TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

5805 N LAMAR BLVD • BOX 4087 • AUSTIN, TEXAS 78773-0001
512/424-2000
www.dps.texas.gov

March 9, 2026

Emma Lewis
records@americanoversight.org

RE: Public Information Request for certain communications. (TX-DPS-26-0449; DPS Reference # P004883-022326)

Dear Ms. Lewis:

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) received your above-referenced request on February 23, 2026. We have located records responsive to your request; however, we believe these records may be excepted from required public disclosure at this time. We are seeking a ruling from the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) with respect to disclosure of these records, and a copy of our request letter is enclosed. You will be notified directly by OAG when a ruling is issued. We are attached the records we believe can be released at this time.

Please note that some additional communications that may be responsive to this request were released in response to your request TX-DPS-26-447; DPS # P004857-022326.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please submit them in writing via email to publicrecords@dps.texas.gov. Thank you.

Cordially,

ML Calcote
Senior Assistant General Counsel
Office of General Counsel

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Cooper, Kevin
Sent: Mon, 23 Feb 2026 13:46:25 +0000
To: Undisclosed recipients:
Subject: FW: Daily Bull: The Early Voter Gets the Worm, Lawmaker Investigated, Vice Chair Power Play



The Early Voter Gets the Worm, Lawmaker Investigated, Vice Chair Power Play

USA! USA! USA! In a nailbiter of a game Sunday, the U.S. men's hockey team joined the U.S. women's team in beating their Canadian rivals for the Olympic gold medals. Brad, of course, was up early to watch the game, while Richie woke up to the good news significantly later. Regardless, we at *Texas Bullpen* have been yelling "PLAY FREE BIRD" all damn day.

But back to business. In today's Daily Bull, **early voting numbers** continue to roll in, a state rep. is **under investigation**, and Texas House Dems are trying a **new play**.

Top Lines

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

1. **Early Voting Numbers:** Through Saturday, more than 1 million Texans have voted across both the Republican and Democratic primaries, with the latter outpacing the former for the first time in a long time by more than 60,000 votes. These figures are partial because, per usual, counties are slow to report their early voting rolls to the state. But here are some observations:
    - Of the 560,000 Democratic primary voters, 23% have only voted in a general election before and 2.7% are totally new voters. Contrast that with the 501,000 Republicans, only 10% of which are general election-only voters and 1% are totally new.
    - That, paired with the raw totals, shows that Democrats are, so far, more enthusiastic about voting in this primary. That may last through the primary or it may not. And it doesn't necessarily translate to what happens during the general election in November. But it is another datapoint along the trendline that shows Democrats in Texas, even ones who haven't voted in a primary before, are quite motivated.
    - As in every election cycle, hat tip to the great Derek Ryan for his early voting reports that allow us novices a glimpse into the details of election turnout. Sign up for his early voting reports here.
2. **School Choice Showdown:** Texas Democrats sent a letter last week to Acting Comptroller Kelly Hancock, calling for Muslim private schools to be approved for the Education Freedom Accounts. State Rep. Salman Bhojani (D-Euless) said that out of at least 1,500 schools already approved, none are an accredited Muslim school.
    - "We're calling on Acting Comptroller Hancock to end this exclusion and ensure equal treatment for every faith community," Bhojani said.
    - Last year, Hancock requested a legal opinion from Attorney General Ken Paxton concerning whether private schools allegedly affiliated with designated terrorist organizations — such as the Muslim Brotherhood and CAIR — or foreign adversaries may legally participate in the school choice program.
    - Paxton affirmed that the comptroller's office had the authority and obligation to ensure that public funds are not used in an unlawful manner.
3. **Calvary for King:** A contingent of Republican members from the Texas House is traveling out to West Texas this week to help block walk for state

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Rep. Ken King (R-Canadian), who is facing a stiff primary challenge from John Browning. The members will meet in Lubbock on Tuesday, per an email obtained by *Texas Bullpen*, before heading to door knock in nearby Levelland.

- This race has become the most-watched in the GOP primaries for state legislative seats. Speaker Dustin Burrows (R-Lubbock) and members of the West Texas delegation will hold a press conference with King in Plainview on Monday, which is Browning's hometown.
- State Rep. Tony Tinderholt (R-Arlington) is headlining an event for Browning in Plainview on Tuesday.

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The Breakdown

OAG Goes After House Republican

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000004

The Office of the Attorney General has launched an investigation into state Rep. Stan Kitzman (R-Pattison), an embattled GOP incumbent who was among those in the Texas House that voted to impeach Ken Paxton in 2023. The probe, first reported by Texas Scorecard on Friday, concerns Kitzman's involvement with the Brookshire-Katy Drainage District as a hired consultant.

Kitzman ran the special purpose district for years and resigned from the post before running for Texas House. Since then, he has continued his involvement with the district as a hired consultant.

Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, a group under the Tim Dunn-funded apparatus like Texas Scorecard, alleged that Kitzman's arrangement breaches the Texas Constitution's emolument clause, which reads in part: "No person shall hold or exercise at the same time, more than one civil office of emolument."

Another section reads: "No…person holding a lucrative office under the United States, or this State, or any foreign government shall during the term for which he is elected or appointed, be eligible to the Legislature."

Though Kitzman is not explicitly employed by the special purpose district, opponents argue that his involvement still violates the spirit of those clauses in the Texas Constitution.

The Kitzman campaign, meanwhile, says that the lawmaker's "business operation has been legally vetted, fully complies with the Texas Constitution and state law, and is explicitly supported by two Attorney General opinions."

"These facts have been public and unchanged for years," the Kitzman campaign told *Texas Bullpen*. "There is nothing new here; only recycled political attacks timed for an election."

A 2005 legal opinion from Greg Abbott and another in 2019 under Paxton both stated the prohibition doesn't apply to independent contractors. Such opinions are legally nonbinding, but are issued as assessments of how a court would likely rule in such a situation. Because they are nonbinding, Paxton could rescind both of the previous opinions, including his, and issue a new one finding differently.

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Regardless, neither of the two currently existing legal opinions are determinative of the issue in court, should it ever reach that point. That outcome seems unlikely, as it's more effectively used as campaign fodder.

Kitzman, who faces challenger Dennis Geesaman in the March 3 election, is one of the most vulnerable House Republicans in this primary. This issue is sure to be featured in the home-stretch advertising, if it hasn't already.

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TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000006

House Democrats Test the Waters

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TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000007

Texas House Democrats are testing an intra-chamber pressure plate that was never set off during the 2025 legislative session.

State Rep. Ray Lopez (D-San Antonio) — vice chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety, and Veterans' Affairs — sent a letter to the committee's chair, state Rep. Cole Hefner (R-Mt. Pleasant) in an attempt to force a hearing over the death of Ruben Ray Martinez.

Martinez was shot by agents with the Department of Homeland Security in March 2025, which just came to light last week. The federal government said that Martinez was shot while attempting to drive through a traffic stop during spring break. The incident is currently under investigation by Texas Rangers.

Lopez said in his letter that he wants a hearing to investigate the matter itself. And in a move to force that, he is citing a House rule that was the subject of GOP handwringing last year.

"I am formally designating this matter for committee consideration and requesting that we work together to schedule a public hearing at the earliest appropriate opportunity," Lopez wrote. "I do so not in a spirit of confrontation, but in fulfillment of our shared constitutional responsibility as members of the Texas House of Representatives."

That rule, instituted as part of the deal struck between chamber leadership and House Democrats on a new slate of rules that included majority party-only chairmanships, states that a committee's chair must consult with the vice chair on committee business.

"The chair shall arrange to ensure that: measures or matters designated by the vice-chair are promptly scheduled for a public hearing under this rule," reads the part relevant to Lopez's maneuver. It was never exercised, and thus never tested, last year because doing so is an expected way to lose one's vice chairmanship in the next Legislature. Lopez is retiring, so he won't hold that position next year anyway.

But that provision was used by the irreconcilable faction of the GOP that still wars against House leadership to claim that the power Democrats once held as chairs was merely shifted to vice chairs. While a general, if temporary,

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peace has broken out between the majority of the two long-warring camps, some have pointed to this new development as proof of their concerns.

State Rep. Brian Harrison (R-Midlothian), who, like Hiroo Onoda, is the last holdout in the House, reacted to the letter, stating that under the chamber's rules, "Democrat Co-Chairs have as much power as Republican Chairmen."

Hefner declined to comment to *Texas Bullpen* for this story.

For leadership, there are pressure points on both sides of this. Either Hefner acquiesces and the Onoda-wing is proven true, at least to the extent that vice chairs can force hearings, or he runs out the clock on the request, proving to Democrats that this negotiated language was fool's gold.

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Water Cooler

- **Gonzales Burns the Midnight Oil:** Embattled U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales fired off a tweet at 2:46 a.m. Sunday, attacking his primary challenger Brandon Herrera over recent revelations about his affair with a married staffer who later died by self-immolation.
    - "During my six years in Congress not a single formal complaint has been levied against my office. Now days away from an election, coordinated political attacks reign [sic] in. IT WONT [sic] WORK. Half way through early voting and the intensity resides w/ TG [i.e. Tony Gonzales] voters. I'd rather be us than them," Gonzales wrote.
- **Crockett Pouring It on Heavy:** Jasmine Crockett's campaign is running a new attack ad against opponent James Talarico in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate.
    - "James Talarico says the right things. But he doesn't practice what he preaches. He says he'll take on billionaires. But a billionaire-funded super PAC is spending $5.4 million in dark money supporting him. He says he'll show up for Texas, but he missed over 900 votes, like rural healthcare, education, and school safety," the ad says.
- **Tariff Tipping:** On Friday, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act were invalid, potentially triggering refunds to corporations that paid billions of dollars. Immediately after the ruling, however, Trump announced a 10% global tariff under the Trade Act of 1974.
    - While Trump-appointed Justices Amy Coney Barrett and Neil Gorsuch joined the liberal justices and Chief Justice John Roberts, Justice Brett Kavanaugh issued a lengthy dissent, which argued that the president did have tariff powers under the IEEPA and other congressional statutes.

