

Food pantries expanded on Marine bases

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — Marine bases in Japan recently opened one new food pantry and expanded another to ease persistent food insecurity that affects one-fourth of all U.S. military members.

The Neighborhood Pantry debuted in November at Camp Foster, Okinawa, to all service branches and ranks. An expanded Iwakuni Food Pantry reopened that same month in a new location at MCAS Iwakuni, south of Hiroshima.

Some U.S. service members and their spouses are uncertain about how they will feed their families, studies continue to show. Military families, no matter where they're stationed, are susceptible to the same economic tides that affect any household budget.

"There's no doubt the econo-

my, inflation, high costs of items such as food, gas, housing, cars, home and car insurance can wreak havoc on anyone's finances," Dawn Cutler, Navy-Marine Corps Relief headquarters chief operations officer, said Monday.

Generally, 26% of U.S.-based service members and 23% of those overseas report food insecurity, defined as an economic or social condition that limits access to food, according to a January 2023 Rand report. Rand prepared "Food Insecurity in the U.S. Military" for Congress on behalf of the Defense Department.

Military members in grades E-4 to E-6, the bulk of the enlisted population, were more likely to report food insecurity, according to a 2018 Rand report.

However, those lower ranks more often turned to SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, once known as

food stamps, to feed their families, according to Rand.

Navy spouse Faith Henderson said the Iwakuni Food Pantry helps her stretch her family's financial resources.

"We're already on WIC," she said Thursday at the pantry, referring to the U.S. government program that provides nutrition assistance to low-income women, infants and children. "It also gives me meal ideas coming here."

An average of 77 people visit Foster's pantry each month, Jen Hall, a Navy spouse and assistant pantry director, said. The MCAS Iwakuni pantry gets about 100 monthly visitors, Marine spouse and pantry director Sara Shoop said.

"We've had over 12,000 pounds of food donated in less than six months and have distributed over 10,000 of those pounds," Hall said.

The relief society director at

MCAS Iwakuni, Christina Grantham, said she noticed a sizeable increase in loans to service members during the summer months, when school is out, and kids are eating at home more often.

Last year, service members at the air station self-reported that 44% of the \$344,129 in no-interest loans went toward basic living expenses, including food, she said.

Three hundred of the 1,118 students enrolled in MCAS Iwakuni schools are part of the free and reduced lunch program, Karen Altig, Marine Corps Community Services School Meal Program manager, said.

"Most of the people that are going to the food pantry for help have just moved here and have this huge credit card debt," Shoop said. "And now they would need to go to the commissary and fill their pantry with spices, flour and sugar."

Soldiers impressed after firing new XM7, XM250

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Army Sgt. Marcus Colston squeezed the trigger on his new XM7 rifle and sent a round speeding toward a target protected by a 3/8th-inch steel plate.

The XM7's 6.8 mm round tore through the plate, striking Colston's small target, the infantryman said shortly after firing the weapon for the first time Monday at Fort Campbell, Ky. He continued pulling the trigger, sending more rounds through steel plates and cinder blocks and into targets.

"Straight through. Every single shot," said Colston, who had

previously been using the Army's standard M4 carbine throughout his four years in uniform.

Colston's unit — the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team — recently became the Army's first brigade to field the XM7 rifle officially and the Army's new XM250 squad automatic weapon. Both built by Sig Sauer, the weapons are envisioned to replace the aging M4 carbine and M249 medium machine gun in the Army's close combat forces, such as infantry, armor and special operations formations.

Col. Trevor Voelkel, who commands the 101st's 1st Bri-

gade, said his soldiers were taking "a lot of pride" in being the first to field the XM7 and XM250, which have been under development for years in the Army's Next Generation Squad Weapon program.

Voelkel and Colston walked away impressed with their initial shooting of the XM7 and the new-to-the-Army 6.8 mm round it shares with the XM250. Colston said while the XM7's rounds easily punched through the steel plates on Monday, the 5.56 mm rounds that he shot with an M4 "barely bulged the back" of the plates.

The added stopping power is the point of the new weapon, Ar-

my officials have said throughout its development. Army studies in recent years showed 5.56 mm rounds might not be powerful enough in a fight against China or Russia, which have advanced body armor unlike most of the insurgent forces that U.S. troops have fought in recent decades.

However, the rifle's added punch comes with potential disadvantages. At slightly more than 10 pounds, the XM7, which will soon drop the X for experimental from its name, is heavier than the M4's roughly 6.4 pounds. Soldiers who have fired both weapons have said the new rifle has a stronger kickback.

Pentagon leaders press for Ukraine funding

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Ukraine and Israel both desperately need the military weapons that are being held up by Congress' failure to pass a funding package for the two countries at war, Pentagon leaders told House appropriators Wednesday, calling the situation in Ukraine dire.

