

Groton Daily Independent

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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

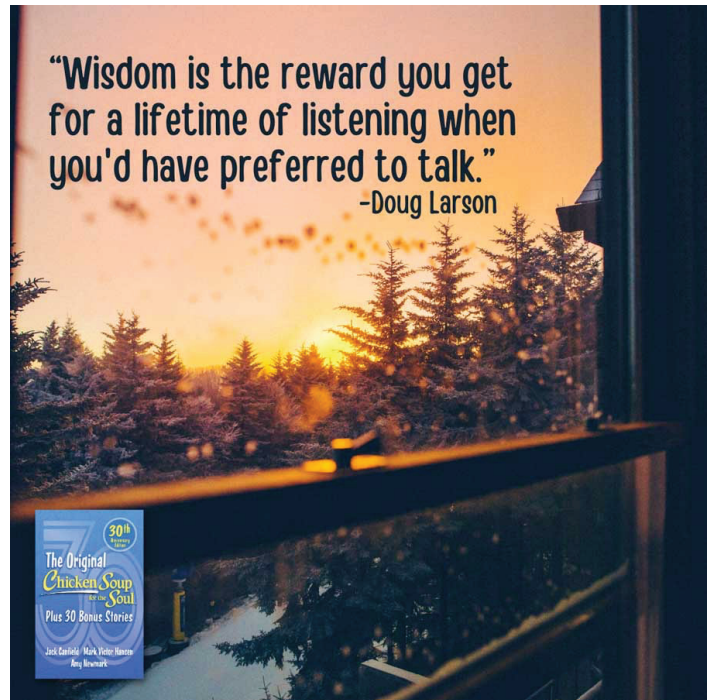
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

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

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.

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



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

Tuesday, Jan. 2

Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, pineapple/mandarin oranges, breadstick.

No School

Basketball Doubleheader at Warner: Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow.

JV/JH boys wrestling at Oakes, 4:30 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

Every year on Jan. 1, a new batch of copyrighted works and intellectual property enters the public domain. On Monday, the first versions of Mickey and Minnie Mouse, featured in the 1928 short "Steamboat Willie", will become available for public use.

Russia launches 122 missiles, 36 drones against Ukraine.

At least 30 people were killed and 144 injured across Ukraine Friday from the attack. The Ukrainian military said it had intercepted most of the missiles and drones. The attack is considered the largest aerial barrage since the war between Russia and Ukraine began in February 2022. See war updates here.

South Africa accuses Israel of genocide in case brought to top UN court.

South Africa, which has been a critic of Israel's military campaign in Gaza and has compared it to South Africa's past apartheid regime, seeks an order from the UN's International Court of Justice to halt Israel's attacks and declare Israel in violation of the Genocide Convention (see 101). Israel maintains it is abiding by international law. Separately, tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza moved south to Rafah, while a delegation met in Egypt Friday for cease-fire talks. See war updates here.

World population projected to top 8 billion on New Year's Day.

The world's population grew by more than 75 million people this year, up 0.95% from New Year's Day 2023, according to the US Census Bureau. On Jan. 1, the population is expected to reach a little over 8 billion, from 7.9 billion a year ago. Next year, 4.3 births and two deaths are expected worldwide every second. Track the Census Bureau's US and world population clocks here.

California keeps Trump on state's 2024 primary ballot.

Former President Donald Trump will appear on the Republican ballot in California's Super Tuesday (March 5) presidential primary after Secretary of State Shirley Weber (D) published a list of official candidates, including Trump, late Thursday. The news came hours after Maine's secretary of state nixed Trump due to a 14th Amendment clause (see previous write-up). See a state-by-state tracker of challenges here.

At least eight people injured after huge wave batters California coast.

The massive 20-foot-plus wave crashed onto Ventura, California, flooding surrounding areas and sweeping up a truck. California has been experiencing huge waves this week as a result of low-pressure storm systems in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Coastal flooding and waves in the range of 15 to 20 feet are expected along California's coast through this evening.

Google settles \$5B consumer privacy lawsuit over "Incognito" mode.

The class-action lawsuit was brought by users who accused the tech giant of tracking their data while using "Incognito" mode, a function of Google's Chrome browser that is supposed to allow users to browse privately. The lawsuit originally sought at least \$5B; the settlement agreement terms have not been disclosed.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Bob S. in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"In 1980, I was accompanying my boss on a VIP flight from Brussels to Washington on one of the Air Force's pushed-out large jets—the ones with 'United States of America' emblazoned along the fuselage. My wife and I, along with two small sons, were at a round table with four captain's chairs across from an Army straphanger and his wife at a similar table. He saw that my wife was exhausted from having handled most of our move while I had concentrated on my boss and that my boss was buzzing me every few minutes with questions about our reception in Washington. An hour or so into the flight, the general motioned for my boys to come to his table. For the next five hours, he and his wife entertained my sons so that my wife could get some rest and I could take care of my boss. Those two life-savers were Colin and Alma Powell."

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Wishing you and your loved ones peace, health, happiness and prosperity in the coming New Year.

FULL CIRCLE AG

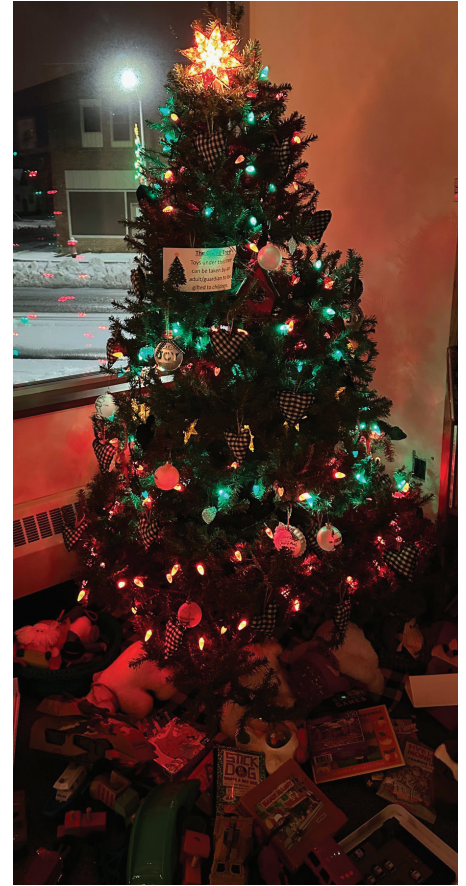
Tomorrow's Vision Today

GRAIN, AGRONOMY, ENERGY, FEED

Groton: 605-824-6851

www.fullcircleag.com

Trees featured at Wage Memorial Library



Drop the last year into the silent limbo of the past. Let it go, for it was imperfect, and thank God that it can go.

- Unknown

Happy New Year!



Weismantel Agency

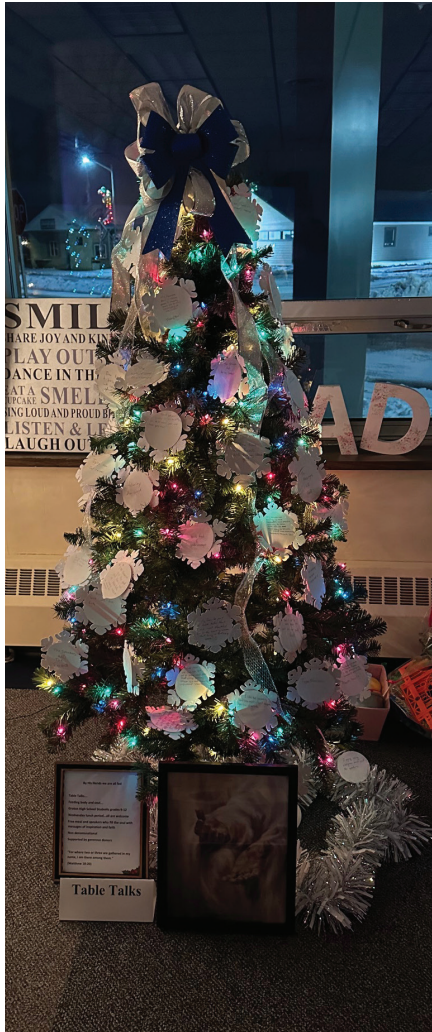
Marty Weismantel ~ 605/396-7341

weisag@nvc.net



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Wanna get away?



2024

We'd love to help you
make memories for 2024

**SUN & SEA
TRAVEL CO.**

**Happy
New Year!**

Becah Flichs: 605-846-0580

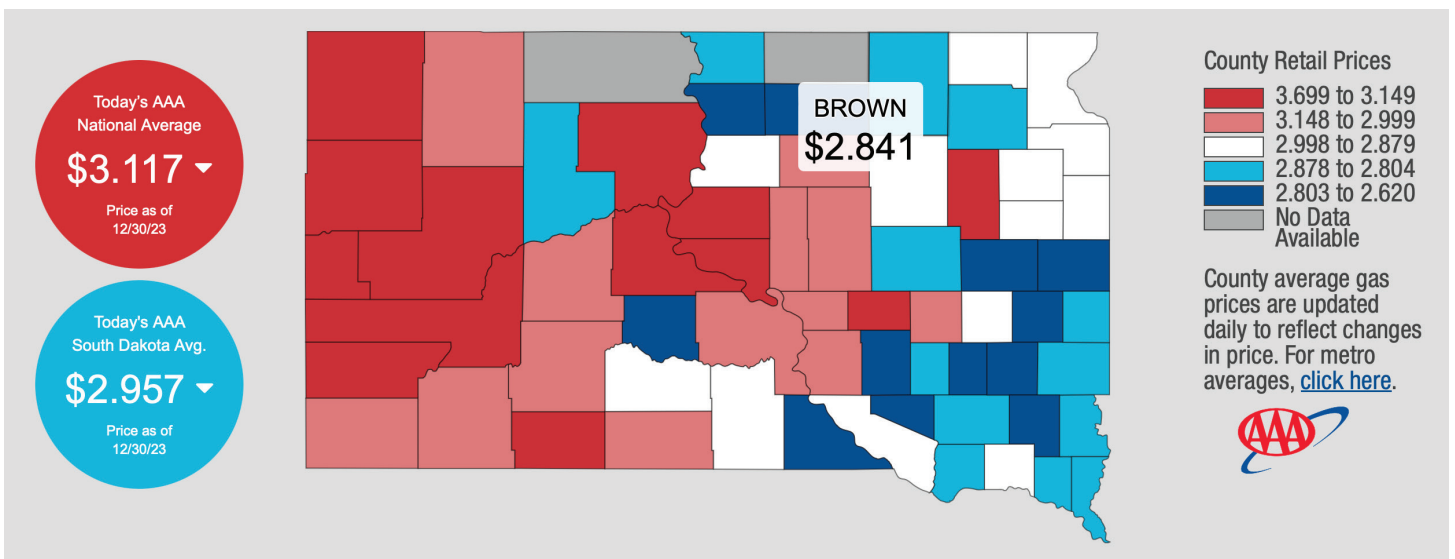
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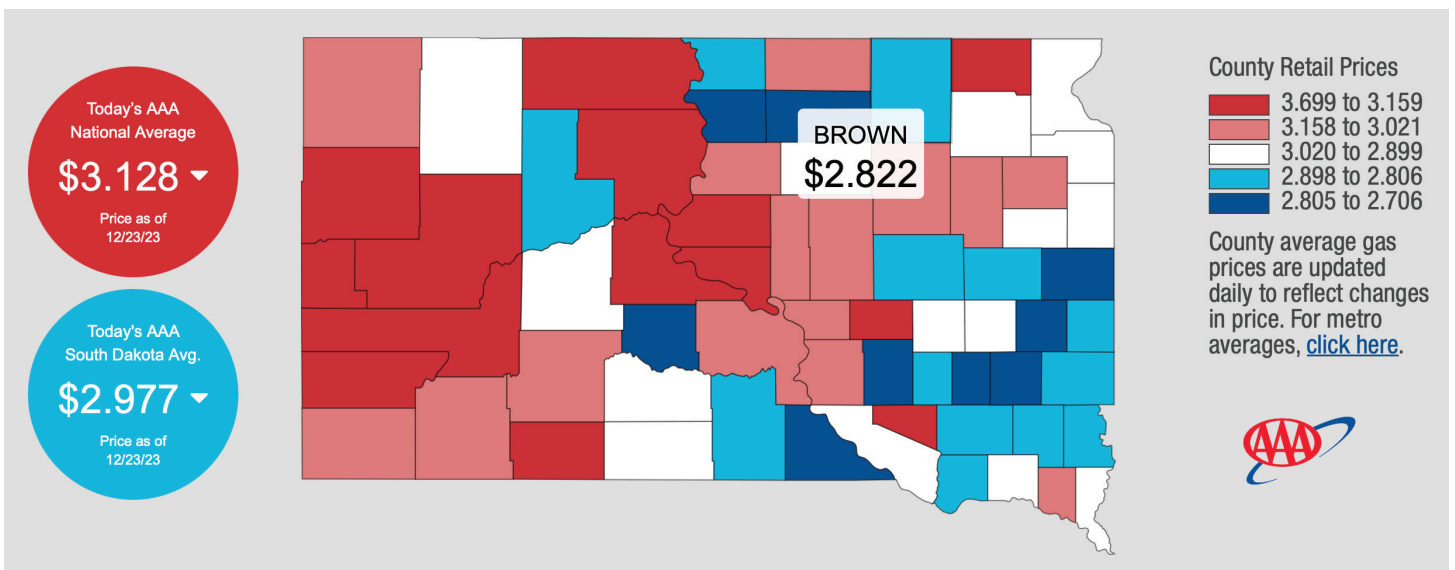
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.957	\$3.127	\$3.591	\$3.766
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.963	\$3.144	\$3.626	\$3.766
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.977	\$3.158	\$3.616	\$3.750
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.149	\$3.322	\$3.801	\$4.039
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.110	\$3.271	\$3.736	\$4.296

This Week



Two Weeks Ago



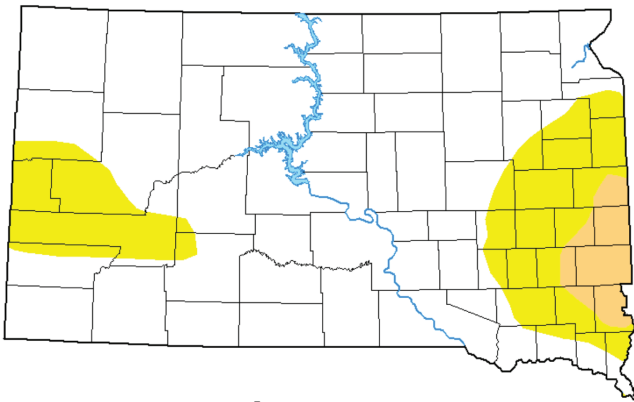
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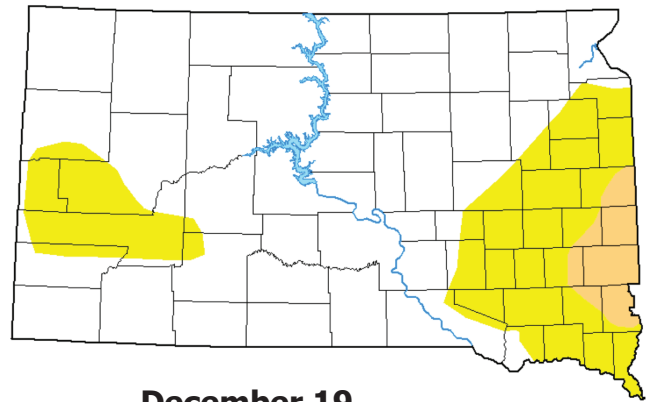
Drought Classification

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

Drought Monitor



December 26



December 19

Heavy precipitation fell over much of eastern portions of the region, where rainfall totals were greater than 600% of normal and ranged between 1 to 4 inches this week. Exceptional drought (D4) was improved in eastern Nebraska, while extreme drought (D3) was improved in eastern portions of Nebraska and Kansas where precipitation totals were up to 3 inches above normal for the week. Above-normal precipitation also led to improvements to severe drought (D2) and moderate drought (D1) over parts of eastern Kansas and northeast Nebraska. Abnormal dryness (D0) was improved along parts of the eastern border of the High Plains and in portions of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. Conversely, dry conditions persisted in portions of eastern Colorado and Wyoming where precipitation remains below normal this week. Deteriorating conditions shown in short-term SPI/SPEI, streamflow, soil moisture and snow water equivalent (SWE) data justified degradations across these states. Abnormal dryness was expanded in parts of northern Colorado and in eastern and southern Wyoming, while abnormal dryness was introduced in north-central and northeast Wyoming.

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GHS Boys' Basketball

Pine Ridge remains undefeated with win over Groton Area

Four players hit double figures but it was not enough for Groton Area to overcome Pine Ridge in boys basketball action played Friday at the Corn Palace, 73-62.

Pine Ridge led at the quarter stops at 19-15, 30-28 and 49-39.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 21 points, six rebounds two assists and two steals. Jacob Zak had 14 points, three rebounds, two assist and two steals. Ryder Johnson had 11 points, one rebound one one assist. Keegen Tracy had 11 points, two rebounds, four assists and one steal. Kassen Keough had three points, Taylor Diegel had two points, four rebounds, two assists and two steals. Logan Ringgenberg had one rebound.

Groton Area made 12 of 24 two-pointers for 50 percent, nine of 21 three-pointers for 43 percent, 11 of 16 free throws for 69 percent, had 17 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 11 assists, seven steals and 13 team fouls.

Marvin Richard III scored 24 of his 31 points in the second half to lead Pine Ridge while Kanye Hollow Horn had 13 points, Jaylin Rouillard had 12, Anthony Steele 10, Domonic Ghost Bear four and Xavier Little had three points.

Pine Ridge is now 5-0 on the season while Groton Area is 3-2.

Unemployment Insurance Tax Cut Goes into Effect January 1

PIERRE, S.D. – The bill to cut unemployment insurance employer contributions by 0.5%, HB 1011, goes into effect on January 1st, 2024. This bill delivers an \$18 million tax cut for South Dakota businesses.

“The first bill I signed last legislative session delivered a massive tax cut to South Dakota businesses,” said Governor Kristi Noem. “Our unemployment reserves are strong, our economy is continuing to thrive, and more businesses are moving to our state. Now, our hardworking business owners will get to keep more of their hard-earned dollars.”

South Dakota was the only state to reject additional elevated unemployment benefits offered by the federal government during the pandemic. People kept working. Unemployment rates remained low. And earlier this year, South Dakota broke the national record for the lowest unemployment rate.

Now, with a very healthy unemployment trust fund balance, we are cutting the unemployment tax for businesses.

