

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, January 16, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Experts suggest digging into tax law now

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The new U.S. tax law is not even a month old, but financial experts say it's not too soon for military servicemembers, veterans and retirees to dig into how the massive policy change will impact their pocketbooks for years to come.

The \$1.5 trillion plan installed new tax brackets, benchmarks for deductions and child tax credits, among other changes.

While many people could see a boost in take-home pay this year, and another increase in their tax refunds next year, those gains could diminish over time. Many of the cuts are slated to expire by 2025.

"The good news is some of the deductions that have been removed for the general public are still in place for the military," said Priya Mishra, managing attorney at Top Tax Defenders in Houston. "For example, there were eliminations to moving deductions. However, military members are exempt from this. For the most part, the benefits the rest of the public will see is also reflected for our military. The child care credit, for example, has gone up. So any of our servicemen and women with children will be able to claim more for their children on taxes."

The vast rewrite of the U.S. tax code, the first of its magnitude in more than 30 years, could be a planning headache for taxpayers, including servicemembers. The plan was rushed through Capitol Hill and then signed into law by President Donald Trump on Dec. 22, so there's plenty of work facing the Internal Revenue Service, tax experts, financial consultants, businesses and taxpayers to interpret the plan and its impact.

Among the changes, most of the seven income tax brackets will have lower tax rates until 2025. Standard deductions increase, nearly doubling to \$24,000 for married couples and to \$12,000 for individuals. Child tax credits double to \$2,000. Mortgage interest deductions will be capped to loans under \$750,000, while state, local and property tax deductions will be capped at \$10,000.

In one scenario, a middle-class family of four with an annual income of \$70,000 to \$80,000 could end up with at least \$2,000 in tax relief in take-home pay this year and their tax bill next year.

"The effects are going to play out for a long period of time," said Michael Saunders, deputy legislative director for The Retired Enlisted Association, or TREA, which has been tracking the changes and their impact on military members. "You are looking at a long road to go before we know the full effects."

Tax exemptions

The tax changes will be vastly similar for servicemembers and veterans.

"For the most part, military members and retirees will see the same benefits and changes due to the tax bill that all Americans will see," said John Cooney, a former Army officer who owns Green and Gold Financial Planning in Middleboro, Mass.

The larger standard deductions could help simplify the tax process at least in that area, experts said.

It "will eliminate the need for a majority of Americans to itemize on their taxes," said Mike Molitoris, an Air Force veteran who works with servicemembers and other veterans through his Flagship Wealth Manage-

ment Group in Cary, N.C.

The average age of servicemembers is in their 20s, which likely puts them in the lower tax bracket. Changes to those rates will be especially important to watch, experts said. Also, deductions for married couples and family tax credits will also be key. More than half of active-duty military are married, the Defense Department says, and more than 40 percent of military personnel have children.

"Increasing the child tax credit ... will be beneficial as well" for veterans and servicemembers, Molitoris said.

There are specific wins for servicemembers and veterans in the new tax legislation. Among them: Initial efforts on Capitol Hill to start taxing military personnel for moving costs were thwarted.

"This change was a recognition of the fact that military families are required to move fairly often," Cooney said of the new law's special provision for military members.

Under the plan, a civilian will have to report an employer-paid move as income and pay a tax on that income while a servicemember won't. Or, a civilian who covers their own move won't get a tax deduction as they did in the past, while servicemembers will.

"The military was specifically excluded from that," said Jeffrey Kupfer, a tax reform expert and former White House assistant who is an adjunct professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College in Pittsburgh. For the military, "you can continue to deduct (moving costs) or you don't have to include them in your income." Other wins include the forgiveness of student loans as tax-free — not taxable income — for certain disabled veterans.

Most will see savings

The bill will likely reduce the tax burden for all people at least on the front end, unless they are facing specific costs with reduced tax relief, such as higher medical bills or property and state income taxes in locations like California and New York.

"It's very likely that most military servicemembers will see some tax savings under the law," said Forrest Allen, associate director of government relations for the Military Officers Association of America. "It would take some unique financial circumstances for them to see some increase in their tax burden."

For example, servicemembers based in locations with no state income tax might have fewer worries than others in higher-tax states.

"If you are paying taxes in Texas for instance, it won't be much an issue," said Kupfer, who was special assistant for economic policy in the George W. Bush administration. "But if you are paying taxes in New York state, it becomes much more an issue."

High-tax states, however, might be looking at ways to ease the new tax burden, Molitoris said.

"There have been indications from various high-tax states that they may file suit or try to find work-arounds for their constituents to preserve their ability to deduct a higher amount," he said.

The White House has estimated as much as 90 percent of taxpayers could end up with a cut in the beginning, which would apply to military members as well.

"Essentially all servicemembers will end up with a tax cut, depending on how much one is paying to begin with," Kupfer said.

B-2 deployment underscores fragility of Koreas' detente

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — While North and South Korea take steps toward detente, the U.S. military has sent nuclear-capable stealth bombers and warships to the region ahead of next month's Olympics.

The deployments send a clear signal that Washington isn't letting down its guard despite an agreement to postpone U.S.-South Korean military exercises on the divided peninsula until after the Winter Games.

