's "not that difficult to identify and acknowledge the role slavery played in the Civil War."

DeSantis faced criticism over slavery earlier in the year when Florida enacted new education standards requiring teachers to instruct middle school students that slaves developed skills that "could be applied for their personal benefit." U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the only Black Republican in the Senate and DeSantis' then-rival for the GOP presidential nomination, rejected that characterization, saying instead that slavery was about "separating families, about mutilating humans and even raping their wives."

Make America Great Again Inc., a super PAC supporting Trump's campaign, sent out a release saying Haley's response shows she "is clearly not ready for primetime." The group also included an X post from Florida Rep. Byron Donalds, a Black Republican who supports Trump, reading "1. Psst Nikki... the answer is slavery PERIOD. 2. This really doesn't matter because Trump is going to be the nominee. Trump 2024!"

Trump did not mention the two centuries of slavery in America at a 2020 event marking the 223rd anniversary of the signing of the Constitution. He instead focused on America's founding having "set in motion the unstoppable chain of events that abolished slavery, secured civil rights, defeated communism and fascism and built the most fair, equal and prosperous nation in human history."

Issues surrounding the origins of the Civil War and its heritage are still much of the fabric of Haley's home state, and she has been pressed on the war's origins before. As she ran for governor in 2010, Haley, in an interview with a now-defunct activist group then known as The Palmetto Patriots, described the war as between two disparate sides fighting for "tradition" and "change" and said the Confederate flag was "not something that is racist."

During that same campaign, she dismissed the need for the flag to come down from the Statehouse

grounds, portraying her Democratic rival's push for its removal as a desperate political stunt.

Five years later, Haley urged lawmakers to remove the flag from its perch near a Confederate soldier monument following a mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, in which a white gunman killed nine Black church members who were attending Bible study. At the time, Haley said the flag had been "hijacked" by the shooter from those who saw the flag as symbolizing "sacrifice and heritage."

South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession — the 1860 proclamation by the state government outlining its reasons for seceding from the Union — mentions slavery in its opening sentence and points to the "increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery" as a reason for the state removing itself from the Union.

On Wednesday night, Christale Spain — elected this year as the first Black woman to chair South Carolina's Democratic Party — said Haley's response was "vile, but unsurprising."

"The same person who refused to take down the Confederate Flag until the tragedy in Charleston, and tried to justify a Confederate History Month," Spain said in a post on X, of Haley. "She's just as MAGA as Trump," Spain added, referring to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

Jaime Harrison, current chairman of the Democratic National Committee and South Carolina's party chairman during part of Haley's tenure as governor, said her response was "not stunning if you were a Black resident in SC when she was Governor."

"Same person who said the confederate flag was about tradition & heritage and as a minority woman she was the right person to defend keeping it on state house grounds," Harrison posted Wednesday night on X. "Some may have forgotten but I haven't. Time to take off the rose colored Nikki Haley glasses folks."

Independent lawyers begin prosecuting cases of sexual assault and other crimes in the US military

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military on Thursday opened a new chapter in how it investigates and prosecutes cases of sexual assault and other major crimes, putting independent lawyers in charge of those decisions and sidelining commanders after years of pressure from Congress.

The change, long resisted by Pentagon leaders, was finally forced by frustrated members of Congress who believed that too often commanders would fail to take victims' complaints seriously or would try to protect alleged perpetrators in their units.

The new law was fueled by a persistent increase in sexual assaults and harassment across the military. The Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Navy all saw reported sexual assaults go up last year, but a sharp 9% drop in reports from the Army — the largest military service — drove the overall number down. In 2021, reported assaults spiked by 13%.

Under the law, new special counsels will have the authority to make prosecution decisions on a number of major crimes, including murder, rape and several other sexual assault-related offenses, kidnapping, domestic violence, making or possessing child sexual abuse images, stalking and retaliation.

In a statement, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III called it "the most important reform to our military justice system since the creation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1950."

It's unclear, however, what impact the change will have on the broader problem of sexual misconduct in the military, including if it will trigger an increase in prosecutions and, if so, whether that will have any deterrent effect.

Senior officials from the military services who are familiar with the new program said they already have more than 160 certified special trial counsels who will take over the prosecution decisions as of Thursday. Many of those lawyers, however, have already been involved, providing advice and support for months on cases that are underway. The officials spoke to reporters on the condition of anonymity to discuss the new program under rules set by the Defense Department.

As of Thursday, the special trial counsels will have sole authority to make prosecution decisions on new cases involving the major crimes. Any advice on already existing cases is nonbinding, the officials said.

