

\$1.2B for repairs to barracks announced

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth pledged \$400 million to address immediate needs in barracks across the military and another \$800 million for critical renovation projects, though details about how the money will be allocated have not been released.

The \$1.2 billion in funding stemmed from a barracks task force Hegseth launched in October to overhaul the military's aging housing for junior enlisted and unaccompanied service members. The Defense Department did not respond to questions about exactly how and where the money will be spent.

Government reports and the military's own assessments of barracks have found substan-

dard conditions including mold, non-working appliances and air conditioning, plumbing issues, and broken locks and windows. The services have all committed to renovations and new construction, but have said ongoing work has not kept up with the rapidly aging infrastructure.

The \$1.2 billion surge in funds came after Hegseth met with the barracks task force for a 30-day report just before Thanksgiving.

The funds came from a massive spending package signed into law earlier this year commonly referred to as the "One Big Beautiful Bill," Hegseth said.

The task force did a "wall-to-wall" assessment of the entire Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force and the Army's

18th Airborne Corps. By the end of January, the task force will fully assess barracks for the Army Reserve and National Guard. The Army confirmed that a full review of active-duty barracks is ongoing.

"The mission was to find and fix now, to provide every warfighter a room that is clean, safe and comfortable — locks that lock, security cameras that work, furniture and mattresses that aren't older than the service members sleeping on them. And no mold," Hegseth said in a video posted last week to social media.

The initial \$400 million has gone toward purchasing new furnishings and mattresses for 81 barracks housing more than 15,000 service members, Hegseth said without specifying which services and bases re-

ceived the support.

Roughly \$101 million was spent on "quality-of-life improvements," including new door locks in 10 barracks housing more than 6,000 troops and new security systems in 13 barracks with more than 1,500 service members.

The military services did not immediately respond to questions about how much of the funding each received and which bases have already made improvements with it.

Moving forward, Hegseth said he will get monthly reports from the task force "to confirm work is getting accomplished."

"We're just getting started," he said. "Service members must be prepared to win the next fight, and where they live impacts their physical and mental well-being."

DOD IG: Hegseth's use of Signal posed risk to troops

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon's watchdog found that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth put U.S. personnel and their mission at risk when he used the Signal messaging app to convey sensitive information about a military strike against Houthi militants in Yemen, two people familiar with the findings said Wednesday.

Hegseth, however, has the ability to declassify material and the report did not find he did so improperly, according to one of the people familiar with the report's findings who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the information.

The review by the Pentagon inspector general's office was delivered to lawmakers, who

were able to review the report in a classified facility at the Capitol. A partially redacted version of the report was expected to be released publicly later this week.

The findings ramp up the pressure on the former Fox News Channel host after lawmakers had called for the independent inquiry into his use of the commercially available app. Lawmakers also just opened investigations into a news report that a follow-up strike on an alleged drug-smuggling boat in the Caribbean Ocean in September killed survivors after Hegseth issued a verbal order to "kill everybody."

Hegseth defended the strike as emerging in the "fog of war," saying he didn't see any survivors but also "didn't stick

around" for the rest of the mission and that the admiral in charge "made the right call" in ordering the second strike.

In at least two separate Signal chats, Hegseth provided the exact timings of warplane launches and when bombs would drop — before the men and women carrying out those attacks on behalf of the United States were airborne.

Hegseth's use of the app came to light when a journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, was inadvertently added to a Signal text chain by then-national security adviser Mike Waltz. It included Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and others, brought together to discuss

March 15 military operations against the Iran-backed Houthis.

Hegseth had created another Signal chat with 13 people that included his wife and brother where he shared similar details of the same strike, *The Associated Press* reported.

Signal is encrypted but is not authorized for carrying classified information and is not part of the Defense Department's secure communications network.

Hegseth has said none of the information shared in the chats was classified. Multiple current and former military officials told the AP there was no way details with that specificity, especially before a strike took place, would have been OK to share on an unsecured device.

Navy to upgrade training areas off Hawaii, Calif.

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is moving ahead with plans to expand and modernize vast training areas used in waters off Hawaii and California, including the addition of mine warfare ranges, the service announced Tuesday.

The areas, which the Navy calls the Hawaii-California Training and Testing Study Area, have been used by the joint services for decades for air, surface and underwater training and testing.

The Navy contends that modernization of the training areas is needed to complement America's newest weapons and drone systems that would be used in future conflicts.

"Adversaries of the United States have and continue to acquire modern, quiet submarines that can pose serious threats to national security, the safety of military forces, and the nation's economy," a Navy fact sheet states. "Sonar proficiency is complex and requires regular, hands-on training in realistic and diverse conditions."

The Navy issued a draft environmental impact statement reviewing the proposed changes in late 2024 and published a final draft this fall.

The Department of the Navy's decision of record announced Tuesday was issued jointly with the Coast Guard, Army and Air Force, which all conduct readiness training in the areas.

Among the planned upgrades is the installation of mine warfare training areas, which would include installation, removal and replacement of non-explosive mine countermeasure targets offshore of Hawaii and Southern California, according to the final impact statement.