"Whether it's munitions, whether it's vehicles, whether it's platforms," Ukraine is being out-matched by the Russians, Air Force Gen. CQ Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. "I'll just tell you that Ukraine right now is facing some dire battlefield conditions."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, seated alongside Brown, told lawmakers that time matters.

"We're already seeing things on the battlefield begin to shift a bit in Russia's favor. We are see-

ing them make incremental gains. We're seeing the Ukrainians be challenged in terms of holding the line," he said.

Their grim assessments came as House Republicans wrangle over the \$95 billion foreign aid bill that the Senate passed in February. That legislation provides funding for Ukraine, Israel and other allies, as well as humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza and Ukraine and replenishment cash for the U.S. military to replace weapons sent to Ukraine.

House Speaker Mike Johnson was forging ahead Wednesday toward votes later this week on the funding, even as he risks losing his leadership post in the bitterly divided Republican caucus.

President Joe Biden urged Congress to pass the aid, saying that besides critical support to Israel and Ukraine, it would offer "desperately needed humanitar-

ian aid to Palestinians in Gaza." He said he would sign the funding package right away, sending a message that "we won't let Iran or Russia succeed."

Members of the House panel lamented the gridlock that has stalled the foreign aid, but several said they are hopeful the legislation will begin to move.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., noted the "chilling" comments by Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli, the top U.S. military commander for Europe, last week. He told the committee that Ukraine will be outgunned 10 to one by Russia within a matter of weeks if Congress doesn't approve the funding.

"Without the United States assistance, Ukraine will literally run out of ammunition and more civilians in Ukraine will be murdered by Russia," McCollum said.

Brown told lawmakers that Israel also critically needs support in the bill, including air defense interceptors and munitions to defend itself following Iran's attack over the weekend. Iran launched about 300 missiles and drones toward Israel on Saturday, but the vast majority were shot down by Israeli defenses or U.S. and other allies.

The attack came less than two weeks after a suspected Israeli strike in Syria killed two Iranian generals in an Iranian consular building.

Israel has vowed to retaliate as the U.S. and other allies urge restraint.

The Pentagon's comptroller, Michael McCord, told lawmakers that the Defense Department has already spent about \$2 billion for military operations in Europe and the Middle East to ensure troops and allies there are secure.

The 7th Fleet's 1st shipboard USO center opens on Reagan

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Sailors aboard the USS Ronald Reagan gathered deep inside the aircraft carrier on Wednesday to celebrate the opening of the U.S. 7th Fleet's first shipboard USO center.

Located in the Nancy Reagan Library and adjacent to the ship's religious ministry department, the center features a lounge, video game center, internet cafe, an updated library and a miniature movie theater.

Being able to socialize, read, enjoy movies or play video games in a "place that doesn't look like the rest of the ship" is critical for sailors who might be at sea for months at a time, said the Ronald Reagan's skipper, Capt. Daryle Cardone.

"I think it is crucial not only to

our readiness, but to our health and wellness as people," he said during the ceremony.

An open space aboard the carrier is also rare and a "real treat for sailors," Ronald Reagan spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Phil Chitty said before the ceremony.

Entirely operated by volunteers, the center is expected to be open approximately 20 hours every day while the carrier is at sea to provide services for every shift, Chitty said.

The center was opened just months before the Ronald Reagan's expected relocation from Japan to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Wash. However, the USO center aboard the USS George Washington, the Ronald Reagan's replacement, will ensure a feeling of continuity for any sailors who transfer to the new carrier, Chitty said.

Bill proposes pilot program for military early child care

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A persistent deficit of affordable and available early child care for military families could be improved under a new bill that seeks to establish partnerships between the military and civilian child care providers.

The legislation proposes the creation of a five-year pilot program to begin in 2026 that would task the Defense Department with entering into 12 partnerships with private and public child care centers on or near military installations to expand the number of child care options for service members.

The bill also would allow the military to partner with the volunteer program AmeriCorps to place volunteers in eligible child

care centers as the nation struggles with child care worker shortages and military families grapple with additional obstacles.

"Right now, too many military families ... face unique challenges in accessing high-quality, affordable child care due to frequent moves and new school enrollments for their children," said Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., the bill's co-sponsor.

The pilot program proposal, which is also co-sponsored by Republican Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, would "leverage resources from the Department of Defense to train child care providers, increase available child care slots in communities across the country and provide new career development opportunities," Shaheen said.

2 jurors dismissed in hush money trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Two jurors in former President Donald Trump's hush money trial were dismissed Thursday, one after expressing doubt about her ability to be fair and impartial and the other over concerns that some of his answers in court may not have been accurate.

The dismissals reduced to five the number of jurors who have been seated for the first-ever criminal trial of a former president.

The setbacks in the selection process emerged during a frenetic morning in which prosecutors also asked for Trump to be held in contempt over a series of social media posts this week, while the judge in the case barred reporters from identifying jurors' employers after expressing privacy concerns.