According to the officials, the Army will have 65 certified trial counsels, the Air Force will have 40, the Marine Corps will have 33 and the Navy will have 24, with 23 attorneys who are not yet certified assisting in the cases. About 10 more are expected to be certified in the summer.

The lawyers will be scattered around the U.S. and the world, with larger numbers at bases and locations where there are more service members and more crime.

The officials said they expect each trial counsel to handle as many as 50 investigations and roughly eight to 12 trials a year.

An independent commission that studied sexual assaults in the military suggested in its report that the use of special counsels would have a positive impact. It said the special counsels would make better decisions on what cases should go forward, resulting in higher conviction rates. Increased convictions, the report said, will encourage more accused perpetrators to make plea agreements, which alleviates the need for victims to testify at trials.

"These outcomes will also increase confidence in the public that the military is correcting its course in the prosecution of special victim cases," the report said.

Sean Timmons, managing partner at the Tully Rinckey law firm, which specializes in military cases, said the change doesn't really get at the underlying behavioral problems. As a result, he said, it is unlikely to have any real impact or deterrent effect on misconduct by service members. He said that it could result in more people being fired as a result of board proceedings but that in agreements in which the victims don't testify, the cases may end up being weaker.

"My analogy of that is we're rearranging the chairs on the Titanic," said Timmons, a former Army judge advocate general. "Nothing will really change other than semantics and appearances. That's the unfortunate reality."

The military services have long struggled to come up with programs to prevent sexual assaults and to encourage reporting, including a number of new initiatives in recent years. But they have yet to show any real progress in lowering the number of reported assaults, and anonymous surveys still indicate that many more victims opt not to report.

Defense officials have long argued that an increase in reported assaults is a positive trend, both in the military and in society as a whole. Greater reporting, they say, shows there is more confidence in the reporting system and the support available for victims.

Nate Galbreath, acting director of the Pentagon's sexual assault prevention and response office, said in April the department was using a budget infusion of \$479 million this year to hire as many as 2,400 personnel for a new prevention workforce. He said about 350 had already been hired and as the number grew they would be placed in military installations around the world to help commanders address some of the risk factors that lead to sexual assault.

Gypsy Rose Blanchard out of prison years after persuading boyfriend to kill her abusive mother

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Gypsy Rose Blanchard, the Missouri woman who persuaded an online boyfriend to kill her mother after she had forced her to pretend for years that she was suffering from leukemia, muscular dystrophy and other serious illnesses, was released Thursday from prison on parole.

Blanchard was released early in the day from the Chillicothe Correctional Center, said Karen Pojmann, a spokesperson for the Missouri Department of Corrections. Blanchard was granted parole after serving 85% of her original sentence, Pojmann said.

Blanchard's case sparked national tabloid interest after reports emerged that her mother, Claudine "Dee Dee" Blanchard, who was slain in 2015, had essentially kept her daughter prisoner, forcing her to use a wheelchair and feeding tube.

It turned out that Gypsy Blanchard, now 32, was perfectly healthy, not developmentally delayed as her friends had always believed. Her mother had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a psychological disorder in

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which parents or caregivers seek sympathy through the exaggerated or made-up illnesses of their children, said her trial attorney, Michael Stanfield.

"People were constantly telling Dee Dee what a wonderful mother she was, and Dee Dee was getting all of this attention," he said.

Through the ruse, the mother and daughter met country star Miranda Lambert and received charitable donations, a trip to Disney World and even a home near Springfield from Habitat for Humanity.

Stanfield said Gypsy Blanchard's mother was able to dupe doctors by telling them her daughter's medical records had been lost in Hurricane Katrina. If they asked too many questions, she just found a new physician, shaving the girl's head to back up her story. Among the unnecessary procedures Gypsy Blanchard underwent was the removal of her salivary glands. Her mother convinced doctors it was necessary by using topical anesthetic to cause drooling.

Gypsy Blanchard, who had little schooling or contact with anyone but her mother, also was misled, especially when she was younger, Stanfield said.

"The doctors seem to confirm everything that you're being told. The outside world is telling you that your mother is a wonderful, loving, caring person. What other idea can you have?" Stanfield said.

But then the abuse became more physical, Stanfield said. Gypsy testified that her mother beat her and chained her to a bed. Slowly, Gypsy also was beginning to understand that she wasn't as sick as her mom said.