In Hawaii, nearshore areas such as Kaneohe Bay and Marine Corps Training Area Bellows on the east side of Oahu will be used for new and more frequent training and testing activities, including mine warfare, a Navy fact sheet states.

Other planned changes are:

- A special use airspace in the Southern California range that would offer real-world maneuvering space for manned and unmanned aircraft.

- Upgrades to the existing Southern California offshore anti-submarine range with the installation of underwater recording devices called hydrophones and undersea cables.

- Two new shallow-water training ranges that would serve as extensions to the offshore anti-submarine range.

- Laying seabed cables and connected instrumentation in Southern California and Hawaii.

- Installation of underwater platforms for underwater vehicle pilot training in Hawaii and Southern California.

Environmental activists have criticized the Navy's sea training, particularly for its use of sonar and explosives that can harm sea creatures.

Navy vessels hit two whales in the Hawaii-California Training and Testing Study Area in separate incidents in June and July of 2021, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. A third whale was struck in August 2023 in the same waters.

The Navy will undertake steps to lessen the impact of training on sea life and terrain, according to the impact statement. For example, explosives will not be detonated on or near the seafloor within a horizontal distance of 350 yards from artificial reefs, rocky seafloor or shipwrecks.

NATO chief urges allies to buy more US arms

By **JOHN VANDIVER**
Stars and Stripes

One way to make Russia pay for acts of sabotage in Europe is to intensify military support for Ukraine, NATO's top official said Wednesday following a meeting of top alliance diplomats.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte referred specifically to an initiative that involves allied purchases of American weapons for onward delivery to Ukraine.

Known as the Prioritized Ukraine Requirement Lis, the endeavor should be seen as a tool for sending a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Rutte said.

"We will not blow up railway lines in Russia," he said, an allusion to the recent explosion on a Polish train route used by allies for delivering weapons to Ukraine. "But we will make sure you feel it if you do stuff like this."

While Russia hasn't been offi-

cially blamed for the explosion, Polish officials suspect Kremlin involvement.

Such incidents have become a source of heightened concern in Europe, where political and military leaders say Russia is waging an extensive sabotage campaign that targets Western infrastructure.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio skipped the meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels because of ongoing negotiations that seek to bring the Russia-Ukraine war to an end after almost four years.

NATO itself isn't part of the talks, but Rutte said U.S. officials are keeping the alliance abreast of developments.

In Brussels, the foreign ministers focused their talks on how to bolster support for Ukraine. Rutte praised alliance members for pledging more support through the PURL program.

DOD to launch \$1B effort to acquire 300,000 drones

By **LARA KORTE**
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is rushing to catch up with modern warfare — and spending big to do so.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Tuesday announced a \$1 billion initiative intended to deliver 300,000 one-way attack drones to U.S. service members over the next two years.

"We cannot be left behind," Hegseth said in a Defense Department statement.

The initiative announced Tuesday is meant to kick-start industrial capacity and reduce prices so the military can adequately budget for unmanned weapons, according to the Pen-

tagon.

The program will be broken down into four phases. Each begins with a "gauntlet" challenge, in which service members will test vendors' products and select the highest-scoring ones for orders from the Pentagon.

With each new phase, DOD will increase the number of drones it purchases while at the same time narrowing the number of vendors and decreasing the per-unit cost, according to a request for information posted this week. By the final phase of the program, the Pentagon plans to purchase 150,000 drones from five vendors at a price of \$2,300 per unit.

Man pleads not guilty in Guard shooting

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A man accused of shooting two National Guard troops near the White House pleaded not guilty Tuesday to murder and assault charges during his first hearing before a judge, appearing remotely by video from a hospital bed.

Rahmanullah Lakanwal, a 29-year-old Afghan national who was also shot during last Wednesday's confrontation, said through an interpreter that he was in pain and couldn't open his eyes.

A court-appointed defense attorney entered Lakanwal's plea on his behalf during a brief hearing in Washington, D.C.

Lakanwal is charged with first-degree murder, assault with intent to kill and illegal possession of a firearm in the shoot-

ing that killed Spc. Sarah Beckstrom, 20, and wounded Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24.

Another National Guard member heard gunshots and saw Beckstrom and Wolfe fall to the ground as Lakanwal fired a gun and screamed, "Allahu Akbar!" according to a police report filed in court Tuesday.

Lakanwal chased after and shot at another Guard member before troops detained him as he tried to reload his gun, the report says.

D.C. Superior Court Judge Renee Raymond ordered Lakanwal held without bond.

His case is due back in court Jan. 14.

Beckstrom and Wolfe were deployed with the West Virginia National Guard for President Donald Trump's law-enforcement surge in the nation's cap-

ital, which has flooded the city with federal agents and troops since August.

Authorities were investigating a possible motive for what they described as an ambush-style attack.

A prosecutor, Ariel Dean, described the shooting as a "shocking crime" and said it appears that Lakanwal "traversed the city to some extent" before approaching the troops and shooting them.