The two Koreas began their first formal negotiations in more than two years last week, leading to an agreement for the North to participate in the Olympics, which begin on Feb. 9 in the South Korean resort town of Pyeongchang.

Another round of talks is scheduled for Wednesday in the

heavily fortified border area that divides the countries. But experts caution the process can't make significant progress in ending the crisis over North Korea's nuclear weapons program until the United States becomes involved.

President Donald Trump has welcomed the talks and tamped down his bellicose rhetoric. But the military moves and continued North Korean threats against the U.S. are a stark reminder of the fragility of efforts to ease tensions that have raised fears of a new conflict on the divided peninsula.

The three B-2 Spirits with about 200 airmen flew last week from Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., to Andersen Air Force Base on the Pacific island of Guam.

Meanwhile, the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier and its strike group of guided-missile destroyers and cruisers are en route to

the Western Pacific. And the amphibious-assault ship USS Wasp pulled into its new homeport in Japan on Sunday after receiving upgrades allowing it to launch the next-generation F-35B stealth fighters.

The bombers, in particular, are likely to infuriate the North Koreans, who believe the presence of U.S. strategic assets and military exercises are preparations for an invasion.

U.S. officials stressed the deployments are part of preplanned rotations and training while acknowledging they also serve as a message not only to North Korea but also to its main ally, China.

The New York Times also reported that the Pentagon plans to send more special operations troops to the peninsula beginning with the Olympics, although it was unclear what their role would be.

Dunford supports rotational forces

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The United States' top military officer made the case Monday for continued use of a rotational force in Europe to deal with a possible Russia threat while acknowledging the need for reforms to improve NATO maneuverability in a crisis.

"I would say that none of us are comfortable with where we are," Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Defense Department's internal news service. "If you are complacent in this business, you are obsolete. So you need to stay focused."

Dunford made the statements ahead of a two-day meeting of NATO defense chiefs that began Tuesday in Brussels and will focus on plans for a new alliance command structure and its missions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The general said he favors a U.S. military posture that utilizes rotational forces, even as the Pentagon studies alternative basing strategies to assure allies along Russia's western border.

An Army War College study conducted last year, which recommended permanently basing another brigade in Europe, found that the long unit rotations are more costly and can take a toll on morale.

But Dunford said he has received positive feedback from the Army, whose leaders have also said rotational forces provide a higher state of combat readiness.

"This model seems to work pretty well for the soldiers, for the families and allows us to meet commitments with the infrastructure available," Dunford told DOD News.

Marines continue training Afghans to take aggressive stance in Helmand

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

CAMP SHORAB, Afghanistan — A new batch of Marines has taken over an effort to build up Afghan security forces in restive Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold at the heart of the country's opium trade.

Brig. Gen. Roger B. Turner Jr., commander of the first rotation of Task Force Southwest, transferred authority to Brig. Gen. Benjamin Watson in a ceremony Monday at this base formerly known as Camp Leathorneck and Camp Bastion.

The Marine task force was the main effort of NATO's Resolute Support mission last year and will continue to be so in 2018, said Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in

Afghanistan, at a ceremony in which Turner passed the guidon to Watson.

"As we speak, [Afghan security forces] are conducting offensive operations in 13 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and it started right here in Helmand," Nicholson said. "The Taliban, and especially their senior leadership, are seriously questioning their future here in Helmand."

The province has been the site of some of the heaviest fighting, where many Marines gave their lives in the 16-year war. But after combat operations ended in 2014, security in the province faltered, and the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, was on the verge of falling to the insurgents in 2016.

The local army corps was disintegrating under poor leader-

ship and corruption, so NATO scrambled an ad hoc Army advisory group to help shore up government forces and rebuff the Taliban advance. Last spring, the Army handed that mission over to the Marines, the largest contingent the Corps had deployed to the country since the end of combat operations.

While the first rotation trained and advised security forces at the brigade and battalion levels in some cases, the second rotation is expected to do more to support tactical units.

The Trump administration's strategy calls for putting more U.S. advisers with front-line units. Nicholson expects to have those troops in place this spring with the deployment of the Army's 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade.

DHS chief says she didn't hear Trump use vulgarity

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON—Homeland Security Secretary Kristjen Nielsen confirmed that President Donald Trump used “tough language” in an Oval Office meeting last week over immigration policy, but she said she did not hear him describe some African countries and Haiti as “shithole countries,” as has been reported.

Nielsen confirmed Trump's tone while testifying under oath to the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday morning. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., asked Nielsen whether Trump had used the vulgarity to describe the countries “or a substantially similar word.”

“I did not hear that word used,” Nielsen told members of the committee.

When Leahy asked again, Nielsen said, “The conversation was very impassioned. I don't dispute that the president was using tough language. Others in the room were also using tough language.”

“The president used tough language in general, as did other congressmen in the room, yes sir,” she said later, when Leahy pressed her again.

Nielsen sat before the Senate panel for a long-scheduled oversight hearing on Homeland Security Department matters.

Hopes of a deal to keep the government open beyond a Friday deadline have been complicated by lingering mistrust following the Oval Office meeting, during which, according to several people familiar with the gathering, Trump used vulgar terms to describe poor countries sending immigrants to the United States.