The seating of the full jury — whenever it comes — will be a seminal moment in the case, setting the stage for a trial that will place the former president's legal jeopardy at the heart of the campaign against Democrat Joe Biden and for weeks of testimony about Trump's private life before he became president.

The jury selection process picked up momentum Tuesday with the selection of seven jurors. But on Thursday, Judge Juan Merchan revealed in court that one of the seven, a cancer nurse, had "conveyed that after sleeping on it overnight she had concerns about her ability to be fair and impartial in this case." And though jurors' names are being kept confidential, the woman said her family members and friends questioned her about being a juror.

A second seated juror was dismissed after prosecutors raised concerns that may not have been honest in answering a jury selection question by say-

ing that he had never been accused or convicted of a crime.

The IT professional was summoned to court to answer questions after prosecutors said they found an article about a person with the same name who had been arrested in the 1990s for tearing down political posters pertaining to the political right in suburban Westchester County.

A prosecutor had also disclosed that a relative of the man may have been involved in a deferred prosecution agreement in the 1990s with the Manhattan district attorney's office, which is prosecuting Trump's case.

Because the juror was questioned Thursday at the judge's bench, off-microphone and out of earshot of reports, it was not known whether the man confirmed or denied either instance was connected to him.

Twelve jurors and six alternates must be seated to hear the trial. Merchan said Tuesday that opening statements could begin as soon as Monday.

The process of picking a jury is a critical phase of any criminal trial, but especially so when the defendant is a former president and the presumptive Republican nominee.

Prospective jurors have been grilled on their social media posts, personal lives and political views as the lawyers and judge search for biases that would prevent them from being impartial.

After dismissing from the jury the nurse who had already been selected, Merchan ordered journalists in court not to report prospective jurors' answers to questions about their current and former employers.

He said that "as evidenced by what's happened already, it's become a problem." The answers will also be redacted from court transcripts.

Dems clear path to bring proposed repeal of Ariz. full abortion ban to vote

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Democrats in the Arizona Senate cleared a path to bring a proposed repeal of the state's near-total ban on abortions to a vote after the state's highest court concluded the law can be enforced and the state House blocked efforts to undo the long-dormant statute.

Although no vote was taken on the repeal itself, Republican Sens. T.J. Shope and Shawonna Bolick sided with 14 Democrats in the Senate on Wednesday in changing rules to let a repeal proposal advance after the deadline for hearing bills had passed. Proponents have said the Senate could vote on the repeal as early as May 1.

If the proposed repeal wins final approval from the Republican-controlled Legislature and is signed into law by Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs, the 2022 statute banning the procedure after 15 weeks of pregnancy would become the prevailing abortion law.

The move by the Senate came after Republicans in the Arizona House, for the second

time in a week, blocked attempts on Wednesday to bring a repeal bill to a vote. One Republican joined 29 Democrats in the House to bring the repeal measure to a vote Wednesday, but the effort failed twice on 30-30 votes.

The state's near-total ban, which predates Arizona's statehood, permits abortions only for saving the woman's life and provides no exceptions for rape or incest. It carries a sentence of two to five years in prison for doctors or anyone else who assists in an abortion.

Last week, the Arizona Supreme Court drastically altered the legal landscape for terminating pregnancies in the state, concluding the 1864 law can be enforced and suggesting doctors can be prosecuted under the statute.

The debate in the House over whether to allow a vote on the repeal proposal was much fierier than in the Senate. Members from pro-life groups packed the House's gallery and gave a standing ovation after efforts to bring the repeal bill to a vote were defeated.

Jobless benefit claims hold steady; labor market strong

Associated Press

The number of Americans filing for jobless benefits didn't change last week as the labor market continues to defy efforts by the Federal Reserve to cool hiring.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that unemployment claims for the week ending April 13 were unchanged from the previous week's 212,000.

The four-week average of claims, which softens some of the weekly volatility, was also

unchanged at 214,500.

The Federal Reserve raised its benchmark borrowing rate 11 times beginning in March of 2022 in a bid to stifle the four-decade high inflation.

The Fed's intention was to loosen the labor market and cool wage growth, which it said contributed to persistently high inflation.

Many economists thought there was a chance the rapid rate hikes could cause a recession, but jobs have remained plentiful.

US, UK impose new sanctions on Iran

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. and U.K. on Thursday imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran as concern grows that Tehran's unprecedented attack on Israel could fuel a wider war in the Middle East.

Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control targeted 16 people and two entities in Iran that produce engines that power the drones used in the April 13 attack on Israel. OFAC also sanctioned five firms involved in steel production and three subsidiaries of Iranian automaker Bahman Group — which is accused of materially supporting Iran's military

and other sanctioned groups. A representative from Bahman was not immediately available for comment.