Raymond ordered him detained, citing the "sheer terror that resulted" from Lakanwal's actions. The magistrate said it appears that Lakanwal, a resident of Washington state, traveled across the country "with a specific purpose in mind."

She described the government's case against him as "exceedingly strong."

Defense attorney Terrence Austin noted that Lakanwal doesn't have any prior criminal record.

After the hearing, U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro said Lakanwal will be taken to a correctional facility that can address his "medical concerns" once he is well enough to leave the hospital.

Pirro said Lakanwal could face additional charges in federal court as the investigation continues.

Attorney General Pam Bondi ultimately will decide whether to seek the death penalty in the case, according to Pirro.

Lakanwal entered the U.S. in 2021 through Operation Allies Welcome, a Biden administration program that resettled Afghans after the U.S. withdrawal from the country, officials said.

Feds plan to target Somali immigrants in Minnesota

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Federal authorities are preparing a targeted immigration enforcement operation in Minnesota that would primarily focus on Somali immigrants living unlawfully in the U.S., according to a person familiar with the planning.

The move comes as President Donald Trump again on Tuesday escalated rhetoric about Minnesota's sizable Somali community, saying he did not want immigrants from the east African country in the U.S. because "they contribute nothing."

The enforcement operation could begin in the coming days and is expected to focus on the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and people with final orders of deportation, the person said. Teams of immigration agents would spread across the Twin Cities in what the person described as a directed, high-priority sweep, though the plans remain subject

to change.

The prospect of a crackdown is likely to deepen tensions in Minnesota — home to the nation's largest Somali community. They've been coming to the state since the 1990s, fleeing their country's long civil war and drawn by Minnesota's generous social programs.

An estimated 260,000 people of Somali descent were living in the U.S. in 2024, according to the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey.

The largest population is in the Minneapolis area, home to about 84,000 residents, most of whom are American citizens.

Trump has become increasingly focused on Somalis, saying they "have caused a lot of trouble."

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey pushed back against Trump's depiction of Somalis, saying it "violates the moral fabric of what we stand by in this country as Americans."

GOP keeps US House seat in Tenn., but by smaller margin

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Republican Matt Van Epps won a nationally watched special election in Tennessee for a U.S. House seat Tuesday, maintaining his party's grip on the conservative district with help from President Donald Trump. But the comparatively slim margin of victory fueled Democratic hopes for next year's midterms as the party grasps for a path back to power in Washington.

A military veteran and former state general services commissioner from Nashville, Van Epps defeated Democratic state Rep. Aftyn Behn to represent the 7th Congressional District.

With 99% of votes counted, Van Epps' lead was around 9 percentage points. The previous Republican who held the seat won by 21 points last year, and Trump carried the district by 22 points.

Behn, who ran as an unapologetic progressive, ran up a huge

margin in Davidson County, which is the most Democratic county in the district and home to Nashville. But Van Epps carried the rest of the district, including many deep-red counties throughout central Tennessee, as he tied himself tightly to Trump.

"Politicians who run from the president or abandon the common-sense policies that the American people gave us a resounding mandate on do so at their own peril," Van Epps said at his victory party. "No matter what the D.C. insiders or liberal media say, this is President Trump's party. I'm proud to be a part of it and can't wait to get to work."

Trump congratulated Van Epps in a social media post, saying he won even though "the Radical Left Democrats threw everything at him."

Despite falling short, Behn said the result was "the beginning of something" powerful.

States told to share data to get SNAP funds

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's administration warned on Tuesday that it will withhold money for administering SNAP food aid in most Democratic-controlled states starting next week unless those states provide information about people receiving the assistance.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said at a Cabinet meeting Tuesday that the action is looming because those states are refusing to provide data the department requested such as the names and immigration status of aid recipients. She said that the cooperation is needed to root out potential fraud in the program.

Democratic states have sued to block the requirement, saying they verify eligibility for SNAP beneficiaries and never share large swaths of sensitive program data with the federal government.

States and the federal government split the cost of running SNAP, with the federal government paying the full cost of benefits.

After Rollins' remarks, a USDA spokesperson later explained that the agency is targeting the administrative funds — not the benefits people receive.

Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia previously sued over the request for information, which was initially made in February.

A San Francisco-based federal judge has barred the administration, at least for now, from collecting the information from those states.

The federal government last week sent the states a letter urging compliance, but the parties all agreed to give the states until Dec. 8 to respond.

"We have sent Democrat States yet another request for data, and if they fail to comply,

they will be provided with formal warning that USDA will pull their administrative funds," the USDA said in a statement Tuesday.

Federal law allows the USDA to withhold some of the money states receive for administering SNAP if there's a pattern of non-compliance with certain federal regulations.

But "there's never authority to withhold the SNAP benefits and, in this case, there's also no authority to withhold the administrative funding," said David Super, a law professor at Georgetown University who has studied the food aid program for several decades.

About 42 million lower-income Americans, or 1 in 8, rely on SNAP to help buy groceries.

The average monthly benefit is about \$190 per person, or a little over \$6 a day.