The meeting was convened to consider a bipartisan immigration deal to protect the so-called “Dreamers” — young immigrants brought to the United States illegally as children, including the 690,000 currently enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that Trump has canceled. Democratic leaders are demanding that protections for the DACA recipients be part of any spending deal.

They have the leverage to do so because Senate Republicans would need at least nine Democratic votes to support any funding measure. Democrats also want Republicans to match military spending that Trump and many GOP lawmakers are seeking with an equal increase in nondefense funding.

In an interview with “CBS This Morning” on Tuesday morning, Nielsen reiterated that she didn't recall Trump using vulgarity to describe African nations and Haiti.

“I just don't — I don't — that's — I don't — that's not a word that I remember being used. It was very impassioned,” Nielsen said. “People on all sides feel very strongly about this issue, frankly, as well as they should. There were a lot of conversations happening at the same time. It's not a particular phrase that I heard.”

If Congress fails to reach an agreement on the status of DACA recipients by the end of March, Nielsen told CBS that people protected by the program will not be a priority for federal immigration agents for removal.

“If you are a DACA that's compliant with your registration, meaning you haven't committed a crime and you in fact are registered, you're not priority of enforcement for ICE should the program end,” she said.

Nielsen's testimony comes as Republicans have concluded that they are unlikely to reach a long-term spending accord by the Friday deadline. GOP leaders are now turning to a short-term funding measure in hopes of keeping agencies open while talks continue, but Democratic leaders say they are unlikely to support any deal that does not protect young illegal immigrants.

Aides to key negotiators from both parties planned to meet Tuesday in an effort to rekindle budget talks, setting up a Wednesday meeting of the leaders themselves. If they cannot agree, the government would shut down at midnight Friday for the first time since 2013.

Japan has false alarm on N. Korean missile

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's public broadcaster mistakenly sent an alert Tuesday warning citizens of a North Korean missile launch and urging them to seek immediate shelter, then minutes later corrected it, days after a similar error in Hawaii.

NHK television issued the message on its internet and mobile news sites as well as on Twitter, saying North Korea appeared to have fired a missile at Japan. It said the government was telling people to evacuate and take shelter.

“North Korea appears to have fired a missile,” NHK said, adding that a government warning had been issued. “The government: Seek shelter inside buildings and basements.”

The false alarm came just days after Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency sent a mistaken warning of a North Korean missile attack to mobile phones across the state, triggering panic.

NHK said the mistake was the result of an error by a staff member who was operating the alert system for online news, but it did not elaborate.

NHK deleted the tweet and text warning after several minutes, issued a correction and apologized several times on air and in other formats.

“The flash was a mistake,” NHK said. “We are very sorry.”

Tension has grown in Japan over North Korean missile tests as they have flown closer to Japanese coasts. NHK and other Japanese media generally alert each missile test, and the government has issued emergency notices when the missiles flew over Japan.

Also, Japan is stepping up its missile intercepting capabilities and conducting missile drills across the country in which residents, including schoolchildren and elderly people, rush to community centers, cover their heads and duck down to the floor.

A major drill is planned in downtown Tokyo next week.

Unlike the mistaken Hawaii warning, the NHK alert did not contain the statement, “This is not a drill.” NHK was able to correct its error in a few minutes, far faster than the nearly 40 minutes that lapsed before the Hawaii alert was withdrawn.

The Hawaii agency has now changed its protocols to require that two people send an alert and has made it easier to cancel a false alarm.

Tillerson in Canada at meeting on North Korea

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is calling for nations to improve maritime interdiction of ships conducting illicit trade with North Korea.

Tillerson met in Vancouver with 19 nations that fought on America's side in the Korean War to intensify the “maximum pressure” campaign on the North and combat sanctions evasion.

He said the gathering of like-minded nations sends Kim Jong Un a unified message: “We will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.”

He is especially urging China and Russia, which are not invited to the meeting, to fully imple-

ment United Nations sanctions.

Tillerson highlighted in his opening remarks Tuesday that North Korean missile tests pose a threat to civilian air traffic.

He said the pressure campaign will continue until North Korea takes decisive steps to give up its nukes.

The meeting was hosted by Tillerson and his Canadian counterpart, Chrystia Freeland. It was called before the recent start of talks between North and South Korea, the first in two years. President Donald Trump also has signaled openness to talks under the right circumstances.

From The Associated Press

King children criticize Trump, decry racism

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Two of Martin Luther King Jr.'s children and the pastor of his historic Atlanta church marked the national King holiday Monday with sharp denunciations of President Donald Trump, focusing on disparaging remarks he is said to have made about African countries and Haitian immigrants. Angry, pro-Haiti protesters and Trump supporters yelled at each other from opposite sides of a street near the president's Florida resort.

At gatherings across the nation, activists, residents and teachers honored the late civil rights leader on what would have been his 89th birthday and ahead of the 50th anniversary of his assassination in Memphis, Tenn. But in the many speeches delivered from pulpits and podiums across the country, Trump's name came up nearly as often as King's, with speakers indicating that his turbulent presidency was undermining efforts to ease racial tensions in the U.S.

