

Pentagon offers temporary housing help

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon will temporarily boost the Basic Allowance for Housing rates for thousands of troops in parts of the country that have seen spikes in rental costs this year amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Wednesday.

Austin approved the temporary BAH increase for all troops in locations where rental prices have risen at least 10% during 2021. His memorandum issued Wednesday also directed commanders to new resources meant to give them tools to help their troops who might face economic challenges or don't have sufficient amounts of food as consumer prices increase at the highest rate in decades.

"Our men and women in uniform and their families have enough to worry about — basic necessities, like food and housing, shouldn't be among them," Austin told reporters in a news briefing at the Pentagon. "This is a readiness issue. And that's why I'm focused on making sure that our service members and their families have what they need to thrive so that they can focus on the hard work of de-

fending our nation."

Austin also approved the military to reimburse service members for the cost of temporary lodging — typically in hotels — beyond the current 10-day limit in locations with tight housing markets.

BAH rates are set in individual locations where service members are stationed and vary based on local markets, but Austin's temporary increase authorization would likely impact troops at dozens of bases in the United States. Rent prices for one- and two-bedroom apartments in the U.S. have increased on average nearly 20% since last year, according to an October report by Apartment Guide.

Nearly every state saw some rental rate increases, Apartment Guide found. In September, Oregon, Nevada, Florida and Arizona saw the largest year-over-year spikes for two-bedroom apartments, according to Apartment Guide. The average two-bedroom rent price jumped about 41% in Oregon and about 38% in Florida.

Austin directed the Army, Navy and Air Force departments to provide an update on the economic issues impacting troops within 90 days.

In a rare news briefing by the defense sec-

retary, he revealed the new steps just ahead of the holiday season, noting the economic issues, which primarily impact junior enlisted troops, can be felt more this time of year.

It also comes about one week after the federal government announced Nov. 10 that inflation had increased 6.2% in the last 12 months, the largest year-over-year jump since 1990.

Austin's memo pointed military leaders to the Pentagon's new Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit, which provides them information about signs their troops might be facing food insecurity, educates them on how to discuss the issue and where they might find help.

Not having sufficient amounts of food is not a new issue among the military's lowest paid troops. Lawmakers have spent years attempting to address the problem, which they have said impacts thousands of service members.

BAH payments for service members is counted as income in the federal system, which often disqualifies low-paid troops from the federal food assistance program known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Navy says 97% of active-duty force is fully vaccinated

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — About 99.7% of all active-duty sailors are at least partially vaccinated against the coronavirus less than two weeks ahead of the Navy's deadline, the service announced Wednesday.

The Navy also said all but about 3% are fully vaccinated. The Pentagon considers troops fully vaccinated two weeks after their final coronavirus shot.

The total does not include the Marine Corps' numbers, though the two services share the same Nov. 28 deadline for troops to be vaccinated. As of Nov. 10, about 94% of active-duty Marines were at least partially vaccinated and 89% were fully vaccinated, according to the service.

The deadline was established after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in August ordered all service members to be vaccinated.

The Marine Corps said it would publish its number of approved exemptions after the deadline passes.

The Pentagon allows troops to request medical or religious waivers for the vaccine. As of Wednesday, the Navy had issued six permanent medical exemptions for the shot and no religious exemptions.

Service members who decline the vaccine without an exemption could face separation from the military for failing to obey a lawful order, the Pentagon has said.

Navy personnel without an exemption will have five days to start receiving their shots before facing separation from the service, according to a memo Monday from the service. Those troops will receive a general discharge, meaning they could lose some Department of Veterans Affairs benefits such as tuition funding under the GI Bill.

Some lawmakers, such as Jim Inhofe, of

Oklahoma, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, have worried the mandate would hurt military readiness by forcing out objectors.

"At a time when our adversaries continue to increase their quantitative and qualitative advantage against our forces, we should seek to ensure that no policy, even unintentionally, hinders military readiness," Inhofe wrote to Austin in a letter last month.

However, the Pentagon has said mandating the vaccines helps maintain readiness, as an unvaccinated force could be rendered undeployable if they catch the coronavirus.

"The rise of the highly transmissible delta variant and the speed with which it transmits among individuals have increased risk to our Marines and the Marine Corps' mission," the Marine Corps said in a statement last week. "We are confident the vaccine protects our Marines, our communities and the nation."

USS Rushmore heads to new homeport

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The latest vessel to be stationed at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, arrived this week as a replacement for its sister ship, which returned to the United States two months ago.

The amphibious dock landing ship USS Rushmore steamed into Sasebo, on the island of Kyushu in southern Japan, on Wednesday after a journey across the Pacific, according to a news release from the U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet.

A spokesperson for Sasebo Naval Base did not return a phone request for comment on Thursday.

Formerly homeported in San Diego, the Rushmore has been in service since 1991.

The Whidbey Island-class ship has served in numerous operations over the years, including Restore Hope and Support Hope in Africa in the early 1990s and Iraqi Freedom in 2005.