Rollins has cited information provided by states that have complied, saying it shows that

186,000 deceased people are receiving SNAP benefits and that 500,000 are getting benefits more than once.

"We asked for all the states for the first time to turn over their data to the federal government to let the USDA partner with them to root out this fraud, to make sure that those who really need food stamps are getting them," Rollins said, "but also to ensure that the American taxpayer is protected."

Her office has not released detailed data, including on how much in benefits obtained by error or fraud are being used.

The USDA said Tuesday evening that 28 states and Guam have complied with the request for information. That list consists primarily of states with Republican governors, though North Carolina — which has a Democratic governor — also has complied.

Twenty-two states have sued to block the request.

US immigration pause targets 19 countries

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is pausing all immigration applications such as requests for green cards for people from 19 countries banned from travel earlier this year, as part of sweeping immigration changes in the wake of the shooting of two National Guard troops.

The changes were outlined in a policy memo posted Tuesday on the website of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The pause puts on hold a wide range of immigration-related decisions such as green card applications or naturalizations for immigrants from those 19 countries that the administration has described as high-risk.

The administration in June

banned travel to the U.S. by citizens of 12 countries and restricted access for those from seven others, citing national security concerns.

The ban applied to citizens of Afghanistan, Myanmar, Chad, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen while the restricted access applied to people from Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan and Venezuela.

At the time, no action was taken against immigrants from those countries who were already in the U.S. before the travel ban went into effect. But now the news from USCIS means those people already in the U.S. will come under extra scrutiny.

Raccoon goes on drunken rampage in Va. liquor store

Associated Press

ASHLAND, Va. — The masked burglar broke into the closed Virginia liquor store early on Saturday and hit the bottom shelf, where the scotch and whiskey were stored. The bandit was something of a nocturnal menace: bottles were smashed, a ceiling tile collapsed and alcohol pooled on the floor.

The suspect acted like an animal because, in fact, he's a raccoon.

On Saturday morning, an employee at the Ashland, Va.-area liquor store found the trash panda passed out on the bathroom floor at the end of his drunken escapade.

"I personally like raccoons," said Samantha Martin, an officer who works at the local animal control. "They are funny lit-

tle critters. He fell through one of the ceiling tiles and went on a full-blown rampage, drinking everything."

Martin said she took the raccoon back to the animal shelter, though she had her fair share of giggles along the way.

"Another day in the life of an animal control officer, I guess," she said.

The Hanover County Animal Protection and Shelter commended Martin for handling the break-in and confirmed the raccoon had sobered up.

"After a few hours of sleep and zero signs of injury (other than maybe a hangover and poor life choices), he was safely released back to the wild, hopefully having learned that breaking and entering is not the answer," the agency said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

\$1B development project near Fenway Park on hold

MA BOSTON — A \$1 billion construction project over the Massachusetts Turnpike near Fenway Park is on hold because demand for commercial lab space has waned.

Company officials at IQHQ, the developer of the Fenway Center, told the Boston Globe that while a deck spanning the highway was close to complete, the plans for a 22-story and a 12-story tower it was meant to support are not going forward.

Instead, construction will remain on pause until the developer finds a tenant willing to commit to leasing at least 50% of the nearly 1 million square feet of what was initially intended to be lab space.

Demand for commercial office and lab space has declined in Boston, where companies have reduced their footprints since the COVID-19 pandemic. Many lab buildings constructed in recent years remain largely or entirely vacant according to the Globe.

Black bear stakes claim of home's crawl space

CA LOS ANGELES — Ken Johnson, 63, got a new roommate last week — a black bear living in the crawl space under his home in Southern California.

The bear was seen on video footage clambering out from beneath his house Tuesday. He had installed a camera near the space in June when he saw what looked like damage caused by an animal.

Nothing showed up on the camera until last week. And

now he's trying to figure out how to make it leave.

Johnson lives in Altadena, an unincorporated community northeast of Los Angeles that was devastated by the Eaton Fire in January. The fire killed at least 19 people and scorched thousands of structures, but it also tore through the Angeles National Forest, displacing wildlife and destroying their food supply.

While it's not cold enough in Southern California for bears to hibernate, they will engage in a behavior called "denning," where they take long naps but may emerge periodically to eat.

Murder trial starts, wife disappeared in 2023

MA DEDHAM — Prosecutors on Monday argued a Massachusetts man was responsible for the grisly murder of his wife, who disappeared more than two years ago, while his lawyers insisted the man panicked after she suddenly died in bed.

Ana Walshe, a real estate agent who emigrated from Serbia, was last seen early on Jan. 1, 2023, following a New Year's Eve dinner at her Massachusetts home. Her body has never been found. Her husband, Brian Walshe, faces a first-degree murder charge, after agreeing to plead guilty last month to lesser charges of misleading police and willfully disposing of a human body in violation of state law.

Walshe's attorney, Larry Tipton, argued this was not a case of murder but what he called a "sudden unexplained death" of Ana Walshe.