Additionally, the U.K. is targeting several Iranian military branches and individuals involved in Iran's drone and ballistic missile industries.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that he had directed U.S. Treasury "to continue to impose sanctions that further degrade Iran's military industries." "Let it be clear to all those who enable or support Iran's attacks," he said, "we will not hesitate to take all necessary action to hold you accountable."

U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in a statement that the sanctions "will further limit Iran's ability to destabilize the region."

In addition to Treasury's sanctions, the U.S. Commerce Department is imposing new controls to restrict Iran's access to basic commercial grade microelectronics, which apply to items manufactured outside the U.S. that are produced using U.S. technology.

The actions come after U.S. officials earlier this week warned that they were readying new sanctions in response to Iran's activity in the region and to prevent future attacks. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill also have been quick-

ly pushing forward legislation that would financially punish the Islamic Republic and its leaders.

Iran's attack on Israel early Sunday came in response to what it says was an Israeli strike on Iran's consulate in Syria earlier this month. Israel's military chief said Monday that his country will respond to the Iranian attack, while world leaders caution against retaliation, trying to avoid a spiral of violence.

European Union leaders also vowed on Wednesday to ramp up sanctions on Iran, targeting its drone and missile deliveries to proxies in Gaza, Yemen and Lebanon.

Senate dismisses Mayorkas impeachment charges

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate dismissed all impeachment charges against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Wednesday, ending the House Republican push to remove the Cabinet secretary from office over his handling of the U.S.-Mexico border and shutting down his trial before arguments even began.

Senators voted to dismiss both articles of impeachment and end the proceedings, with Democrats arguing that the ar-

ticles were unconstitutional. The first article charged Mayorkas with "willful and systemic refusal to comply" with immigration law and second article charged him with a "breach of trust" for saying the border was secure. The votes were 51-48 and 51-49, both along party lines.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the House Republicans' charges failed to meet "the high standard of high crimes and misdemeanors" and could set a dangerous prece-

dent.

"For the sake of the Senate's integrity and to protect impeachment for those rare cases we truly need it, senators should dismiss today's charges," said Schumer, D-N.Y., as he opened Wednesday's session.

Senate Republicans had argued for a full impeachment trial after the House narrowly voted in February to impeach Mayorkas for his handling of the border, stating in the two articles that he "willfully and sys-

tematically" refused to enforce American immigration laws.

An outright dismissal of House Republicans' prosecution of Mayorkas, with no chance to argue the case, is an embarrassing defeat for House Republicans and embattled House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., who made the impeachment a priority. And it is likely to resonate politically for both Republicans and Democrats in a presidential election year when border security has been a top issue.

Abu Ghraib contractor had warned bosses of abuses

Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A civilian contractor sent to work as an interrogator at Iraq's infamous Abu Ghraib prison resigned within two weeks of his arrival and told his corporate bosses that mistreatment of detainees was likely to continue.

Jurors saw the October 2003 email from Rich Arant, who worked for military contractor CACI, during testimony Wednesday in a lawsuit filed by

three Abu Ghraib survivors.

The former prisoners are suing CACI, alleging that the Reston-Va., based company shares responsibility for the mistreatment they endured.

CACI had a contract to supply interrogators to the Army after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and scrambled to supply the needed personnel.

The first CACI interrogators arrived at Abu Ghraib on Sept. 28 of that year.

Arant sent his resignation letter to CACI on Oct. 14. He informed his bosses about his concerns over the handling of prisoners, including what he described as an unauthorized interview of a female inmate by male interrogators.

He wrote that "violations of the well-written rules of engagement will likely continue to occur."

CACI senior officials took no action in response to Arant's

resignation letter, according to CACI's lawyers.

Subsequent investigations showed that horrific abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, including physical and sexual assaults of inmates, continued for months until the Army launched an investigation in January 2004.

Shocking photos of the abuse became public in April 2004, resulting in a worldwide scandal.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Small plane lands in middle of tourist mecca

H HONOLULU — A small plane landed in a sprawling Honolulu park Tuesday and the two people on board were not injured, officials said.

The plane “lost power and landed safely” in Kapiolani Park, in the heart of tourist-mecca Waikiki, said Scott Humber, a spokesperson for the city of Honolulu.

Honolulu Emergency Services Department received a call about the plane at about 3 p.m. Tuesday. Department spokesperson Shayne Enright said emergency responders determined no one was injured when the plane landed near Waikiki Shell, an amphitheater in the 200-acre park in the shadow of the island’s iconic Diamond Head crater.

Millie Dydasco, a coach for the Leahi Soccer Club, was getting ready for three teams to arrive for practice when the plane glided about 20-feet in front of her. “It was a pretty smooth landing,” she said. “It didn’t come smashing down.”

Elephant briefly on loose after escaping circus

MT BUTTE — An elephant got loose on Tuesday in Butte, Mont., after escaping a traveling circus.

The animal, named Viola, left the Jordan World Circus, which was set up at the Butte Civic Center, and was seen wandering around the town.