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Texas Department of Public Safety

Daily update · February 22, 2026

NEWS

DHS agent killed US citizen in March 2025, records show - Reuters

Reuters

A federal immigration agent shot and killed a U.S. citizen in **Texas** in March 2025, months before the Trump administration began its deportation ...

Flag as irrelevant

US citizen shot and killed by federal immigration agent last year, new records show

The Guardian

The **Texas department of public safety**, which includes the Rangers, said in a statement Friday that the investigation into the shooting was still ...

Flag as irrelevant

Texan shot dead by ICE agent months before killings in Minneapolis, records show - KSAT

KSAT

The involvement of federal immigration agents in the fatal shooting of Ruben Ray Martinez on South Padre Island in March had not been disclosed in ...

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Ruben Ray Martinez death: officials demand answers over ICE shooting - Newsweek

Newsweek

Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) covered it up. "DPS is lying when they say they aren't targeting Latinos, and I'm going to make sure we ...

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Records show ICE agent fatally shot U.S. citizen nearly a year ago in **Texas**, as lawmaker ...

CBS News

Ruben Ray Martinez was fatally shot in South Padre Island, **Texas**, in March 2025. ICE's involvement in the shooting was not disclosed until more ...

Flag as irrelevant

DHS confirms ICE agent shot, killed driver during spring break on South Padre Island

FOX8 WGHP

The **Department** of Homeland **Security** has confirmed to Border Report that special agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement were involved ...

Flag as irrelevant

Texas U.S. citizen was fatally shot by an immigration agent last year during a stop, new records show

NBC News

The death of Ruben Ray Martinez, 23, would mark the earliest of at least six deadly shootings by federal officers since the start of the Trump ...

Flag as irrelevant

Harlingen pursuit ends in Brownsville, police say | KVEO-TV - Valley Central

Valley Central

... Department. ValleyCentral reached out to the Harlingen Police Department, **Texas Department of Public Safety**, and U.S. Border Patrol for more ...

Flag as irrelevant

Texan shot dead by ICE agent months before killings in Minneapolis, records show

The Texas Tribune

The **Texas Department of Public Safety's** Rangers are investigating the shooting. DPS spokespersons did not return a request for comment Friday night.

Flag as irrelevant

DHS agent killed U.S. citizen in March 2025, records show - The Detroit News

The Detroit News

Ruben Ray Martinez, 23, who was identified as a U.S. citizen, was taken to a hospital in Brownsville, **Texas**, where he was later pronounced dead.

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WEB

Today, **Texas Department of Public Safety** (DPS) personnel competed at the Austin Winter ...

x.com

Texas DPS (@TxDPS). 12 likes 814 views. Today, **Texas Department of Public Safety** (DPS) personnel competed at the Austin Winter International Open ...

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Texas Department of Public Safety

Daily update · February 23, 2026

NEWS

Records show ICE agent fatally shot U.S. citizen nearly a year ago in **Texas**, as lawmaker ...

CBS News

DHS said the incident is under investigation by the **Texas Department of Public Safety's** Ranger Division, and deferred questions to **Texas DPS**.

Flag as irrelevant

Texas man fatally shot by federal immigration agent, records show - MPR News

MPR News

A U.S. citizen was shot and killed by a federal immigration officer during a late-night traffic stop nearly a year ago in a **Texas** beach town ...

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Dam B Bridge Hit-and-run under investigation by **Texas Department of Public Safety**

YouTube

Dam B Bridge Hit-and-run under investigation by **Texas Department of Public Safety**. 4 views · 3 minutes ago ...more ...

Flag as irrelevant

Texas rep calls for **public** hearing on alleged state cover-up of ICE shooting - FOX 7 Austin

FOX 7 Austin

State departments say the case is still active. The AP says the **Texas Department of Public Safety** declined to add new information. Texas Democrats ...

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Flag as irrelevant

Texas Democrat Seeks **Public** Hearing After ICE Agent Killed Ruben Ray Martinez

Newsweek

Christopher Olivarez, a spokesperson with the **Texas Department of Public Safety**, told Newsweek that there is an open investigation into the incident.