Prosecutors have said that starting on the day of Ana

Walshe's disappearance and for several days after, Brian Walshe made multiple online searches on iPhones, iPads and MacBook at his house including for "dismemberment and best ways to dispose of a body," "how long before a body starts to smell" and "hacksaw best tool to dismember."

When questioned by investigators, Walshe said his wife had been called to Washington, D.C., from Massachusetts on New Year's Day for a work emergency. He didn't contact her employer until Jan. 4. The company said there was no emergency, prosecutors said.

College offers support to deported student

NH CONCORD — Babson College has instructed faculty and staff to provide "academic and community support" to a student who was deported to Honduras when she tried to fly home to visit family for Thanksgiving.

Any Lucia Lopez Belloza, 19, was detained at Boston Logan International Airport on Nov. 20 when she tried to board a flight to surprise her family in Texas. She was sent to Honduras two days later despite a court order prohibiting the government from moving her out of Massachusetts or the United States, according to her attorney.

Lopez Belloza, whose family emigrated from Honduras when she was 7, is now staying with her grandparents. The college's dean of campus life, Caitlin Capozzi, informed faculty and staff of Lopez Belloza's detention last week.

"Our ability to share specifics is limited by law, but please know that our focus remains on

supporting the student and their family, as well as the wellbeing of our community," the dean wrote in a message made public Monday. "Relevant faculty and staff have been informed so they can provide appropriate academic and community support in the student's absence."

Lopez Belloza, a freshman, is studying business at Babson, which has 2,800 undergraduate students at its campus in Wellesley, just west of Boston.

\$50M gift to cover some tuition for lab students

WA SEATTLE — An anonymous donation expected to exceed \$50 million is helping cover tuition costs for medical laboratory science students at the University of Washington for the next half-century.

The dean of the university's School of Medicine, Dr. Tim Dellit, made the surprise announcement Monday to about 30 grateful undergrads, who will each see two quarters' worth of tuition covered for their senior-year clinical rotations, The Seattle Times reported.

Students in the program are trained to perform clinical lab tests on patient samples, which are used to help diagnose, treat and prevent disease and other conditions. Their clinical rotations are so time-consuming that it's hard to hold down part-time jobs during them.

The announcement Monday is worth about \$8,000 to \$10,000 per student, said UW Medicine spokesperson Susan Gregg. The program will also be able to expand from 70 to 100 students over the next 10 years.

— From wire reports

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Ole Miss moves up CFP ranks after Kiffin's exit

Associated Press

Ole Miss lost a coach and moved up a spot anyway. Notre Dame didn't lose a thing but the Irish fell.

The release Tuesday of the latest College Football Playoff rankings produced its fair share of eye-openers and head-scratchers—plenty to talk about before the final rankings and the actual pairings for the 12-team playoff come out this weekend after a slate of conference title games.

Undefeated Ohio State and Indiana remained at 1 and 2 in the rankings, while Georgia moved to third and Texas Tech rose to No. 4.

The rest of the top 12: Oregon, Mississippi, Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Alabama, Notre Dame, BYU and Miami.

Even though ex-Rebels coach Lane Kiffin left the school for LSU last weekend, the selection committee moved Ole Miss up

one spot to No. 6. Committee chairman Hunter Yurachek explained the panel talked about the upheaval in Oxford but didn't quite know what to make of it.

"We can only evaluate what we know, and what we know now is Ole Miss is an 11-1 football team," Yurachek said.

Notre Dame is a 10-2 football team, same as Alabama, but those two flip-flopped spots after wins last week.

The Crimson Tide are now ranked No. 9—in a much better position to grab an at-large berth if they lose to Georgia in the SEC title game—while the Fighting Irish are No. 10, a little more on the bubble despite a 10-game winning streak.

Yurachek described the debate pitting two of the nation's most storied programs as one "that has really split our committee room."

In the end, he said, it came down to Alabama's 27-20 win

over Auburn (5-7) in a rivalry game on the road getting more run than Notre Dame's 49-20 romp at 4-8 Stanford.

In another move that could have a major impact, the committee put James Madison of the Sun Belt Conference at No. 25, which plays No. 17 Virginia for the Atlantic Coast Conference title.

The final rankings come out Sunday, the day after the title games determine the five automatic qualifiers for the 12-team bracket.

Conference watch

ACC: Any lingering notion that the expanded playoff was designed to get the 12 best teams playing for a title has been obliterated by what's going on in this league. No. 17 Virginia's in if it wins the league, but the ACC's best team, No. 12 Miami, is not in the title game and needs help. Yurachek left some glimmer of

hope when he said even teams that don't play this week will be reevaluated.

Big 12: This one seems simple. BYU's only loss this season was 29-7 to Texas Tech. A similar result would seem to give the committee a reason to drop the Cougars. A BYU win is bad for Notre Dame.

Big Ten: This is a three-team league—Ohio State, Indiana, Oregon, with the only question being whether the Buckeyes-Hoosiers loser in the league title game will stay in the top four and get a first-round bye.