"I wanted to be free of her hold on me," Gypsy testified at the 2018 trial of her former boyfriend, Nicholas Godejohn of Big Bend, Wisconsin, who is serving a life sentence in the killing. She went on to add: "I talked him into it."

When she took the stand at his trial, prosecutors already had cut her a deal because of the abuse she had endured. In exchange for pleading guilty in 2016 to second-degree murder, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The first-degree murder charge she initially faced would have meant a life term.

"Nick was so in love with her and so obsessed with her that he would do anything," Godejohn's trial attorney Dewayne Perry argued in court, saying his client has autism and was manipulated.

Prosecutors, however, argued that he was motivated by sex and a desire to be with Gypsy Blanchard, whom he met on a Christian dating website.

According to the probable cause statement, Gypsy Blanchard supplied the knife and hid in a bathroom while Godejohn repeatedly stabbed her mother. The two ultimately made their way by bus to Wisconsin, where they were arrested.

"Things are not always as they appear," said Greene County Sheriff Jim Arnott as the strange revelations began to emerge.

Even Gypsy's age was a lie. Her mother had said she was younger to make it easier to perpetuate the fraud, and got away with it because Gypsy was so small: just 4 feet, 11 inches (150 centimeters) tall.

Law enforcement was initially so confused that the original court documents listed three different ages for her, with the youngest being 19. She was 23.

Greene County Prosecutor Dan Patterson described it as "one of the most extraordinary and unusual cases we have seen."

Stanfield recalled that the first time he met Gypsy, she got out of breath walking the 75 yards (69 meters) from the elevator to the room where he talked to her. He described her as malnourished and physically frail.

"I can honestly say I've rarely had a client who looks exceedingly better after doing a fairly long prison sentence," Stanfield said. "Prison is generally not a place where you become happy and healthy. And I say that because, to me, that's kind of the evidence to the rest of the world as to just how bad what Gypsy was going through really was."

Gypsy Blanchard later said it wasn't until her arrest that she realized how healthy she was. But it took time. Eventually, she got married while behind bars to Ryan Scott Anderson, now 37, of Saint Charles, Louisiana.

The bizarre case was the subject of the 2017 HBO documentary "Mommy Dead and Dearest," the 2019 Hulu miniseries "The Act" and an upcoming Lifetime docuseries "The Prison Confession of Gypsy Rose

Blanchard." Daytime television psychologist "Dr. Phil" McGraw interviewed her from prison. The novel "Darling Rose Gold" draws upon the story for its premise and Blanchard's own account, "Released: Conversations on the Eve of Freedom" is set for publication next month.

Amid the media storm, Pojmann, of the corrections department, said no in-person coverage of her release was allowed "in the interest of protecting safety, security and privacy."

US companies are picky about investing in China.

The exceptions? Burgers and lattes

By AAMER MADHANI, PAUL WISEMAN and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There's been no shortage of tough news for China's economy as some of the world's biggest brands consider or take action to shift manufacturing to friendlier shores at a time of unease about security controls, protectionism and wobbly relations between Beijing and Washington.

Count Adidas, Apple and Samsung among those looking elsewhere.

But as a tumultuous 2023 for the Chinese economy comes to a close, there has been at least one bright spot for Beijing when it comes to foreign investment: American fast-food chains have decided a market of 1.4 billion people is simply too delicious to pass up.

KFC China's parent company opened its 10,000th restaurant in China this month and aims to have stores within reach of half of China's population by 2026. McDonald's is planning to open 3,500 new stores in China over the next four years. And Starbucks invested \$220 million in a manufacturing and distribution facility in eastern China, its biggest project outside the U.S.

This is surely not what Chinese President Xi Jinping had in mind as he made the case to American CEOs about the upside of China's "super-large market" last month while he was in San Francisco for a summit of world leaders. The investments in fast food and other consumer goods, while Washington is curbing exports of computer chips and other advanced technology, don't fit into China's own blueprint for modernizing its economy.

"As you try to interpret the signals from McDonald's and Starbucks" and other chains, says Phil Levy, chief economist at the supply chain management firm Flexport, "note what the industries are: These are not high-tech burgers."

And while some U.S. companies are increasing investments in the world's second-largest economy, overall foreign investment began falling this year. In the July-September quarter, net foreign direct investment in China sank to a deficit of \$11.8 billion, the first quarterly deficit since Beijing began publishing the data in 1998.

As tensions simmer between China and its Western trading partners, many multinational companies are shifting investments to other places, such as Southeast Asia or India, or repatriating their earnings. That has sapped China of a key engine when its economy has yet to fully recover from the disruptions of the pandemic and a property industry crisis that has been a drag on growth.