The president spent his first Martin Luther King Jr. Day in office buffeted by claims that during a meeting with senators on immigration last week, he used a vulgarity to describe African countries and questioned the need to allow more Haitians into the U.S. He also is said to have asked why the country couldn't have more immigrants from nations like Norway.

In Washington, King's eldest son, Martin Luther King III, criticized Trump, saying, "When a president insists that our nation needs more citizens from white states like Norway, I don't even think we need to spend any time even talking about what it says and what it is."

He added, "We got to find a way to work on this man's heart."

In Atlanta, King's daughter, the Rev. Bernice King, told hundreds of people who packed the pews of the Ebenezer Baptist Church that they "cannot allow the nations of the world to embrace the words that come from our president as a reflection of

the true spirit of America."

Trump dedicated his weekly address to the nation, released Monday, to King.

"Dr. King's dream is our dream, it is the American dream, it's the promise stitched into the fabric of our nation, etched into the hearts of our people and written into the soul of humankind," he said in the address, which he tweeted to his followers. "It is the dream of a world where people are judged by who they are, not how they look or where they come from."

The president's remarks appeared not to resonate with the Rev. Al Sharpton, who also used the holiday to take aim at the racial rhetoric Trump is said to have used.

"Trump Tower is in the wrong state," Sharpton told a crowd of 200 at the National Action Network in Harlem, N.Y. He said it was embarrassing that Trump is from New York. "What we're going to do about Donald Trump is going to be the spirit of Martin Luther King Day," he said.

13 California siblings held captive by parents rescued

The Washington Post

The front yard of the house in the quiet neighborhood in Peris, Calif., was often overgrown with weeds nearly 6 feet tall. There were no toys, no bicycles in the front yard, neighbors said. More than a dozen children supposedly lived inside the home, but they never came outside to play.

On Sunday morning, authorities found 13 brothers and sisters held captive in the home, with several shackled to beds with chains and padlocks, "in dark and foul-smelling" conditions, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department said in a news release.

The siblings all appeared to be children, so sheriff deputies were "shocked" to discover that seven of them were actually adults, according to the news release. The ages of the 13 victims ranged from 2 to 29. They appeared malnourished and dirty and told authorities they were starving.

One of them, a 17-year-old girl, managed to escape early Sunday morning, calling police

on a cellphone she found in the home. "She appeared to be only 10 years old and slightly emaciated," the sheriff's department said in their news release.

The parents, David Allen Turpin, 57, and Louise Anna Turpin, 49, have been arrested on charges of torture and child endangerment. Their bail is set at \$9 million each. They were "unable to immediately provide a logical reason" why their children were shackled and chained, authorities said.

Authorities interviewed the children and provided them with food and drink. The six minors were taken to a hospital and admitted for treatment, the sheriff's department said. The seven older children were taken to a different medical center and also admitted for treatment.

David Turpin's parents, James and Betty Turpin, of West Virginia, told ABC News they are "shocked" by the allegations. They said their grandchildren are home-schooled. They hadn't seen their son and daughter-in-law in four or five years, they said.

Student's stabbing death investigated as act of rage

Associated Press

SANTA ANA, Calif. — The death of a 19-year-old University of Pennsylvania student who was stabbed nearly two dozen times and whose body was found buried in a shallow grave at a California park is being investigated as an act of rage, a newspaper reported.

The Orange County Register reported Blaze Bernstein was stabbed more than 20 times. No weapon has been found.

Samuel Lincoln Woodward, 20, was arrested and taken into custody Friday on suspicion of homicide after DNA evidence linked him to the death of Bernstein, a college sophomore, Orange County Undersheriff Don Barnes said.

Carrie Braun, a public information officer for the Orange County Sheriff's Department, would not confirm to The Associated Press if Bernstein was stabbed, but said "the condition of the body at the time it was discovered turned it from a missing person to a homicide immediately."

Bernstein may have been planning to sexually pursue Woodward, according to a 16-page search warrant affidavit obtained by The Orange County Register.

Bernstein texted two female friends about a June interaction with Woodward, according to the affidavit. Bernstein wrote that Woodward was about to "hit on me" and "he made me promise not to tell anyone."

Bernstein was home visiting his family in Lake Forest when Woodward picked him up on Jan. 2 and drove with him to several places before winding up at a park.

The two knew each other from high school, Barnes said.

Woodward was interviewed by investigators after Bernstein was reported missing by his parents on Jan. 3.

Authorities searched for Bernstein for nearly a week with assistance from drone pilots and found his body on Tuesday after recent rains partially exposed it.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

State officials: Saving roadkill makes sense

WA SPOKANE — Idaho and Washington have passed laws allowing people to salvage roadkill, provided they fill out a short form with the state wildlife agency to get a permit.

The Spokesman-Review reported Washington's law, which took effect July 1, 2016, allows for deer and elk only. Between then and the end of 2017, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife said 3,099 animals were salvaged off Washington roads.

Idaho's law, which took effect six years ago, is much broader, listing nearly 50 species of mammals and birds as salvageable. Oregon will begin allowing permit holders to salvage roadkill in 2019.