SEC: Vanderbilt, which destroyed Tennessee and knocked the Volunteers out of the rankings, stayed at 14. Texas, with its impressive win over Texas A&M, moved up three to No. 13. The conference will still have more teams than anyone (four or more) in the bracket and commissioner Greg Sankey will probably be angling for more.

Evans lifts No. 4 Duke over No. 15 Florida with late 3-pointer

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Isaiah Evans hit a go-ahead 3-pointer with 19.7 seconds left, and No. 4 Duke held on to beat No. 15 Florida in the ACC/SEC Challenge.

The slim sophomore hit a go-ahead 3-pointer with 19.7 seconds left in a 67-66 victory for the Blue Devils (9-0) over the Gators on Tuesday night. It came with Evans sitting at 0 for 7 from behind the arc, a struggle in a normally reliable element of his game with his quick release and floor-stretching range.

"I mean, it was hard," said Evans, who finished with 13 points on 5-for-14 shooting. "I know y'all had seen I was losing my mind. I'm not going to lie. I don't think I had shot that bad in a long time. I just had to keep telling myself, 'It's bigger than me, it's not just about me, it's about the team.' So I had to focus on what can I do to help the team win."

Florida (5-3) had a final desperation possession down one with 1.4 seconds left, but Maliq Brown tipped Thomas Haugh's heave at the inbounds point to run the final time off and send Cameron Indoor Stadium into an ear-ringing frenzy.

No. 1 Purdue 81, Rutgers 65: Trey Kaufman-Renn had 19 points and 13 rebounds for his fourth double-double this season to lead the host Boilermakers over the Scarlet Knights in the Big Ten Conference opener for both teams.

Braden Smith added 16 points and eight assists for Purdue (8-0).

No. 5 UConn 61, No. 21 Kansas 56: Solo Ball scored 17 points, Braylon Mullins also had 17 in a breakout performance by the freshman guard, and the visiting Huskies overcame a seven-point deficit in the second half to beat the Jayhawks.

Eric Reibe added 12 points

and Alex Karaban scored 11 for UConn (7-1), which defeated Kansas (6-3) for the first time in five tries while picking up its third win over a ranked opponent already this season.

No. 7 Michigan State 71, Iowa 52: Coen Carr had nine of his 15 points in the second half after Jeremy Fears Jr. scored 10 of his 14 points in the first half, helping the host Spartans remain unbeaten with a win over the Hawkeyes in the Big Ten opener for both teams.

Michigan State (8-0, 1-0 Big Ten) will play Duke at home Saturday.

Syracuse 62, No. 13 Tennessee 60: Freshman Nate Kingz scored a career-high 19 points, William Kyle III made a go-ahead free throw with 13.8 seconds left, and the host Orange held off the Volunteers.

J.J. Starling hit a 3-pointer and a short jumper to give Syracuse (5-3) a 60-56 lead with 2:05

remaining. But jumpers by Jaylen Carey and Bishop Boswell tied it at 60-all with 38 seconds to go.

No. 16 North Carolina 67, No. 18 Kentucky: Derek Dixon made a tiebreaking layup with 16 seconds remaining and scored five of the Tar Heels' last six points to lift visiting North Carolina over the Wildcats in the ACC/SEC Challenge. Dixon finished with nine points off the bench, and his 3-pointer with 53 seconds left helped give the Tar Heels (7-1) their first road win of the season.

No. 24 Southern Cal 82, Oregon 77: Chad Baker-Mazara scored 25 points and Jacob Cofie added 17 as the visiting Trojans beat the Ducks in a Big Ten Conference opener for both teams.

USC, which entered the AP Top 25 on Monday for the first time in more than two years, improved to 8-0 to continue its best start since the 2021-22 season.

Serena Williams says she is not coming back

Associated Press

Serena Williams threw cold water on the idea that she might be preparing to return to tennis, writing on social media Tuesday that she is “NOT coming back,” after a spokesman for the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) said the 23-time Grand Slam champion had registered with the sport’s drug-testing body.

That is the first step that would be required by a player seeking to come out of retirement.

The 44-year-old Williams,

one of the greats of the game, has not competed since bidding farewell at the 2022 U.S. Open. At the time, Williams said she didn’t want to use the word “retiring” and instead declared that she was “evolving” away from tennis.

It was initially not clear when or where — or even if — Williams would actually play again, and she later posted: “Omg yall I’m NOT coming back. This wildfire is crazy.”

Her agent did not immediately return a request for comment.

In a statement emailed to The Associated Press, U.S. Tennis Association spokesman Brendan McIntyre said: “We are aware that Serena has filed the necessary paperwork with the International Tennis Integrity Agency to reenter the International Registered Testing Pool. If Serena decides to return and compete at the professional level, together with her fans, we will enthusiastically welcome the return of one of the greatest champions in the history of our sport.”

Williams was one of the big-

gest stars of any sport, a dominant talent on the court and still someone drawing attention away from it. If she were to end up returning to the tour, it would be a significant story line.

Her decision to place her name back in the testing pool with the ITIA, which oversees anti-doping and anti-corruption efforts, was first reported by Bounces.