A driver recorded video of the elephant crossing through traffic on a busy street and into a parking lot as a man gives chase.

While it’s unclear how long

Viola was loose, she was reportedly caught by circus handlers and safely corralled, according to NBC Montana. No injuries were reported in the incident.

Court: Pandemic rules for bars violated Constitution

NC RALEIGH — North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper’s orders during the COVID-19 pandemic that directed standalone bars to remain shuttered for safety while restaurants that serve alcohol got to reopen were “illogical” and violated the state constitution, an appeals court ruled Tuesday.

A state Court of Appeals panel declared unanimously that a trial judge erred when he rejected claims by the North Carolina Bar and Tavern Association and private bars that their constitutional rights to earn a living and for equal treatment were violated with the Democratic governor’s executive orders.

It was “arbitrary and capricious” to allow some restaurants with bars to reopen with limited capacity while the plaintiffs’ bars weren’t allowed to reopen in the same way, Court of Appeals Judge April Wood wrote in the panel’s opinion vacating parts of Superior Court Judge James Gale’s decision. The association and bars in the lawsuit were subjected to unequal treatment that was “illogical and not rationally related” to the governor’s stated goal of slowing the virus’ spread, Wood said.

Council gives a key OK for Disneyland upgrades

CA SANTA ANA — Visitors to Disney’s California parks could one day walk through the snow-covered ham-

let of Arendelle from “Frozen” or the bustling, critter-filled metropolis of “Zootopia” under a park expansion plan approved by the Anaheim City Council.

Disney would spend at least \$1.9 billion over the next decade to transform its 490-acre campus in densely-populated Southern California. It would be the biggest expansion of Disney’s Southern California theme parks in decades, aiming to create more immersive experiences for guests. Disney would also be required to spend tens of millions of dollars on street improvements, affordable housing and other infrastructure in the city.

A second council vote for final approval of Disney’s plan is required in May, the Orange County Register reported.

The plan wouldn’t expand Disney’s footprint but would help it add rides and entertainment by letting the company relocate parking to a new multi-story structure and redevelop the massive lot.

Court rejects tribes’ request on energy project

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A federal judge on Tuesday rejected a request by Native American tribes and environmentalists to stop work on a \$10 billion transmission line being built through a remote southeastern Arizona valley that will carry wind-generated electricity from New Mexico to customers as far away as California.

The project has been touted as the biggest U.S. electricity infrastructure undertaking since the Hoover Dam was built in the 1930s.

Two tribes joined with ar-

chaeologists and environmentalists in filing a lawsuit in January, accusing the U.S. Interior Department and Bureau of Land Management of refusing for nearly 15 years to recognize “overwhelming evidence of the cultural significance” of the remote San Pedro Valley to Native American tribes.

The suit was filed after Pattern Energy received approval to transmit electricity generated by its SunZia wind farm in central New Mexico through the San Pedro Valley, east of Tucson.

State internet gambling revenue sets a record

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — New Jersey’s high-flying internet gambling market continues to smash records. But the amount of money won from in-person gamblers at most of Atlantic City’s casinos is less than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figures released Tuesday by the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement show that the casinos and their online arms won over \$197 million from online casino games in March, setting another monthly record.

But the casinos’ key metric, the amount of money won from in-person gamblers, continued to struggle. While the \$239 million the nine casinos collectively won from in-person gamblers was up nearly 5% from a year earlier, and narrowly exceeded the total that all nine won in March 2019, before the pandemic hit, only two of the nine casinos individually won more in person last month than they did pre-COVID.

— From wire reports

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76ers advance to playoffs; Bulls to face Heat

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The 76ers needed all the improbable tricks they could summon to even have a chance at winning their first play-in game in team history.

Nicolas Batum hit game-shifting 3-pointers. Buddy Hield was in the mix. Even the promise of free chicken nuggets was enough to revive an offense and smother the boos from Philly fans that rained inside the arena.

But in crunch time, the game came down to Joel Embiid. Always Joel Embiid.

With the NBA MVP on the court, the 76ers proved they have a shot at a long postseason run as long as he's in the lineup.

Embiid had 23 points, 15 rebounds and one huge assist to Kelly Oubre Jr. on a go-ahead three-point play that led the 76ers to a 105-104 win over the

Miami Heat in the Eastern Conference play-in tournament on Wednesday night.

"Lots of booing," Embiid said, smiling. "We stuck together. It just shows you that I don't play my best, I don't get to my spots the whole game until the fourth quarter, and we still find a way to win."

The 76ers earned the No. 7 seed and advanced to play the second-seeded New York Knicks in the opening round of the Eastern Conference playoffs. Game 1 is Saturday at Madison Square Garden.

The Heat—who went from the play-in tourney to the NBA Finals a year ago—host Chicago on Friday night, with the winner getting the No. 8 seed.