Police: People on party bus beat, robbed clerk

CA SEAL BEACH — Authorities said about 50 people inside a large party bus were detained and questioned after a few of them beat up and robbed a store clerk.

The Los Angeles Times reported Seal Beach police officers responded to reports of a robbery Saturday at a CVS pharmacy.

Seal Beach Police Sgt. Mike Henderson said the victim claims several people exited a party bus, surrounded him and began to strike him.

Henderson said the suspects stole personal property from the victim and fled the scene.

Woman told to remove gutted VW from tree

UT CLEARFIELD — A Utah grandmother who decorated her yard with

a painted Volkswagen Beetle hung in a tree is fighting back after the city ordered her to take it down.

Janis Zettel, 64, of Clearfield, bolted the gutted car into the branches of a tree in her yard. She and her husband, Roy, stripped the vehicle so that it wouldn't weigh any more than the treehouse it would be replacing. They sealed it up so no one could get into it, painted it like a ladybug, lifted it with the assistance of a neighbor's forklift, and bolted it into place.

Authorities handed Zettel a "nuisance vehicle" ordinance citation and an order to take it down.

Sleeping Bear Dunes home to be razed

MI EMPIRE — An iconic home that overlooks a scenic channel in northern Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore will be demolished this year.

The demolition is called for under a long-standing agreement between the park and the home's late owner, Edward Cole. He died at age 84 in November 2015.

MLive.com reported the home was built within the boundaries of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in 1970, the same year the lakeshore was founded.

The lakeside home was maintained as a private residence through a series of legislative amendments and land-use agreements, but it will be razed this year and the property returned to a natural state.

Rare 2-headed snake on public display

MO SPRINGFIELD — A rare two-headed snake is on public display at the Shepherd of the Hills Hatchery

in Branson.

The juvenile Western ratsnake, which is not venomous, was discovered under a house in Hurley.

John Miller, a manager at the hatchery, said the snake is healthy, growing and has shed its skin twice. When it's full grown, it will be about 6 feet long.

Police: Woman driving wrong way hit cruiser

CT DARIEN — Connecticut State Police said a woman driving the wrong way on Interstate 95 crashed into a police cruiser driven by a trooper who was dispatched to stop her.

Police said they began getting calls shortly after midnight Monday about a 2016 Audi driving the wrong way in Stamford. The car was reportedly driving at a high rate of speed and had several near misses.

Police said a trooper near Exit 12 in Darien located the Audi, and it crashed into him.

Ashton Steen, 26, of Darien, was charged with driving under the influence and other charges.

Woman reunited with her childhood diary

MI BLENDON TOWNSHIP — A Michigan father and son returned a nearly 45-year-old diary to its original owner, who was a teenager when she made entries in it during the 1970s.

Kodi Brandt found the diary in a storage area in his family's house in Blendon Township, WOOD-TV reported. The last entry was from 1974.

Brandt and his father, Dave, researched online to locate the diary's owner.

They met with Rae Green recently to return the book. Green was 13 years old when

she started the diary.

Green is unsure how the diary ended up in the Brandts' home. She grew up in Ferndale on the other side of the state.

Dogs are seized from woman's home

OH COOLVILLE — Authorities seized about 100 dogs from a southeastern Ohio home and charged a 76-year-old woman with misdemeanor animal cruelty, alleging she kept animals in unsanitary conditions.

The Athens Messenger reported a dog warden removed the animals last week from a home in the village of Coolville, roughly 80 miles southeast of Columbus.

Dog Warden Mary Beth Brown said the local humane society sent a mobile clinic to the home last fall, expecting to spay and neuter about 18 animals, but ended up doing that for more than 40 creatures brought out of the home.

Center comes to aid of icy turkey vultures

MA BARNSTABLE — Recent bone-chilling temperatures across Massachusetts had even turkey vultures seeking warmth.

The Cape Cod Times reported that two turkey vultures whose wings were encased in ice were brought to the Cape Wildlife Center after a woman discovered them huddling to stay warm under a bush in her backyard.

Zak Mertz, executive director of the wildlife center, said they used space heaters to warm the birds and free them from the ice. Wildlife officials tweeted last week that the birds had been released back into the wild.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Eagles embracing underdog role again

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA—The dog masks aren't going anywhere.

The Philadelphia Eagles (14-3) are home underdogs again. Case Keenum and the Minnesota Vikings (14-3) opened the week as 3½-point favorites in the NFC championship game Sunday.

That's just fine with the Eagles, who embraced their underdog role against sixth-seeded Atlanta. Philadelphia was the first No. 1 seed in league history not favored to win its first playoff game.

After beating the Falcons 15-10, Pro Bowl right tackle Lane Johnson and veteran defensive end Chris Long mocked doubters by wearing German Shepherd dog masks as they walked off the field.

The dog masks have become a popular item in Philly since the players wore them Saturday night. The team announced fans can wear them on Sunday as long as they take them off during security check entering

the stadium.

"To have a lot of people not having a lot of confidence in us and yet to find ways to win just makes it that much more special for this group," coach Doug Pederson said Monday.

Expectations for the Eagles have dropped since quarterback Carson Wentz tore his ACL in Week 14. Nick Foles is 3-1 in his place with the only loss coming in Week 17 when the starters only played one quarter.