“She is on the list and back in the testing pool,” ITIA spokesman Adrian Bassett wrote to the AP on Tuesday.

Golden Knights hold off Blackhawks in Hart’s NHL return

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Pavel Dorofeyev and Shea Theodore scored in a shootout Tuesday night to make Vegas goalie Carter Hart’s anticipated debut a success, giving the Golden Knights a 4-3 victory over the Chicago Blackhawks.

Vegas entered 1-8 in games decided after regulation.

Braeden Bowman forced overtime for the Golden Knights when he put in his own rebound with 2:28 left in the third period.

Bowman and Ivan Barbashev each had a goal and an assist. Ben Hutton also scored and Theodore had two assists. Hart stopped 27 shots, including six in overtime.

Tyler Bertuzzi had a goal and an assist for Chicago, and Connor Bedard and Oliver Moore also scored. Spencer Knight made 25 saves.

This was Hart’s first NHL appearance in nearly two years, since he played for Philadelphia. He and four other 2018 Canada world junior hockey players were acquitted of sexual assault in July.

Avalanche 3, Canucks 1: Nathan MacKinnon scored two more goals and Gabriel Landeskog had two assists, leading host Colorado over Vancouver.

Brock Nelson also scored as the Avalanche improved to 14-0-3 in their last 17 games. Mackenzie Blackwood made 11 saves after Scott Wedgewood departed in the second period with an upper-body injury.

It’s the second-longest point streak for Colorado in franchise history, trailing a 17-0-2 stretch during the 2021-22 season.

Capitals 3, Kings 1: Anthony Beauvillier scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third

period and Logan Thompson made 24 saves in visiting Washington’s fifth straight victory, this time over Los Angeles.

Tom Wilson scored his 16th goal and Alex Ovechkin had two assists for the Capitals, whose 8-1-0 surge since mid-November has moved them into a first-place tie atop the Metropolitan Division with Carolina, which has two games in hand.

Aliaksei Protas added an empty-net goal for Washington, which opened a California road trip featuring three games in four nights by sweeping its season series with the Kings.

Islanders 2, Lightning 1: Bo Horvat and Anthony Duclair scored to lead host New York past Tampa Bay, ending the Lightning’s seven-game winning streak.

Ilya Sorokin made 28 saves for his eighth win of the season as the Islanders snapped a three-game skid.

Maple Leafs 4, Panthers 1: Troy Stecher and Scott Laughton both got their first goals of the season, Dakota Joshua added a goal and an assist, and visiting Toronto topped Florida.

Bobby McMann had two assists for the Maple Leafs, who have won three of their last four, and John Tavares added an empty-netter with 18.6 seconds left.

Nashville 5, Flames 1: Reid Schaefer and Ozy Wiesblatt each scored their first NHL goal, Juuse Saros made 27 saves and host Nashville defeated Calgary.

Michael Bunting had a goal and an assist, Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault also scored, and Nicolas Hague had a pair of assists for the Predators, winners of three of four.

Rangers 3, Stars 2 (OT): Vladislav Gavrikov scored just over a minute into overtime and host New York beat Dallas, ending the Stars’ four-game winning streak.

Gavrikov scored for the Rangers 1:09 into overtime on a backhand shot. Carson Soucy and Will Cuyll also scored for New York, which has won four of its previous five games.

Red Wings 5, Bruins 4: Moritz Seider had a goal and two assists, and host Detroit snapped a four-game losing streak by holding off Boston.

Lucas Raymond and Alex DeBrincat each had a goal and an assist, helping the Red Wings avenge a 3-2 shootout loss at the Bruins on Saturday. James van Riemsdyk and Ben Chiarot also scored, and John Gibson stopped 33 shots.

Senators 5, Canadiens 2: Brady Tkachuk and Fabian Zetterlund had a goal and an assist each as visiting Ottawa defeated Montreal in a heavy-hitting game between two Atlantic Division rivals.

Drake Batherson, Jake Sanderson and Artem Zub also scored as the Senators snapped a two-game skid to end a season-long seven-game road trip.

Wild 1, Oilers 0: Jesper Wallstedt made 33 saves to record his fourth shutout of the season in just 10 games as visiting Minnesota carried its torrid pace from last month into December, emerging with a victory over Edmonton.

Jonas Brodin scored the lone goal for the Wild, who have achieved at least a point in 12 straight games. Minnesota went 11-1-2 in November.

Clippers cutting ties with veteran Paul

Associated Press

Chris Paul said the Los Angeles Clippers are sending him home from their road trip, putting a shocking twist on what is expected to be the veteran point guard's final NBA season.

"Just Found Out I'm Being Sent Home," Paul posted on social media at around 3 a.m. Wednesday morning, adding a peace emoji.

The struggling Clippers were in Atlanta for a road game against the Hawks on Wednesday night. Los Angeles lost at Miami on Monday night to fall to 5-16 in a wildly disappointing start to the season.

The 40-year-old Paul is playing his 21st NBA season, and he strongly hinted last month that it will be his last. The 12-time All-Star and two-time Olympic gold medalist has earned four All-NBA first team selections, and he ranks second in NBA history with 12,552 assists. He was the first player to score at least 20,000 points while recording at least 10,000 assists.