"Rushmore and her Sailors look forward to continuing our service to the Navy and the Nation while forward deployed to the tip of the spear," said the ship's skipper, Cmdr. Emily Royse, in the Wednesday news release. "Our crew is ready to join the elite blue-green team of the America Expeditionary Strike Group, and to establish positive relationships with our new host country, and our partners and allies."

The strike group's "blue" team include vessels surrounding the amphibious assault ship USS America; the "green" team

is the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit.

The Rushmore arrives as a replacement for the USS Germantown, which left Sasebo in September and returned to San Diego after a decade of service in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Rushmore has a fantastic reputation, and I am certain that the team will seamlessly pick up where Germantown left off," said Capt. Greg Baker, commodore of Amphibious Squadron 11, in the release. "Commander Emily Royse brings a wealth of [forward-deployed naval forces] and Sasebo experience, and I am excited for her return to set an even higher bar of excellence as Rushmore operates with the ships, Sailors and Marines of the America Expeditionary Strike Group."

Marines end rescue team in Africa and Middle East

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

DJIBOUTI — A medical evacuation in the Indian Ocean last week relied on Marine Corps aircraft recently sent to Africa after the service quietly dropped a crisis response approach born in the wake of the deadly 2012 attack in Benghazi, Libya.

The MV-22 Ospreys that delivered Air Force pararescuemen to a cargo ship to save a British merchant mariner were from San Diego-based Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 161, which deployed to Djibouti in September. So was a KC-130 tanker that provided aerial refueling along the way.

Previously, a Special Marine Air-Ground Task Force in Kuwait sent tilt-rotor detachments to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, Osprey pilot Capt. Marc Meier said in an interview at the base in October.

But the Marine Corps quietly ended rotations of that task force, known as SPMAGTF-

Crisis Response-Central Command. The new crisis response approach combines Marine airlift with Army ground forces.

"The last rotation of the SPMAGTF-CR-CC redeployed last month, and will not be replaced by another permanent element," 1st Lt. Jack Coppola, a Marine spokesman in Tampa, Fla., said in an email.

Marine Corps officials said earlier this month that they would provide details on the unannounced decision to cease SPMAGTF rotations to the Middle East and Africa.

Commanded by a colonel, the specially tailored task force was made up of over 2,000 troops in command, air combat, logistics and ground combat elements.

There are still Marine Corps units in Central Command and elsewhere capable of rapidly deploying, Coppola said.

"Marines will always provide rapid response capability and serve as America's 911 force," he added.

Help needed at military mailrooms ahead of surge

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Post offices on military bases are calling for volunteers to help sort mail with thousands of holiday packages expected in coming weeks.

At the home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo, officials are looking to put five volunteers to work each day with package deliveries expected to peak in mid-December, 374th Airlift Wing spokesman Staff Sgt. Juan Torres said in a Nov. 16 email.

"Having an adequate number of volunteers enables postal workers to process the packages while volunteers assist by delivering mail and sorting letters," he said.

Most months Yokota's mailroom receives between 15,000 and 17,000 packages, he said.

"During the month of December, we see an increase in mail of up to 27,000 packages," he said. "Due to this increase, we ask that customers remain patient

as we work diligently to process your holiday mail for you and your loved ones."

The post office at Misawa Air Base, home of the 35th Fighter Wing in northeastern Japan, expects between 700 and 800 parcels per delivery through the holiday season, Misawa spokesman Tech. Sgt. Chris Jacobs said in an email Thursday.

The post office there will be soliciting mailroom volunteers for Dec. 1-14, he said.

"As of yet, we do not have a solid number of how many volunteers will step up, but any organization that wants to volunteer more than 10 members at a time needs to arrange their volunteers through the local Post Office," he said.

"We ask that patrons send their packages on time to ensure they're delivered before the holidays," Torres said.

The Postal Service recommends shipping retail ground mail by Wednesday, priority and first-class mail by Dec. 1 and express mail by Dec. 15, he said.

Navy orders sub crews to review navigation safety

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Submarine crews have been ordered to review navigation safety as the U.S. Navy continues to investigate a nuclear-powered vessel's undersea collision last month.

The commanders of U.S. Submarine Forces and Submarine Forces Pacific — Vice Adm. William Houston and Rear Adm. Jeffrey Jablon — sent a joint message to the Navy's submarine crews on Wednesday declaring a "navigation stand-down," Submarine Forces spokesman Cmdr. Paul Macapagal told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday.

Unlike stand-downs issued to aviation crews, the order doesn't mean submariners will cease operations. Instead, the crews are slated to review navigational training and safety procedures, Macapagal said.

The message comes as the Navy continues to grapple with fast-attack submarine USS Connecticut's collision with a seamount, or undersea mountain, on Oct. 2.

"Submarine crews will be reviewing the lessons learned from USS Connecticut and governing doctrine to reinforce sound navigation practices," Macapagal said. "Submarine crews will review required procedures

in navigation planning, operations, risk management and best practices as part of this training."

Macapagal said he couldn't release the original message to Stars and Stripes because portions of it contain classified information. He also couldn't specify a timetable for the stand-down, but he did say it's a "near-term" situation rather than a long-term one.