If you're a businessowner who is interested in moving to a state that lets you keep more money in your pocket, visit FreedomWorksHere.com.

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

January 2, 2024 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

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

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Department Reports
4. Employee Salaries and Volunteer List
5. 2024 Fee Schedule
6. Election Date – April 9, 2024
 - 2-Year Terms Ending:
 - Kevin Nehls – Ward 1
 - Brian Bahr – Ward 2
 - Jason Wambach – Ward 3
 - 1-Year Appointment Ending:
 - Jon Cutler – Ward 1
7. Housing Study Discussion
8. Minutes
9. Bills
10. Applications Due by February 6, 2024, at 5:00pm:
 - Baseball Coordinator
 - Softball Coordinator
 - Legion Coach
 - Jr. Legion Coach
 - Jr. Teener Coach
 - Girls' Softball Coaches (U8/U10/U12/U14)
 - Day Baseball/Softball Coach
 - Concessions Manager
11. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
12. Adjournment

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY
January 2, 2024, 8:45 A.M.

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

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Blessing
3. Approval of the Agenda
4. Commission Reorganization Meeting for 2024
 - a. Election of Chairman for 2024
 - b. Election of Vice-Chairman for 2024
 - c. Update Board Book
 - i. Commissioner Committee Appointments
 - ii. Expense Policy – Brown County Boards
 - iii. ADA Coordinator
 - iv. Depositories
 - v. Officials Newspaper(s)
 - vi. Tax Deed Notices
 - vii. Volunteers for Work Comp Purposes
 1. Cert
 2. Chaplains
 3. Citizens Corp Council
 4. Dive Team
 5. Fair Board
 - viii. Board Appointments
 1. Communications Council
 2. Dacotah Prairie Museum
 3. Planning & Zoning Board
 4. 4-H
 5. Weed & Pest
 - ix. Range Fire Suppression Assistance
 - x. Safety Committee & SDPAA Representatives
 - xi. Homeland Security Regional Review Board
 - xii. Housing & Redevelopment Commission of Brown County
 - xiii. Regional Railroad Authority Commission
 - d. Designation of Deputies in Auditor, Treasurer and Register of Deeds
 - e. Investment Policy
 - f. Interest Policy
 - g. Expense Policy - Employees
 - h. Expense Policy – Elections Officials
 - i. Rental Rates for Fairgrounds
 - j. Rental Rates for Richmond Youth Camp
 - k. Weed & Pest Application Costs
 - l. DOE Clothing Allowance
 - m. DOE Fees
5. Opportunity for Public Comment
6. South Dakotans First: - Update on keeping local control
7. Second Reading & Possibly Adoption:
 - a. Ordinance #262 - Rezone
 - b. Ordinance # 263 - Rezone
 - c. Ordinance # 264 - Rezone
8. Rachel Kippley, Fair/Fairgrounds Manager
 - a. Discuss Expo Roof
9. Authorize Chairman to sign Inmate Housing Agreement with Corson County
10. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of December 27, 2023
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. LEMPG 1st Qtr. Report
 - e. Auto Budget Supplement for CDBG YDC Addition Pass-Thru
11. Other Business

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12. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
13. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

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

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

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

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

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

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission.

Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board) - Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem grants early release to 12 convicted of felonies for drug use

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 29, 2023 11:59 AM

Gov. Kristi Noem used the Friday before Christmas to reduce the sentences of nine women and three men convicted of felonies for using drugs in 2023.

Each of the 12 commutations signed on Dec. 22 orders that the person receiving it be placed on community supervision for their unauthorized possession of a controlled substance convictions.

That felony charge is unique in the nation in its scope and application. The only evidence needed to obtain a conviction for ingestion, which can carry a prison sentence of up to two years, is a positive drug test showing the presence of a controlled substance in a person's system.

The charge has been controversial for years. Critics say it criminalizes the disease of addiction, expands the state's prison population and does little to address public safety. Lawmakers as a whole have disagreed, and have rejected multiple attempts to wipe the charge from the state's codified laws, most recently in February.

In 2022, just under 19% of the state's non-violent female inmates were imprisoned on ingestion charges alone. Ingestion accounted for a little over 12% of non-violent male inmates.

Each of Noem's December 2023 commutations involved ingestion charges collected this year. Two of the convictions came in November; another two came in October.

The 12 new commutations double the total number issued by Noem since she first took office in 2019, from 12 to 24. Last year on Christmas Eve, Noem announced the issuance of seven commutations, some for people convicted of violent crimes, and some of which went against the wishes of victims' family members and the state Board of Pardons and Paroles. One of the beneficiaries of Noem's Christmas mercy in 2022 pleaded guilty to another crime 11 days after her commutation-enabled release.

None of the latest commutations were reviewed by the Board of Pardons and Paroles during its public hearings, the agendas and minutes for which are posted online each month. The board can make recommendations to the governor, but governors don't have to utilize the board or heed its advice. Nor did Noem publicly announce the new commutations in a news release, as she did last year.

A commutation can lead to the release of current inmates earlier than they'd be released otherwise.



A sign for the Solem Public Safety Center in Pierre. The center is the home of the South Dakota Department of Corrections administrative offices, as well as the South Dakota Women's Prison. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

Noem has been far more generous with pardons, another form of executive clemency that scrubs an old charge completely from a person's record years after they complete their sentence. In South Dakota, the parole board reviews pardon and commutation requests and makes recommendations to the governor, but the governor alone can sign the documents.

Here are the 12 commutations signed on Dec. 22.

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

State request for federal money aims to improve dismal rate of broadband subsidy use

South Dakota enrollments in assistance program rank second-to-last in the nation

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 29, 2023 11:01 AM

Just over two years ago, Congress pumped \$14.2 billion into the Affordable Connectivity Program in hopes of connecting more people to high-speed internet.

Eligible low-income households on tribal land can get \$75 off their monthly internet bills; those outside of tribal land can get \$30 a month. The program also offers \$100 one-time payments for the purchase of a laptop, desktop or tablet.

But the eligible don't get the money unless they ask. And hardly any eligible South Dakotans do ask.

The quickest way to ask is online, but that's not especially simple for someone without an internet-connected device or an email address.

Knowing the program exists is an obvious prerequisite, of course, and plenty of the people who could benefit don't.

Those are a few of the reasons just 16% of eligible South Dakotans — 21,283 people — have collected a share of the money, according to state officials and nonprofit groups working to connect people to the benefits.

That figure puts South Dakota behind every state but North Dakota for program enrollment.

The 84% of eligible South Dakotans who go without add up to more than 107,000 people.

South Dakotans have benefitted from \$12.5 million thus far through the program, according to the Universal Service Administrative Company, which administers the funds on behalf of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Improving those numbers is one of several goals embedded in the state's digital equity plan, submitted Nov. 14 to the federal Department of Commerce by the state Department of Labor and Regulation.

The plan will help determine how much of the \$2.75 billion made available through the Digital Equity Act will land in state coffers.

Funding uncertainty

The Digital Equity Act is separate from the Affordable Connectivity Program, though both address broadband issues.

While the connectivity program is only accessible to those with low incomes, the equity act is meant to help states address connectivity issues to a broader population through long-term programs, as well as to address gaps in digital literacy and security. South Dakota collected \$527,052 through the act to write its digital opportunity plan.

The Digital Equity Act aims to help eight "covered populations" get access to and learn how to best use the internet — inmates, veterans, people with disabilities, people 60 or older, racial or ethnic minorities, people with limited literacy skills and rural populations.

"About 81.6% of South Dakotans fall into one of these categories," said Bill Wendling, the state's digital

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opportunity coordinator.

Among other goals, the South Dakota digital opportunity plan would move to enroll more people in the Affordable Connectivity Program, or through other programs such as Lifeline, which offers \$9.95 off internet bills. Lifeline has sent just over \$1 million to South Dakota residents so far in 2023.

The state plan would also address digital literacy and cybersecurity through outreach and education programs, and could involve the purchase of digital devices for distribution to needy households.

But the Affordable Connectivity Program's future is unclear, as is the amount of funding South Dakota will have to implement its plan. Congress has yet to extend the connectivity program's funding beyond next April; the vast majority of Digital Equity Act funding has yet to be awarded.

Meanwhile, Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, joined Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Washington, and Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio, in a recent letter voicing concerns about the connectivity program. The GOP group characterizes it as wasteful spending.

"While you have repeatedly claimed that the ACP is necessary for connecting participating households to the internet, it appears the vast majority of tax dollars have gone to households that already had broadband prior to the subsidy," the lawmakers wrote in their letter, addressed to FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel.

State plan: Connection, education

Back in South Dakota, Wendling offered the details on South Dakota's participation in the Affordable Connectivity Program and residents' digital needs during a Dec. 11 meeting of the state's Workforce Development Council.

The digital opportunity plan proposes more "navigators" to help connect eligible families to broadband assistance. Currently, there are seven state employment specialists who spend half their work time acting as navigators now from local job service offices. Several nonprofit organizations also employ digital navigators, though the state doesn't support them financially at the moment.

The labor department declined to make Wendling available for an interview. In an emailed response to questions from South Dakota Searchlight, department spokesperson Dawn Dovre said the combination of state employees and contractors have "ensured every county in South Dakota has a Navigator (whether it be ours or someone else's) to assist them if needed."

Barriers to using the subsidies, Dovre wrote, include a lack of knowledge about the program, a cumbersome application process and, for some, a lack of trust in the federal government and internet service providers.

That list of barriers matches those seen nationwide, according to Ellen Goldich, who leads the strategic partnership work of the Education Superhighway.

"I think a lot of people think it's a scam," Goldich said. "There's a lot of feeling of, 'I'm not sure if this is a legitimate program.'"

Wendling told the workforce council it'll be a few months before he knows how much funding the state will get to implement it under the Digital Equity Act, regardless of what happens with the Affordable Connectivity Program.

The first \$60 million of the act's funding was used to help states pay for the production of their digital opportunity plans. The remaining money is split into two buckets: \$1.44 billion for states, allocated based on their state plans, and \$1.25 billion in competitive grants open to government and non-government organizations.

The Commerce Department is expected to announce its state-level awards in February or March, Wendling told the workforce council.

Outreach events and advertising, adding more public computing terminals across the state (such as those located in libraries or universities), purchasing new or used digital devices for distribution to those in need, and expanding digital literacy and online safety courses are all listed as potential state goals.

"We're not sure how many of our ideas or programs we'll be able to implement," he said. "As much as I would love to, and hopefully get to, address all of these, we don't know how much funding we're getting."

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Goldich said she's reviewed the digital opportunity plans from every state that's submitted one, and she sees a lot of promise in South Dakota's roadmap. Most state plans scarcely mention outreach for connectivity.

"We applaud them for articulating very clear goals for the (affordable connectivity program)," Goldich said.

Nonprofits work to move needle

Not every city in South Dakota has struggled to connect the eligible to funding to the same degree. Sioux Falls has a 21% enrollment rate, for example, and several tribal communities have higher rates. Mission has a 78% enrollment rate; St. Francis sits at 100%.

On the other end of the spectrum are 126 cities with an enrollment rate less than 1%.

In Sisseton, the rate sits at 52% – higher than the national average of 41%.

Several factors have contributed to that success, according to Olivia DeBoer of Grow South Dakota, a Sisseton-based nonprofit that began navigation work in March through an FCC grant. Grow South Dakota helps connect people to emergency rent and energy assistance, DeBoer said, so it already had an internal mailing list of potential beneficiaries.

"We know they qualify because the programs have the same requirements," DeBoer said.

The group also works to get the word out at community events with the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe, and has worked with area state assistance offices to ask them to pass the word along about broadband assistance.

In Sioux Falls, a grant-funded navigator with South Dakota Voices for Peace has worked at a slower pace. That's partly a measure of its target audience: immigrants and people with limited English skills. Voices for Peace Director Taneeza Islam said it takes about an hour to work through the online application process, and that's often after several attempts at outreach.

Clients in Sioux Falls sometimes don't have an internet connection, email address or devices that could get them one before they begin speaking with the Voices for Peace navigator. Islam's office also doesn't have a list of likely-eligible families at the ready, though it's working with the Sioux Falls School District to connect with those who receive free or reduced-price lunch.

"If we can get 60 people enrolled in a month, that's really great," Islam said.

Best practices, uncertain future

Goldich said the best local results come from partnerships with other organizations, targeted outreach and a repetition of messaging.

"If you have a child who receives free or reduced price lunch, your entire household is eligible for the program," said Goldich, who applauded the efforts to connect to those families in Sioux Falls.

Multi-agency partnerships in the community have helped in other states. In North Carolina, for instance, the state's broadband office worked with the Division of Motor Vehicles to put information on the connectivity program in driver's license exam offices.

The question of funding hangs heavy, Goldich said, and her group has a lot of hope that Congress will vote to support it. Internet service providers are lobbying for an extension, as are a host of other organizations. Connectivity also has also enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress and at the state level. Gov. Kristi Noem has pushed for broadband expansion throughout her years in the Governor's Mansion, with progress tracked on the ConnectSD website. South Dakota's digital opportunity plan even refers to broadband as "the fourth utility."

Sen. Thune's concerns, however, could signal snags for continued broadband subsidies. The recent letter to the FCC demands "a list of efforts by the FCC to target ACP funds to households that previously lacked broadband subscriptions, rather than those that already had broadband, amid a potential lapse in funding," by Jan. 4.

DeBoer and Islam each said they're encouraging those who sign up for the connectivity program to reach out to their congressional representatives to urge an extension, though, hoping that its value to

those who truly couldn't have internet without it carries the day.

"When people get connected, it's just such a great feeling, because they'll say, 'Oh, now I can talk to my friends; I can see my grandkids,'" DeBoer said. "You can only hope that they see how many people have benefitted from this program and choose to keep it going."

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

SD delegation has concerns about extension of internet subsidy program

Affordable Connectivity Program factors into South Dakota broadband goals

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 29, 2023 11:00 AM

If Congress renews funding for a program that helps low-income people pay their internet bills — a program South Dakota hopes to lean on to connect more homes to broadband in the coming years — it won't be the result of vigorous advocacy from the state's congressional delegation.

Sen. John Thune, the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband, is among the GOP leaders concerned about haphazard management, waste and fraud potential in the Affordable Connectivity Program.

Most damningly, according to Thune and others who've demanded accountability on the issue from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the vast majority of the program's subsidy dollars flow to families who'd paid for broadband without its help before signing up.

The Affordable Connectivity Program, which replaced a similar but more generous pandemic-era program in 2021, offers \$30 a month to eligible households to help cover broadband bills. Qualifying households on tribal lands can get up to \$75 a month.

The program will run out of funding in April unless Congress takes action. The outcome of that congressional decision — or lack thereof — will affect the way South Dakota rolls out its digital opportunity plan, which serves as a five-year roadmap for addressing internet access and digital literacy in the state more broadly.

The plan will help federal officials decide how many dollars from a separate pool of federal money will flow to South Dakota during that five-year period. Improving South Dakota residents' use of the soon-to-be-exhausted Affordable Connectivity Program dollars is one pillar of the state plan. Depending on federal funding, the digital opportunity plan could also see the state adding more public Internet terminals, offering digital literacy courses or delivering new or used devices to some segments of South Dakota's population.

Funding for those initiatives is separate from the Affordable Connectivity Program, but scrapping the latter would leave South Dakota and other states with one less tool for addressing connectivity for their citizens.

One possible pathway to improving South Dakota's 49th-in-the-nation ranking for connectivity program use could involve "enrollment events" meant to allow signups en masse in the months and years ahead, according to the state's digital opportunity plan.

"... the State hopes ACP will be extended to continue supporting South Dakotans. However, without such a program, hosting enrollment events will no longer be relevant," the plan reads.

GOP: Subsidies poorly targeted, monitored

Questions about the Affordable Connectivity Program in some quarters of the GOP came to a head for Thune's camp on Dec. 15, just one day after the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation submitted its digital opportunity plan to the federal government.

That's the day Thune issued a joint press release with Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, Rep. Cathy McMorris

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Rogers, R-Washington, and Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio, demanding that FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel retract and correct statements delivered to Congress late last month.

"We have come so far, we can't go back," Rosenworcel testified on Nov. 30. "We need Congress to continue to fund this program. If Congress does not, in April of next year, we'll have to unplug households and, based on current projections, it'll be about 25 million households we will unplug from the internet in April."

But the joint GOP press release, which accompanied a letter to Rosenworcel, said that only about 1-in-5 program participants lacked broadband internet access before getting the subsidy, according to the FCC's own surveys.

"While you have repeatedly claimed that the ACP is necessary for connecting participating households to the internet, it appears the vast majority of tax dollars have gone to households that already had broadband prior to the subsidy," the letter says.

The same group of lawmakers successfully pushed for program reviews by the U.S. Government Accountability Office and the FCC's Office of Inspector General. The reviews found that, among other issues, the COVID-era precursor to the Affordable Connectivity Program "did not prioritize unconnected households," and that the FCC did not adequately address that issue when the new program took effect in 2021.

Thune's concerns about the subsidies are not shared by all Republicans, however.

In November, a bipartisan group of governors inked a letter to House and Senate leadership urging them to renew the funding. It called the program "a critical complement to our collective efforts to expand access to broadband infrastructure in rural, unserved communities across the country," and asserted, as Rosenworcel did, that people "could lose connectivity as well as all the essential services that come with it" if Congress fails to act. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem was not among the signatories of that letter.

The governors' letter, pointing to a report from a nonprofit organization called Common Sense Media, says that the program's value extends beyond simply connecting previously unconnected households.

The program "reduces the subsidy needed to incentivize providers to build in rural regions by 25% per household, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are used to their maximum potential," it says.

"Closing our nation's digital divide transcends politics," it continues. "Whether you live in a rural area, a suburb, or a city, every American needs access to high-speed internet. Preserving the ACP will allow us to build upon the progress we've made in expanding connectivity rather than falling behind in a mission we cannot afford to lose."

Gov. Noem did not sign that letter, even though her state's digital opportunity plan expressed support for a funding extension one month after it was sent.

When asked directly if the governor wants the connectivity plan to continue, spokesperson Ian Fury said via email that he agrees with statements sent by the Department of Labor last week. Those statements outlined the state's efforts to connect families to the program, but did not take a position on its extension.

Rounds, Johnson share concerns, open to ideas

The ultimate fate of future funding for the program remains unclear in the face of the concerns of senators like Thune and Cruz. Thune has long backed connectivity and broadband expansion in rural areas, but sees better options than the connectivity program.

He's part of a bipartisan working group, for example, studying the possibility of expanding access through the Universal Service Fund, which is paid for through contributions from telecom providers, which pass fees along to consumers.