Paul became arguably the most accomplished player in Clippers franchise history while leading the team to six winning seasons from 2011-17, including their first two Pacific Division titles and three playoff series victories. He

returned to Los Angeles as a free agent last July, rejoining a franchise where he is loved by fans while having an outside chance to contend for his first championship alongside Kawhi Leonard and James Harden.

Lawrence Frank, the Clippers' top basketball executive, issued a statement confirming Paul's departure to several media outlets early Wednesday. Frank indicated LA will attempt to trade Paul, who signed a \$3.6 million deal to return to LA.

Paul hasn't spoken to reporters since he strongly hinted at retirement while the Clippers were back in his native North Carolina.

But he acknowledged a video retrospective of his career played by Los Angeles during a timeout at Intuit Dome last week. The video ended with "Congratulations, Point God" on the screen.

Paul couldn't really be blamed for the Clippers' profound struggles this season because he hasn't played much.

LA is on a five-game skid, and it's tied with Sacramento for the second-worst record in the Western Conference heading into Wednesday's games. Leonard has been limited to 10 games by injuries, and it's already lost guard Bradley Beal to season-ending hip surgery.

Edwards, Timberwolves edge out Pelicans in OT

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Anthony Edwards scored 34 of his season-high 44 points in the second half, including a driving layup to force overtime, and Julius Randle scored eight points in the extra period to lift the Minnesota Timberwolves to a 149-142 victory over the New Orleans Pelicans on Tuesday night.

Edwards, who came in averaging 37.2 points in his last five games, struggled from long range early, missing 4 of 5 3-point attempts in the first half. But he caught fire in the second half, going 5 of 8 from deep.

Edwards sent the game into overtime by driving past Jose Alvarado for a layup with 2.3 seconds left. New Orleans led 129-125 with 1:03 remaining in regulation on Derik Queen's dunk but went scoreless the rest of the way.

Rudy Gobert finished with 26 points for Minnesota, including three dunks in overtime, and 13 rebounds. Jaden McDaniels had 17 points and Randle 16 for the Timberwolves, who won their third straight.

Trey Murphy III led six Pelicans in double figures with 33 points. Saddiq Bey had 22, and Queen and fellow rookie Jeremiah Fears added 21.

New Orleans, with the worst record in the league (3-19), has lost 13 of its last 14 games.

76ers 121, Wizards 102: Tyrese Maxey scored 20 of his 35 points in the third quarter, Andre Drummond had 12 points and 10

rebounds, and host Philadelphia beat Washington.

Maxey, who was coming off a 44-point performance, was 13 of 26 from the field to score 20-plus for the 20th straight game this season.

The 76ers had their 66-54 halftime lead trimmed to five after the Wizards scored the first seven points of the third quarter. But Philadelphia scored 11 of the next 13 points to rebuild a double-digit lead at 77-63.

Celtics 123, Knicks 117: Jaylen Brown scored a season-high 42 points, sealing the game with a breakaway dunk in the final seconds as host Boston beat New York in a rematch of last season's Eastern Conference semifinal.

Derrick White scored seven of his 22 points in the last four minutes, after the Celtics turned back a Knicks charge that cut a 15-point deficit to 102-99. Jordan Walsh had six points and five rebounds in the fourth quarter for Boston.

Mikal Bridges scored 17 of his 35 points in the fourth and went 8 for 12 from 3-point range overall. Karl-Anthony Towns added 29 for New York, which had won four in a row.

Raptors 121, Trail Blazers 118: Scottie Barnes scored 28 points to help host Toronto edge Portland.

Barnes was 10 for 18 from the field. He also had seven rebounds, seven assists and two blocks. Immanuel Quickley had 23

points with eight assists for the Raptors, who had lost two in a row.

The Trail Blazers wasted a solid performance by Deni Avdija, who had 25 points, 14 assists and eight boards. Toumani Camara added 21 points and seven rebounds, and reserve Shaedon Sharpe — a London, Ontario, native — scored 23 points.

Spurs 126, Grizzlies 119: Harrison Barnes scored 31 points, De'Aaron Fox had 29 and host San Antonio beat Memphis.

Dylan Harper added 15 points as the Spurs improved to 6-2 since losing Victor Wembanyama to a strained left calf on Nov. 15.

Zach Edey had 19 points and 15 rebounds for the Grizzlies, who had won three straight and five of six without star point guard Ja Morant.

Thunder 124, Warriors 112: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 38 points and made a key 3-pointer with 3:34 left, Jalen Williams added 22 points and six assists, and visiting Oklahoma City held off determined Golden State.

Chet Holmgren hit a go-ahead 3 from the top with 6:02 remaining and finished with 21 points and eight rebounds for the defending champions.

Brandin Podziemski scored 17 points and Seth Curry added 14 in his Warriors debut with older brother Stephen Curry sidelined for a second straight game with a bruised left quadriceps and muscle strain sustained last Wednesday against Houston.