Details on the Connecticut's collision have remained sparse, but Navy investigators revealed on Nov. 2 that the Seawolf-class submarine struck an "uncharted seamount" in international waters in the Indo-Pacific region.

The exact location of the incident was not publicly disclosed, but an unnamed defense official said it occurred in the South China Sea, according to an Oct. 8 report from U.S. Naval Institute News.

The collision, which resulted in minor injuries to about a dozen sailors, also led to the removal of the Connecticut's commander, executive officer and enlisted chief. Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, commander of 7th Fleet, relieved the three on Nov. 4, citing a "loss of confidence" in their leadership.

B-21 cost estimate: \$203B over 30 years

Bloomberg

The U.S. Air Force's next-generation B-21 stealth bomber program will likely cost taxpayers at least \$203 billion to develop, purchase and operate 100 aircraft over 30 years, according to new service estimates.

The figure represents the most complete estimate to date for the heavily classified program won by Northrop Grumman Corp. in 2015. It's also an attempt by the Air Force to make good on a vow to help prevent sticker shock among lawmakers by providing more transparency on cost data as the secretive aircraft proceeds through development.

According to figures provided to Bloomberg News, the total cost, priced in fiscal year 2019 dollars, includes \$25.1 billion for development, \$64 billion for production, and \$114 billion for 30 years of sustaining and operating a fleet of 100 bombers.

Those costs are part of a huge "bow wave" of spending facing the U.S. military — and American taxpayers — as the Pentagon seeks to upgrade the nation's land-sea-air triad of nuclear weapons and pay for weapons systems including new Ford-class aircraft carriers, Columbia-class submarines and nearly 2,500 F-35 jets for the Air Force, Navy and Marines.

The service had previously released B-21 development and production estimates but not its 30-year operations and support costs, which traditionally comprise as much as 70% of a program's life-cycle cost.

The \$114 billion sustainment estimate is "used for planning purposes," Air Force acting acquisition chief Darlene Costello said in a statement. The estimate "will become more mature when the program begins fielding aircraft and accumulating actual costs — manpower, maintenance, modifications, flying hours, fuel consumption," she added.

The bomber program is still in the engineering and manufacturing development phase and "remains on track to the government acquisition program baseline for cost, schedule and performance," Costello said.

Democratic Rep. Adam Smith, of Washington state, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and a frequent skeptic of Pentagon acquisition programs, said in April that the program is "on time, on budget, and they're making it work in a very intelligent way."

QAnon Shaman gets over 3 years for storming US Capitol on Jan. 6

New York Daily News

A right-wing extremist known as the QAnon Shaman was sentenced to 41 months in prison Wednesday for storming the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 in a horned headdress.

Jacob Chansley, the conspiracy theorist who brandished a 12-foot spear and left a threatening note for Vice President Mike Pence, will stew behind bars for three years and five months — the most severe sentence meted out so far for the insurrection.

"What you did was terrible. You made yourself the epitome of the riot," U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth told Chansley before imposing sentence in Washington.

Prosecutors described Chansley as "the flag-bearer" of the Jan. 6 insurrection. The government had asked Lamberth, who was appointed by President Ronald Reagan, to

impose a 51-month sentence.

Chansley pleaded guilty to a felony count of obstructing an official proceeding before Congress. During the riot, he took a seat in the Senate chamber that had just been occupied by Pence. Chansley left a note on the dais reading "It's Only A Matter of Time. Justice Is Coming!"

Chansley, 31, pleaded for mercy before being sentenced and expressed remorse for his role in the attack, which he said was inspired by former President Donald Trump.

The Arizona military veteran compared himself to Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi in a rambling statement.

The tough sentence is somewhat surprising because it is longer than the sentence also handed down by Lamberth to another Capitol rioter who attacked a police officer, unlike Chansley.

Advisory accuses Iran-backed hackers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hackers linked to the Iranian government have been targeting a “broad range of victims” inside the United States, including by deploying ransomware, according to an advisory issued Wednesday by American, British and Australian officials.

The advisory says that in recent months, Iran has exploited computer vulnerabilities exposed by hackers before they can be fixed and targeted entities in the transportation, health care and public health sectors. The attackers leveraged the initial hack for additional operations, such as data exfiltration, ransomware and extortion, according to the advisory. The group has used the same Microsoft Exchange vulnerability in Australia, officials say.

The warning is notable because even though ransomware

attacks remain prevalent in the U.S., most of the significant ones in the past year have been attributed to Russia-based criminal hacker gangs rather than Iranian hackers.

Government officials aren’t the only ones noticing the Iranian activity: Tech giant Microsoft announced Tuesday that it had seen six different groups in Iran deploying ransomware since last year.

Microsoft said one of the groups spends significant time and energy trying to build rapport with their intended victims before targeting them with spearphishing campaigns. The group uses fake conference invitations or interview requests and frequently masquerade as officials at think tanks in Washington, D.C., as a cover, Microsoft said.

Once rapport is built and a malicious link is sent, the Iranians

are extra pushy at trying to get their victims to click on it, said James Elliott, a member of the Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center.

“These guys are the biggest pain in the rear. Every two hours they’re sending an email,” Elliott said at the Cyberwarcon cybersecurity conference Tuesday.