"We will do this the hard way," coach Erik Spoelstra said. "That has to be the path right now. We're going to rest up, treat up, rally around each other up, get

ready for Friday. Again, embrace these competitive games. It will be competitive in front of our home fans."

Bulls 131, Hawks 116: Coby White drew roars from the crowd early on with vicious crossovers and spins toward the basket. He was so effective he had fans chanting his name as the final minutes ticked away.

It was that kind of night.

White scored a career-high 42 points, and host Chicago advanced in the play-in tournament, knocking out Atlanta with a victory Wednesday.

White had never scored more than 37 points in a regular season or postseason game. But in a breakthrough season, he delivered his best performance to date.

"It was a dope moment for that to happen," White said. "I'm thankful for the fans. It felt like a

playoff vibe. The place was rocking tonight."

Chicago visits Miami on Friday for a shot at the No. 8 seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs and a first-round matchup with Boston.

Dejounte Murray led Atlanta with 30 points, but the Hawks came up short again after dropping their final six regular-season games.

Nikola Vucevic had 24 points and 12 rebounds for Chicago. DeMar DeRozan finished with 22 points and nine assists.

Ayo Dosunmu added 19 points after missing the final four regular-season games because of a bruised right quadricip.

But White stole the spotlight. He went hard at the rim and made 15 of 21 field goals in a game where the Bulls shot 56.8% from the field. He also had nine rebounds and six assists.

NCAA allowing transfers to be immediately eligible

Associated Press

NCAA athletes will be immediately eligible to play no matter how many times they transfer — as long as they meet academic requirements — after the association fast-tracked legislation Wednesday to fall in line with a recent court order.

The NCAA announced the Division I Council's decision became official Thursday when its meeting adjourned. The change still needs to be ratified by the DI Board next week, but that is expected.

The new rules will go into effect immediately, though in reality they have already been enacted through a lawsuit filed late last year.

Transfer windows, which are sport-specific, remain in place and require undergraduate athletes to enter their names into the portal at certain times to be immediately eligible at a new school. Graduate students can already transfer multiple times and enter the portal outside the windows while maintaining immediate eligibility.

A coalition of state attorneys general late last year sued the NCAA, challenging rules that forced athletes that wanted to transfer multiple times as undergraduates to sit out a season with their new school.

A judge in West Virginia granted the plaintiffs a temporary injunction, lifting requirements for multiple-time transfers to request a waiver from the NCAA to be immediately eligible to compete.

The NCAA quickly requested the injunction be kept in place throughout the remaining school year to clear up any ambiguity for athletes and schools. The association has had to issue guidance to its members to clarify what that means for next season. Now the rules match the court ruling.

By eliminating the so-called year-in-residence for transfers, an athlete must be academically eligible at the previous school and not subject to any disciplinary suspension or dismissal to compete immediately at a new school. Transferring athletes must also meet progress-toward-degree requirements before competing.

"We hope that this practical approach to transfer eligibility requirements will encourage student-athletes to make well-informed decisions about transferring and the impacts such a move could have on their ability to graduate on time in their degree of choice, particularly as it relates to transferable credits," Florida deputy ath-

letic director and council chairwoman Lynnda Tealer said in a statement.

The board will ask the committee on academics to explore creating a new metric — similar to the NCAA's Academic Progress Rating — that would hold schools accountable for graduating the transfers they accept.

The portal windows are currently open for both football and basketball, and the lifting of restrictions on multiple-time transfers has led to an uptick in athletes looking to switch schools.

In a notable move that would not have been permissible without a waiver under previous rules, Alabama offensive tackle Kadyn Proctor entered the portal in January after Crimson Tide coach Nick Saban retired, committed to Iowa, but then changed his mind during the spring and has reentered the portal with the intention to reenroll at Alabama.

The DI Council also moved forward on legislation that would allow schools to be more actively involved in securing sponsorship deals for their athletes. Schools could still not directly pay athletes, but they could facilitate NIL opportunities between third parties and athletes.

Depth gives high-scoring Stars balance

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — There was a time not long ago when the Dallas Stars were far too dependent on their top line.

With a trio of 70-point scorers skating together two seasons ago, the Stars didn't even get out of the first round of the playoffs. That came after being the only one of the 16 playoff teams to allow more goals than they scored during the regular season.

Joe Pavelski, Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz remained top scorers last year but got more help as Dallas made it to the Western Conference finals, and the scoring is now even deeper and more balanced. The Central Division champion Stars have a franchise-record and NHL-high eight 20-goal scorers, and a ninth player with more than 50 points.

"Depth is one of the keys," the 39-year-old Pavelski said.

"You look at all of our numbers and we're all almost identical, which is pretty cool," said Matt Duchene, a veteran newcomer to the group this season. "It's kind of the next-man-up mentality where you just kind of

roll the lines over and one night, one line's going to have a big night, and the next night someone else ... and when we get two going, it's really scary."