Beijing puts some of the blame on U.S. government policies.

Commerce Ministry spokesperson Shu Jueting said recently, "The U.S. side has repeatedly politicized economic, trade and technology issues and overstretched the concept of security, abused export control measures, and restricted trade and investment in China by its own enterprises, which is forcing enterprises to give up opportunities in the Chinese market and opportunities for win-win cooperation."

A survey released in September by the U.S.-China Business Council, which represents American companies in China, suggested that the uncertainty has taken a toll: 43% of its members said China's business environment had deteriorated in the past year, and 83% said they were less optimistic about China than they had been three years ago. Twenty-one percent said they were investing fewer resources in China, versus just 10% who were investing more.

Surveys of European and Japanese companies have shown similar results.

While China's market is gigantic, it's ailing. Unemployment among young Chinese rose to over 20% by June, the last time the government released that data. Housing prices are falling and the stock market is

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down nearly 15% since the summer. That's left many Chinese feeling nervous about spending.

Still, bullishness for China as other industries try to de-risk and detangle from Beijing may be a profit-increasing strategy for the fast-food industry.

"We believe there is no better time to simplify our structure, given the tremendous opportunity to capture increased demand and further benefit from our fastest-growing market's long-term potential," McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski said as the Chicago-based company announced in November it was increasing its minority 20% ownership of its McDonald's licensed stores in China, Macau and Hong Kong to 48%.

Burgers and lattes don't raise the sorts of friction that more high-tech industries have in the complicated U.S.-China relationship. Those strains have persisted under the presidency of Joe Biden, who took office vowing to do more to counter China's expanding military clout and its menacing of neighbors, to improve the country's treatment of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities, and to crack down on intellectual property theft.

Relations hit a low point in February when Biden ordered a Chinese spy balloon that traversed the continental United States to be shot down. Beijing, which claims self-governed Taiwan as its own territory, also protested a stopover in the U.S. by the island's president, Tsai Ing-wen, earlier this year. China answered fresh U.S. controls on exports of advanced computer chips and the technology to make them with limits of its own on exports of vital commodities like graphite, gallium and germanium, all metals used in making semiconductors, solar panels, missiles and radar.

The relationship appears to be stabilizing somewhat as 2023 winds down, highlighted by last month's Biden and Xi meeting outside San Francisco. But since then, Biden's top advisers have said there are no plans to shift the strategy of tightening regulations and blocking U.S.-based high-tech investments in China, citing the need to safeguard national security.

Both former President Donald Trump, the 2024 GOP presidential front-runner, and Biden have worried about depending on China, a potential adversary, for supplies of critical materials used in many high-tech products. Both have sought to reduce America's reliance on Chinese factories and have encouraged companies to shift away from China to other countries — so-called "friend-shoring."

Still, Biden administration officials have said they don't want to see a total decoupling of the world's two biggest economies.

"De-risking, yes. Decoupling, no," Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador to China, said at a recent event in Washington. "We want to continue a major trade and investment relationship with China, just not ... in the realm that might help them leapfrog over us sometime in the next 10 years in military technology."

Rosemary Coates, executive director of the nonprofit Reshoring Institute, noted that decisions to expand or retrench are relatively easy for a company like McDonald's or its fast-food rivals.

Franchises "can be opened or closed," Coates said. "It's not like you're investing in an auto plant or some kind of machine shop."

China's vast market is vital for many foreign companies: At their annual investors day gathering this month, McDonald's executives noted that 70 million of the 150 million customers active in its customer loyalty program are in China.

KFC China says growth in its new outlets has averaged more than 22% over the last five years, and it plans to open 1,200 additional stores in the next three years. The chain Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen relaunched its brand in China in August with a flagship restaurant in Shanghai and plans to open 1,700 stores over the next 10 years.

But for all the promise of China's huge market, U.S. businesses have other reasons to think twice about expanding in China.

In July, the U.S. recommended Americans reconsider traveling to China because of arbitrary law enforcement and exit bans and the risk of wrongful detentions. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo has warned Chinese leaders that U.S. businesses might stop investing in their country if they do not address complaints about worsening conditions due to raids on firms, unexplained fines and unpredictable official behavior.

While insisting that China is keen to have foreign investment, Beijing has given no indication it might change trade, market access and other policies that irk Washington and its other trading partners.