"Universal service is a bipartisan principle that has been the bedrock of our nation's communications policies for nearly 90 years, and programs that efficiently and effectively strengthen its underlying goal have contributed to advancements in health care, education, and economic development," Thune said in a May press release.

Thune has been the most vocal South Dakotan in Washington in his concerns about the soon-to-expire connectivity program, but the other two members of South Dakota's all-GOP congressional delegation share them.

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An emailed statement from Rep. Dusty Johnson says that he sees broadband access as important and worthy of support, but that perhaps existing programs represent more time-tested and reliable ways for the federal government to preserve it for low-income households.

Johnson pointed specifically to the Lifeline program, which has offered telecom subsidies since 1985. In recent years, Lifeline's income-based financial support for telephone services has expanded to cover assistance with monthly broadband bills, at \$9.95 per month.

Thune has also expressed concerns about Lifeline, which has been subject to scrutiny on multiple occasions over the years. An income verification requirement for Lifeline users was implemented in 2012; Former FCC Chair Ajit Pai moved to rein in its budget in 2017.

Even so, Johnson said that program may offer better accountability and fealty to goals like maintaining broadband access for the vulnerable.

"I have some concerns with how the Affordable Connectivity Program has been funded and administered," Johnson said. "I'm not opposed to helping lower income Americans stay connected, though. Congress' time would be better spent reforming Lifeline, a very similar program, which has provided support to millions of Americans for decades."

Rounds largely echoed Johnson in his emailed response to South Dakota Searchlight. He said that "sound, reliable internet service is a vital component of nearly everything we do in today's world," but that Congress must provide oversight for subsidy program.

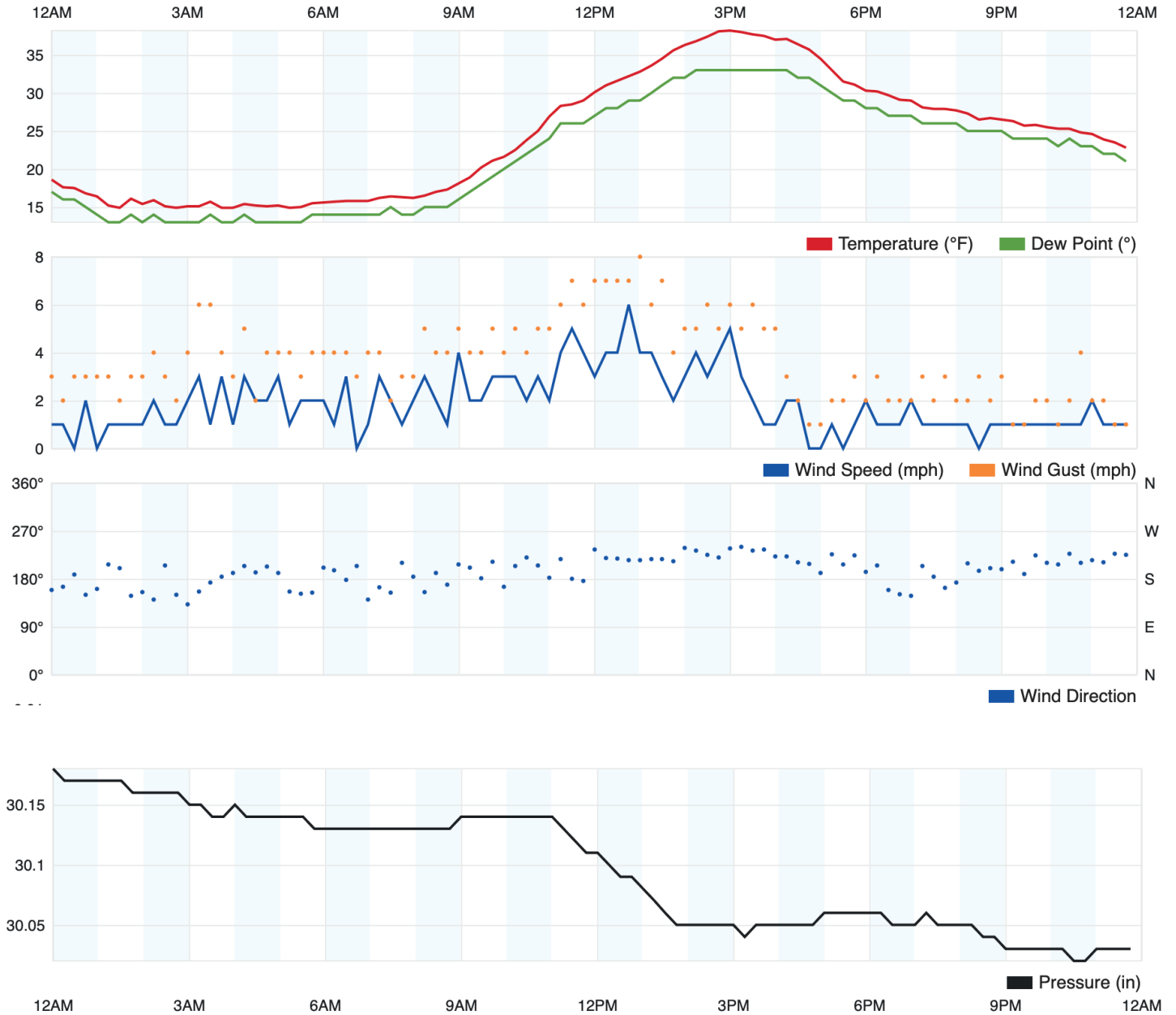
"The questions raised by Sen. Thune and others are important, and we intend on carefully reviewing the response from Chairwoman Rosenworcel," Rounds said.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Sat Dec 30	Sun Dec 31	Mon Jan 1	Tue Jan 2	Wed Jan 3	Thu Jan 4	Fri Jan 5
27°F 17°F	25°F 13°F	28°F 21°F	31°F 17°F	25°F 13°F	26°F 16°F	28°F 17°F
NW 18 MPH	N 11 MPH	SSW 15 MPH	WNW 12 MPH	NW 10 MPH	S 13 MPH	NNW 7 MPH

New Year's Forecast

Today	New Year's Eve	New Year's Day
PM Flurries	Decrsng Clouds	
High: 24 to 31° Low: 9 to 19°	High: 22 to 28° Low: 6 to 15°	High: 27 to 36° Low: 13 to 18°

- Chance (10-30%) for flurries/light snow over parts of eastern/northeastern SD into west central MN this afternoon-tonight
- Patchy fog late/Sunday am- Central SD
- Bundle up if you are planning to be out late!



Other than a few flurries/light snow chances (10-30%) across parts of eastern and northeastern SD & west central MN, the forecast looks dry through the new year! Make sure to bundle up once the sun sets as overnight lows this weekend will range in the single digits to the teens.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 2:52 PM

Low Temp: 14 °F at 2:37 AM

Wind: 8 mph at 12:59 PM

Precip: 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 52 in 1980

Record Low: -34 in 1917

Average High: 24

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.59

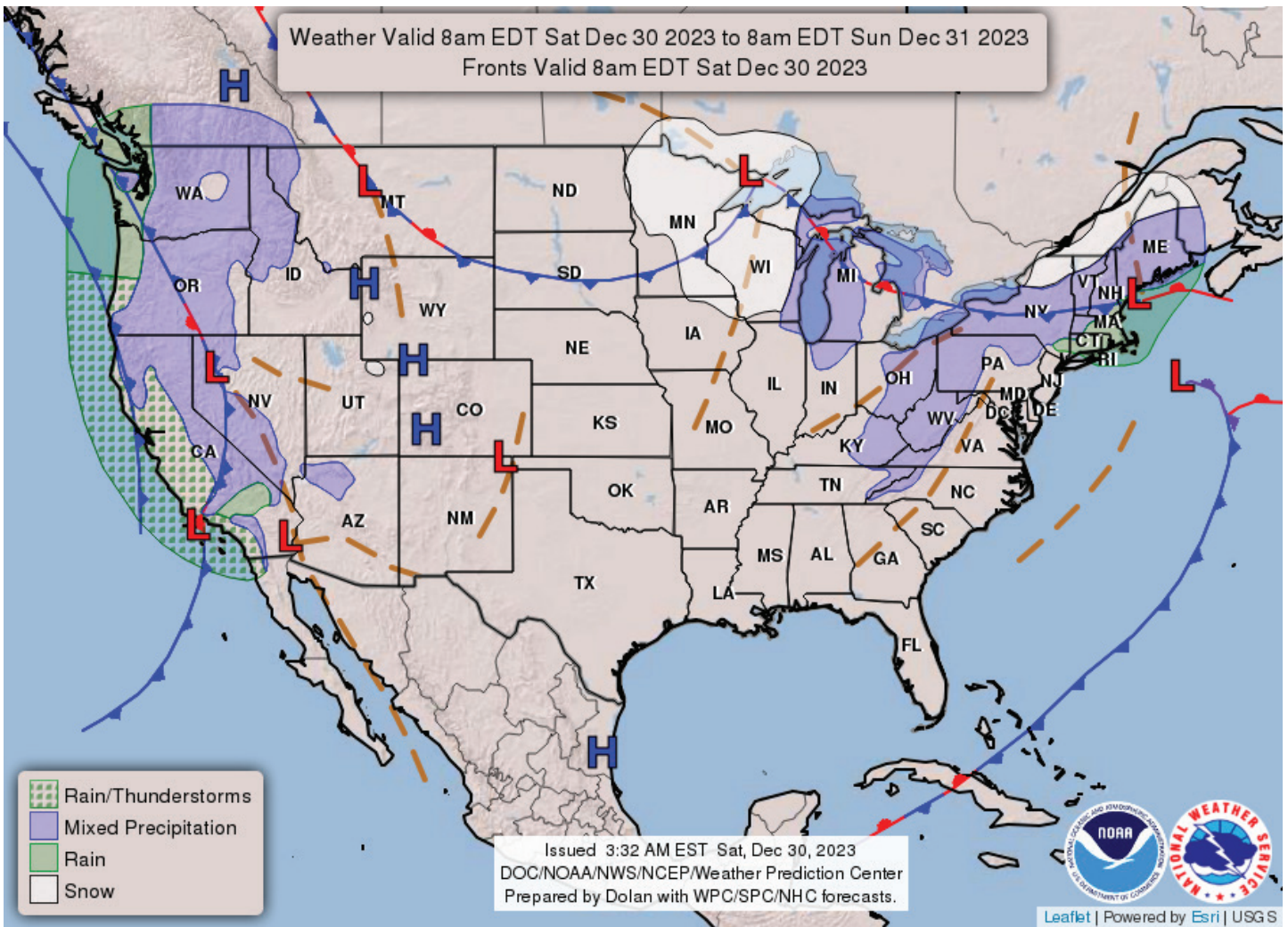
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85

Average Precip to date: 21.80

Precip Year to Date: 25.02

Sunset Tonight: 4:59:30 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:24 am



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Today in Weather History

December 30, 1985: Winds gusted to 40 to 50 mph over northern South Dakota through the day and into the southern part of the state by late afternoon. The high winds lowered visibilities to near zero at times between Lemmon in Perkins County and Faith in Meade County. The strongest wind gusts were to 63 mph at Mitchell. At 9:33 pm CST, the strong winds blew a semi-tractor trailer off the highway one mile east of Aberdeen.

December 30, 2010: A strong upper-level low-pressure trough and associated surface low-pressure area moved across the region bringing the first of two consecutive blizzards to central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 3 to 6 inches combined with bitter cold north winds of 25 to 40 mph caused widespread blizzard conditions across central and northeast South Dakota from the late morning until the evening hours. Near zero visibilities caused dangerous travel conditions resulting in the closing of Interstates 29 and 90 along with several highways across the region. Several hundred people were stranded in the aftermath of the storm. A group of fishermen had to be rescued in Day County when they became stranded on the ice. The snowfall began across the area anywhere from 7 to 11 am CST and ended between 10 pm and 1 am CST.

1880 - The temperature at Charlotte, NC, plunged to an all-time record cold reading of 5 degrees below zero, a record which was equalled on the 21st of January in 1985. (The Weather Channel)

1917 - A great cold wave set many records in the northeastern U.S. The mercury plunged to 13 degrees below zero at New York City, and to 15 degrees below zero at Boston. Temperature readings dipped below zero at Boston five nights in a row. Berlin NH hit 44 degrees below zero in the "Great World War I Cold Wave," and Saint Johnsbury VT reached 43 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1933 - The temperature reached 50 degrees below zero at Bloomfield, VT. It was the coldest reading in modern records for New England. The temperature at Pittsborough NH reached 44 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1955 - Anchorage, AK, reported an all-time record snow depth of 47 inches. (30th-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1960: A massive accumulation of snow, 68.2 inches to be exact, buries the Japanese city of Tsukayama in 24 hours. Tsukayama is located in the coastal mountains inland from the Sea of Japan along Honshu's west coast and subject to significant sea-effect snowfalls.

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in Utah, with 28 inches reported in the Mount Holly and Elk Meadows area. Strong winds prevailed ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. Winds gusted to 46 mph at Dodge City KS, and reached 80 mph at Ruidoso NM. Strong northerly winds, ushering arctic cold into the north central U.S., created blizzard conditions in western Minnesota and central and eastern South Dakota. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. A week of subfreezing temperatures in southern California claimed the lives of five people. Redding CA was blanketed with four inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Extreme cold continued across northern Maine. Milo ME was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 38 degrees below zero, and the low of 31 degrees below zero at Caribou ME was a December record for that location. Freezing rain spread across much of Lower Michigan, knocking out electrical power to 1.9 million customers in southeastern Lower Michigan. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003: The first time in five years, sections of Las Vegas receive an inch or two of snow on cars, roads, sidewalks, and trees, while snow flurries fell on downtown and the Strip.

2008 - Severe to extreme drought was observed across parts of the Hawaiian Islands, the western continental U.S., and parts of Georgia and South Carolina. Meanwhile, severe to exceptional drought conditions were present across southern Texas. (NCDC)

2014: Steam Devils were seen over Lake Superior near Saginaw, Minnesota.

2017: Funnels/steam devils were observed on Lake McConaughy, Nebraska in the morning. A boundary moved over the lake's 'warmer' water (compared to the surrounding air). The combination of converging winds and energy added by the lake helped spin these up.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2024

As we come to the close of this year and face the uncertainties that are before us in the year to come, it is important to pause, listen to, and accept a promise from our God:

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

“In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you search for me with all your heart, you will find me, declares the Lord.”

This is one of God’s if – then’s. There can be no misunderstanding of what He is talking about in this passage of Scripture. God knows our future. He very carefully designed it in our best interest to enable us to find and follow His will. Because He knows our future, He assures us that it can be one of goodness and hope – not one of disaster.

But if we want this future that contains goodness and hope, we must study His Word and go to Him in earnest prayer. He assures us that He will listen to us IF we search for Him with all of our hearts and THEN are obedient to and follow Him. IF we do this, THEN He will bless us.

Perhaps we have prayed and even searched for Him in years past, but did not do so with all our heart. With God, it is always IF you obey me, THEN you can count on Me.

Prayer: Lord, may we come to You this year with sincerity and singleness of heart to find Your plans. Give us Your courage to seek, find, and follow You in our lives. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scriptures For Today: Jeremiah 29:11: For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.



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: 12.29.23

11 27 30 62 70 10

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$114,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[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: 12 Hrs 54 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.29.23

11 17 21 40 46 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 9 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

11 14 15 19 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 9 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.27.23

14 29 39 66 67 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 38 Mins 0 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: 13 Hrs 38 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 49, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 41
Beresford 65, Parker 42
Burke 50, Colman-Egan 47
Campbell County, Wyo. 60, Rapid City Christian 31
Centerville 77, Wall 47
Chester 48, Jones County 22
Corsica/Stickney 41, Freeman Academy-Marion 19
Hanson 63, Irene-Wakonda 31
Herreid/Selby Area 37, Stanley County 25
Hills-Beaver Creek, Minn. 79, Dell Rapids St. Mary 50
Howard 48, Faulkton 35
Iroquois-Lake Preston 48, Highmore-Harrold 47
Kimball/White Lake 61, Lower Brule 34
Lemmon High School 52, Newell 44
Mitchell 53, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 26
Parkston 51, Dakota Valley 50
Platte-Geddes 55, Canistota 40
Rapid City Stevens 68, Rapid City Central 57
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 48, DeSmet 45
Sioux Falls Jefferson 69, Sioux Falls Washington 52
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 61, Sioux Falls Lincoln High School 33
Sisseton 65, Sioux Valley 60
Sturgis Brown 42, Douglas 33
Wagner 51, Avon 38
Wakpala 71, White Shield, N.D. 18
Warner 56, Deubrook 51
Chadron Holiday Tournament=
Custer 64, Hemingford, Neb. 24
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Scotland vs. Ethan, ccd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Beresford 69, Parker 51
Cordova, Tenn. 63, Hamlin 57
Dakota Valley 86, Hill City 56
Douglas 65, Sturgis Brown 56
Hanson 67, Irene-Wakonda 24
Highmore-Harrold 62, Iroquois-Lake Preston 40
McCook Central-Montrose 55, Centerville 48
McLaughlin 47, White Shield, N.D. 42
Pine Ridge 73, Groton Area 62
Sioux Falls Christian 67, DeLaSalle, Minn. 63
Sioux Falls Lincoln High School 60, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 52

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Sioux Falls Washington 66, Sioux Falls Jefferson 51
White River 49, Lower Brule 30
Chadron Holiday Tournament=
Custer 78, Hemingford, Neb. 23
Southwest Minnesota State Univ. Tournament=
Marshall, Minn. 73, Tea Area 67

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

Stewart's 33 lead South Dakota over North Dakota State 75-66

By The Associated Press undefined

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Kaleb Stewart scored 33 points and South Dakota beat North Dakota State 75-66 in a Summit League opener on Friday night.

Stewart was 13 of 22 shooting, including 4 for 6 from 3-point range, and went 3 for 4 from the line for the Coyotes (8-6). Lahat Thioune scored 13 points and added 19 rebounds. Bostyn Holt had 13 points.

The Bison (7-7) were led in scoring by Andrew Morgan, who finished with 19 points. Noah Feddersen added 13 points and Boden Skunberg had 12 points and seven rebounds.

Airstrikes hit camps in central Gaza as Biden administration approves new weapons sales to Israel

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli warplanes struck two urban refugee camps in central Gaza on Saturday, as the Biden administration approved a new emergency weapons sale to Israel despite persistent international cease-fire calls over mounting civilian deaths, hunger and mass displacement in the enclave.

Even a brief halt in fighting seems out of reach. A senior Hamas official told The Associated Press in Beirut on Saturday that the group has not budged from its position that a permanent cease-fire has to be the starting point for any further releases of Israeli and foreign hostages the group holds, which runs counter to a recent proposal by Egypt for a staged end to the war.