Flag as irrelevant

DHS agent killed US citizen in March 2025, records show | 1470 & 100.3 WMBD

1470 & 100.3 WMBD

... **Texas Department of Public Safety's** Ranger Division, a DHS spokesperson said. A spokesperson with the **Texas DPS** said the case is still an active ...

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DHS agent killed US citizen in March last year, records reveal | News - Al Jazeera

Al Jazeera

Texas shooting appears to be the first known instance of US citizen being killed during Trump's immigration crackdown.

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Dam B Bridge Hit-and-run under investigation by **Texas Department of Public Safety**

12newsnow.com

The crash is being investigated by the **Texas Department of Public Safety** Southeast Texas Region and the Jasper County Sheriff's Office. The ...

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Major crash shuts down all U.S. 281 lanes near San Pedro Avenue

San Antonio Express-News

The closure was reported by the **Texas Department of Public Safety**. There is no indication as to when the highway will reopen.

Flag as irrelevant

DHS agent fatally shot and killed US citizen who hit officer with car in March 2025: records

NY Post

... **Texas Department of Public Safety** Ranger Division, a DHS spokesperson said. A spokesperson with **Texas DPS** did not immediately respond to a ...

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Texas Department of Public Safety

Daily update · February 21, 2026

NEWS

DPS presents oilfield theft training to Midland law enforcement - CBS7

CBS7

The **Texas Department of Public Safety's** Oilfield Theft Prevention Unit brought a new training course to law enforcement and oil industry workers ...

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Texas DPS Launches Oilfield Theft Investigations Training in Midland

Texas Border Business

On February 19, 2026, the **Texas Department of Public Safety** Criminal Investigations Division Oilfield Theft Prevention Unit presented a newly ...

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Gang member added to Texas 10 Most Wanted Fugitives list | FOX 26 Houston

FOX 26 Houston

DPS seeks Jamie Wilson. What we know: Jamie Nicholas Wilson, 36, is a confirmed Black Gangster Disciple Nations gang member, according to the **Texas** ...

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DPS: Unsafe U-turn led to crash that killed two, including young child

Midland Reporter-Telegram

The **Texas Department of Public Safety** reports that two people were killed after a driver made an unsafe U-turn on a state highway.

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Gang member added to **Texas** 10 Most Wanted Fugitives list | FOX 7 Austin

FOX 7 Austin

Texas Crime Stoppers is offering up to $5,000 for information leading to his arrest. **DPS** seeks Jamie Wilson. What we know: Jamie Nicholas Wilson, 36, ...

Flag as irrelevant

Ruben Ray Martinez Was Killed in an Undisclosed ICE Shooting in March, His Family Says

The New York Times

... security for the **Texas Department of Public Safety**. Sheridan Nolen, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Safety, said in an email on Friday ...

Flag as irrelevant

Texas DPS says Lamesa child, Lubbock man killed in Martin County crash

Lubbock Avalanche-Journal

... **Texas Department of Public Safety**. Investigators believe 23-year-old Mariano Molinar of Lubbock was driving a 2022 Dodge Charger north on SH 349 ...

Flag as irrelevant

A Fatal ICE Shooting Occurred in **Texas** Months Before Renee Good's Killing

The New York Times

Sheridan Nolen, a spokeswoman for the **Department of Public Safety**, said in an email on Friday that the investigation was ongoing, but declined to ...

Flag as irrelevant

WATCH LIVE: Lubbock High students evacuated to Central **Office** due to threat, officials ...

KCBD

As a precaution, we are holding the campus in a LOCKDOWN protocol at this to ensure staff and student safety. ... **Texas Department of Public Safety**, ...

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Seguin PD: 5 arrested in vehicle theft, burglary spree spanning multiple cities near San Antonio

KENS 5

With assistance from the New Braunfels Police Department and the **Texas Department of Public Safety**, officers arrested the three juveniles and two ...

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[redacted]

From: "Cooper, Kevin" <Kevin.Cooper@dps.texas.gov>
Date: February 23, 2026 at 7:51:43 AM CST
To: "Shiver, Scotty" <Scotty.Shiver@dps.texas.gov>, "Bobo, Jason" <Jason.Bobo@dps.texas.gov>
Cc: "Martin, Freeman (Colonel)" <Freeman.Martin@dps.texas.gov>, "Goodson, Walt" <Walt.Goodson@dps.texas.gov>, "Bobo, Jason" <Jason.Bobo@dps.texas.gov>, "Adkins, Phillip" <Phillip.Adkins@dps.texas.gov>
Subject: FYSA

House Democrats Test the Waters

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Texas House Democrats are testing an intra-chamber pressure plate that was never set off during the 2025 legislative session.

State Rep. Ray Lopez (D-San Antonio) — vice chair of the House Committee on Homeland Security, Public Safety, and Veterans' Affairs — sent a letter to the committee's chair, state Rep. Cole Hefner (R-Mt. Pleasant) in an attempt to force a hearing over the death of Ruben Ray Martinez.