But the offense clearly isn't the same without Wentz, who is an MVP candidate after tossing 33 touchdown passes in 13 games.

"Since that point, no one has given us a chance," Pederson said. "Nobody has given us a chance. And I understand, Carson's a great player, but every week, our guys are hearing the same thing; that now we are all of a sudden not good enough. We're 13-3 and have the best record in football, we've got home-field advantage

throughout.

"The guys are going to motivate themselves just based on what they have done and heard for the last month of football.

"Listen, it really doesn't matter what you guys talk about because that locker room in there is united and I'll go to bat for every one of those guys and I'll go to war with every one of those guys in that dressing room."

The Eagles were on the opposite side the previous time they played for a trip to the Super Bowl nine years ago. They were 4-point road favorites in the conference championship game at Arizona, but Kurt Warner and Larry Fitzgerald led the Cardinals to a 32-25 comeback win.

Since 2000, the home team has been an underdog four times in the NFC title game. The underdog Giants beat the Vikings in January 2000 and the Cardinals beat the Eagles in January 2009. The Bears lost to the Packers in Chicago

in January 2010 and the Falcons lost to the 49ers in Atlanta in January 2012.

"I'm glad they're not in charge of my finances," tight end Zach Ertz said of prognosticators. "It feels like all of those guys that pick the games are typically wrong. Same with the guys that usually do the draft stuff, the mock draft, kind of the same thing. All these guys that think they know everything typically don't."

The Eagles are using critics for extra motivation as they pursue the franchise's first Super Bowl title and first NFL championship since 1960.

"Just keep on disrespecting and we're going to keep proving people wrong," receiver Alshon Jeffery said. "We just believe in one another, we don't care what anybody else says. We're just going to keep believing in one another and just keep fighting."

Victims confront ex-USA Gymnastics doctor

Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. — One of the dozens of victims expected to testify at the sentencing hearing of a disgraced former Michigan sports doctor on Tuesday described the sexual abuse Larry Nassar inflicted on her as a child and warned him that "little girls don't stay little forever."

Kyle Stephens was the first of nearly 100 women and girls who will be allowed to speak or will have their statements read by others during the extraordinary four-day hearing in Lansing, Mich. Nassar pleaded guilty to molesting females with his hands at his Michigan State University office, his home and a Lansing-area gymnastics club. He also worked for Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics, which trains Olympians.

"I testified to let the world know that you are a repulsive liar," Stephens said to Nassar, 54, who bowed his head with his eyes closed as she and others spoke. She said Nassar repeatedly abused her from age 6 until age 12 during family visits to

his home in Holt, near Lansing. She said he rubbed his genitals on her and digitally penetrated her, among other things. She said Nassar later denied it, and her parents believed him.

"Perhaps you have figured it out by now, but little girls don't stay little forever," Stephens said. "They grow into strong women that ... destroy your world."

Another statement came from Donna Markham, who told of how her daughter Chelsea committed suicide in 2009, years after Nassar sexually abused her during a medical examination.

"It all started with him," she said, describing her daughter's downward spiral into drugs.

Ingham County Circuit Judge Rosemarie Aquilina is expected to order a sentence Friday.

The Michigan attorney general's office is seeking 40 to 125 years in prison for Nassar, 54. The maximum represents a year for each of the 125 girls and women who filed reports of abuse with campus police.

He already has been sentenced to 60 years in federal prison for child pornography crimes.

Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles on Monday said she was among the athletes sexually abused by Nassar. Another gold medalist, Aly Raisman, tweeted Monday that she would not attend the sentencing "because it is too traumatic for me. My impact letter will be read in court in front of Nassar. I support the brave survivors. We are all in this together."

Olympians McKayla Maroney and Gabby Douglas also have said they were among Nassar's victims as teens.

In November, he admitted to digitally penetrating 10 girls, mostly under the guise of treatment, between 1998 and 2015. As part of plea deals in two adjacent Michigan counties, he said his conduct had no legitimate medical purpose and that he did not have the girls' consent.

Nassar is scheduled to be sentenced in Eaton County in two weeks.

NBA roundup

Durant, Warriors coast past Cavaliers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Once the lead swelled to 14, Kevin Durant waved both arms like a boxing referee stopping a fight.

Another knockout on the road for these Warriors.

Durant scored 32 points, Stephen Curry added 23 and Golden State extended its road winning streak to 13 with a 118-108 Martin Luther King holiday victory Monday night over the Cleveland Cavaliers, their struggling NBA Finals foes.

Durant scored 16 in the third quarter for the defending champions, who clamped down on defense and pulled away in the fourth to remain unbeaten outside Oracle Arena since Nov. 22. It's not that they play poorly at home, but Durant said the Dubs take a different identity when they travel.

"At home, we just relax a little bit," Durant said. "This is

who we are when we're on the road."

LeBron James scored 32 points and Kevin Love 17 for Cleveland, which had its home winning streak stopped at 13. Isaiah Thomas, getting his first taste of the Warriors-Cavaliers rivalry, had 19 points in 32 minutes — his most in five games as he returns from a hip injury.