Earlier this year Facebook announced it had found Iranian hackers using “sophisticated fake online personas” to build trust with targets and get them to click on malicious links and often posed as recruiters of defense and aerospace companies.

Researchers at the CrowdStrike cybersecurity firm said they and competitors began seeing this type of Iranian activity last year.

The Iranian ransomware attacks, unlike those sponsored by North Korea’s government, are

not designed to generate revenue so much as for espionage, to sow disinformation, to harass and embarrass foes — Israel, chief among them — and to essentially wear down their targets, CrowdStrike researchers said at the Cyberwarcon event.

“While these operations will use ransom notes and dedicated leak sites demanding hard cryptocurrency, we’re really not seeing any viable effort at actual currency generation,” CrowdStrike global threat analysis director Katie Blankenship said.

CrowdStrike considers Iran to be the trendsetter in this novel “low form” of cyberattack, which typically involves paralyzing a network with ransomware, stealing information and then leaking it online. The researchers call the method “lock and leak.” It is less visible, less costly and “provides more room for deniability,” Blan-

Taiwan deploys top F-16V jets amid Chinese threat

Associated Press

CHIAYI, Taiwan — Taiwan has deployed the most advanced version of the F-16 fighter jet in its air force, as the self-ruled island steps up its defense capabilities in the face of continuing threats from China, which claims it as part of its territory.

Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen commissioned into service 64 upgraded F-16V fighter jets at an air force base in Chiayi on Thursday. The aircraft represent part of Taiwan’s total 141 F-16 A/B jets, an older model from the 1990s that will be completely retired by the end of 2023.

Tsai said the upgrade project showed the strength of Taiwan’s cooperation with the U.S. defense industry. It comes at a time the island’s status has become a major point of tension in the U.S.-China relationship. Beijing has been stepping up its threat by sending

fighter jets in combat formations into Taiwan’s buffer zone southwest of the island on a regular basis, along with longer-range missions into the Western Pacific.

China also has increased its rhetoric. President Xi Jinping told President Joe Biden this week that challenges to China’s claim over the island amounted to playing with fire. China and Taiwan split during a civil war in 1949; Beijing has not ruled out force to reunify with the island.

The United States’ “One China” policy recognizes Beijing as the government of China but allows informal relations and defense ties with Taipei.

“This represents the steadfast promise of the Taiwan-U.S. partnership,” Tsai said. “I trust that in holding fast to democratic values, there will definitely be more countries with similar values who will stand with us on this front.”

China uses water cannon on Philippine supply boats

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Chinese coast guard ships blocked and sprayed a powerful stream of water at two Philippine boats carrying supplies to troops at a disputed South China Sea shoal, prompting Manila to order Beijing’s ships to back off and warn that its supply vessels are covered by a mutual defense treaty with the United States, Manila’s top diplomat said Thursday.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said no one was hurt in the incident on Tuesday, but the two supply ships had to abort their mission to provide food to Filipino forces occupying Second Thomas Shoal, which lies off western Palawan province in the Philippines’ internationally recognized exclusive economic zone.

Locsin said in a tweet that the three Chinese coast guard ships’

actions were illegal and urged them “to take heed and back off.”

It was the latest flare-up in the long-simmering territorial disputes in the strategic waterway, where China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have overlapping claims. China claims virtually the entire South China Sea and has transformed seven shoals into missile-protected island bases to cement its assertions, ratcheting up tensions and alarming rival claimants and Western governments led by the U.S.

The Philippine government conveyed to China “our outrage, condemnation and protest of the incident,” Locsin said.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China’s coast guard had upheld China’s sovereignty after the Philippine ships entered Chinese waters at night without permission.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Buck goes to church on hunting season's 1st day

MI STURGIS — A 10-point buck sought sanctuary inside a southern Michigan church on opening day of the state's firearm deer hunting season.

Pastors at Grace Sturgis encountered the buck inside the church's auditorium on Monday before it leapt through a window and back into the wild.

A video the church posted on Facebook shows the buck wandering around the church. Pastors Amanda and Luke Eicher and Justin Wickey erected barricades in a hallway to try to keep the animal from the rest of the church. At one point, it climbed stairs to a balcony.

Company fined \$39K in fatal trench collapse

NC TAYLORSVILLE — A construction company has been fined \$39,200 by the North Carolina Department of Labor for a trench collapse that killed a worker in May.

Shane Anthony Sharpe, 38, of Taylorsville, was killed in the collapse of a 10-foot deep trench at an Alexander County shopping center. Crews were working on a drainage line, according to the Alexander County Sheriff's Office.

After a six-month investigation, the Department of Labor levied \$39,200 in penalties against the contractor on the job, Barnes Backhoe & Grading Inc.

The Charlotte Observer reported that Natalie Bouchard, a department spokeswoman, said the state cited the company "for one alleged willful serious violation and four alleged serious violations of the Occupational

Safety and Health Act of North Carolina."

Roadrunner hitchhikes across country in van

ME FREEDOM — A wayward roadrunner is on the mend in Maine after traveling across the country in a moving van.