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That rule, instituted as part of the deal struck between chamber leadership and House Democrats on a new slate of rules that included majority party-only chairmanships, states that a committee's chair must consult with the vice chair on committee business.

"The chair shall arrange to ensure that: measures or matters designated by the vice-chair are promptly scheduled for a public hearing under this rule," reads the part relevant to Lopez's maneuver. It was never exercised, and thus never tested, last year because doing so is an expected way to lose one's vice chairmanship in the next Legislature. Lopez is retiring, so he won't hold that position next year anyway.

But that provision was used by the irreconcilable faction of the GOP that still wars against House leadership to claim that the power Democrats once held as chairs was merely shifted to vice chairs. While a general, if temporary, peace has broken out between the majority of the two long-warring camps, some have pointed to this new development as proof of their concerns.

State Rep. Brian Harrison (R-Midlothian), who, like Hiroo Onoda, is the last holdout in the House, reacted to the letter, stating that under the

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TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000022

chamber's rules, "Democrat Co-Chairs have as much power as Republican Chairmen."

Hefner declined to comment to *Texas Bullpen* for this story.

For leadership, there are pressure points on both sides of this. Either Hefner acquiesces and the Onoda-wing is proven true, at least to the extent that vice chairs can force hearings, or he runs out the clock on the request, proving to Democrats that this negotiated language was fool's gold.

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TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000023

Kevin Cooper
GR Chief | Texas Department of Public Safety
Kevin.Cooper@dps.Texas.gov
www.dps.Texas.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: DPS Government Relations
Subject: 0223 Legislative Clips
Date: Monday, February 23, 2026 7:50:56 AM
Attachments: 0223.pdf
image003.jpg

Good morning,

Attached are February 23, 2026, Legislative Clips.

Thank you,

Government Relations

Texas Department of Public Safety
Office: 512-424-7200
Government.Relations@dps.texas.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Monday February 23 2026 26-034

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Austin
American-Statesman FEB 23 2026

More than 100K students have applied to Texas' voucher program. A lottery determines who gets a spot.

By Isaac Yu

More than 100,000 families have applied for the Texas private school voucher program as of this week, meaning the state will officially use a lottery process to determine which are first in line.

Republicans say hitting the milestone just two weeks after the application portal opened is a sign that their signature education policy, which sends state dollars to families for private tuition, books, therapy and more, is popular with the public.

It also means the applicant pool likely exceeds the program's available funding, set at $1 billion for the first year. The Texas comptroller's office will need to run a complex lottery system to determine which applicants' families will ultimately receive the limited state dollars, and which families go on a waitlist.

Students will be sorted into several tiers based on disability, income and other factors, and officials say they will receive final notification of their application status in April or May.

The application window remains open through 11:59pm on March 17, and applications are not considered on a first-come, first-served basis.

How many slots are available?

The program's size is set at $1 billion through 2027. Some of the funding is already being used to pay the program's private tech partner, Odyssey, as well as for advertising and staff to maintain the program.

Vouchers are worth roughly $10,500 each, but families who submit disability information will qualify for up to $30,000, while homeschoolers are eligible only for $2,000.

Assuming the average voucher award is around $10,500, the program would fund roughly 90,000 slots. That could go up or down depending on whether the final mix includes more homeschoolers or children with disabilities.

How will prioritization work?

Republican legislators emphasize that they wanted the voucher program to be "universal," meaning all families are eligible regardless of income, even as they say vouchers are designed to help low-income families and children with disabilities find better options outside of public schools. Democratic critics say this will funnel tax dollars to wealthy families who already have their children in a private school.

But the law does set certain priorities, with special education first, then low-income families, middle-income families, and finally all other households. More specifically:

The first tier: children with disabilities whose household income falls under 500% of the poverty line. That is $165,000 for a family of four in 2026, per federal guidelines.

The second tier: children whose household income falls under 200% of the poverty line, or $66,000 for a family of four.

The third tier: children whose household income falls under 500% of the poverty, or $165,000 for a family of four.

The four tier: all other children. Within this final group, the program will prioritize students who were previously enrolled in a traditional public or charter school.

Slots could fill up before reaching later tiers, meaning those families would automatically go on a waitlist. The fourth tier of the wealthiest families is also capped at receiving 20% of the program funds.

Families with multiple children will be kept together in tiers. That means having one child with a qualifying disability would bring all of their siblings into the first tier.

Some families may end up on a waitlist, then later receive an award as families in front of them ultimately decline a voucher or become ineligible. That could happen if a child is rejected from their preferred private school, for example. Some funding may also free up if some families approved for private school vouchers opt to homeschool their children instead.

The comptroller will ultimately create a randomized waitlist of eligible families who are not awarded funding. The state Legislature is expected to return in 2027 and add more funding to the program. Waitlisted applicants from this year will be first in line next year.