"Where do you draw the line?" asked Levy, a former White House economic adviser in George W. Bush's administration. "Someone might say: For sourcing sensitive computer chips, this has to be done in a place I really trust. ... The other extreme is: We're OK selling them lattes and burgers. But where do you draw the line for the stuff in between — say, automotive parts? What about ball bearings?"

Election officials see a range of threats in 2024, from hostile countries to conspiracy theorists

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — For election officials preparing for the 2024 presidential election, the list of security challenges just keeps growing.

Many of the concerns from four years ago persist: the potential for cyberattacks targeting voter registration systems or websites that report unofficial results, and equipment problems or human errors being amplified by those seeking to undermine confidence in the outcome.

Add to that the fresh risks that have developed since the 2020 election and the false claims of widespread fraud being spread by former President Donald Trump and his Republican allies. Death threats directed at election workers and breaches of voting equipment inside election offices have raised questions about safety and security. Some states have altered their voting and election laws, expanded legislative control of local elections and added penalties for election workers who violate rules.

The turmoil has contributed to a wave of retirements and resignations among election staff, creating a vacuum of institutional knowledge in some local election offices.

With Trump running again and already warning that the 2024 vote is "on its way to being another rigged election," election workers are bracing for a difficult year that will have no margin for error.

FOREIGN THREATS

National security experts have warned for years that foreign governments — primarily Russia, China and Iran — want to undermine the U.S. and see elections as a pathway to do it.

In 2016, Russia sought to interfere with a multi-pronged effort that included accessing and releasing Democratic emails and scanning state voter registration systems for vulnerabilities. Four years later, Iranian hackers obtained voter data and used it to send misleading emails.

In 2022, there were multiple instances in which hackers linked to Iran, China and Russia connected to election infrastructure, scanned state government websites and copied voter information, according to a recent declassified report.

While there has been no evidence of any compromises affecting the integrity of U.S. elections, experts say those countries are more motivated than ever given tensions across the globe.

"Election 2024 may be the first presidential election during which multiple authoritarian actors simultaneously attempt to interfere with and influence an election outcome," Microsoft warned in a November threat assessment.

The company said it was unlikely that Russia, China and Iran would sit out next year's contest because the "stakes are simply too high." The report said Russia remains "the most committed and capable threat to the 2024 election," with the Kremlin seeing next year's vote as a "must-win political warfare battle" that could determine the outcome of its war against Ukraine.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, a Democrat, said she believes foreign adversaries have a "greater incentive than ever before" to get involved in the upcoming elections.

"We're going to do everything we can to be prepared, but we are facing well-funded, serious adversaries, and that requires all of us to be clear-eyed about those challenges -- and for voters to also know that there are foreign actors that want to influence their vote to further their own goals and not America's," she said.

ELECTION SYSTEM VULNERABILITIES

Many of the conspiracy theories that have persisted since Trump lost the 2020 presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden relate to voting technology and claims that equipment was manipulated to steal the vote. There is no evidence of manipulation, and the systems have safeguards to detect problems.

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An intensive effort has been underway for several years to build defenses around voting machines and tabulators and develop plans to recover if tampering occurs. Experts are particularly concerned about non-voting systems such as voter registration databases, electronic poll books and websites that report results because they rely on internet connections.

Experts have warned that a well-timed attack, perhaps using ransomware that locks up computers until payments are made or systems are restored from backups, could disrupt election operations.

Many local election offices have been moving their systems off countywide networks to protect them, but not all have. In early September, election officials in Hinds County, Mississippi, were preparing for statewide elections when everything came to an abrupt halt.

Workers in the election office were unable to access their computers for about three weeks. The breach of the county's computers caused a slight delay in processing voter registration forms and pushed back training for poll workers.

Local election offices, particularly in rural areas, often struggle to secure enough funding, personnel and cybersecurity expertise. Hinds County Election Commissioner Shirley Varnado said it was a "wonderful idea" to have their election office networks separated from the county but would take money they don't have.

"That should be done, but we're in a building without heat or air," she said.

Election integrity groups say more needs to be done and point to a series of voting system breaches since the 2020 election that have resulted in proprietary software being distributed among various Trump allies. They want a federal investigation and for authorities to force anyone with copies to hand them over.

They also worry about technical failures, noting an incident last November in which some votes in a Pennsylvania judicial race were flipped. The prevalence of false election claims has made it difficult to raise valid criticisms, said Susan Greenhalgh, a senior adviser on election security with Free Speech For People, a left-leaning nonprofit focused on election and campaign finance reforms.

"Our election system is not perfect," Greenhalgh said. "There are a lot of things that need to be and should be improved."