It was Golden State's second straight win over Cleveland, which has dropped eight of 10 dating to a loss to the Warriors on Christmas Day. The Cavs were down just 93-91 entering the fourth, but missed 17 of 19 shots to open the period, and Golden State throttled away.

Bucks 104, Wizards 95: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 27 points and grabbed a career-high 20 rebounds as visiting Milwaukee beat Washington for the second time in 10 days.

Grizzlies 123, Lakers 114: Dillon Brooks matched his sea-

son best with 19 points, and eight players for host Memphis finished in double figures.

Clippers 113, Rockets 102: Lou Williams scored 31 points, Blake Griffin added 29 before his ejection, and host Los Angeles beat Houston in Chris Paul's heated return to Staples Center against his old team.

Thunder 95, Kings 88: Russell Westbrook had 19 points, 16 rebounds and nine assists before being ejected, and host Oklahoma City rallied from a 15-point first-half deficit to beat Sacramento.

76ers 117, Raptors 111: Joel Embiid had 34 points and 11 rebounds and host Philadelphia narrowly avoided blowing another big lead to beat cold-shooting Toronto.

Hawks 102, Spurs 99: Dennis Schroder scored 26 points, Ersan Ilyasova added 20 and host Atlanta held off San Antonio in the closing seconds.

Bulls 119, Heat 111: Zach LaVine scored 18 points in his second game for Chicago, Justin Holiday made a career-best seven threes and scored 25 points, and host Chicago ended Miami's seven-game winning streak.

Knicks 119, Nets 104: Kristaps Porzingis had 26 points and nine rebounds, Michael Beasley added 23 points and 10 boards, and New York opened its longest road trip in nearly 30 years by beating Brooklyn.

Hornets 118, Pistons 107: Kemba Walker scored 17 of his 20 points in the second half, and visiting Charlotte pulled away in the fourth quarter of a win over Detroit.

Pacers 109, Jazz 94: Victor Oladipo scored 28 points and visiting Indiana shot 54 percent from three-point range in a win over Utah.

College basketball roundup

No. 5 Blue Devils storm back, beat No. 25 Hurricanes

Associated Press

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — Duke's comeback began with a three-pointer from the corner by Gary Trent Jr.

On the next possession, Trent scored from the same spot. He was just getting going, and so were the Blue Devils.

The freshman guard scored a season-high 30 points and No. 5-ranked Duke needed less than three minutes to erase a 13-point, second-half deficit, scoring 18 consecutive points to overtake No. 25 Miami 83-75 on Monday night.

"We played a great 32 minutes," Hurricanes coach Jim Larranaga said. "And then everything changed. The Gary Trent show began."

The Blue Devils scored 15 points in only six possessions

to rally, and the comeback included a trio of three-pointers by Trent. He shot 9-for-14, including 6-for-9 from beyond the arc.

"Spectacular," coach Mike Krzyzewski said. "Trent got us started."

What inspired the freshman's breakout performance?

"My teammates finding me," Trent said. "Coach drawing up great plays. Everything coming together for me at the right time, and just doing my job."

Duke (16-2, 4-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) extended its winning streak against ranked teams to seven games, including four this season. Miami (13-4, 2-3) lost at home for the first time this season.

"We beat an outstanding team," Krzyzewski said. "We had to play almost, like, perfect

basketball, which we did kind of in the last 11 minutes."

No. 10 Kansas 71, No. 6 West Virginia 66: Svi Mykhailiuk scored 17 points, including 12 over the final seven minutes, and the visiting Jayhawks roared back from a big deficit to beat the Mountaineers.

Devonte Graham added 16 points and Udoka Azubuike scored 10 for the Jayhawks (15-3, 5-1 Big 12).

Kansas has won four straight and broke a four-game losing streak in Morgantown to West Virginia (15-3, 4-2). The Mountaineers have lost two straight for the first time this season.

Sagaba Konate had 16 points, 10 rebounds and five blocked shots for West Virginia. But he didn't score over the final seven minutes. Esa Ahmad added 15 points and Jevon Carter scored

14.

No. 23 Michigan 68, Maryland 67: Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman made two free throws with 1.2 seconds left, lifting the host Wolverines over the Terrapins.

Kevin Huerter connected on a go-ahead three-pointer on the previous possession for short-handed Maryland.

Moritz Wagner had 18 points and 11 rebounds for Michigan (16-4, 5-2), and reserve Jordan Poole had 11 points.

The Wolverines went ahead by 10 with 5:50 to go and yet barely did enough to win against a team with just eight healthy players on scholarship.

Maryland's Anthony Cowan scored 24 points, Huerter had 12 on 4-for-11 shooting and Darryl Morsell added 10 points.

Australian Open

Sharapova wins first match in return

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — It wasn't Maria Sharapova's choice to miss the last Australian Open. That decision was taken out of her hands because of a doping ban following a failed test on her previous visit to Melbourne Park.

The five-time major champion said it was her choice to return, though, and she relished every moment of it in Tuesday's 6-1, 6-4 victory over Tatjana Maria.

"With that choice I know that I face difficulties and challenges on the court, and that I start from no ranking and that I might start on some outside courts, and I understand that and that's part of the process," said Sharapova, who was a contentious choice to represent the women's champions last week at the official draw.