It's a demand Israel is bound to reject. Israel has said it will pursue its unprecedented air and ground offensive until it has dismantled Hamas, a goal viewed by some as unattainable because of the militant group's deep roots in Palestinian society. The United States has shielded Israel diplomatically and has continued to supply weapons.

Israel argues that ending the war now would mean victory for Hamas, a stance shared by the Biden administration which at the same time urged Israel to do more to avoid harm to Palestinian civilians.

The war, triggered by the deadly Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel, 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.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Saturday that the Palestinian death toll since the start of the war rose to 21,672, with a further 56,165 people wounded during the same period. Over the past 24 hours, 165 people were killed, said ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra. The ministry does not distinguish between the deaths of combatants and civilians, but has said about 70% of those killed have been women and children.

Some of the latest deaths were reported as Israeli airstrikes targeted the urban refugee camps of Nuseirat and Bureij overnight and into Saturday.

Nuseirat resident Mustafa Abu Wawee said a strike hit the home of one of his relatives, killing two people.

"The (Israeli) occupation is doing everything to force people to leave," he said over the phone while searching along with others for four people missing under the rubble. "They want to break our spirit and will but they will fail. We are here to stay."

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A second strike late Friday in Nuseirat targeted the home of a journalist for Al-Quds TV, a channel linked to the group Islamic Jihad whose militants also participated in the Oct. 7 attack. The channel said the journalist, Jaber Abu Hadros and six members of his family were killed.

Bureij resident Rami Abu Mosab said sounds of gunfire echoed across the camp overnight, followed by heavy airstrikes Saturday.

With Israeli forces pushing deeper into Khan Younis and the camps of central Gaza, tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed into the already crowded city of Rafah at the southernmost end of Gaza in recent days.

Drone footage showed a vast camp of thousands of tents and makeshift shacks set up on what had been empty land on Rafah's western outskirts next to U.N. warehouses. People arrived in Rafah in trucks, in carts and on foot. Those who did not find space in the already overwhelmed shelters put up tents on roadsides slick with mud from winter rains.

MORE U.S. WEAPONS FOR ISRAEL

The State Department said Friday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Congress he approved a \$147.5 million sale for equipment, including fuses, charges and primers, that is needed for 155 mm shells Israel bought previously.

It marked the second time this month that the Biden administration is bypassing Congress to approve an emergency weapons sale to Israel. The department cited the "urgency of Israel's defensive needs" as a reason for the approval.

Blinken made a similar decision on Dec. 9 to approve the sale to Israel of nearly 14,000 rounds of tank ammunition worth more than \$106 million.

Both moves have come as President Joe Biden's request for a nearly \$106 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs remains stalled in Congress, caught up in a debate over U.S. immigration policy and border security. Some Democratic lawmakers have spoken of making the proposed \$14.3 billion in American assistance to its Mideast ally contingent on concrete steps by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to reduce civilian casualties in Gaza during the war with Hamas.

DIFFICULTIES IN DELIVERING AID

More than a week after a U.N. Security Council resolution called for the unhindered delivery of aid at scale across besieged Gaza, conditions have only worsened, U.N. agencies warned.

Aid officials said the aid entering Gaza remains woefully inadequate. Distributing goods is hampered by long delays at two border crossings, ongoing fighting, Israeli airstrikes, repeated cuts in internet and phone services and a breakdown of law and order that makes it difficult to secure aid convoys, they said.

Nearly the entire population is fully dependent on outside humanitarian aid, said Philippe Lazzarini, head of UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. A quarter of the population is starving because too few trucks enter with food, medicine, fuel and other supplies — sometimes fewer than 100 trucks a day, according to U.N. daily reports.

U.N. monitors said operations at the Israeli-run Kerem Shalom crossing halted for four days this week because of security incidents, such as a drone strike and the seizing of aid by desperate Gaza residents.

They said the crossing reopened Friday, and that a total of 81 aid trucks entered Gaza through Kerem Shalom and the Rafah crossing on the Egyptian border — a fraction of the typical prewar volume of 500 trucks a day.

TRADING FOR HOSTAGES

Israeli officials, meanwhile, have vowed to bring back more than 100 hostages still held in Gaza, after militants seized more than 240 in the Oct. 7 assault that also killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

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

Mediator Egypt has proposed a multi-stage plan that would kick off with a swap of hostages for prisoners, accompanied by a temporary cease-fire — along the lines of an exchange during a weeklong truce in November.

In a subsequent phase, talks would begin on forming a transitional Palestinian government of experts

who would run both Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Israel and Hamas remain far apart on the terms of a cease-fire and future swaps.

"We have been clear that a complete cease-fire is the first step," Osama Hamdan, a senior Hamas official in Beirut, said Saturday. It's a position that seemingly derails the Egyptian plan, though Hamdan also said conversations are continuing.

"There are also ideas we have received through our brothers in Qatar, and we have not given any final answer so far," he said. "This may take some time. We are keen to talk about the details, because the idea put forward today may develop in different ways and may no longer be raised at all."

10 killed by shelling on Russia's Belgorod following Moscow's aerial assault against Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

Shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod killed 10 people and injured 45 more on Saturday, emergency services said.

Russian officials accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour aerial Russian barrage across Ukraine killed at least 39 civilians.

Images of Belgorod on social media showed cars set alight and plumes of black smoke rising among damaged buildings as air raid sirens sounded. One strike hit close to a public ice rink in the very heart of the city.

Earlier on Saturday, Moscow officials had reported shooting down 32 Ukrainian drones over the country's Moscow, Bryansk, Oryol, and Kursk regions.

They also reported that cross-border shelling had killed two other people in Russia. A man died and four other people were injured when a missile struck a private home in the Belgorod region late Friday evening and a 9-year-old was killed in a separate incident in the Bryansk region.

Cities across western Russia have come under regular attack from drones since May, with Russian officials blaming Kyiv. Ukrainian officials never acknowledge responsibility for attacks on Russian territory or the Crimean peninsula. However, larger aerial strikes against Russia have previously followed heavy assaults on Ukrainian cities.

Russian drone strikes against Ukraine continued Saturday, with the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reporting that 10 Iranian-made Shahed drones had been shot down across the Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, and Mykolaiv regions.

On Friday, Moscow's forces launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones across Ukraine, an onslaught described by one air force official as the biggest aerial barrage of the war.

As well as the 39 deaths, at least 160 people were wounded and an unknown number were buried under rubble in the assault, which damaged a maternity hospital, apartment blocks, and schools.

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

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.

Russia's ongoing aerial attacks have also sparked concern for Ukraine's neighbors.

Poland's defense forces said Friday that an unknown object had entered the country's airspace before vanishing off radars, and that all indications pointed to it being a Russian missile.

Speaking to Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti Saturday, Russia's Charge d'Affaires in Poland, Andrei Ordash, said that Moscow would not comment on the event until Warsaw had given the Kremlin evidence of an airspace violation.

"We will not give any explanations until we are presented with concrete evidence because these accusations are unsubstantiated," he said.

Air raids over eastern Syria near Iraqi border kill 6 Iran-backed militants

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Three overnight airstrikes on eastern Syria Saturday near a strategic border crossing with Iraq killed six Iran-backed militants, two members of Iraqi militia groups told The Associated Press.

The strikes on the border region of Boukamal came hours after an umbrella group of Iran-backed Iraqi militants — known as the Islamic Resistance — claimed an attack on a U.S. military base in the city of Irbil in northern Iraq. The group has conducted over a hundred attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq and eastern Syria since the onset of the Hamas-Israel war on Oct. 7.

Four of the killed were from Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah group while the other two militants were Syrian, the militants said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not cleared to talk to the press. Another two were injured, they added.

Meanwhile, an activist collective that covers news in the area, Deir Ezzor 24, said the airstrikes hit two militant posts and a weapons warehouse that it says was recently stocked with rocket launchers and munitions.

Elsewhere, Britain-backed opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said in addition to the weapons warehouse, the strikes targeted a militants' convoy that had arrived from Iraq to Syria as well as a location where a militia affiliated with Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was training.

It added that the strikes killed nine people, three Syrians and six people from other nationalities.

Washington did not immediately comment on the strike, though it has announced some were planned on Iran-backed militia positions following the surge of attacks over the past two months.

President Joe Biden last week ordered the U.S. military to carry out strikes on Iranian-backed Iraqi groups following a rocket attack that wounded three U.S. troops.

The spike in tension has put Baghdad in a delicate situation. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has tried to ease the strain between the militant groups that helped him reach power and the U.S. where Iraq's foreign reserves are housed.

The Boukamal region in Deir el-Zour, Syria, along the Iraqi border, has been a strategic area for Iran-backed militants after it was taken back from the extremist Islamic State group in 2019. U.S. coalition forces have conducted strikes targeting convoys there prior to recent tensions.

Separatist Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik vows to tear his country apart despite US warnings

By RADUL RADOVANOVIC Associated Press

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — The Bosnian Serbs' separatist leader vowed to carry on weakening his war-scarred country to the point where it will tear apart, despite a pledge by the United States to prevent such an outcome.

"I am not irrational, I know that America's response will be to use force ... but I have no reason to be frightened by that into sacrificing (Serb) national interests," Milorad Dodik, the president of Bosnia's Serb-run part, told The Associated Press in an interview Friday.

He said any attempt to use international intervention to further strengthen Bosnia's shared, multi-ethnic institutions will be met by Bosnian Serb decision to abandon them completely and take the country back to the state of disunity and dysfunction it was in at the end of its brutal interethnic war in the 1990s.

Because Western democracies will not be agreeable to that, he added, "in the next stage, we will be forced by their reaction to declare full independence" of the Serb-controlled regions of Bosnia.

The Bosnian War started in 1992 when Belgrade-backed Bosnian Serbs tried to create an "ethnically pure" region with the aim of joining neighboring Serbia by killing and expelling the country's Croats and Bosniaks, who are mostly Muslims. More than 100,000 people were killed and upward of 2 million, or over half of the country's population, were driven from their homes before a peace agreement was reached in Dayton, Ohio, late in 1995.

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The agreement divided Bosnia into two entities — the Serb-run Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation — which were given wide autonomy but remained linked by some shared, multiethnic institutions. It also instituted the Office of the High Representative, an international body charged with shepherding the implementation of the peace agreement that was given broad powers to impose laws or dismiss officials who undermined the fragile post-war ethnic balance, including judges, civil servants, and members of parliament.

Over the years, the OHR has pressured Bosnia's bickering ethnic leaders to build shared, statewide institutions, including the army, intelligence and security agencies, the top judiciary and the tax administration. However, further bolstering of the existing institutions and the creation of new ones is required if Bosnia is to reach its declared goal of joining the European Union.

Dodik appeared unperturbed Friday by the statement posted a day earlier on X, formerly known as Twitter, by James O'Brien, the U.S. assistant secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, that Washington will act if anyone tries to change "the basic element" of the 1995 peace agreement for Bosnia, and that there is "no right of secession."

"Among Serbs, one thing is clear and definite and that is a growing realization that the years and decades ahead of us are the years and decades of Serb national unification," Dodik said.

"Brussels is using the promise of EU accession as a tool to unitarize Bosnia," said Dodik, who is staunchly pro-Russian, adding: "In principle, our policy still is that we want to join (the EU), but we no longer see that as our only alternative."

The EU, he said, "had proven itself capable of working against its own interests" by siding with Washington against Moscow when Russia launched its ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

Dodik, who has been calling for the separation of the Serb entity from the rest of Bosnia for over a decade, has faced British and U.S. sanctions for his policies but has had Russia's support.

There are widespread fears that Russia is trying to destabilize Bosnia and the rest of the region to shift at least some world attention from its war in Ukraine.

"Whether U.S. and Britain like it or not, we will turn the administrative boundary between (Bosnia's two) entities into our national border," Dodik said.

Most money for endangered species goes to a small number of creatures, leaving others in limbo

By MATTHEW BROWN and JOHN FLESHER Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Since passage of the Endangered Species Act 50 years ago, more than 1,700 plants, mammals, fish, insects and other species in the U.S. have been listed as threatened or endangered with extinction. Yet federal government data reveals striking disparities in how much money is allocated to save various biological kingdoms.

Of the roughly \$1.2 billion a year spent on endangered and threatened species, about half goes toward recovery of just two types of fish: salmon and steelhead trout along the West Coast. Tens of millions of dollars go to other widely known animals including manatees, right whales, grizzly bears and spotted owls.

But the large sums directed toward a handful of species means others have gone neglected, in some cases for decades, as they teeter on potential extinction.

At the bottom of the spending list is the tiny Virginia fringed mountain snail, which had \$100 spent on its behalf in 2020, according to the most recent data available. The underground-dwelling snail has been seen only once in the past 35 years, according to government records, yet it remains a step ahead of more than 200 imperiled plants, animals, fish and other creatures that had nothing spent on their behalf.

With climate change increasing threats to organisms around the planet and adding to the number that qualify for protection under the Endangered Species Act, government officials are struggling in many cases to execute recovery actions required under the law.

Some scientists even argue for spending less on costly efforts that may not work and putting the money toward species with less expensive recovery plans that have languished.

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"For a tiny fraction of the budget going to spotted owls, we could save whole species of cacti that are less charismatic but have an order of magnitude smaller budget," said Leah Gerber, a professor of conservation science at Arizona State University.

An Associated Press analysis of 2020 data found fish got 67% of the spending, the majority for several dozen salmon and steelhead populations in California, Oregon and Washington. Mammals were a distant second with 7% of spending and birds had about 5%. Insects received just 0.5% of the money and plants about 2%. Not included in those percentages is money divided among multiple species.

Species drawing no spending at all included stoneflies threatened by climate change in Montana's Glacier National Park, the stocky California tiger salamander that has lost ground to development and flowering plants such as the scrub lupine around Orlando, Florida, where native habitat has been converted for theme parks.

Such spending inequities are longstanding and reflect a combination of biological realities and political pressures. Restoring salmon and steelhead populations is expensive because they are widespread and hemmed in by massive hydroelectric dams. They also have a broad political constituency with Native American tribes and commercial fishing interests that want fisheries restored.

Congress over decades has sent massive sums of money to agencies such as the Bonneville Power Administration that operate dams along rivers the fish once traveled up to spawn. The money pays for fish ladders around dams, habitat restoration projects, monitoring by scientists and other needs.

More than half the species protected under the Endangered Species Act are plants, but the entire plant kingdom was almost excluded from the landmark conservation law when it was adopted in 1973, according to the Congressional Record and Faith Campbell, who interviewed people involved in the bill's passage for a 1988 study published in the *Pace Environmental Law Review*.

Plants initially were left out when the measure passed the Senate, with opposition led by influential Republican Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska. They were added back at the 11th hour following a push by botanists from the Smithsonian Institution and Lee Talbot, a senior scientist at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, according to Campbell.

Botanists at the time proposed more than 2,500 plants as threatened with future extinction. However, most failed to get protections because federal officials failed to act prior to a Congressional deadline.

Today more than 900 trees, ferns, flowers and other flora are protected. Combined, they received about \$26 million in 2020.

"In terms of numbers they're catching up, but as far as money and attention they're still not getting their share," said Campbell, a longtime environmental advocate who now works at the Center for Invasive Species Prevention. "The threats are serious, they're the same as the threats to animals. Yet they don't have the political clout of, say, a couple dozen of the big animal species that attract favorable attention or get in people's way."

Most plants receive less money than recommended under their recovery plans, according to Gerber and others. Researchers say that has direct consequences: species tend to decline when allocated less funding than needed, while they have a higher chance of recovery when receiving enough money.

Gerber has suggested redirecting some money from species getting more than their recovery plans seek — the bull trout, the gopher tortoise and the Northern spotted owl among them — to those receiving little or none. Her ideas have stirred pushback from some conservationists.

Former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark said debating how to allocate scarce resources for rescuing endangered species is a distraction.

"The issue is not where the money is spent," said Clark, now president of Defenders of Wildlife. "The issue is that there isn't nearly enough of it."

Gerber said she doesn't want to let anything go extinct but that a strategic approach is needed with the shortage of resources.

"Unfortunately, the clock is ticking," she added. "We need to take action."

Wildlife officials say they are trying to do just that with money for endangered species in the climate law

signed last year by President Joe Biden.

It included \$62.5 million officials said will allow them to hire biologists to craft recovery plans to guide future conservation work, initially for 32 species and for as many as 300 over coming years.

Among them are a colorful fish known as the candy darter that lives in rivers in the southeastern U.S., a flowering shrub from the Virgin Islands called marron bacora, the Panama City crayfish of Florida and the pocket-sized Stephens' kangaroo rat in southern California.

The extra money is intended to provide some relief after the agency's environmental review staff fell 20% over the past two decades, even while new species were listed, according to officials. Increased funding is especially important because more than half the agency's existing recovery plans are more than two decades old, according to Lindsay Rosa, vice president for conservation research at Defenders of Wildlife.

Also in the law was \$5.1 million for recovery projects that could benefit hundreds of species from four groups that officials said have historically been underfunded: Hawaii and Pacific island plants, butterflies and moths, freshwater mussels and desert fish in the southwestern U.S.

"Each of these species are part of this larger web of life," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Martha Williams said in an interview. "They're all important."

Trump's dominance in GOP frustrates some in Iowa eager for a competitive campaign

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — The Iowa frenzy is typically in full force by now.

With less than three weeks until the Iowa caucuses formally usher in the presidential nomination process, White House hopefuls are usually in a heated competition. They fan out across the state and pack as many events into a single day as is humanly possible — all in a bid to appeal to undecided voters and lock down support that could lift them to victory in Iowa and keep them in the race for months to come.

But as the campaign intensifies ahead of the Jan. 15 caucuses, the normal frenzy is subdued. While the schedule is filling up, former President Donald Trump is such a commanding force in the party that some voters worry the contest that normally transforms Iowa into the center of the political world may turn out to be something of a snooze.

"It's kind of frustrating," said Jenna Maifeld, a 19-year-old student at the University of Iowa who is eager to participate in her first caucus but is disappointed with the campaign cycle's lack of competition. "I feel like a lot of people's voices aren't being heard."

There's still time for the dynamics of the race to shift. And Trump's rivals are hardly ceding the state to him, working to convince voters that his victory isn't inevitable. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has effectively centered his campaign on Iowa, pumping it with advertising and crafting a robust travel schedule of events and media availabilities. Former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley is also campaigning throughout Iowa, stepping up criticism of Trump while laying the groundwork for a potentially stronger showing in New Hampshire, where the Jan. 23 primary includes more independent voters.