The increase in balanced scoring coincides with Pete DeBoer's two seasons as coach of the Stars since the departure of Rick Bowness, who took them to the Stanley Cup Final in 2020. After scoring 285 goals last season, the Stars now have 296 through Tuesday — the most since the franchise moved to Dallas before the 1993-94 season.

"The two times I've been to the Finals and lost, it was because the depth of the other team was better than ours," said DeBoer, who coached in the Final with New Jersey in 2012 and San Jose in 2016. "There's not many teams you can put our lineup up against up front where that's going to be the case. So that's a great option to have, and that's really the strength of this team. We've got to make sure we utilize that."

Robertson is the leading scorer with 80 points (29 goals, 51 assists) and still on the top line

with Pavelski (67 points, 27 goals) and Hintz (65 points, 30 goals). Wyatt Johnston, the 20-year-old already finishing his second full season, has a team-best 32 goals to go with his 33 assists.

With every line contributing, the Stars have been able to manage ice time while prepping for what they hope is an even longer postseason run than last year, when they lost at home to eventual Cup champion Las Vegas in Game 6 of the West finals. They earned the top seed in the Western Conference in this year's postseason by beating St. Louis 2-1 in a shootout Wednesday in the regular-season finale. All they needed was a point, which they earned when the game went to overtime.

"The nice thing is you're not physically exhausted at all at this time of year because our minutes are lower than a lot of other teams," said Duchene, who has 64 points (25 goals) while playing under 17 minutes a game, well below his career average. "If you're able to still produce and contribute offensively as a forward group, that

doesn't really matter how much you're playing. We're fresh and ready to go."

The 24-year-old Robertson is getting the most ice time among Dallas forwards at almost 18½ minutes a game. Jamie Benn, the 34-year-old captain, still has 60 points (21 goals) in just over 15 minutes a game, his lowest average ice time since his rookie season 14 years ago and coming primarily on a third line with Johnston and 21-year-old Logan Stankoven.

Six-time All-Star Tyler Seguin (25 goals) and Mason Marchment (21 goals), usually with Duchene on the second line, are the other 20-goal scorers. Defenseman Miro Heiskanen has nine goals and 45 assists. Seguin is the only player on the roster with a Stanley Cup title, though that came during his rookie season with Boston in 2010-11.

"Everyone here has sacrificed. We talked about that sacrifice from day one at camp. To play on a contender, you're going to have to check your ego at the door and make some sacrifices personally," DeBoer said.

Orioles enjoying major power surge early in season

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The first Baltimore batter homered, and so did the final one.

The latter was a drive by Cedric Mullins that ended the game — and extended an impressive streak of power by the Orioles.

Mullins hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning Wednesday to beat the Minnesota Twins 4-2. Gunnar Henderson also went deep leading off the first, and Anthony Santander hit a tying solo shot in the seventh. Baltimore has hit at least three home runs in five straight games.

"I think as a whole, we still have a pretty balanced lineup in

terms of being able to steal bags, put pressure on guys," said Mullins, who was a 30-30 player in 2021. "The home run total's going up. I think that's just a matter of how our offseasons were and how we prepared for the season this spring."

After winning 101 games and the AL East title last year, the Orioles look even better offensively — and their major league-leading total of 30 home runs is a big reason why. Only twice before had Baltimore hit three homers in five straight games — in 1987 and 1996, two of the most homer-happy seasons of the 20th Century for baseball in general.

Last year's Orioles had an ex-

cellent season but only ranked 17th in the majors in home runs. Henderson and Santander led the team with 28.

Now Henderson already has six after his third straight game going deep. Mullins' game winner was his fifth of the year. Santander, Ryan O'Hearn, Jordan Westburg and Colton Cowser have four apiece.

"One through nine, we've got a really good lineup each and every day and have the ability to hit the ball out of the ballpark, too," said first baseman Ryan Mountcastle, himself a 33-homer player three years ago. "It's a lot of fun to be a part of and watch."

Baltimore is averaging 5.78

runs per game, trailing only Atlanta.

The Orioles changed the dimensions at Camden Yards before the 2022 season, moving the wall significantly back in left field. Baltimore's lineup — full of good athletes and line-drive hitters — seems well suited to the change, but the Orioles have shown lately they can put the ball over the fence as well.

Mullins and Henderson hit their homers Wednesday to spots unaffected by the change. Santander's drive in the seventh was perfectly placed, clearing the 376-foot marker in left-center field — just barely to the right of where the wall juts back over 20 feet.

NFL reducing early entrants into draft

Associated Press

The lure of starting a pro football career early apparently isn't quite as tempting for underclassmen now as it was in the days before college stars could profit off their name, image and likeness — or NIL.