INCREASED PROTECTIONS

Improvements since the 2016 election, in which Trump beat Democrat Hillary Clinton, include replacing outdated and vulnerable voting machines that lacked paper records of every vote cast. In 2020, an estimated 93% of ballots cast nationwide produced a paper record, up from 82% four years earlier.

After 2016, election systems were added to the list of critical infrastructure in the U.S. that also includes dams, banks and nuclear power plants.

In 2018, Congress established the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which provides security reviews. CISA Director Jen Easterly launched a cyber defense initiative in 2021 and last summer said 10 new regional election security advisers would be hired to work directly with local election offices.

"There's just been so much that has transformed the face of election infrastructure security over the past seven years," Easterly said in an interview last August. "In a space where people can sometimes get pretty down, I think we should be optimistic."

Larry Norden, an election expert with the Brennan Center for Justice, said he sees "massive progress" but also said turnover in local election offices has diminished institutional knowledge.

Just 29% of local election officials surveyed this year for the Brennan Center were aware of CISA routine vulnerability scans, and just 31% were aware of the agency's physical security assessments.

"There was not nearly as much awareness of the services that are offered as I think there should be," Norden said. "It's not surprising, but it means there's work to do."

'PERFECT STORM'

Staffing has long been a challenge for local election offices, which rely on both permanent and temporary workers, including those who staff some 80,000 polling locations nationally on Election Day.

But 2020 was a tipping point, with coronavirus pandemic-related challenges before the presidential vote and everything that followed: death threats, a flood of information requests from election skeptics, hostile county boards and new laws that impose fines or criminal penalties on election officials for violating rules. That contributed to a wave of retirements and resignations among election officials. Utah Lt. Gov. Deidre

Henderson said two-thirds of county clerks there are new since the 2020 election.

"This all combines into this perfect storm," said Henderson, a Republican. "It's a real challenge."

Insider threats — the possibility that someone working in an election office could tamper with systems or provide access to them — poses another concern. To address this, election officials have been boosting security around key equipment by limiting access and adding surveillance cameras.

Meanwhile, the threats and harassment have continued. Georgia's Fulton County, a target of various 2020 election conspiracy theories, was one of several election offices in November sent envelopes containing a powdery substance that in some cases tested positive for fentanyl.

The letters are another reminder of the charged environment surrounding U.S. elections heading into 2024. Despite all the challenges, Henderson said election officials are doing everything they can to prepare.

"When you have a human-run system, there will be human error. That's just part of it," she said. "But we're working hard to make sure that we mitigate those human errors and mitigate the risks and continually improve our processes so that people can have the confidence that when they vote, only eligible voters are voting, and when they vote, their votes count accurately."

The number of wounded Israeli soldiers is mounting, representing a hidden cost of war

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

RAMAT GAN, Israel (AP) — Igor Tudoran spent just 12 hours inside the Gaza Strip before a missile slammed into his tank, leaving him with a life-altering injury.

"Already within the tank, I understood from the condition of my leg that I would lose it. But the question was how much of it will I lose," he said, seated on a bed in the hospital where he has been treated since he was wounded last month.

Tudoran, 27, a reservist who volunteered for duty after the Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel by Hamas that triggered the war, lost his right leg beneath the hip. He has kept up a positive attitude — but concedes that his hopes of becoming an electrician may no longer be possible.

Tudoran is part of a swelling number of wounded Israeli fighters, yet another sizable and deeply traumatized segment of Israeli society whose struggles are emerging as a hidden cost of the war that will be felt acutely for years to come. Given the large numbers of wounded, advocates worry the country is not prepared to address their needs.

"I have never seen a scope like this and an intensity like this," said Edan Kleiman, who heads the non-profit Disabled Veterans Organization, which advocates for more than 50,000 soldiers wounded in this and earlier conflicts. "We must rehabilitate these people," he said.

Israel's Defense Ministry says roughly 3,000 members of the country's security forces have been wounded since Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking 240 people hostage. Nearly 900 of those are soldiers wounded since Israel began its ground offensive in late October, in which troops have engaged in close combat with Hamas militants. More than 160 soldiers have been killed since the ground operation began.

"They add up," said Yagil Levy, who teaches civil-military relations at Israel's Open University, of the wounded. "There could be a long-term impact if we see a big rate of people with disabilities that Israel must rehabilitate, which can produce economic issues as well as social issues."

The war has also brought unprecedented suffering to Palestinians in Gaza, where more than 21,000 have been killed, over 55,000 wounded and amputations have become commonplace. Most of the tiny enclave's population has been displaced.