The question is whether any of those efforts will notably erode Trump's standing, a prospect some voters find unlikely at this point.

"A lot of candidates are hoping that one of these spears in his back will finally take him down, but I doubt it," said Nick Peters, a 31-year-old from Prairie City who is also among the Iowa Republicans frustrated by Trump's dominance.

Trump enters the final stretch before the caucuses facing a host of challenges. He's the subject of 91 criminal charges related to everything from his handling of classified information to efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election. The Colorado Supreme Court and Maine's top election official have recently declared Trump ineligible to appear on their states' ballots, decisions the former president is likely to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

And Trump is embroiled in controversy over his harsh rhetoric toward immigrants, repeatedly using language that extremism experts say echoes writings from Adolf Hitler about the "purity" of Aryan blood,

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which underpinned Nazi Germany's systematic murder of millions of Jews and other "undesirables" before and during World War II.

For now, however, Trump's baggage appears to be doing little to deter a majority of Republican voters. In fact, Trump has sought to turn his vulnerabilities into something of an advantage, arguing that he's been indicted on behalf of his supporters. He's also aimed to turn around concerns that he poses a threat to democracy by accusing President Joe Biden of harnessing the power of government against a political rival. There's no evidence that Biden or the White House had any influence on the Justice Department's decision to criminally charge Trump.

It's Trump's impenetrable base of support that has left many feeling resigned to seeing his name on the ballot in November.

"If democracy is working fairly and if the country wants him, then it's going to be him," said Dylan Kooiman, a 21-year-old student at Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa, who said it would be hard for him to support Trump given his legal battles. "It doesn't always fall the way everyone wants it."

Iowans are historically proud of the role they play at the beginning of the presidential election calendar every four years. Voters are accustomed to intimate exchanges with candidates, who pay visits to living rooms, neighborhood centers and county fairgrounds in an effort to connect and persuade.

The pride Iowans take in their role in shaping the presidential contest is also matched with a perennial anxiety that their status may not last forever. The final period ahead of the 2020 caucuses, which focused on Democrats, was unusually muted because many candidates, who were also senators, had to be in Washington to participate in Trump's first impeachment trial. A bungled effort to report results contributed to Democrats removing Iowa from their leadoff spot, replacing it instead with South Carolina.

Republicans have kept Iowa in the opening position in the 2024 campaign. But like so many traditions, Trump has abandoned some long held Iowa political practices, particularly when it comes to retail campaigning. He's largely traded living rooms for rallies, prompting some criticism that he's taking Iowa for granted.

Trump is stepping up his efforts in the closing weeks to prove that he's willing to work for a win that's so commanding that his rivals will have to give up. He is, for example, taking the rare step of holding four campaign events over two days in early January, appearing in rural western Iowa, in industrial eastern Iowa along the Mississippi River and stops in between.

If he's successful, he may be on a path to a race that few Americans appear eager to embrace. Nearly 3 in 10 U.S. adults, or 28%, say they would be dissatisfied with both Trump and Biden becoming their parties' respective nominees, a recent AP-NORC poll showed.

Independents (43%) are more likely than Democrats (28%) or Republicans (20%) to express their displeasure with both men gaining party nominations.

Rick Hyndman may be one of the thousands of Iowans who wants to support Trump again, but he also thinks Trump needs to speak more to the middle.

In line to attend a Trump rally in Coralville, the 70-year-old local retiree was noncommittal, waiting to hear some signals from the former president that he could appeal to independents to ensure his electability in the general election. Hyndman thinks he could, by focusing on the issues and avoiding putting other people down.

Despite that concern, Hyndman thinks neither DeSantis nor Haley can beat him.

"I don't see anybody stepping up," he said. "We've been waiting."

Retirements could tip control of the House majority. It's Republicans who have the early edge

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A chaotic year for the House is coming to a close with more Democrats than Republicans deciding to leave the chamber, a disparity that could have major ramifications in next year's elections.

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About two dozen Democrats have indicated they won't seek reelection, with half running for another elected office. Meanwhile, only 14 Republicans have said they are not seeking another term, with three seeking elected office elsewhere.

More retirements can be expected after the holidays, when lawmakers have had a chance to spend time with families and make decisions ahead of reelection deadlines. But so far, the numbers don't indicate the dysfunction in the House is causing a mass exodus for either party.

"Members sort of knew that this is what the institution is currently like when they chose to run for office," said Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a think tank that maintains a database of vital statistics on Congress, including retirements. "Some of them may well be feeling frustrated at this point in time, but anybody who has been elected to Congress in recent years, they're not surprised at what they're finding when they are getting to Washington."

Republicans certainly had the most high-profile exits. Rep. George Santos, R-N.Y., became only the third lawmaker to be expelled by colleagues since the Civil War. Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., was the first-ever speaker removed from that office by his colleagues. He opted to leave effective Dec. 31 rather than serve among the rank-and-file.

But it's the departure of a handful of Democrats in competitive districts that has Republicans thinking the overall retirement picture gives them an advantage in determining who will control the House after the 2024 elections.

Reps. Katie Porter of California, Elissa Slotkin of Michigan and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia proved they could win toss-up congressional districts in good election cycles for Democrats and not-so-good cycles. They are all seeking higher office within their home states. Porter and Slotkin are running for the U.S. Senate. Spanberger is running for governor in 2025.

Democrats are also losing six-term Rep. Dan Kildee of Michigan to retirement, leaving them with another competitive open seat to defend in a state that will be crucial in the presidential election. Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-Va., is not seeking reelection due to health challenges in a district that leans Democratic but is more competitive than most.

On the other side of the aisle, the Republicans leaving office generally represent districts that Democrats have little chance of flipping. They'll be replaced by Republicans, predicted Rep. Richard Hudson, the chairman of the House Republican campaign arm.

"Retirements are a huge problem for the Democrats. They're not a problem for us," Hudson said.

The exception is Santos, who represented a competitive New York district. Democrats hope former Rep. Tom Suozzi can win back the seat, which he gave up when he ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2022.

Republican Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma said he found it "a bit of a surprise" that the number of Democrats leaving office exceeded the Republican exits given all that has transpired this year.

"Politically, I think we're very well positioned for 2024," Cole said. "I just think the margins are going to remain narrow no matter who wins. The number of competitive seats is so much lower than it was even a decade ago, the polarization is so much greater, that it's hard to move big numbers. Whoever wins the presidency probably wins the House."

Sometimes, legislators in the states tip the scales in determining the makeup of Congress. It's one reason there are so few competitive races.

Three incumbent House Democrats from North Carolina have essentially been left with little opportunity to return after GOP lawmakers in the state drew new boundaries for their congressional districts. What were once competitive seats became near locks for whichever Republican emerges from the state's primary elections.

Democratic Rep. Jeff Jackson decided to run for attorney general rather than attempt to run again for a Charlotte-area seat that he had just won in the 2022 midterms. Rep. Wiley Nickel, a fellow freshman who flipped a toss-up district in the last election, also announced he would not be running, and would focus instead on a potential U.S. Senate bid in 2026. And Rep. Kathy Manning said she won't file for reelection under the current maps but would run if a federal lawsuit seeking to overturn the new districts is successful.

Manning said the city of Greensboro in her district was split into three pieces and combined with rural

counties. She won in 2022 by a margin of 9 percentage points, but she said the new district gives a 16-point advantage to a Republican candidate.

Democrats are hoping court-ordered redistricting in Alabama and Louisiana will favor their side and effectively make the redistricting battles a wash.

Ambition is also playing a role in the retirement trends. About half of the Democrats not seeking reelection to the House are seeking office elsewhere. That includes three members running for the seat once held by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who entered the Senate in 1992 and served more than three decades before her death in September. Slotkin is running for the seat Sen. Debbie Stabenow has held for more than two decades. Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota is running for president against fellow Democrat Joe Biden.

"If you are interested in a higher office, you're going to be sensitive to when those things come up. They don't always come up," Reynolds said.

Still, a few lawmakers do attribute their leaving, at least in part, to the dysfunction they've witnessed in Congress.

Democratic Rep. Brian Higgins of New York doesn't plan to wait for the election to get out. He's retiring sometime in February.

"We're spending more time doing less. And the American people aren't served," he said when announcing his retirement last month.

Republican Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., described a similar sense of frustration in his retirement announcement. He's been critical of Republican leaders for "lying to America" that the 2020 election was stolen and downplaying the Jan. 6 insurrection.

"Our nation is on a collision course with reality and a steadfast commitment to the truth," Buck said.

California is expanding health care coverage for low-income immigrants in the new year

By TRÂN NGUYỄN Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — More than 700,000 immigrants living illegally in California will gain access to free health care starting Monday under one of the state's most ambitious coverage expansions in a decade.

It's an effort that will eventually cost the state about \$3.1 billion per year and inches California closer to Democrats' goal of providing universal health care to its roughly 39 million residents.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom and lawmakers agreed in 2022 to provide health care access to all low-income adults regardless of their immigration status through the state's Medicaid program, known as Medi-Cal.

California is the most populous state to guarantee such coverage, though Oregon began doing so in July.

Newsom called the expansion "a transformative step towards strengthening the health care system for all Californians" when he proposed the changes two years ago.

Newsom made the commitment when the state had the largest budget surplus in its history. But as the program kicks off next week, California faces a record \$68 billion budget deficit, raising questions and concerns about the economic ramifications of the expansion.

"Regardless of what your position is on this, it doesn't make sense for us to be adding to our deficit," said Republican Sen. Roger Niello, the vice-chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee.

Immigration and health care advocates, who spent more than a decade fighting for the changes, have said the expanded coverage will close a gap in health care access and save the state money in the long run. Those who live in the state illegally often delay or avoid care because they aren't eligible for most coverage, making it more expensive to treat them when they end up in emergency rooms.

"It's a win-win, because it allows us to provide comprehensive care and we believe this will help keep our communities healthier," said Dr. Efrain Talamantes, chief operating officer at AltaMed in Los Angeles, the largest federally qualified health center in California.

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The update will be California's largest health care expansion since the 2014 implementation of former President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, which allowed states to include adults who fall below 138% of the federal poverty level in their Medicaid programs. California's uninsured rate dropped from about 17% to 7%.

But a large chunk of the population was left out: adults living in the United States without legal permission. They are not eligible for most public benefit programs, even though many have jobs and pay taxes.

Some states have used their tax dollars to cover a portion of health care expenses for some low-income immigrants. California first extended health care benefits to low-income children without legal status in 2015 and later added the benefits for young adults and people over the age of 50.

Now the last remaining group, adults ages 26 to 49, will be eligible for the state's Medicaid program.

The state doesn't know exactly how many people will enroll through the expansion, but state officials said more than 700,000 people will gain full health coverage allowing them to access preventative care and other treatment. That's larger than the entire Medicaid population of several states.

"We've had this asterisk based on immigration status," said Anthony Wright, executive director of Health Access California, a consumer advocacy group. "Just from the numbers point of view, this is a big deal."

Republicans and other conservative groups worry the new expansion will further strain the overloaded health care system and blasted the cost of the expansion.

State officials estimated the expansion will cost \$1.2 billion the first six months and \$3.1 billion annually thereafter from the budget. Spending for the Medi-Cal program, which is now about \$37 billion annually, is the second-largest expense in the California budget, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office.

Earlier this month, the state Department of Finance sent a letter urging state agencies to cut costs in light of the deficit. It has not given specific directions about the Medicaid expansion, state officials told The Associated Press in December.

California's expansion of Medicaid will face other challenges. The state is chugging through a review of Medicaid enrollees' eligibility for the first time in more than three years that was prompted by the end of some federal pandemic policies. Many immigrants who had their coverage protected during the COVID-19 pandemic now find themselves ineligible because they no longer financially qualify.

John Baackes, CEO of L.A. Care Health Plan, the state's largest Medi-Cal plan with nearly 2.6 million members, said roughly 20,000 members have lost their Medicaid coverage during the review process this past year and are looking to secure new insurance plans. His organization is juggling to help people navigate through both processes.

"People are being bombarded with information," Baackes said. "I can't imagine if somebody were having to maneuver through all this, why they wouldn't be terribly confused."

"The phones are ringing off the walls," he said.

Fear and distrust are also barriers for the expansion, said Sarah Dar, policy director for the California Immigrant Policy Center.

Many immigrants avoid accepting any public programs or benefits out of fear it will eventually prevent them from gaining legal status under the "public charge" rule. The federal law requires those seeking to become permanent residents or gain legal status to prove they will not be a burden to the U.S., or a "public charge." The rule no longer considers Medicaid as a factor under President Joe Biden's administration, but the fear remains, she said.

More resources and effort are required to reach this population "because of the history of just being completely excluded and not interfacing with the health care system or with government programs at all for so long," Dar said.

California has more work to do to see the state's uninsured rate hit zero, known as "universal coverage," Dar said.

For one thing, immigrants living in the U.S. without legal permission are still not eligible to purchase insurance from Covered California, the state-run exchange offering steep discounts for people who meet certain income requirements. A bill pending in the state Legislature, supported by the California Immigrant

Policy Center, would change that.

"It's going to be another really big undertaking," Dar said. "And we know that revenues are down ... but it's our job to make the case that, in times of economic downturn and whatnot, these are the communities that need the support the most."

Bollywood celebrates rocking year, riding high on action flicks, unbridled masculinity and misogyny

By VINEETA DEEPAK Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Bollywood has made a financial comeback this year worthy of one of its traditional singing-on-top-of-the-hills moments.

India's Hindi language movie industry made an impressive recovery after a pandemic-driven slowdown, audience fatigue with big studio productions and Bollywood megastars, and streaming platforms taking away a large chunk of viewership.

According to consultancy firm Ormax Media, the cumulative box office in 2023 pulled in \$1.3 billion, making it one of the best-grossing years of all time.

Indian moviegoers — both the masses and niche film lovers — are back in theaters and the massive commercial success of big-ticket Bollywood films has set at ease fears that Mumbai's glitzy dream factory was losing its shine.

As one of the largest film producers in the world, India rolls out more than 1,500 movies yearly, its diverse storytelling traditions reflected in its prolific cinematic entertainers.

The films that made the cut this year were a mixed bag of visual delights. Some portrayed the classic Bollywood larger-than-life spectacles, others were action-filled spy thrillers with top-billing movie stars. Many included stylized special effects, slickly choreographed romantic songs filmed in stunning locales, and pulsating music that had fans cheering and dancing in cinema halls.

More than anything, the year belonged to India's beloved superstar, Shah Rukh Khan, whose son was jailed amid controversy in a narcotics case in 2021 and subsequently cleared of the charges. Khan's global fandom welcomed him back like never before, with his movies pumping the box office numbers.

The year began with his movie "Pathaan," which made more than \$100 million worldwide, according to The Numbers website. Then came "Jawan," which raked in nearly \$136 million worldwide. And the year is ending with yet another, titled "Dunki."

"Very grateful to all the people around the world who have given me soooo much love as an entertainer," Khan recently posted on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

"This year Shah Rukh Khan has almost single-handedly revived cinema, very similar to what Tom Cruise did in Hollywood with his 'Top Gun' last year, said Nikhil Taneja, co-founder of the youth-centered media organization Yuvaa and host of the popular YouTube show, "Be A Man, Yaar."

Other blockbusters of the year include the heavily criticized "Animal" featuring actor Ranbir Kapoor, "Gadar 2" with actor Sunny Deol, and Salman Khan's "Tiger 3."

It was also a year when hyper-masculinity overwhelmed Bollywood, often wrapped in misogyny and aggressive nationalism.

Angry young men have always been a staple of Indian movies but the excessive, fantasized screen violence this year took it to another level. Almost all 2023 Bollywood hits were filled with anger and violence, and led by alpha male protagonists with rippling muscles and blazing guns brandished on screen as they went on a bone-crunching rampage to vanquish their enemies.

Even Shah Rukh Khan, known as the king of romance, embraced the gun and gore while playing a spy fighting a militant outfit in "Pathaan" and a vigilante battling institutional injustices in "Jawan."

While Khan's soft machismo remained nurturing and women-friendly even in his action flicks, many critics slammed the superhit movie "Animal" directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga for glorifying the toxic masculinity and misogyny of its twisted leading man. The film is moving toward a \$100-million run at box offices

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worldwide, its production company, Bhadrakali Pictures, said.

"Violent men do exist in the real world and a violent man can certainly be the central character in a film — the issue here, as always, is the manner of the portrayal, the script's indulgence towards him, the humour and coolth written into his fictional character, and the various means used to give him an allure despite his violent ways," film critic and author Anna MM Vetticad wrote in a blog post.

India has the world's largest young population, who also make up the majority of movie watchers. In a country where movie stars have a cult-like following, and movies reflect as well as shape mass behavior, making dehumanizing violence and casual sexism aspirational can be damaging, observers said.

The country's National Crime Records Bureau reported more than 445,000 cases of crimes against women in 2022, an increase of 4%. "Cruelty by Husband or Relatives" accounted for more than 31% of such crimes, the report said.

"Today what we see is the detachment of violence from emotional purpose," in the movies, wrote social commentator Santosh Desai in the Times of India newspaper. "Given that politically, there is great comfort with maintaining more traditional gender roles, this emphatic assertion of masculinity might take us back in time."

Taneja, the Yuva organization co-founder, has been holding roadshows to reach out to young Indians about what he calls "positive masculinity." He said some films "feed into every single bias" of the viewer, whether it was misogyny or a villain of a different religion.

"When they see such films, they can relate to what they see in their homes where their fathers are misogynistic. They are patriarchal to their mothers. They see a certain kind of gender imbalance and they start believing it," he said.

However, other successful films this year showcased a less angry, more accommodative masculinity, said Taneja.

Karan Johar's "Rocky aur Rani kii Prem Kahaani," or "Rocky and Rani's love story," won praise from most critics for its gender politics and for challenging male stereotypes and prejudices. The film went on to make nearly \$45 million at box offices worldwide, according to the Bollywood Hungama website.

The answer lies in steering the public discourse away from movies that "aim to provoke only for the act of triggering," toward those that espouse other versions of modern Indian masculinity, Taneja said. "We need to have more conversations about the alternates — positive, empathetic and gentle masculinity — and push them more."

The Biden administration once again bypasses Congress on an emergency weapons sale to Israel

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the second time this month the Biden administration is bypassing Congress to approve an emergency weapons sale to Israel as Israel continues to prosecute its war against Hamas in Gaza under increasing international criticism.

The State Department said Friday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken had told Congress that he had made a second emergency determination covering a \$147.5 million sale for equipment, including fuses, charges and primers, that is needed to make the 155 mm shells that Israel has already purchased function.

"Given the urgency of Israel's defensive needs, the secretary notified Congress that he had exercised his delegated authority to determine an emergency existed necessitating the immediate approval of the transfer," the department said.