She was banned for 15 months

after testing positive for meldonium, not long after the medication was added to the list of banned substances, when she was in Australia in 2016.

There were all kinds of comebacks on Tuesday. Six-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic and 2014 winner Stan Wawrinka returned from injuries that had sidelined them since Wimbledon, top-ranked Simona Halep recovered from 5-2 down in her first set and a tumble in the second, and 2016 champion Angelique Kerber continued her amazing return to form.

Defending champion Roger Federer just picked up where he left off, beating Aljaz Bedene 6-3, 6-4, 6-3 in a night match, his first on Rod Laver Arena since clinching a career-reviving title in Melbourne last year.

Djokovic tweaked his service motion while recovering from

an injured right elbow, and used it to good effect in a 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 win over Donald Young.

Wawrinka, who had six months out after surgery on his left knee, beat Ricardas Berankis 6-3, 6-4, 2-6, 7-6 (2).

Fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev, No. 5 Dominic Thiem, No. 7 David Goffin, No. 12 Juan Martin del Potro and No. 19 Tomas Berdych all advanced, but No. 20 Roberto Bautista Agut lost to Fernando Verdasco and former Wimbledon finalist Milos Raonic lost to Lukas Lacko.

No. 13 Sam Querrey restored some order for the U.S. men with a 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 win over Feliciano Lopez.

Madison Keys reversed a trend, becoming the only one of the four American women who contested the U.S. Open semifinals four months ago to reach the second round in Australia.

The 17th-seeded Keys, the

U.S. Open runner-up, advanced with a 6-1, 7-5 win over Wang Qiang and will be one of four American women who made it through the opening two days.

Halep ended a run of back-to-back first-round exits in Melbourne by beating teenage wild-card entry Destanee Aiava 7-6 (5), 6-1, setting up a match against 2014 Wimbledon finalist Eugenie Bouchard.

Former No. 1-ranked Kerber, the 2016 Australian Open champion, continued her resurgent run with a 6-0, 6-4 victory over Anna-Lena Friedsam to extend her streak to 10 consecutive wins.

Wimbledon champion Garbine Muguruza, No. 6 Karolina Pliskova, No. 8 Caroline Garcia, No. 9 Johanna Konta, No. 16 Elena Vesnina, No. 18 Ash Barty, No. 26 Agnieszka Radwanska and No. 28 Mirjana Lucic-Baroni also advanced.

NHL roundup

Tavares scores in OT to lift Islanders over Canadiens

Associated Press

MONTREAL — John Tavares scored his second goal of the game 1:51 into overtime to lift the New York Islanders to a 5-4 win over the Montreal Canadiens on Monday night.

Mathew Barzal, coming off his second five-point game of the season, had a goal and two assists to keep up his scoring binge for New York. Anthony Beauvillier and Adam Pelech also scored to help the Islanders win their third straight after a season-high five-game losing streak, and Thomas Greiss finished with a career-high 52 saves.

Trailing 4-2, Drouin banged in a rebound of Jakub Jerabek's shot with 44 seconds left in the second for his first goal in 14 games since Nov. 29. Pacio-

retty tied it on a power play as he tipped in Jeff Petry's point shot with just under 7 minutes remaining in regulation.

Sharks 4, Kings 1: Chris Tierney had a goal and an assist, and Martin Jones made 35 saves and visiting San Jose beat Los Angeles for the third straight time.

Barclay Goodrow and Mikkel Boedker ended lengthy goal droughts for the Sharks, who built a three-goal lead during another strong game by Jones against his former Kings teammates.

Dylan DeMelo returned from a three-game injury absence with two assists for his second career multipoint game. Joonas Donskoi also had two assists, and Joe Thornton added an empty-net goal.

Trevor Lewis ended Jones'

shutout bid with 7:18 to play, but the Kings lost their fourth straight.

Avalanche 3, Ducks 1: Nathan MacKinnon kept up his torrid home scoring with a goal, Jonathan Bernier stopped 33 shots and Colorado won its seventh straight.

Matt Nieto and Colin Wilson also scored for the Avalanche, who are outscoring opponents 29-10 during their longest winning streak since the 2005-06 season.

MacKinnon leads the league in scoring on home ice this season with 41 points (15 goals and 26 assists) in 24 games.

Chris Wagner had a goal in the second period for Anaheim. It was his first goal since Nov. 27.

Stars 3, Bruins 2 (OT): Former Boston first-round draft

pick Tyler Seguin scored on a delayed penalty in overtime to lift visiting Dallas.

Boston rallied from a 2-0 deficit to send the game into overtime and earn a point for the 13th consecutive game. But with about three minutes left in the 3-on-3 overtime, the referee signaled for a penalty.

The Stars pulled goalie Kari Lehtonen for an extra skater and spent the next minute holding the puck, knowing they could maintain a 4-on-3 advantage the rest of the way. With 2:01 showing on the clock, Seguin skated across the middle and beat Anton Khudobin with the game-winner.

Stephen Johns and Alexander Radulov also scored for Dallas, and Lehtonen stopped 30 shots.