What do we know about the applications so far?

The comptroller's office says that as of Feb. 15, roughly 80% of students are seeking a private school voucher, while the other 20% are seeking the money for homeschooling.

Roughly 10% of the pool qualifies in the first, disability-oriented tier.

Seventy-one percent are considered middle- or low-income, and 29% are in the wealthiest group of families.

Originally from Garland, Texas, Isaac Yu is a politics reporter based in Austin.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 23 2026

Meta launches Texas campaign to get AI-friendly Republicans elected in March primary

By James Osborne

A super PAC backed by a $45 million investment from the California tech giant Meta launched an ad campaign in Texas this week to boost state Republicans viewed by the company as friendly to the development of artificial intelligence.

On Friday, the Forge the Future Super PAC launched its first round of digital ads that support Kelly Hancock, who is locked in heated GOP primary battle for Texas Comptroller, two candidates for state Senate and one North Texas state representative.

Continued on Next Page

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000026

Cont. from "Meta launches…"

The ads don't make mention of AI or the data centers that drive the technology, and instead focus on the candidates' efforts to keep taxes low and improve education.

Brian Baker, a GOP strategist leading the effort, said in a statement the super PAC will support "a select group of pro-innovation Republican candidates" for the state Legislature and state offices like governor and attorney general.

"Our focus is on elevating Republican leaders who have demonstrated a strong commitment to championing America's tech future and maintaining our global competitive edge," he said.

Hancock and the other candidates, who include state Rep. Trent Ashby, a Lufkin Republican running for an East Texas state Senate seat, and Brett Ligon, who is vying to replace Galveston state Sen. Mayes Middleton, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The campaign, which is also active in California and Illinois, comes amid a flurry of efforts in Texas to put guardrails around AI technology and the affiliated data centers that require huge amounts of water and energy to operate.

Last year, state Sens. Angela Paxton and Tan Parker, both Republicans, spearheaded a bill that for the first time established a regulatory framework for AI in Texas, including provisions prohibiting the misuse of biometric data and AI technology that discriminates against a particular group of people or encourages suicide and self-harm.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller is pushing regulation to stop the development of data centers on prime farm land by encouraging tech companies, through tax breaks and other incentives, to instead build them on less productive acreage.

Proponents described the effort to put limits on the technology as the product of bipartisan concerns over the potential harms of AI.

"Everywhere I go there's overwhelming skepticism for the big tech companies, about job losses and energy costs and water and how do we maintain control of the technology," said Brendan Steinhauser, CEO of the Austin-based non-profit Alliance for Secure AI. "And it's Republicans and Democrats; it's bipartisan."

Tech companies like Meta, which counts more than 3.5 billion users worldwide through the online platform Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, are on the leading edge of a technology that many believe will transform human society, creating a global economy powered not by workers but computer chips.

The United States, China and other nations are locked in a competition to develop increasingly advanced AI platforms, with President Donald Trump saying last year his government will do "whatever it takes" to lead the world on the technology.

And Texas, with its abundant land and relatively low energy prices, is at the epicenter of the effort, with a flood of new data centers slated for construction across the state.

In September, Meta put $45 million into its American Technology Excellence Project Super PAC, according to a filing with the Internal Revenue Service obtained by Politico.

That funding is now going to Forge the Future, which is exclusively backing GOP candidates, and the Democrat-focused super PAC Making Our Tomorrow, which is launching a campaign in Illinois this week. Both super PACs are expected to eventually expand their campaigns to other states, as state legislatures weigh regulation on AI.

Meta also put $20 million into the Mobilizing Economic Transformation Across California Super PAC, towards fighting AI regulations in that state.

With only three weeks until the Texas GOP primary, the super PAC is launching its campaign at the tail end of the campaign season in Texas — because of gerrymandering most state offices no longer have competitive general elections.

Tech companies are facing the prospect of more legislation around AI when the Texas Legislature meets next January.

"Next session I will do whatever it takes to protect Texas children," Paxton said in a statement. "My constituents expect their state lawmakers to take proactive action to protect children and that is exactly what I will do."

At the same time, Meta and CEO Mark Zuckerberg are facing mounting legal challenges, with dozens of state attorneys general suing the company over allegations their technology is endangering children. Last year, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton won a $1.4 billion settlement from Meta after filing a lawsuit that claimed the company used facial recognition technology to collect biometric data from millions of Texans without their consent.

Zuckerberg took the stand in a trial in Los Angeles this week to defend the company against claims that it and other companies, including YouTube and TikTok, had intentionally engineered the online platforms to make them addictive to users.

"I'm focused on building a community that is sustainable," he testified Wednesday, according to media reports. "If you do something that's not good for people, maybe they'll spend more time [on Instagram] short term, but if they're not happy with it, they're not going to use it over time."