Israelis still largely stand behind the war's objectives and it is mostly seen as an existential battle meant to restore a sense of security lost in Hamas' attacks. The country's mainstream media hardly cover the hardship endured by Palestinians, and their plight barely registers in Israeli public discourse.

In a country with compulsory military service for most Jews, the fate of soldiers is a sensitive and emotional topic.

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The names of fallen soldiers are announced at the top of hourly newscasts. Their funerals are packed with strangers who come to show solidarity. Their families receive generous support from the army.

But historically the plight of the wounded, though lauded as heroes, has taken a backseat to the stories of soldiers killed in battle. After the fanfare surrounding tales of their service and survival recedes, the wounded are left to contend with a new reality that can be disorienting, challenging and, for some, lonely. Their numbers have not had significant bearing on public sentiment toward Israel's wars in the way that mounting soldiers' deaths have.

The exceptionally large numbers of wounded in this war, however, will provide a visible reminder of the conflict for years to come.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized their sacrifice during a recent visit to wounded soldiers at Sheba Medical Center, Israel's largest hospital, which has treated and rehabilitated many of the injured. "You are genuine heroes," he said.

At Sheba, soldiers and civilians wounded in the war spilled out into the corridors on a recent day and passed the time with their families on an outdoor deck. Soccer paraphernalia adorned the wounded soldiers' hospital beds as did the ubiquitous Israeli flag.

One man who had lost a leg after being attacked at the Nova music festival on Oct. 7 lay in the sun on the hospital grounds, his wheelchair parked nearby. The Israeli pop diva Rita handed out hugs to some wounded soldiers. A military helicopter carrying more wounded landed nearby.

The Israeli Defense Ministry said it was working at "full capacity" to assist the wounded, and that it was cutting red tape and hiring employees to deal with the influx.

Jonathan Ben Hamou, 22, who lost his left leg beneath the knee after a rocket-propelled grenade struck the bulldozer he was using to help clear the way for other troops, is already looking forward to the day when he can use a state-funded prosthetic.

Ben Hamou, who mostly uses a wheelchair since the incident in early November, said that he eventually plans to pursue his goal of attending a military commanders' course.

"I'm not ashamed of the wound," said Ben Hamou, who filmed the RPG's moment of impact as well as his evacuation to hospital. "I was wounded for the country in a war inside Gaza. I am proud."

But Kleiman, who himself was wounded in an operation in the Gaza Strip in the early 1990s, said he thinks Israeli authorities are not grasping the severity of the situation.

The disabled veterans group is ramping up efforts to address what he suspects will be the overwhelming needs of a new cadre of wounded soldiers. He said the organization is tripling its manpower, adding therapists and employees to help wounded veterans navigate bureaucracy and upgrade rehab centers.

Kleiman said the number of wounded is likely to stretch close to 20,000 once those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder are included.

He said if wounded soldiers don't receive the mental and physical care they need, including making their homes or cars accessible, it could stunt their rehabilitation and delay or even prevent their reentry into the workforce.

"There are wounded whose lives have been ruined," said Idit Shafran Gittleman, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv research center. "They will have to contend with their wound their entire lives."

A cargo ship picking up Ukrainian grain hits a Russian floating mine in the Black Sea, officials say

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A civilian cargo ship struck a Russian mine in the Black Sea near Ukraine's Danube ports Thursday, injuring two sailors, officials and analysts said, in an incident that underscored the dangers faced by those exporting Ukrainian grain during the war.

The Panama-flagged vessel struck the floating mine during stormy weather as it went to pick up grain, according to Ukraine's Southern Defense Forces, adding that churning seas often increase the risk from

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mines.

As the fighting grinds on through the winter and likely into a third year after Russia's February 2022 invasion, and with little recent change along the front line, Ukraine is aiming to strengthen its financial resources for what could be a protracted war.

After Russia pulled out of a U.N.-brokered export agreement last summer, Ukraine launched a new Black Sea shipping corridor to get grain, metals and other cargo to world markets. That has given a boost to Ukraine's agriculture-dependent economy.

The mine incident occurred about 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Chornomorsk, which is near Odesa on Ukraine's southern coast, the Ambrey maritime risk analysis company said. The ship with 18 crew was on its way to Izmail, another port in the area.

The mine detonated at the ship's stern, causing equipment and machinery failure and resulting in the vessel losing power, Ambrey said. The captain reportedly maneuvered into shallow water to prevent the ship from sinking.