The greater roadrunner, a species native to Southwestern states, hitched a ride in the storage area of a moving van from Las Vegas to Westbrook, Maine. Volunteers took the bird to Avian Haven, a bird rehabilitation facility in Maine.

Avian Haven representatives said that they took the call about the bird Nov. 13 and that it continued to rest Tuesday. The center is looking at ways to return the roadrunner to Nevada once it is healthy enough, said Diane Winn, Avian Haven's executive director.

Graves won't be moved as cemetery problem solved

IA SERGEANT BLUFF — Plans to relocate an Iowa cemetery that is surrounded by a brickmaker's industrial complex have been scrapped.

Established in 1854, the Woodbury Township Cemetery in Sergeant Bluff has reached its capacity of 1,200 graves, and there's nowhere to expand.

In August, Brickworks North America had offered a nearby 10-acre site for a new cemetery with space for 5,600 graves. The company also offered to pay to develop the new cemetery and move the graves, The Sioux City Journal reported.

But some people didn't want their ancestors' graves disturbed, and Brickworks recently learned that relocation costs

would run \$2.5 million higher than initially anticipated.

Instead, Brickworks and the city agreed to a land exchange in which the company will give the city the 10-acre site for a new cemetery. In return, the city will give the brickmaker a road that runs through the company's industrial complex and enters the cemetery on the south.

Town clerks charged with taking more than \$200K

AL CULLMAN — Two onetime clerks from a north Alabama town were charged with stealing more than \$200,000 by forging checks, making up work hours and buying items with credit and debit cards, authorities said.

Shannon James, 43, who worked as town clerk for Garden City, and 39-year-old Leslie Johnson, who was the utility clerk, were charged with ethics violations, theft of public funds and possession of forged documents, authorities in Cullman County said Tuesday.

The town council voted to place both James and Johnson on leave on Sept. 20 but didn't give a reason, The Cullman Times reported.

Mayor charged with posting revenge porn

MD CAMBRIDGE — A Maryland mayor has been arrested and charged with distributing revenge porn online, prosecutors announced Monday.

Andrew Bradshaw, the 32-year-old mayor of Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore, is accused of posting nude photos of a woman he was no longer in a romantic relationship with.

Bradshaw posted the photos

using multiple Reddit accounts he created using variations of the woman's name and birthdate, according to a news release from the Office of the State Prosecutor. The photos were captioned with racial slurs and sexually explicit language and were posted in April and May, authorities said.

Bradshaw was arrested Monday and charged with 50 counts of distributing revenge porn and released on his own recognizance, according to online court records.

The woman contacted authorities in May after learning that the photos were posted on Reddit. She told authorities that she had sent the photos only to Bradshaw while they were in an intimate relationship and she didn't give him permission to redistribute them, the document states.

Teacher's family receives unclaimed property check

WV CHARLESTON — The family of a deceased West Virginia teacher has received an unclaimed property check of more than \$151,000.

State Treasurer Riley Moore presented the check Saturday to the family of Debra Handy.

A lifelong resident of War, Handy worked with the McDowell County school system for more than four decades. After her 2017 death, the funds in her teacher's retirement account were eventually turned over to the treasurer's office as unclaimed property.

Handy's daughter, Willa Handy, also is a teacher and plans to use the funds to complete her doctoral degree, Moore's office said in a news release.

— From wire reports

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Nuggets' Jokic done with playing nice

Associated Press

Reigning NBA MVP Nikola Jokic is steadily learning what all great big men have had to figure out when it comes to physical play: how to show enough is enough without hurting the team.

The Denver Nuggets' center — nicknamed "Joker" — has been known to turn to officials over perceived no-calls down low, with a frustrated look as he stretches out his arms.

It's the life of an NBA big man. Just ask Shaquille O'Neal, Dwight Howard or even Zion Williamson.

"I've coached a lot of good big guys and I always think it's been sort of open season on big guys," said Stan Van Gundy, an analyst for TNT who coached the New Orleans Pelicans last season and encouraged Williamson to speak up on fouls. "I mean, we just allow people to beat the heck out of them. So big guys have to make the decision of, 'How much is enough?'"

The 7-foot Jokic reached his breaking point again last Monday, when he shoved Miami forward Markieff Morris in the back shortly after being elbowed in the ribs.

"I felt bad, really bad," Jokic said afterward. "I felt I just needed to protect myself but on the other hand, I'm not supposed to react that way, get thrown out of the game."

The fracas later led to a back-and-forth exchange on Twitter between the Jokic brothers, Strahinja and Nemanja, and Morris' twin, Marcus.

Last year in the playoffs the Jokic broth-

ers defended him after the Denver big man felt an opponent had crossed the line. His siblings had to be held back in the stands when things got heated between Jokic and Phoenix guard Devin Booker during the playoffs last season. Jokic was ejected from that game.

It's a fine line to walk, especially for skilled big men.

"For great team players and great winners like Jokic, that is the calculus. He would probably love to stick up for himself every single night, but he puts the team ahead of himself," Van Gundy said. "Because of that he has to put up with a lot of crap. But at times, it's going to boil over and it's hard to fault those guys for drawing the line."