Dallas
Morning News FEB 23 2026

ELECTIONS '26 | U.S. SENATE: What's driving race's final week

By JOSEPH MORTON and GROMER JEFFERS JR.

In the closing sprint of Texas' Senate primary, candidates are swapping policy talk for paper plates, making a last-minute grab for votes over melted cheese and fryer grease.

Sen. John Cornyn's supporters were treated last week to Mexican food at Serranos in South Austin.

U.S. Rep. Wesley Hunt served up Zalat Pizza slices at Dallas County's GOP headquarters and fans of Attorney General Ken Paxton munched on chicken tenders at Republic Icehouse in Tyler.

State Rep. James Talarico filled El Palacio Event Center in his hometown of Austin and U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Dallas packed Pure Social Bar & Grill in Richardson.

The Lone Star Five have been crisscrossing the state, rallying the faithful and encouraging them to nudge friends, family and neighbors to cast ballots before early voting ends Friday.

Among the Republicans, Cornyn touts experience and results, Paxton promises unflinching MAGA combat and Hunt pitches generational change.

For the Democrats, Crockett calls for a fighter against President Donald Trump and Talarico preaches unity beyond the partisan divide.

While each party has its own flavor, some shared ingredients are shaping the finish to March 3. Here's what's cooking:

Money gap

Cash alone doesn't guarantee victory, but it helps.

GOP financial firepower: Cornyn, the Republican incumbent, and his allies have a deep well of money. His opponents, not so much.

The Cornyn camp has spent tens of millions, so much so that Hunt likened it to a Powerball jackpot.

Cornyn has blanketed the airwaves with ads attacking his rivals and promoting himself as a staunch Trump ally and partner on border policy.

Cornyn's principal campaign committee had nearly $5 million on hand as of Feb. 11, not counting a committee tied to Senate Republicans that can raise and spend far larger sums.

Paxton had more than $3.9 million and Hunt reported having $342,307 on hand.

Some Republicans have questioned whether so much money should go to Cornyn instead of supporting GOP candidates in Maine and other swing states.

Despite that, Cornyn backers keep pouring money into the matchup.

"We are committed to John and we will spend whatever we need to spend for him to be successful," former Gov. Rick Perry said last week at Serranos.

Perry is connected to a significant fundraising coalition backing Cornyn.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "Elections…"

Paxton said Cornyn's money comes from "the D.C. establishment."

"I'm not their person, and I will never be their person," Paxton told supporters last week in Tyler. "I'm going to stay here and fight for you all."

Blue side bankroll: On the Democratic side, Crockett ended the latest reporting period with nearly $3.5 million – less than her rival, which she said didn't matter.

Massive fundraising is overrated, she said.

"The polling still has me ahead and we've been outspent 10 to 1," Crockett said last week in Fort Worth.

"I believe in the rapport that I've established with people over the years. This isn't about a single viral moment. This is about consistently fighting on behalf of the people and, ultimately, that's what will win the day."

Talarico's campaign had nearly $4.8 million at the close of the most recent reporting period.

That tally was filed before a burst of online donations after an interview with Stephen Colbert that the late-night host said CBS attorneys would not allow him to air.

The segment was later posted online and quickly drew millions of views, giving Talarico fresh national exposure and a new fundraising hook.

CBS has disputed Colbert's characterization of the decision.

The Trump test

Trump has become a looming issue in both primaries.

Split Democratic strategy: Crockett's campaign launch video had her turning and defiantly staring down the camera as clips of Trump insulting her played in the background.

She regularly spotlights him on the trail, saying Texas needs a fighter to take on the president.

Talarico also has criticized Trump but said at the Austin rally he is running against a broader system that keeps Americans divided.

The tech and media moguls who joined Trump at his inauguration are using algorithms to keep Americans divided by party, race, gender and religion, he said, so they can keep fleecing them.

"It's the reason you and your MAGA uncle … now live in completely separate realities," he said. "Politics shouldn't feel this way."

It reflects his potential general election strategy of attracting crossover voters dissatisfied with Republican governance.

Crockett has taken a different approach. While she would like to have support from all voters, outreach to disillusioned Trump supporters or Republicans is not her focus.

"All we've ever needed to do was increase voter participation and voter turnout on our side," she said.

GOP endorsement chase: The trio of Republicans have sought to position themselves as the biggest Trump allies.

In a state where Republicans have kept Democrats out of statewide office for three decades, each is jockeying for that prized endorsement.

So far, the president has held back, saying he likes all three men.

Paxton and Hunt have said Cornyn isn't sufficiently MAGA while Cornyn has said he has a record of delivering for the president and Texas.

November math

Candidates on both sides have been slugging it out over who's the best bet in the fall election.

Republican electability fight: Cornyn has said nominating Paxton risks a GOP massacre because of his legal and personal liabilities.

Paxton has contended electability is a made-up issue raised by a "desperate" Cornyn.