"The United States is committed to the security of Israel, and it is vital to U.S. national interests to ensure Israel is able to defend itself against the threats it faces," it said.

The emergency determination means the purchase will bypass the congressional review requirement for foreign military sales. Such determinations are rare, but not unprecedented, when administrations see an urgent need for weapons to be delivered without waiting for lawmakers' approval.

Blinken made a similar decision on Dec. 9, to approve the sale to Israel of nearly 14,000 rounds of tank ammunition worth more than \$106 million.

Both moves have come as President Joe Biden's request for a nearly \$106 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs remains stalled in Congress, caught up in a debate over U.S. immigration policy and border security. Some Democratic lawmakers have spoken of making the proposed \$14.3 billion in American assistance to its Mideast ally contingent on concrete steps by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to reduce civilian casualties in Gaza during the war with Hamas.

The State Department sought to counter potential criticism of the sale on human rights grounds by saying it was in constant touch with Israel to emphasize the importance of minimizing civilian casualties, which have soared since Israel began its response to the Hamas attacks in Israel on Oct. 7.

"We continue to strongly emphasize to the government of Israel that they must not only comply with international humanitarian law, but also take every feasible step to prevent harm to civilians," it said.

"Hamas hides behind civilians and has embedded itself among the civilian population, but that does not lessen Israel's responsibility and strategic imperative to distinguish between civilians and Hamas terrorists as it conducts its military operations," the department said. "This type of campaign can only be won by protecting civilians."

Bypassing Congress with emergency determinations for arms sales is an unusual step that has in the past met resistance from lawmakers, who normally have a period of time to weigh in on proposed weapons transfers and, in some cases, block them.

In May 2019, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made an emergency determination for an \$8.1 billion sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan after it became clear that the Trump administration would have trouble overcoming lawmakers' concerns about the Saudi and UAE-led war in Yemen.

Pompeo came under heavy criticism for the move, which some believed may have violated the law because many of the weapons involved had yet to be built and could not be delivered urgently. But he was cleared of any wrongdoing after an internal investigation.

At least four administrations have used the authority since 1979. President George H.W. Bush's administration used it during the Gulf War to get arms quickly to Saudi Arabia.

British warship arrives in Guyana as tensions heat up in border dispute with Venezuela

By MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — A British warship arrived in Guyana on Friday afternoon amid rising tensions from a border dispute between the former British colony and Venezuela.

The HMS Trent's visit led Venezuela to begin military exercises a day earlier in the eastern Caribbean near its border with Guyana as the Venezuelan government presses its claim to a huge swath of its smaller neighbor.

Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern Friday about the situation and urged the two South American countries to return to dialogue. It said other nations should avoid "military activities" that support either side.

Brazil's statement called on Guyana and Venezuela to stay true to the Argyle Declaration, an agreement signed earlier this month in which their leaders said they would solve the border dispute through nonviolent means.

The dispute is over Essequibo, a sparsely populated region that is the size of Florida and rich in oil and minerals. Venezuela has long claimed it was cheated out of the territory when Europeans and the U.S. set the border.

The UK's defense ministry has said that the ship is visiting Guyana as part of a series of engagements in the region and that the vessel will conduct training exercises with Guyana's military.

On its X account, the ship posted photos of sailors welcoming Britain's ambassador to Guyana and the

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chief of staff of Guyana's Defense Force, Brig. Gen. Omar Khan. They were hosted at a formal lunch and provided with a tour of the ship's capabilities.

The warship is generally used to intercept pirates and drug smugglers, and it recently conducted joint exercises with the navies of several West African nations. It is equipped with cannons and a landing pad for helicopters and drones and can carry around 50 marines.

In a statement late Thursday, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said Venezuela "had nothing to fear" from the ship's activities in Guyanese waters.

"Guyana has long been engaged in partnerships with regional and international states aimed at enhancing internal security," Ali said. "These partnerships pose a threat to no one and are in no way intended to be aggressive."

But Venezuela on Thursday began military exercises involving 5,000 troops in the eastern Caribbean, citing the visit by the British patrol ship.

In a nationally televised speech, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro accused Guyana of betraying the spirit of the Argyle Declaration.

"We will not let anyone push us around," Maduro said, surrounded by military commanders. He described Britain's decision to send a warship as a threat from a "decaying former empire."

Guyana has controlled Essequibo for decades, but Venezuela revived its historical claim to the region earlier this month through a referendum in which voters were asked whether the territory should be turned into a Venezuelan state.

Critics of Maduro say the socialist leader has reignited the border dispute to draw attention from the nation's internal problems as Venezuela prepares for a presidential election next year. Maduro intends to run for a third term.

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.

Venezuelan officials also argue that an agreement among Venezuela, Britain and the then 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.

Google settles \$5 billion privacy lawsuit over tracking people using 'incognito mode'

By The Associated Press undefined

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google has agreed to settle a \$5 billion privacy lawsuit alleging that it spied on people who used the "incognito" mode in its Chrome browser — along with similar "private" modes in other browsers — to track their internet use.

The class-action lawsuit filed in 2020 said Google misled users into believing that it wouldn't track their internet activities while using incognito mode. It argued that Google's advertising technologies and other techniques continued to catalog details of users' site visits and activities despite their use of supposedly "private" browsing.

Plaintiffs also charged that Google's activities yielded an "unaccountable trove of information" about users who thought they'd taken steps to protect their privacy.

The settlement, reached Thursday, must still be approved by a federal judge. Terms weren't disclosed, but the suit originally sought \$5 billion on behalf of users; lawyers for the plaintiffs said they expect to present the court with a final settlement agreement by Feb. 24.

Google did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the settlement.

Judge allows lawsuit that challenges Idaho's broad abortion ban to move forward

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

An Idaho judge on Friday denied a request by the state's top legal chief to throw out a lawsuit seeking to clarify the exemptions tucked inside the state's broad abortion ban.

Instead, 4th District Judge Jason Scott narrowed the case to focus only on the circumstances where an abortion would be allowed and whether abortion care in emergency situations applies to Idaho's state constitutional right to enjoy and defend life and the right to secure safety.

Scott's decision comes just two weeks after a hearing where Idaho's Attorney General Raul Labrador's office attempted to dismiss the case spearheaded by four women and several physicians, who filed the case earlier this year.

Similar lawsuits are playing out around the nation, with some of them, like Idaho's, brought by the Center for Reproductive Rights on behalf of doctors and pregnant people who were denied access to abortions while facing serious pregnancy complications.

According to the Center for Reproductive Rights, Idaho's Constitution entitles its residents to certain fundamental rights, but a sweeping abortion ban poses a risk to those rights.

Labrador's office countered that the Idaho Supreme Court has already upheld the state's abortion bans — thus solving any lingering questions on the matter.

Scott agreed in part with the state attorneys that the state Supreme Court ruled there was no fundamental right to abortion inside the state constitution, but added that the court didn't reject "every conceivable as applied challenge that might be made in a future case."

"We're grateful the court saw through the state's callous attempt to ignore the pain and suffering their laws are causing Idahoans," said Gail Deady, a senior staff attorney for the Center for Reproductive Rights. "Now the state of Idaho will be forced to answer to these women in a court of law."

Meanwhile, the Idaho judge also sided with the attorney general in removing Gov. Brad Little, Labrador, and the Idaho Board of Medicine as named defendants in the lawsuit — leaving the state of Idaho as the only remaining defendant. Scott called the long list of defendants as "redundant," saying that all three would be subject to whatever is ultimately decided in the lawsuit.

"This is only the beginning of this litigation, but the Attorney General is encouraged by this ruling," Labrador's office said in a statement. "He has long held that the named defendants were simply inappropriate, and that our legislatively passed laws do not violate the Idaho Constitution by narrowly limiting abortions or interfering with a doctor's right to practice medicine."

The four women named in the case were all denied abortions in Idaho after learning they were pregnant with fetuses that were unlikely to go to term or survive birth, and that the pregnancies also put them at risk of serious medical complications. All four traveled to Oregon or Washington for the procedures.

Idaho has several abortion bans, but notably Idaho lawmakers approved a ban as a trigger law in March of 2020, before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

At the time, any suggestion that the ban could harm pregnant people was quickly brushed off by the bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Todd Lakey, who said during one debate that the health of the mother "weighs less, yes, than the life of the child."

The trigger ban took effect in 2022. Since then, Idaho's roster of obstetricians and other pregnancy-related specialists has been shrinking.

Maine secretary of state who opted to keep Trump off primary ballot is facing threat of impeachment

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's top election official could face an impeachment attempt in the state Legislature over her decision to keep former President Donald Trump off the Republican primary ballot.

At least one Republican lawmaker has vowed to pursue impeachment against Democratic Secretary of State Shenna Bellows despite long odds in the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

Bellows said Friday that she had no comment on the impeachment effort, but said she was duty-bound by state law to make a determination on three challenges brought by registered Maine voters. She reiterated that she suspended her decision pending an anticipated appeal by Trump in Superior Court.

"Under Maine law, I have not only the authority but the obligation to act," she said. "I will follow the Constitution and the rule of law as directed by the courts," she added.

Bellows' decision Thursday followed a ruling earlier this month by the Colorado Supreme Court that removed Trump from the ballot under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. That decision is on hold until the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether Trump violated the Civil War-era provision prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

"In 150 years, no candidate was kept off a ballot for engaging in an insurrection. It's now happened twice to Donald Trump in the last two weeks. There will be major pressure on the Supreme Court to offer clarity very soon," said Derek Muller, a Notre Dame Law School professor and election law scholar.

In Maine, state Rep. John Andrews, who sits on the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, called the decision "hyper-partisanship on full display" as he pressed for an impeachment proceeding. He said he sent a notice to the state revisor's office for a joint order to set the wheels in motion ahead of lawmakers' return to Augusta next week.

"There is bipartisan opposition to the extreme decision made by the secretary of state. She has clearly overstepped her authority. It remains to be seen if her effort at voter suppression will garner enough Democrat support to remove her from her position," said House Republican leader Billy Bob Faulkingham.

The decision exposed Bellows to hate and vitriol on social media — along with posts showing support — and her office said Bellows and members of her staff were subjected to threats, something she called "unacceptable."

"My obligation is to the Constitution and the rule of law. It's the Constitution and the rule of law that make our Democratic Republic so great. No one should be threatened for doing their job," she said Friday evening.

"I hope those people who are engaging in angry and threatening communications consider the impact of their words and actions," she added.

Among Maine's congressional delegation, only Democratic U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, who represents the liberal 1st Congressional District, supported Bellows' conclusion that Trump incited an insurrection, justifying his removal from the March 5 primary ballot.

U.S. Sen. Angus King, an independent who caucuses with Democrats, said Friday that absent a final judicial determination on the issue of insurrection, the decision on whether Trump should be considered for president "should rest with the people as expressed in free and fair elections."

U.S. Rep. Jared Golden, a Democrat representing the 2nd Congressional District, agreed that "until (Trump) is found guilty of the crime of insurrection, he should be allowed on the ballot."

U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, the state's senior senator, was one of a handful of Republicans to vote to convict Trump during his second impeachment trial, and she criticized him in a floor speech for failing to obey his oath of office.

But she nonetheless disagreed with Bellows' decision. "Maine voters should decide who wins the election, not a secretary of state chosen by the Legislature," she said.

Judge blocks most of an Iowa law banning some school library books and discussion of LGBTQ+ issues

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A federal judge on Friday temporarily blocked key parts of an Iowa law that bans some books from school libraries and forbids teachers from raising LGBTQ+ issues.

Judge Stephen Locher's preliminary injunction halts enforcement of the law, which was set to take effect Jan. 1 but already had resulted in the removal of hundreds of books from Iowa schools.

The law, which the Republican-led Legislature and GOP Gov. Kim Reynolds approved early in 2023, bans books depicting sex acts from school libraries and classrooms and forbids teachers from raising gender identity and sexual orientation issues with students through the sixth grade. Locher blocked enforcement of those two provisions.

The judge said the ban on books is "incredibly broad" and has resulted in the removal of history volumes, classics, award-winning novels and "even books designed to help students avoid being victimized by sexual assault." He said that part of the law is unlikely to satisfy the constitution's requirements for free speech.

In barring the provision barring any discussion of "gender identity" and "sexual orientation" in elementary school, Locher said the way it was written it was "wildly overbroad."

Reynolds said in a statement that she was "extremely disappointed" by the ruling.

"Instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation has no place in kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms," Reynolds said. "And there should be no question that books containing sexually explicit content — as clearly defined in Iowa law — do not belong in a school library for children. The fact that we're even arguing these issues is ridiculous."

Educators lauded the decision, however.

"When education professionals return to work next week, they can do what they do best: take great care of all their students without fear of reprisal," Mike Beranek, president of the Iowa State Education Association, said in a statement.

The judge let stand a requirement that school administrators notify parents if their child asks to change their pronouns or name, saying the plaintiffs did not have standing.

Iowa's measure is part of a wave of similar legislation across the country. Typically backed by Republican lawmakers, the laws seek to prohibit discussion of gender and sexual orientation issues, ban treatments such as puberty blockers for transgender children, and restrict the use of restrooms in schools. Many have prompted court challenges.

Opponents of the Iowa law filed two lawsuits. One is on behalf of the organization Iowa Safe Schools and seven students, represented by the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa and Lambda Legal. The other is by the Iowa State Education Association, publisher Penguin Random House and four authors.

The first lawsuit argues the measure is unconstitutional because it violates students' and teachers' free speech and equal protection rights. The second, which focused more narrowly on the book bans, argues the law violates the First and 14th amendments.

Lawyers for both lawsuits said the law is broad and confusing.

At a Dec. 22 hearing, Daniel Johnston of the Iowa attorney general's office argued that school officials were applying the book ban too broadly. When deciding whether to remove books, educators shouldn't focus on the idea of a sex act but instead look for text or images that meet Iowa's definition of a sex act, Johnston said.

Resilient economy energizes investors, as financial markets end 2023 up 24%

By DAMIAN J. TROISE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The S&P 500 closed out 2023 with a gain of more than 24% and the Dow finished near a record high, as easing inflation, a resilient economy and the prospect of lower interest rates buoyed investors, particularly in the last two months of the year.

Stocks closed Friday with modest losses.

The S&P 500 slipped 13.52 points, or 0.3%, to 4,769.83. The benchmark index still posted a rare ninth consecutive week of gains and is just 0.6% shy of an all-time high set in January of 2022.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 20.56 points, or 0.1%, to 37,689.54 after setting a record Thursday.

The Nasdaq slipped 83.78 points, or 0.6%, to 15,011.35, but that was barely a blemish on an annual gain of more than 43%, its best performance since 2020.

For most of the year, gains in the broader market were driven largely by seven stocks -- Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Nvidia, Meta Platforms and Tesla. Dubbed the Magnificent 7, they accounted for about two-thirds of the gains in the S&P 500 this year, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices. Nvidia led the group with a gain of about 239%, driven by the mania surrounding artificial intelligence.

A strong rally in November and December marked a big psychological shift for investors, said Quincy Krosby, chief global strategist at LPL Financial, because it went beyond the big technology companies. The Russell 2000 index of smaller companies jumped more than 20% over the two months and finished 2023 with a 15.1% gain after falling 21.6% in 2022.

"It was broad participation in the market that reinforced and confirmed gains for smaller company stocks that were particularly important," Krosby said.

Investors in the U.S. came into this year bearing the bruises of sharp losses for both stocks and bonds in 2022. They expected inflation to ease further as the Federal Reserve pushed interest rates higher. The trade-off would be a weaker economy and possibly a recession. But while inflation has come down to around 3%, the economy has chugged along thanks to solid consumer spending and a healthy job market.

The stock market is now betting the Fed can achieve a "soft landing," where the economy slows just enough to snuff out high inflation, but not so much that it falls into a recession. As a result, investors now expect the Fed to begin cutting rates as early as March.

The Fed has signaled three quarter-point cuts to its benchmark interest rate next year. That rate is currently sitting between 5.25% and 5.50%, its highest level in two decades.

Lower rates could add more fuel to the broader market's momentum in 2024. Wall Street is forecasting stronger earnings growth for companies next year after a largely lackluster 2023, when companies wrestled with higher input and labor costs and a shift in consumer spending.

Bond market investors appeared headed for a third losing year in a row until things turned around starting in late October. Excitement about potential cuts to interest rates sent bond prices soaring and yields dropping. The yield on the 10-year Treasury, which hit 5% in October, stood at 3.88% Friday, up from 3.85% on Thursday.

The yield on the two-year Treasury, which more closely tracks expectations for the Fed, fell to 4.25% from 4.28% from late Thursday. It also surpassed 5% in October.

Many global markets also saw solid gains this year. Indexes in France and Germany made double-digit advances, while Britain's has climbed just under 4%.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 gained 27% in 2023, its best year in a decade as the Japanese central bank inched toward ending its longstanding ultra-lax monetary policy after inflation finally exceeded its target of about 2%.

The Shanghai Composite index lost about 3% this year and the Hang Seng index in Hong Kong fell nearly 14%. Weakness in the property sector and in global demand for China's exports, as well as high debt levels and wavering consumer confidence have weighed on the country's economy and the stock market.

U.S. and international crude oil prices were relatively stable on Friday. The price of oil tumbled by more

than 10% this year, defying predictions from some experts that it could cross \$100 per barrel.

Despite production cuts from OPEC, a war involving energy exporter Russia and another in the Middle East, U.S. benchmark crude dropped nearly 11% in 2023, and a whopping 21% in the final three months of the year.

Increased production in the U.S., now the top oil producer in the world, as well as Canada, Brazil and Guyana offset the reduced output from OPEC. Not all OPEC members participated in the cuts and some countries like Iran and Venezuela are pumping more oil, energy analysts say.

Ohio's GOP governor vetoes ban on gender-affirming care and transgender athletes in girls' sports

By SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON and JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press/Report For America
COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Republican Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine vetoed a measure Friday that would have banned gender-affirming care for minors, casting the action out of step with many in his own party as thoughtful, limited and "pro-life."

He simultaneously announced plans to move to administratively ban transgender surgeries until a person is 18, and to position the state to better regulate and track gender-affirming treatments in both children and adults.

At a news conference, DeWine said he hoped the hybrid approach could win the support of legislative Republicans — who immediately signaled they're considering a veto override — as well as serve as a national model to states, as gender-affirming care restrictions enacted across the country in recent years face lawsuits.

The vetoed bill also would have banned transgender athletes' participation in girls' and women's sports. DeWine said he listened to people on both sides of the legislation who all "sincerely and truly believe their position best protects children," ultimately deciding he could not support legislation that bans healthcare so many patients, families and doctors told him is saving lives.