Nuggets coach Michael Malone has long lobbied for Jokic to get more calls than he does as one of the game's best players who regularly takes shots from opponents.

This recent episode was a side of Jokic that hasn't always been on display. The center known for his no-look passes, three-pointers from the top of the key and tip-it-to-himself rebounds lost his cool when Morris fouled him. The 6-9 Morris stuck an elbow in his ribs at half-court and turned and walked away as if nothing had happened.

Morris had his back turned when Jokic retaliated, knocking him to the ground with a push that left Morris with a sore neck. It earned the 26-year-old Jokic an ejection, a one-game suspension and a clear message — he's only going to take so much.

"Look, man, sometimes when you're challenged, sometimes you have to let people know that that's not going to be tolerated," said Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins, who's an analyst for the Atlanta Hawks telecasts. "You've got to have that dog mentality and that's what we had back in the day."

Back in the day, players could do that. In today's NBA, it comes with a steep price.

With Jokic off to another MVP-type season, posting big numbers with Jamal Murray (knee) sidelined, Denver can't afford for him to be ejected and suspended (the Nuggets did beat Indiana in the game he sat out). A second-round pick in 2014, Jokic is averaging 25.3 points, 13.7 rebounds and 6.3 assists through Sunday night.

The Serbian standout has two triple-doubles this season and 59 for his career, tying him with Larry Bird for eighth all-time. Jokic is currently fifth in the MVP odds, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, behind Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Luka Doncic and Giannis Antetokounmpo.

"I love him," said Portland coach Chauncey Billups, who grew up in Denver and played for the Nuggets over two different stints. "He plays the right way. He plays for everybody else on the floor. I think his spirit is infectious."

Van Gundy, the longtime NBA coach turned TNT analyst, has advice for anyone who may think they have a way to stop him: "You don't," Van Gundy cracked. "That's why the guy's the MVP of the league."

Antetokounmpo, Middleton propel Bucks past Lakers

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 47 points and Khris Middleton tied Milwaukee's franchise record for career three-pointers as the Bucks beat the Los Angeles Lakers 109-102 on Wednesday.

Middleton returned after missing eight games due to COVID-19, played 30 minutes and made consecutive three-pointers 30 seconds apart early in the fourth quarter to put Milwaukee ahead for good. The second of those threes was his 1,051st with the Bucks to match Ray Allen for first place on the team's all-time list.

Allen holds the NBA record with 2,973 three-pointers.

Suns 105, Mavericks 98: Devin Booker scored 24 points, Deandre Ayton had 19 points and 13 rebounds and host Phoenix

beat Dallas for its 10th straight victory.

Nets 109, Cavaliers 99: James Harden scored 27 points to help host Brooklyn beat short-handed Cleveland.

Heat 113, Pelicans 98: Jimmy Butler had a triple-double in his return from a sprained right ankle, finishing with 31 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists in Miami's victory over visiting New Orleans.

Hawks 110, Celtics 99: John Collins scored 20 points, Cam Reddish and Kevin Huerter had 19 apiece and host Atlanta beat Boston for its third straight victory.

Hornets 97, Wizards 87: Terry Rozier scored 19 points, Miles Bridges added 17 and host Charlotte beat Washington for its fourth straight victory.

Magic 104, Knicks 98: Cole Anthony had 15 points and 10 rebounds, Mo Bamba

added 12 points and 11 rebounds and Orlando rallied to win at New York.

Thunder 101, Rockets 89: Lu Dort scored 34 points to help host Oklahoma City beat Houston. Dort made 14 of 22 shots and had the second-best points total of his career.

Timberwolves 107, Kings 97: Anthony Edwards scored 16 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter and Karl-Anthony Towns had 22 in Minnesota's victory over visiting Sacramento.

Trail Blazers 112, Bulls 107: Damian Lillard struggled at the start but warmed up to finish with 22 points and 10 assists, rallying host Portland past Chicago.

Pistons 97, Pacers 89: Jeremi Grant scored 19 points, Cory Joseph added 18 and host Detroit rallied to beat Indiana.

Jays' Ray, Brewers' Burnes win Cy Youngs

Associated Press

In this Year of the Pitcher, both Robbie Ray and Corbin Burnes completed their own kind of comebacks.

Ray rebounded from a dismal season that saw him take a rare pay cut to win the AL Cy Young Award with Toronto while Burnes returned from an early bout of COVID-19 with Milwaukee to win the NL's top pitching prize Wednesday.

"Everyone has their story," Burnes said during a conference call.

Burnes led the majors with a 2.43 ERA and edged out Philadelphia's Zack Wheeler. They both got 12 first-place votes from members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America, but Burnes drew 14 seconds to Wheeler's nine.

Burnes pitched 167 innings, the fewest for a Cy Young-winning starter in a non-shortened season, and the right-hander struck out 234. Wheeler fanned 247 — one shy of Ray's big league-leading total — and topped the majors with 213½ innings.

"Everyone's case," Burnes

said, "was different."

Ray was best in the AL with a 2.84 ERA and 193⅓ innings. That came after a pandemic-shortened 2020 when the lefty went a combined 2-5 with a 6.62 ERA for Arizona and the Blue Jays and issued the most walks in the majors.