Ukraine's much-anticipated counteroffensive last summer largely failed to shift the front line despite billions of dollars in weaponry sent by its Western allies. That has given confidence to the Kremlin's forces, especially as further Western aid is in question.

One think tank argues that the front line is not currently "a stable stalemate." The Institute for the Study of War in Washington said in an assessment late Wednesday that "the current balance can be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West or in Russia, and limited Russian gains could become significant especially if the West cuts off military aid to Ukraine."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested that the U.S. and European Union countries plan to continue sending help to Kyiv.

"Neither Washington nor Brussels refrain from assisting the Kyiv regime (Ukrainian government) because they realize it would be doomed without such assistance," Lavrov said in an interview with state news agency Tass that was released on Thursday. "They remain committed to containing Russia at the expense of Ukrainians and their lives."

Today in History: December 29, Texas becomes a state

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 29, the 363rd day of 2022. There are two days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 29, 1845, Texas was admitted as the 28th state.

On this date:

In 1170, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was slain in Canterbury Cathedral by knights loyal to King Henry II.

In 1812, the American frigate USS Constitution engaged and severely damaged the British frigate HMS Java off Brazil during the War of 1812.

In 1851, the first Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the United States was founded in Boston.

In 1890, the Wounded Knee massacre took place in South Dakota as an estimated 300 Sioux Indians were killed by U.S. troops sent to disarm them.

In 1940, during World War II, Germany dropped incendiary bombs on London, setting off what came to be known as "The Second Great Fire of London."

In 1972, Eastern Air Lines Flight 401, a Lockheed L-1011 Tristar, crashed into the Florida Everglades near Miami International Airport, killing 101 of the 176 people aboard.

In 1978, during the Gator Bowl, Ohio State coach Woody Hayes punched Clemson player Charlie Bauman, who'd intercepted an Ohio State pass. (Hayes was fired the next day.)

In 1989, dissident and playwright Vaclav Havel (VAHTS'-lahv HAH'-vel) assumed the presidency of Czechoslovakia.

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In 1992, the United States and Russia announced agreement on a nuclear arms reduction treaty.

In 2006, word reached the United States of the execution of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (because of the time difference, it was the morning of Dec. 30 in Iraq when the hanging took place). In a statement, President George W. Bush called the execution an important milestone on Iraq's road to democracy.

In 2007, the New England Patriots ended their regular season with a remarkable 16-0 record following a 38-35 comeback victory over the New York Giants. (New England became the first NFL team since the 1972 Dolphins to win every game on the schedule.)

In 2016, the United States struck back at Russia for hacking the U.S. presidential campaign with a sweeping set of punishments targeting Russia's spy agencies and diplomats.

In 2021, British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was convicted in New York of helping lure teenage girls to be sexually abused by the late Jeffrey Epstein; the verdict capped a monthlong trial featuring accounts of the sexual exploitation of girls as young as 14. (Maxwell would be sentenced to 20 years in prison.)

In 2022, Brazilian soccer legend Pelé, winner of a record three World Cups and standard-bearer for "the beautiful game," died at age 82.

Today's Birthdays: Retired ABC newscaster Tom Jarriel is 89. Actor Barbara Steele is 86. Actor Jon Voight is 85. Singer Marianne Faithfull is 77. Retired Hall of Fame Jockey Laffit Pincay Jr. is 77. Actor Ted Danson is 76. Singer-actor Yvonne Elliman is 72. The president of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, is 70. Actor Patricia Clarkson is 64. Comedian Paula Poundstone is 64. Rock singer-musician Jim Reid (The Jesus and Mary Chain) is 62. Actor Michael Cudlitz is 59. Rock singer Dexter Holland (The Offspring) is 58. Actor-comedian Mystro Clark is 57. Actor Jason Gould is 57. News anchor Ashleigh Banfield is 56. Movie director Lilly Wachowski is 56. Actor Jennifer Ehle is 54. Actor Patrick Fischler is 54. Rock singer-musician Glen Phillips is 53. Actor Kevin Weisman is 53. Actor Jude Law is 51. Actor Maria Dizzia is 49. Actor Mekhi Phifer (mih-KY' FY'-fuhr) is 49. Actor Shawn Hatosy is 48. Actor Katherine Moennig is 46. Actor Diego Luna is 44. Actor Alison Brie is 41. Country singer Jessica Andrews is 40. Actor Iain de Caestecker is 36. Actor Jane Levy is 34. Singer-actor-dancer Ross Lynch is 28. Rock musician Danny Wagner is 25.