Next week's draft features 58 early entrants, the lowest number of players to enter the draft with college eligibility remaining since 2011. That includes 54 underclassmen who were granted special eligibility by the NFL and four others (Miami defensive back Kamren Kinchens, Alabama defensive back Kool-Aid McKinstry, Texas defensive tackle Byron Murphy and Clemson running back Will Shipley) who earned their degrees in three years.

That represents a dramatic shift, considering at least 100 underclassmen entered the draft every year from 2016 to 2022. The 2021 draft had a record 100 underclassmen selected.

"I wouldn't be surprised if those numbers drop even more next year," Lions general manager Brad Holmes said.

The NIL policy change for col-

lege athletes took effect in the summer of 2021. The next year, 100 underclassmen entered the draft, down from 128 the previous year. That number dropped to 82 last year.

"Some of these guys that are out now didn't come out a year ago because they were enticed to go back for NIL money," Bills general manager Brandon Beane said.

Those NIL opportunities didn't sway every underclassman who was thinking of leaving early.

Wisconsin running back Braelon Allen had arrived on campus planning to turn pro after three seasons. He said at Wisconsin's pro day event that NIL possibilities gave him "zero" reason to rethink that plan.

But it did play a role for other players such as Michigan offensive lineman Zak Zinter, who didn't enter last year's draft and instead stayed for his senior season and helped the Wolverines win a national title.

"It's good to not worry about stuff money-wise while you're here playing ball and to get paid to do what you love," Zinter said.

"Nothing crazy, but it just definitely was a factor we talked about."

The fallout from the lack of underclassmen won't be evident early in the draft. The first round traditionally is heavy on early entries, and that isn't likely to change.

Twenty-five of the 30 top-10 selections over the last three drafts have been early entrants.

The question is whether the lack of underclassmen will limit teams' choices when they get into the later rounds.

"I still think there's more depth at some positions than others but I think there's going to be a good pool," Beane said. "I don't see right now, like all of a sudden you get to a certain round on day three and you're like, 'You know, there's nothing to pick from.'"

While this draft doesn't have as many younger prospects as usual, it does have more approaching their mid-20s than normal, continuing a trend that started well before this year.

The NCAA granted players who were in college during the pandemic-shortened 2020 sea-

son the opportunity for an extra year of eligibility. The age of the players who capitalized on it can affect the evaluation process.

"We don't really go into looking as a vacuum, so let's take age specifically," Cleveland Browns general manager Andrew Berry said.

The impact is most obvious at the quarterback position.

Notre Dame's Sam Hartman, a possible late-round pick, will be 25 when the NFL season starts. Oregon's Bo Nix and Tennessee's Joe Milton are both 24. Washington's Michael Penix Jr. and Florida State's Jordan Travis turn 24 next month.

Future drafts eventually will stop having those older prospects as the college players who were on campus during the pandemic finally exhaust their eligibility.

But the shortage of underclassmen figures to be something NFL teams will have to continue dealing with as long as NIL remains a factor.

"That drop in numbers (is) not a surprise," Holmes said. "And I don't really foresee it changing anytime soon."

Some Russians will qualify, but they might not attend

Associated Press

DUESSELDORF, Germany — With 100 days to go until the Paris Olympics, it's still not clear whether any athletes from Russia who are expected to qualify will actually go.

The question is whether Moscow will accept the conditions that the International Olympic Committee set for Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. Ultimately, it could be up to individual athletes to decide whether to participate.

The IOC expects that 36 Russian athletes — and possibly as many as 54 — will do well enough at qualifying events to compete in Paris.

The IOC will let them compete as "neutral athletes," meaning they can't use their country's flag or anthem or participate in team sports such as soccer and basketball. Athletes with links to the military or who

have expressed support for the war will be banned.

The same restrictions apply to Russian ally Belarus. Athletes from Russia and Belarus also aren't allowed to take part in the opening ceremony on July 26.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has questioned the rules and asked the Russian Olympic Committee and the Sports Ministry to submit recommendations on whether the country's athletes should compete.

The ROC and Sports Ministry have sharply contrasting views.

In social media posts, ROC President Stanislav Pozdnyakov alleged the IOC "again and again thinks up illegitimate criteria" for athletes and "consistently carries out external political orders to isolate Russian sport." On April 5, he likened Russian tennis players who are willing to compete in

Paris to "a team of foreign agents," saying that they mostly play and earn money outside Russia and are critical of its policies. Pozdnyakov himself holds the rank of colonel in the Russian military.

Sports Minister Oleg Matytsin, however, has said Russia should not boycott the Olympics.

"We must preserve the possibility of dialogue as much as possible and take part in competitions," Matytsin said last month.

Russia sent 335 athletes to Tokyo in 2021 — winning 20 golds among 71 total medals. They competed without national symbols at that Olympics and at the Winter Games in 2018 and 2022 because of a doping scandal.

Ukraine opposes Russians participating at the Paris Olympics in any capacity but eased its policy of boycotting events where "neutral" Russians compete.