"I knew ... I was going to have to put in some hard work," Ray said, adding, "I knew I wanted to make changes."

And in a sign of just how much voters have moved past simply win-loss records while crunching new-era stats, Dodgers lefty Julio Urías posted the most victories in going 20-3, but finished a distant eighth and didn't get a single top-four nod.

Max Scherzer, who pitched for Los Angeles and Washington, finished third in the NL and Dodgers ace Walker Buehler was fourth.

Burnes became the first Brewers pitcher to earn the NL honor — Pete Vuckovich in 1982 and Rollie Fingers in 1981 won the award when Milwaukee was still in the American League.

Ray got 29 first-place votes and became the first Toronto

pitcher to win since the late Roy Halladay in 2003. Yankees ace Gerrit Cole drew the other top vote and finished second and Chicago White Sox righty Lance Lynn was third.

Ray went 13-7 in 32 starts and helped keep the Blue Jays in playoff contention until the final weekend.

Having turned 30 last month, the award sets him up well — a free agent, he turned down an \$18.4 million qualifying offer from Toronto earlier Wednesday.

"I'm enjoying free agency," he said. "The process is a lot of fun."

Ray said the Blue Jays are "still in the conversation."

"Obviously, I love Toronto, but we'll see where things go," he said.

Burnes was 11-5 and an All-Star for the NL Central champion Brewers. His innings count was lower than his competitors, owing to him missing two weeks in early May after testing positive for the coronavirus. In his first season as a full-time starter, Burnes struck out a record 58 before issuing his first walk. He tied the major league mark by

fanning 10 in a row against the Cubs in August.

Burnes combined with closer Josh Hader on a no-hitter against Cleveland in September. Burnes struck out 14 over eight innings in that game — it was the record ninth no-hitter in the majors this season, topping the eight set in 1884 when pitchers began throwing overhand.

Burnes had an 8.82 ERA in 28 relief appearances and four starts in 2019, then was 4-1 with a 2.11 ERA during the virus-shortened season when he was hampered by an oblique strain. He came back to lead the majors with 12.6 strikeouts per nine innings this year.

"You always have to evolve," he said.

Voting for the awards was completed before the playoffs began. Burnes threw six shutout innings against Atlanta in the NL Division Series and turned 27 later in October.

Ray's power arm always drew attention. He ranks No. 1 in major league history with 11.2 strikeouts per nine innings (minimum: 1,000 innings), and he was an All-Star with Arizona in 2017.

Houston re-signs Verlander for one year, \$25 million

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Justin Verlander reached a \$25 million deal to remain with the Houston Astros as he comes back from Tommy John surgery, and Brandon Belt accepted an \$18.4 million qualifying offer from the San Francisco Giants on Wednesday.

Verlander, a 38-year-old right-hander, has a conditional \$25 million option for 2023 as part of the agreement.

He made just one start in 2020, pitching six innings on July 24 in a win over Seattle on opening day before being placed on the injured list with a strained right forearm. He attempted a comeback after

he was injured, but announced on Sept. 19, 2020, that he needed Tommy John surgery and underwent the procedure on Oct. 1.

Verlander, a two-time Cy Young Award winner and the 2011 AL MVP, became a free agent after completing a \$94 million, three-year contract with the Astros. He said earlier this year that his rehabilitation was going well and added that he hated that he only played one game in the time that deal covered.

"That gnaws at me," he said. "But ... this was an unfortunate injury that nobody could have seen coming. But I still do like to earn my keep."

Verlander is 226-129 with a 3.33 ERA in 16 seasons.

Belt was the only one to accept among the 14 free agents who received the offers from their former clubs on Nov. 7. Bell is 33 and perhaps wary of a free-agent market at first base that includes 2020 NL MVP Freddie Freeman.

Belt hit .274 with a career-high 29 home runs and 59 RBIs last season.

Players who turned down offers included Freeman (Atlanta), shortstop Carlos Correa and Verlander (Houston), right-hander Raisel Iglesias (Los Angeles Angels), AL Cy Young Award winner Robbie Ray and second baseman/

shortstop Marcus Semien (Toronto), outfielder Nick Castellanos (Cincinnati), shortstop Trevor Story (Colorado), shortstop Corey Seager and infielder/outfielder Chris Taylor (Los Angeles Dodgers) and outfielder Michael Conforto (New York Mets).

Two of the players who received offers have finalized contracts with new teams. Left-hander Eduardo Rodríguez left Boston for a \$77 million, five-year contract with Detroit, and right-hander Noah Syndergaard left the Mets for a \$21 million, one-year contract with the Angels.

Capitals halt Kings' 8-game point streak

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Garnet Hathaway scored twice late in the third period and the Washington Capitals beat Los Angeles 2-0 Wednesday night, snapping the Kings' eight-game point streak.

The Capitals extended their point streak to six (5-0-1) with the win. They are tied with the Florida Panthers for the most points in the NHL with 25.

The game was scoreless until there was 3:30 remaining, when John Carlson caught Jonathan Quick playing out of position and flipped a pass to Hathaway, who was able to put it into the net.