"Ultimately, these tough, tough decisions should not be made by the government. They should not be made by the state of Ohio," DeWine said. "They should be made by the people who love these kids the most, and that's the parents. The parents who have raised that child, the parents who have seen that child go through agony, the parents who worry about that child every single day of their life."

The governor's veto drew swift rebukes Friday from supporters of gender-affirming care bans, both in the state and nationally.

Republican Bernie Moreno, a Trump-endorsed candidate for U.S. Senate, and Center for Christian Virtue President Aaron Baer both called on the Legislature to override his veto.

"Mike DeWine has failed Ohio, and it's our children who are going to pay the price," Baer said in a statement.

Terry Schilling, president of the conservative American Principles Project, said in a statement that DeWine had succumbed to "egregious lies" being perpetuated about transgender care. He said history would remember that DeWine "gave into cowardice and caved to the transgender industry that is preying on so many vulnerable individuals."

The conservative Christian legal group Alliance Defending Freedom called DeWine's veto a betrayal. Republican state Rep. Gary Click, the bill's sponsor, stopped short of supporting a veto override. He commended DeWine for trying to wrap his mind around a complex problem in a short amount of time, while defending his own years of research on the bill. Click said he was particularly disappointed that the ban on transgender girls playing sports could be sidelined if non-legislative solutions were pursued on gender-affirming care.

Republican Senate President Matt Huffman and GOP Ohio House Speaker Jason Stephens both expressed disappointment, defending lawmakers' extensive work on the legislation. Stephens said his chamber is weighing its options with regard to beginning the veto override process.

House Democrats said the legislation was based on hate and DeWine's veto supported "fundamental

freedom" and parental rights. Senate Democratic Leader Nickie Antonio, the first openly gay person to serve in the Ohio General Assembly, said her party would continue its fight "until all may enjoy the freedom to live their authentic lives without government interference."

The Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest LGBTQ+ rights organization, and the American Academy of Pediatrics' Ohio chapter also lauded the veto as a positive for some of the state's most vulnerable youth.

It was a moment of relief for Alicia and Aaron Burkle, parents from Cleveland to Astrid, a 10-year-old transgender girl. The family had been looking into options -- even considering leaving Ohio -- if gender-affirming care was banned. Since the legislation reached his desk, they, along with their friends and family, have been calling and emailing their concerns.

"It's just been constant action," Alicia Burkle said. "So to just sit down and listen to his message and hear that he actually listens to families like ours and heard our stories -- it actually sounded like he listened."

It's not a complete win, though, Aaron Burkle said: "We're breathing a sigh of relief today, but there's already been a lot of damage done to our community, to families like ours. And we know that this issue is not yet completely resolved."

The vetoed bill would have prohibited Ohio minors from receiving gender reassignment surgery, but also from taking puberty blockers or undergoing other hormone therapies. It would have allowed those already undergoing treatments to continue, however.

DeWine directed state agencies to begin the rule-making process to: restrict gender-affirming surgeries to adults only, to set up a system for tracking the gender-affirming treatments both minor and adult Ohioans are undergoing; and to prevent "pop-up clinics or fly-by-night operations" from deceptive practices surrounding gender-affirming care.

The governor said a small number of Ohio children would have been affected by the bill, "but for those children who face gender dysphoria, and for their families, the consequences of this bill could not be more profound." He said he could think of no example where state law overrules the medical decisions of not only parents, but also the medical judgment of a child's treating physician and medical team.

DeWine said he does not see that position as inconsistent with his opposition to November's Issue 1, a successful abortion rights amendment whose backers similarly argued that government has no place in individuals' personal reproductive decisions.

"On the abortion issue, I believe that's a question of life and protecting human life," the governor said. "I believe, ultimately, my decision here was ultimately made about protecting life, and that is the lives of these children."

South Africa launches case at top UN court accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — South Africa launched a case Friday at the United Nations' top court accusing Israel of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and asking the court to order Israel to halt its attacks — the first such challenge made at the court over the current war. Israel swiftly rejected the filing "with disgust."

South Africa's submission to the International Court of Justice alleges that "acts and omissions by Israel ... are genocidal in character" as they are committed with the intent "to destroy Palestinians in Gaza" as a part of the broader Palestinian national, racial and ethnic group.

South Africa has been a fierce critic of Israel's military campaign in Gaza. Many there, including President Cyril Ramaphosa, have compared Israel's policies regarding Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with South Africa's past apartheid regime of racial segregation. Israel rejects such allegations.

South Africa asked The Hague-based court to issue an interim order for Israel to immediately suspend its military operations in Gaza. A hearing into that request is likely in the coming days or weeks. The case, if it goes ahead, will take years, but an interim order could be issued within weeks.

The Israeli government rejected "with disgust" the genocide accusations, calling it a "blood libel." A

Foreign Ministry statement said South Africa's case lacks a legal foundation and constitutes a "despicable and contemptuous exploitation" of the court.

Israel also accused South Africa of cooperating with Hamas, the Palestinian militant group behind the deadly Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel that triggered the ongoing war.

The statement also said Israel operates according to international law and focuses its military actions solely against Hamas, adding that the residents of Gaza are not an enemy. It asserted that it takes steps to minimize harm to civilians and to allow humanitarian aid to enter the territory.

South Africa can bring the case under the Genocide Convention because both it and Israel are signatories to it.

Whether the case will succeed in halting the war remains to be seen. While the court's orders are legally binding, they are not always followed. In March 2022, the court ordered Russia to halt hostilities in Ukraine, a binding legal ruling that Moscow flouted as it pressed ahead with its attacks.

South Africa's foreign ministry said in a statement that the country is "gravely concerned with the plight of civilians caught in the present Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip due to the indiscriminate use of force and forcible removal of inhabitants."

The ministry added that there are "ongoing reports of international crimes, such as crimes against humanity and war crimes, being committed as well as reports that acts meeting the threshold of genocide or related crimes as defined in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, have been and may still be committed in the context of the ongoing massacres in Gaza."

South Africa's president earlier accused Israel of war crimes and acts "tantamount to genocide." And South Africa last month pushed for the International Criminal Court, which also is based in The Hague, to investigate Israel's actions in Gaza.

The ICC prosecutes individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, while the International Court of Justice settles disputes between nations.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry welcomed South Africa's accusations against Israel. In a statement on social media, it urged the court to "immediately take action to protect Palestinian people and call on Israel, the occupying power, to halt its onslaught against the Palestinian people."

Balkees Jarrah, associate international justice director at Human Rights Watch, said South Africa's case "provides an important opportunity for the International Court of Justice to scrutinize Israel's actions in Gaza using the Genocide Convention of 1948." She said South Africa is looking to the United Nations' highest judicial body "to provide clear, definitive answers on the question of whether Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people."

Jarrah stressed that the ICJ case "is not a criminal case against individual alleged perpetrators, and it does not involve the International Criminal Court (ICC), a separate body. But the ICJ case should also propel greater international support for impartial justice at the ICC and other credible venues."

Russia launches the biggest aerial barrage of the war and kills 30 civilians, Ukraine says

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones against Ukrainian targets, officials said Friday, killing at least 30 civilians across the country in what an air force official called the biggest aerial barrage of the war.

At least 144 people were wounded and an unknown number were buried under rubble during the roughly 18-hour onslaught, Ukrainian officials said. A maternity hospital, apartment blocks and schools were among the buildings reported damaged across Ukraine.

In the capital, Kyiv, broken glass and mangled metal littered city streets. Air raid and emergency service sirens wailed as plumes of smoke drifted into a bright blue sky.

Kateryna Ivanivna, a 72-year-old Kyiv resident, said she threw herself to the ground when a missile struck.

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"There was an explosion, then flames," she said. "I covered my head and got down in the street. Then I ran into the subway station."

Meanwhile, in Poland, authorities said that what apparently was a Russian missile had entered the country's airspace Friday morning from the direction of Ukraine and then vanished off radars.

In the attack on Ukraine, the air force intercepted most of the ballistic and cruise missiles and the Shahed-type drones overnight, said Ukraine's military chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

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

The result was "the most massive aerial attack" since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Air Force commander Mykola Oleshchuk wrote on his official Telegram channel. It topped the previous biggest assault, in November 2022 when Russia launched 96 missiles, and this year's biggest, with 81 missiles on March 9, according to air force records.

Fighting along the front line is largely bogged down by winter weather after Ukraine's summer counteroffensive 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. Their appeals have come as signs of war fatigue strain efforts to keep support in place.

The U.N. Security Council hastily convened later Friday to discuss the attack, which Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khari called "appalling."

"Tragically, 2023 is ending as it began — with devastating violence against the people of Ukraine," he said, and noted that international humanitarian law forbids attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that the bombardment shows Russian President Vladimir Putin must be stopped, "but unless Congress takes urgent action in the new year, we will not be able to continue sending the weapons and vital air defense systems Ukraine needs to protect its people. Congress must step up and act."

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the attack should stir the world to further action in support of Ukraine.

"These widespread attacks on Ukraine's cities show Putin will stop at nothing to achieve his aim of eradicating freedom and democracy," Sunak said on social media platform X, formerly Twitter. "We must continue to stand with Ukraine — for as long as it takes."

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned Russia's attack "in the strongest terms" and said attacks against civilians are unacceptable and must end immediately, according to a statement.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said the scale of the attack should wake people up to Ukraine's continuing needs.

"Today, millions of Ukrainians awoke to the loud sound of explosions," he wrote on X. "I wish those sounds of explosions in Ukraine could be heard all around the world. In all major capitals, headquarters, and parliaments, which are currently debating further support for Ukraine."

In Kyiv, the bombardment damaged a subway station that lies across the street from a factory belonging to the Artem company, which produces components for various military-grade missiles. Officials did not say whether the factory was directly hit.

Overall, the attack hit six cities, and reports of deaths and damage came in from across the country. Several dozen missiles were launched towards Kyiv, with more than 30 intercepted, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv military administration. Eight people were killed there, officials said.

In Boyarka, near Kyiv, the debris of a shot-down drone fell on a home and started a fire. Andrii Korobka, 47, said his mother was sleeping next to the room where the wreckage landed and was taken to hospital suffering from shock.

"The war goes on, and it can happen to any house, even if you think yours will never be affected," Korobka said.

Tetiana Sakhnenko lives next door and said neighbors ran with buckets of water to put out the blaze, but it spread quickly. "It's so scary," she said.

In the eastern city of Dnipro, four maternity hospital patients were rescued from a fire, five people were killed and 20 injured, officials said.

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

The mayor of the western city of Lviv, Andrii Sadovyi, said one person was killed there, with three schools and a kindergarten damaged in a drone attack. Local emergency services said 30 people were injured.

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

Mexican president inaugurates centralized 'super pharmacy' to supply medicines to all of Mexico

By MARIA VERZA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's president inaugurated a huge "super pharmacy" Friday in a bid to end the woes of patients throughout the country who are often told they need a specific medicine — but the hospital in question doesn't have it.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's solution was to outfit a big warehouse on the outskirts of Mexico City to centralize a supply and send it to hospitals throughout the country.

"The pharmacy is going to be big, big, big, and it is going to have all the medications that are used in the health system," López Obrador said Friday.

The pharmacy is intended to complement local health facilities. If a patient can't get needed medications at a local hospital, the patient, the patient's doctor or the pharmacist would be able to call up the warehouse and get it delivered from the huge 40,000 square meter (430,000 square foot) Mexico City warehouse.

The armed forces, or the government-run pharmaceutical company Birmex, will ship the drugs out by land or air "within 24 to 48 hours," López Obrador pledged.

The question is whether Mexico can overcome its history of being bad at regulating the pharmaceutical industry, bad at buying medicines, bad at storing them, and bad at distributing them. Extreme centralization also hasn't helped Mexico much in the past in many areas.

The most visible face of this problem are the parents of children with cancer, who frequently stage protests because they say that in recent years chemotherapy and other drugs have been impossible to obtain.

Desperate parents blocked traffic at the Mexico City airport last year, holding up a banner reading: "There isn't any chemotherapy, treatment or medicines, have some empathy and sensitivity."

The problems have killed otherwise healthy people. Because Mexico has had problems in obtaining enough morphine, anesthesiologists in Mexico have had to carry around their own vials of the sedative, drawing multiple doses out of a single vial for routine procedures like spinal blocks during births.

In the United States, where there is no shortage of morphine, doctors are advised to draw a single dose from a vial and throw the remainder out.

But in Mexico, that has led to contamination of the vials, triggering outbreaks of injection-induced meningitis in two Mexican states that have killed dozens of people — including some Americans who sought treatment at clinics in the border city of Matamoros, across from Brownsville, Texas.

López Obrador mounted a major effort to obtain COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, using the armed forces to distribute them and volunteers to help apply them, and by the end of that year just about anybody in Mexico who wanted a vaccine got one, for free.

But trying to replicate that model of centralized government purchasing and army distribution on a national scale for thousands of medications is not the same, according to Mauricio Rodríguez, a professor at the School of Medicine at Mexico's National Autonomous University.

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"This is crazy," said Rodríguez, noting the government is opening the centralized warehouse without answering how the system will operate, especially for urgently-needed medications. He noted that concentrating all the drugs at one site increases risks, and could sideline some already-existing distribution systems.

Many of the problems pre-date López Obrador, who took office in late 2018. For decades, there have been scandals involving of millions of dollars worth of medicines going out-of-date at warehouses while hospitals couldn't get them.

The country's medicine regulatory agency, known by its Spanish acronym as Cofepris, was already so riddled with corruption prior to López Obrador that regulators would hide applications for approval of new medicines for years, and demand bribes to approve them.

And with alarming frequency, regulators in Mexico send out alerts about falsified or knock-off medications being sold for treating everything from cancer to heart disease. Boxes, labels, vials and certifications are copied with amazing accuracy, but the bottles often contain little or none of the medication.

The fake medicine trade is so common, and so lucrative in Mexico because patients or their relatives are often told by doctors to buy medications at private drug stores when they are unavailable at government hospitals.

The civic group "Zero Shortages" said there was an increase of 142% in the number of alerts about falsified medicines between 2021 and 2022.

But part of the problems are of López Obrador's own making. Angry at what he claimed were inflated profits made by drug distributors and importers, the president simply cut the private companies out and decided the government should directly buy all medications.

Because the government did not have much infrastructure, contacts or experience in such a massive effort, López Obrador signed an agreement with the World Health Organization to help Mexico in purchasing. But even with that help, Mexico was unable to obtain some specialized medication, something López Obrador blamed on sabotage by pharmaceutical firms.

Rafael Gual, the director of the National Pharmaceutical Industry Chamber, said the government's own actions created "bottlenecks" in distribution.

According to the group "Zero Shortages," the number of prescriptions that went unfilled in Mexico rose from 1.5 million in 2019 to 22 million in 2021; disruptions due to the COVID pandemic probably played a role.

But even in 2022, there were still about 12.5 million prescriptions that went unfilled.

Dr. José Moya, WHO's Mexico representative, said centralized medical warehouses can be a solution, but the key is to have a good logistical system.

"If they are considering a warehouse like this, it's because there is a need," Moya said, "and this has to be very well organized."

Ex-Trump lawyer Michael Cohen says he unwittingly sent AI-generated fake legal cases to his attorney

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Michael Cohen, Donald Trump's onetime personal lawyer and fixer, says he unwittingly passed along to his attorney bogus artificial intelligence-generated legal case citations he got online before they were submitted to a judge.

Cohen made the admission in a court filing unsealed Friday in Manhattan federal court after a judge earlier this month asked a lawyer to explain how court rulings that do not exist were cited in a motion submitted on Cohen's behalf. Judge Jesse Furman had also asked what role, if any, Cohen played in drafting the motion.

The AI-generated cases were cited as part of written arguments attorney David M. Schwartz made to try to bring an early end to Cohen's court supervision after he served more than a year behind bars. Cohen had pleaded guilty in 2018 to tax evasion, campaign finance charges and lying to Congress, saying Trump directed him to arrange the payment of hush money to a porn actor and to a former Playboy model to fend off damage to his 2016 presidential bid.

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Cohen, who was disbarred five years ago, said in a declaration submitted to the judge on Thursday that he found the citations by doing research through Google Bard and was unaware that the service could generate nonexistent cases. He said he uses the internet for research because he no longer has access to formal legal-research sources.

"As a non-lawyer, I have not kept up with emerging trends (and related risks) in legal technology and did not realize that Google Bard was a generative text service that, like Chat-GPT, could show citations and descriptions that looked real but actually were not," Cohen said. "Instead, I understood it to be a super-charged search engine and had repeatedly used it in other contexts to (successfully) find accurate information online."

Google rolled out Bard earlier this year as an answer to ChatGPT, which Microsoft has been integrating into its Bing search engine. The tools can quickly generate text based off prompts from a user, but have a tendency to make things up, also known as "hallucinations."

Cohen blamed Schwartz, his lawyer and longtime friend, for failing to check the validity of his citations before submitting them to the judge, though he asked that the judge dispense mercy toward Schwartz, calling his failure to check the citations an "honest mistake" and "a product of inadvertence, not any intent to deceive."

In a declaration filed with the court, Schwartz said he thought drafts of the papers to be submitted to the judge to dissolve Cohen's probation early were reviewed by E. Danya Perry, a former federal prosecutor now in private practice who also represents Cohen. He said he never reviewed what he thought was another attorney's research.

Perry, who discovered that the cited cases were bogus after seeing the court filing, said Schwartz's claim that he came to "believe" that the citations came from Perry were "incorrect and I believe, far-fetched, as I had no involvement in any back-and-forth — not directly with Mr. Schwartz or his paralegal and not even indirectly through Mr. Cohen."

When she learned of them, Perry reported the false case citations to the judge and federal prosecutors.

In her submission to the judge, Perry wrote, "Mr. Cohen engaged in no misconduct and should not suffer any collateral damage from Mr. Schwartz's misstep."

In discussing possible sanctions earlier this month, the judge noted that it was the second time this year that a judge in Manhattan federal court has confronted lawyers over fake citations generated by artificial intelligence. Two lawyers in an unrelated case were fined \$5,000 for citing bogus cases that were invented by ChatGPT, the AI-powered chatbot.

In entering the 2018 guilty plea, Cohen did not name the two women who received hush money or even Trump, recounting instead that he worked with an "unnamed candidate" to influence the 2016 election. But the amounts and the dates lined up with \$130,000 paid to porn actor Stormy Daniels and \$150,000 that went to Playboy Playmate Karen McDougal to buy their silence in the weeks and months leading up to the presidential election, which Trump, a Republican, won over Hillary Clinton, a Democrat. Daniels and McDougal claimed to have had affairs with Trump, which he denied.