"Tonight, what a play by Kuzy (Evgeny Kuznetsov) to John, and that's something we've been talking about, trying to get layers of the net but also finding a backdoor presence as well. And John is a skill player, so I just had to stand there and put my stick on the ice," Hathaway said.

Hathaway then added an empty-net goal with 1:18 left. He has five goals on the season and six points in the last four games.

"I thought he was playing good hockey,

but with the amount of offense that is out of the lineup right now, to have him contributing the way he is is really, really important," Capitals coach Peter Laviolette said of Hathaway. "He skates well, he handles the puck well. Shoots it hard. He goes to the net, he goes to the hard areas. There's no reason why he shouldn't score goals, so it's nice to see him get rewarded."

Ilya Samsonov made 34 saves for his second shutout this season and fifth of his career.

Los Angeles had a pair of scoring chances in the second but came away empty. Samsonov made a sprawling save on a wrist shot by Trevor Moore seven minutes into the period. He then made a pad save on Matt Roy's shot from the point and two subsequent rebound chances by Moore late in the period.

"It was a really good performance by him. He seemed like he was in control of the game, control of his crease. Focused. He did a really good job," Laviolette said of Samsonov.

Blackhawks 4, Kraken 2: Patrick Kane and Alex DeBrincat each had a goal and an

assist and visiting Chicago got its fourth straight win.

Seth Jones also scored to extend his points streak to seven games and Jake McCabe added an empty-netter for the Blackhawks to seal the win. Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 31 shots, including 16 in the second period.

Jared McCann and Yanni Gourde scored in the third period for Seattle, and Philipp Grubauer finished with 15 saves. The Kraken have lost five straight and seven of eight.

Avalanche 4, Canucks 2: Nazem Kadri and Mikko Rantanen each had a goal and two assists as visiting Colorado beat Vancouver.

Cale Makar had a goal and an assist and Gabriel Landeskog added an empty-netter for the Avalanche, who scored three times on the power play. Darcy Kuemper stopped 30 shots.

Tucker Poolman had a goal and an assist, and Conor Garland also scored for Vancouver, which lost its fifth straight to fall to 5-10-2. Thatcher Demko had 26 saves.

Four ranked teams to battle in Hall of Fame Tip-Off

Associated Press

The opening week of the college basketball season, as it usually is, was filled with marquee games.

No. 7 Duke beat No. 13 Kentucky in a battle of bluebloods and No. 3 Kansas knocked off Michigan State in a high-level doubleheader at Madison Square Garden. Top-ranked Gonzaga took down No. 8 Texas in Spokane and No. 2 UCLA outlasted No. 5 Villanova in what may be one of the best games of the season.

The second week is mostly filled with pay-to-play games, with one exception: the Hall of Fame Tip-Off Tournament in Uncasville, Conn., this weekend.

The mini-tournament at Mohegan Sun Arena features four AP Top 25 teams. It starts Saturday with Villanova facing No. 17 Tennessee, followed by No. 6 Purdue against No. 18 North Carolina.

The championship and conso-

lation games on Sunday will feature the same four ranked teams.

Villanova (1-1) entered the season as one of the frontrunners to win the national championship with a loaded team and point guard Collin Gillespie back from a knee injury that knocked him out of last postseason.

The Wildcats opened the season with a predictable rout of Mount St. Mary's, then headed cross country to face the Bruins, who have everyone back from last year's Final Four run.

The two highly ranked teams played what felt like an NCAA Tournament game at raucous Pauley Pavilion, with UCLA pulling out an 86-77 overtime victory.

"I think we can be a good team but we still have work to do," Villanova coach Jay Wright said.

After hosting Howard, the Wildcats get another big test against the Vols.

New-look Tennessee (2-0) has rolled through its early schedule, beating UT-Martin and East Tennessee State by a combined 60 points.

The Vols will have a week off before facing the Wildcats, which should give forward John Fulkerson more time to build up his stamina after returning from a thumb injury against East Tennessee State. The graduate senior had six points and 10 rebounds in 22 minutes.

"We wanted to get Fulk into game shape," Tennessee coach Rick Barnes said. "We might have left him in there a little longer than we normally would. There was one time he asked to come out. We need to get him ready."

North Carolina (2-0) has looked solid in its first two games under new coach Hubert Davis. The former understudy to Roy Williams did well on the recruiting circuit to keep the talent level up in Chapel Hill and the Tar

Heels outlasted Brown 94-87 on Friday after rolling over Loyola of Maryland in their opener.

"I was very proud of them, how they responded. Brown was a very good team; played extremely well and we didn't panic," Davis said. "Everybody that played in the game made a play that helped our team win."

Purdue, led by all-Big Ten forward Trevion Williams, opened the season with two easy wins. The Boilermakers rolled over Bellarmine 96-67 in their opener and routed Indiana State 92-67 Friday night.

Purdue has shown off its versatility through two games, hitting 16 three-pointers in the opener and dominating inside against Indiana State.

"They're elite on both ends of the floor, have incredible size and great talent," Sycamores coach Josh Schertz said. "All the hype is legit and they have a chance to be the last team standing."