Earlier this year, Trump pleaded not guilty in New York state court in Manhattan to 34 felony charges alleging that he falsified internal business records at his private company to coverup his involvement in the payouts.

After his arrest, Trump said in a speech, "This fake case was brought only to interfere with the upcoming 2024 election and it should be dropped immediately."

He has since pleaded not guilty to charges in three other criminal cases.

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 2023 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 teenage 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, 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 health care 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

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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 of 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 of 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 OK 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.

Poland says 'everything indicates' a Russian missile briefly entered its airspace and left

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland's defense forces said an unknown object entered the country's airspace Friday morning from the direction of Ukraine and then vanished off radars, and that all indications pointed to it being a Russian missile.

"Everything indicates that a Russian missile intruded in Poland's airspace. It was monitored by us on radars and left the airspace. We have confirmation of this on radars and from allies" in NATO, said Poland's armed forces chief, Gen. Wiesław Kukuła.

Poland's defense forces said the object penetrated about 40 kilometers (24 miles) into its airspace and left it after less than three minutes. The defense forces said both its radar and NATO radar confirmed that the object left Polish airspace.

Kukuła said steps were being taken to verify those findings and eliminate the possibility of a technical error.

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There was no comment from Russian officials.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on X, formerly Twitter, that he had spoken with Poland's president about the "missile incident" and said NATO was vigilant and monitoring the situation "as the facts are established."

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with the head of Poland's National Security Bureau, Jacek Siewiera, to express the "United States' solidarity with Poland, our close NATO ally, as it deals with reports of a missile temporarily entering Polish airspace," the White House said.

Sullivan pledged technical assistance to Poland and assured that President Joe Biden was following the issue closely.

It was not immediately clear where the object disappeared from radar or in which direction it had been going. Troops were mobilized to identify and find it. There were no immediate reports of any explosion or casualties.

The governor of Lublin province in eastern Poland, Krzysztof Komorski, told the Onet news portal that the object appeared on radars near the town of Hrubieszow, where a border crossing with Ukraine is located. Komorski said he had no information to indicate it landed in Lublin province.

Poland's border with Ukraine is also the European Union and NATO border with Ukraine.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk convened a meeting with the defense minister, military commanders and heads of national security bodies, followed by a meeting of the National Security Bureau with President Andrzej Duda, the supreme commander of Poland's armed forces.

Duda said through an aide that there was "no threat at the moment" and nothing to suggest that "anything bad" should be expected.

"The most important is that no one was hurt," said the aide, Grazyna Ignaczak-Bandyk.

On Friday, Ukrainian officials said Russia launched more than 100 missiles and dozens of drones against Ukrainian targets overnight in what an air force official called the biggest aerial barrage since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

It was not clear whether the object that Poland reported was related to the barrage.

"As a result of such massive attacks, this can happen. The enemy is attacking our border territories, including in the west. This is another signal for our partners to strengthen the Ukrainian air defense," Yurii Ihnat, spokesperson for Ukraine's Air Force, said on national television about the incident.

Poland has been supporting Ukraine with military, humanitarian and political assistance.

This is not the first time an unauthorized object has entered Poland's airspace from the direction of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion. In November 2022, two men were killed when a missile struck the village of Przewodow, a few kilometers from the border. Western officials said they believed a Ukrainian air defense missile went astray.

Abortion debate creates 'new era' for state supreme court races in 2024, with big spending expected

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO and ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The 2024 elections will be dominated by the presidential contest and the battle for control of Congress, but another series of races is shaping up to be just as consequential.

Crucial battles over abortion, gerrymandering, voting rights and other issues will take center stage in next year's elections for state supreme court seats — 80 of them in 33 states.

The races have emerged as some of the most hotly contested and costliest contests on the ballot since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating the constitutional right to an abortion. The decision shifted the abortion debate to states, creating a "new era" in state supreme court elections, said Douglas Keith, senior counsel in the judiciary program at the Brennan Center for Justice, which tracks spending in judicial races.

"We have seen attention on state supreme court elections like never before and money in these races like never before," Keith said.

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Heated court races in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania in 2023 handed victories to Democrats and saw tens of millions of dollars in TV ads, offering a preview of 2024. They're also prompting groups to consider investing in states they would not previously have considered.

ABORTION AND GERRYMANDERING TOP ISSUES

At least 38 lawsuits have been filed challenging abortion bans in 23 states, according to the Brennan Center. Many of those are expected to end up before state supreme courts.

The ACLU is watching cases challenging abortion restrictions in Wyoming, Kentucky, Ohio, Utah, Florida, Nevada, Arizona, Nebraska, Georgia and Montana.

"After Roe v. Wade was overturned, we had to turn to state courts and state constitutions as the critical backstop to protecting access to abortion," said Brigitte Amiri, deputy director at the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project. "And the stakes are unbelievably high in each of these cases in each of these states."

The ACLU was among major spenders on behalf of Democrats in this year's state supreme court contests in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

Another big player in recent court races has been the Republican State Leadership Committee, which has said its focus is mainly on redistricting, or the drawing of political district boundaries. The group called state supreme courts the "last line of defense against far-left national groups," but didn't say how much it intends to spend on next year's races or which states it's focusing on.

In Ohio, Democrats are expected to cast state supreme court races as an extension of the November election in which voters enshrined the right to abortion in the state constitution. The state has more than 30 abortion restrictions in place that could be challenged now that the amendment has passed.

"The state supreme court is going to be the ultimate arbiter of the meaning of the new constitutional amendment that the people voted for and organized around," said Jessie Hill, law professor at Case Western Reserve University and a consultant for Ohioans United for Reproductive Rights. "That is a huge amount of power."

With three seats up for a vote and a current Republican majority of 4-3, Democrats have an opportunity to flip the majority of the court while Republicans will try to expand their control. Hill said the "very high-stakes election" will serve as another test of the salience of the abortion issue in turning out voters.

"We saw an incredible number of voters come out to vote on that amendment and an incredible amount of investment in those campaigns," Hill added. "I think we'll see a similar attention and investment in Ohio come next year."

Redistricting also is likely to be a main focus in the state's supreme court races, given the court will have realigned politically since it issued a series of rulings finding Ohio's congressional and legislative maps unconstitutionally gerrymandered to favor Republicans, said David Niven, political science professor at the University of Cincinnati. He expects millions of dollars to be spent on those campaigns.

"There's often little conversation about these races, but they are just so utterly consequential in very tangible, practical ways that touch voters' everyday lives," he said.

MAP BROADENS FOR CONSEQUENTIAL RACES

Pending legislative and congressional redistricting cases also could play a role in North Carolina.

Republicans in North Carolina are looking to expand their majority two years after the court flipped from Democratic control in the 2022 election. That flip to a 5-2 GOP majority led to dramatic reversals in 2023 on rulings made by the previous court, which had struck down a 2018 photo voter identification law as well as district maps for the General Assembly and the state's congressional delegation.

Groups on both sides also are expected to focus on Michigan, where Democrats hold a 4-3 majority on the state Supreme Court. Candidates run without political affiliations listed on the ballot, though they're nominated by political parties.

Two incumbents — one Democrat, one Republican — will be up for election in 2024. The court recently kept former President Donald Trump on the state's ballot, denying a liberal group's request to kick him off. It is currently weighing a high-profile case over a Republican legislative maneuver that gutted a minimum wage hike backed by voters.

2023 RACES A PREVIEW

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In Wisconsin, abortion played a dominant role in the 2023 court race, with Democrats flipping the court to a 4-3 majority in a campaign that shattered previous national records for spending in state supreme court elections.

Liberal-leaning Justice Janet Protasiewicz defeated former Justice Dan Kelly, who previously worked for Republicans and had support from the state's leading anti-abortion groups.

Protasiewicz was targeted with impeachment threats this year over comments she made on the campaign trail about redistricting as Republicans argued she had prejudged what then was an expected case on the state's heavily gerrymandered state legislative districts. Experts say the controversy is an example of how more money and attention have changed the dynamics of many state supreme court races to be increasingly partisan.

Democrats in Pennsylvania added to their majority on the court after a race with tens of millions of dollars in spending. Democrat Dan McCaffery won after positioning himself as a strong defender of abortion rights.

CONTESTED SEATS EVEN IN DEEP RED STATES

It remains to be seen whether abortion rights will play a factor in states where party control isn't at stake. That includes Arkansas, where the court is expected to maintain its 4-3 conservative majority. The seats up next year include the chief justice position, which has drawn three sitting justices.

A fight over abortion could wind up before the court, with a group trying to put a measure on the ballot next year that would scale back a state ban on the procedure that took effect once Roe was overturned.

Abortion rights supporters also aren't writing off longshot states such as Texas and its all-Republican high court, which rejected the request from a pregnant woman whose fetus had a fatal condition to be exempted from the state's strict abortion ban.

In Montana, Republicans have spent huge sums to try to push the court in a more conservative direction. The liberal-leaning court is expected to hear cases related to restrictions on transgender youth and abortion. A landmark climate change case also is pending before the court, which will have two of its seven seats up for election.

Jeremiah Lynch, a former federal magistrate running for the open chief justice position, has cast himself as a defender of the court's independence and has warned voters to expect a barrage of negative advertising. Cory Swanson, a county attorney also running for the post, announced his bid on a conservative talk show and recently vowed to weed out any "radicalized" applicants for law clerks in response to anti-semitism on college campuses.

In West Virginia, where conservatives have a current 5-4 majority on the court and two seats will be up for grabs, GOP chair Elgine McArdle said Republicans aim to focus more on judicial races than in years past.

"One area the state party has never really engaged much in is nonpartisan races, including the judicial races," McArdle said. "That won't be the case this time around."

How recent 'swatting' calls targeting officials may prompt heavier penalties for hoax police calls

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A spate of false reports of shootings at the homes of public officials in recent days could be setting the stage for stricter penalties against so-called swatting in more states.

U.S. Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Georgia U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost have been among the victims.

Several Georgia lawmakers targeted say they want increased penalties for swatting, like laws enacted this year in Ohio and Virginia. Similar bills are pending in other states and Congress.

Here's a look at the issue and what could be done about it:

WHAT IS 'SWATTING'?

Swatting is the act of making a prank call to emergency services to prompt a response at a particular address. The goal is to get authorities, particularly a SWAT team, to show up.

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Calls in multiple states in recent days featured the voice of a man calling himself "Jamal," claiming he had shot his wife because she was sleeping with another man and saying he was holding the boyfriend hostage, demanding \$10,000.

Two Ohio lawmakers said they thought they were targeted recently for helping pass a law making swatting a felony in the state.

Georgia state Sen. Clint Dixon said the incident at his house in Buford on Christmas evening was "quite startling" for himself, his wife and three children.

"I was watching a little football and my wife was upstairs packing for a trip, and all of a sudden, I heard her, you know, start yelling, 'There's police running at the door.' She saw on our Ring doorbell," he told WABE.

WHO'S BEEN TARGETED RECENTLY?

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline just before 11 a.m. Monday, claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home in Rome, Georgia, and was going to kill himself next, said Kelly Madden, the Rome police spokesperson. The call was quickly transferred to police when suicide hotline responders recognized the congresswoman's address.

The department said it contacted Greene's private security detail to confirm she was safe and that there was no emergency. The call was then determined to be a swatting attempt so the response was canceled while police were on the way. Greene has been the subject of multiple swatting attempts.

Scott wrote on X that police were sent to his home in Naples, Florida, while he and his wife were out at dinner on Wednesday night. Police said they met Scott's private security service at the home, but didn't find anything out of place.

"These criminals wasted the time & resources of our law enforcement in a sick attempt to terrorize my family," Scott wrote.

In Boston, a male caller claimed on Monday that he had shot his wife and had tied her and another man up at Wu's home. The Democratic mayor said she was surprised to open the door and see flashing lights, but said her home has been targeted by multiple swatting calls since she took office in 2021.

"For better or worse, my family are a bit used to it by now, and we have a good system with the department," Wu told WBUR.

Also targeted have been a Republican congressman from New York, Georgia Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and a former state senator in Nebraska. Dixon was among four Georgia state senators who were recently swatted. In Ohio, a total of three current or former state lawmakers were affected.

Jones said his home in a small town south of Atlanta was swatted on Wednesday, only to have a bomb threat called in on Thursday.

"Thankfully everyone is safe, and I commend our local law enforcement officers for their professionalism," Jones wrote on X. "Let me be clear — I will not be intimidated by those attempting to silence me," Jones wrote on X. We will put an end to this madness.

HOW WIDESPREAD IS THE PROBLEM?

Hundreds of cases of swatting occur annually, with some using caller ID spoofing to disguise their number. And those targeted extend far beyond public officials.

Police in Lincoln, Nebraska, told KETV-TV that they had handled three swatting calls in the same 48-hour period in which they went to the unoccupied home of former state Sen. Adam Morfeld.

The FBI said earlier this year that it had created a national database in conjunction with other law enforcement agencies to track swatting incidents nationwide. Police had for months reported a huge surge in fake claims about active shooters at schools and colleges. There have also been reports of hundreds of swatting incidents and bomb threats against synagogues and other Jewish institutions since the Israel-Hamas war began.

The Anti-Defamation League estimates that by 2019 there were more than 1,000 incidents of swatting nationwide each year. That group says each incident can cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in emergency response costs.

DO FALSE THREATS POSE OTHER RISKS?

Such calls have proven dangerous and even outright deadly.

In 2017, a police officer in Wichita, Kansas, shot and killed a man while responding to a hoax emergency call. Earlier this year, the city agreed to pay \$5 million to settle a related lawsuit, with the money to go to the two children of 28-year-old Andrew Finch.

In 2015, police in Maryland shot a 20-year-old man in the face with rubber bullets after a fake hostage situation was reported at his home.

In addition to putting innocent people at risk, police and officials say they worry about diverting resources from real emergencies.

WHAT KIND OF RESPONSE COULD THIS PROMPT?

Police are investigating the recent threats. No arrests have yet been reported.

Ohio earlier this year made it a felony offense to report a false emergency that prompts response by law enforcement. And Virginia increased the penalties for swatting to up to 12 months in jail.

Dixon, the Georgia state senator, said in a statement he planned to introduce a bill during the upcoming legislative session to strengthen penalties for false reporting and misuse of police forces.

"This issue goes beyond politics — it's about public safety and preserving the integrity of our institutions," he said.

Jones, the Georgia lieutenant governor, promised "an end to this madness" after his home in a small town south of Atlanta was swatted on Wednesday, only to have a bomb threat called in to his office on Thursday.

"Let me be clear — I will not be intimidated by those attempting to silence me," Jones wrote on X.

The Air Force said its nuclear missile capsules were safe. But toxic dangers 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 toxic dangers 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 toxic dangers. 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

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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 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."

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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 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 toxic danger.

"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."

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 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

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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."

Today in History: December 30 Lenin proclaims establishment of the USSR

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 30, the 364th day of 2023. There is one day left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 30, 1922, Vladimir Lenin proclaimed the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,

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which lasted nearly seven decades before dissolving in December 1991.

On this date:

In 1813, British troops burned Buffalo, New York, during the War of 1812.

In 1853, the United States and Mexico signed a treaty under which the U.S. agreed to buy some 45,000 square miles of land from Mexico for \$10 million in a deal known as the Gadsden Purchase.

In 1860, 10 days after South Carolina seceded from the Union, the state militia seized the United States Arsenal in Charleston.

In 1903, about 600 people died when fire broke out at the recently opened Iroquois Theater in Chicago.

In 1954, Olympic gold medal runner Malvin G. Whitfield became the first Black recipient of the James E. Sullivan Award for amateur athletes.

In 1972, the United States halted its heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

In 1994, a gunman walked into a pair of suburban Boston abortion clinics and opened fire, killing two employees. (John C. Salvi III was later convicted of murder; he died in prison, an apparent suicide.)

In 2004, a fire broke out during a rock concert at a nightclub in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 194 people.

In 2006, a state funeral service was held in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda for former President Gerald R. Ford.

In 2009, seven CIA employees and a Jordanian intelligence officer were killed by a suicide bomber at a U.S. base in Khost (hohst), Afghanistan.

In 2012, recalling that the shooting rampage that killed 20 first graders in Connecticut as the worst day of his presidency, President Barack Obama pledged on NBC's "Meet the Press" to put his "full weight" behind legislation aimed at preventing gun violence.

In 2015, Bill Cosby was charged with drugging and sexually assaulting a woman at his suburban Philadelphia home in 2004. (Cosby's first trial ended in a mistrial after jurors deadlocked; he was convicted on three charges at his retrial in April 2018 and was sentenced to three to 10 years in prison, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned the conviction in June 2021 and Cosby went free.)

In 2020, Dawn Wells, who played the wholesome Mary Ann on the 1960s sitcom "Gilligan's Island," died in Los Angeles at age 82 from causes related to COVID-19.

In 2021, a wildfire driven by wind gusts up to 105 mph swept through towns northwest of Denver, destroying hundreds of homes and forcing tens of thousands of people to flee.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Russ Tamblyn is 89. Baseball Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax is 88. Folk singer Noel Paul Stookey is 86. TV director James Burrows is 83. Actor Concetta Tomei (toh-MAY') is 78. Singer Patti Smith is 77. Rock singer-musician Jeff Lynne is 76. TV personality Meredith Vieira is 70. Actor Sheryl Lee Ralph is 68. Actor Patricia Kalember is 67. Country singer Suzy Bogguss is 67. Actor-comedian Tracey Ullman is 64. Radio-TV commentator Sean Hannity is 62. Sprinter Ben Johnson is 62. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is 60. Actor George Newbern is 60. Movie director Bennett Miller is 57. Singer Jay Kay (Jamiroquai) is 54. Rock musician Byron McMackin (Pennywise) is 54. Actor Meredith Monroe is 54. Actor Daniel Sunjata is 52. Actor Maureen Flannigan is 51. Actor Jason Behr is 50. Golfer Tiger Woods is 48. TV personality-boxer Laila Ali is 46. Actor Lucy Punch is 46. Singer-actor Tyrese Gibson is 45. Actor Eliza Dushku is 43. Rock musician Tim Lopez (Plain White T's) is 43. Actor Kristin Kreuk is 41. Folk-rock singer-musician Wesley Schultz (The Lumineers) is 41. NBA star LeBron James is 39. R&B singer Andra Day is 39. Actor Anna Wood is 38. Pop-rock singer Ellie Goulding (GOL'-ding) is 37. Actor Caity Lotz is 37. Actor Jeff Ward is 37. Country musician Eric Steedly is 33. Pop-rock musician Jamie Follesé (FAHL'-es-ay) (Hot Chelle (shel) Rae) is 32.