"I'm very proud of my record, and I know that we can win," Paxton said.

Hunt, the Houston congressman, has positioned himself as Trump-aligned without Paxton's baggage.

Democrats' case: Crockett touts experience as a civil rights lawyer, former state representative and sitting congresswoman and pushes back on critics who say she is too weak to win statewide.

"Until someone gives me something of substance, it's more annoying and it's noise," she said.

A pro-Talarico super PAC has aired attacks suggesting Crockett would struggle in November.

Crockett has slammed the ads as racist and rejected the idea Republicans are rooting for her, noting Gov. Greg Abbott has been running ads attacking her.

"If I am the one that they really want to face, why would you spend money against me?" she said.

Talarico has said outside groups operate independently of his campaign and has emphasized that he is focused on his own campaign message.

Family feud

Both parties have left bruises they'll need to heal ahead of November.

Democratic flare-up: A social media influencer accused Talarico of calling Colin Allred of Dallas a "mediocre Black man," which Talarico disputed.

He said he was criticizing the former Dallas congressman's lackluster campaigning, that he respects Allred and would never attack him on the basis of race.

Republican infighting: Cornyn's tussle with Paxton and Hunt likely will go to a runoff. That means the primary's top two finishers will continue to battle it out until late May.

Hunt and Paxton call Cornyn a Republican in name only, questioning his loyalty to Trump and his support of a gun safety law after the Uvalde school shooting.

Cornyn has defended the bipartisan gun law, has chided Hunt over missing votes in Washington and relentlessly trolled Paxton over his divorce, allegations of infidelity and issues surrounding his impeachment.

"Character matters and I think character is on the ballot," Cornyn said.

Hunt pitches generational contrast and social media reach.

"John Cornyn ain't on TikTok. Trust me," Hunt said in Dallas.

He also dismissed Paxton as a career politician.

Paxton brushed off Hunt, saying that "my job was to take out Cornyn and let Wesley run his race."

For Texans, early voting ends Friday, last call before the political buffet line becomes a ballot line on March 3.

San Antonio
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Another Texas DEI rollback? UT San Antonio dissolving race and gender departments.

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

Until now, UT San Antonio had avoided major changes reshaping race- and gender-focused programs at other Texas public universities amid growing statewide political scrutiny. Some faculty fear that the merger could reduce institutional support for the programs, restrict curriculum, reduce resources and limit their role in academic decision-making. At the extreme, they fear it could lead to the loss of positions and the elimination of entire programs.

The Department of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies offers graduate degrees, including a Master of Arts in Bicultural-Bilingual Education and a doctoral degree in Culture, Literacy and Language. Formed in 2020, the Department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality Studies houses three undergraduate majors: African American Studies, Mexican American Studies and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies.

Earlier this month, UT-Austin officials announced a similar change — telling faculty in departments of ethnic and gender studies that their units would be folded into a new Department for Social and Cultural Analysis Studies.

In a Jan. 16 email sent to the faculty and staff email list across UT San Antonio's College of Education and Human Development, Dean Mario Torres wrote that the two departments will be consolidated into a single, unified academic department. He did not share the name of the new department or specify who would lead it.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "Another Texas DEI rollback?..."

The reorganization will take effect Sept. 1, and a task force of faculty, staff and students will shape the unified department, he said.

"At this time, no changes to faculty or staff positions, reporting structures, or job responsibilities are planned," he wrote.

Framing the consolidation as a strategic move for the college, Torres described the change as "an exciting opportunity." He said it would support a healthier financial outlook and lead to a "more prosperous future" for academic programs. The programs will continue as usual with students having the same access to courses, advisors and degree pathways, he said.

UT San Antonio officials did not respond to a request for comment or to questions about why the change was made and by whom, or what would change materially as a result of this consolidation.

Torres sent a separate message to students in January, reiterating many of the same points. He told students, "no action is required on your part."

According to the UT San Antonio website, graduates of the soon-to-be merged programs pursue careers in community, education, academic, nonprofit and public service fields. Alumni include college professors, lawyers, nonprofit leaders and entrepreneurs.

Featured alumni describe the programs as formative in testimonials online. Fred Thompson called an African American Studies course "transformative." Matthew Hinojosa said faculty mentorship opened his eyes to the opportunities. Victoria Lopez said her Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies internship helped her discover her life's purpose.

Faculty fear effects

Professors were informed at a faculty meeting before the spring semester started that the decision to consolidate was "already made," said a faculty member who asked not to be named.

They said there had been no prior consultation, and that faculty are concerned about how the merger could affect autonomy, curriculum and long-term stability.

One likely outcome, the faculty member said, is increased pressure to teach content through a "fair and balanced" framework when courses address race, gender or sexuality. That approach would be challenging to implement within the programs' established disciplinary foundations, the faculty member said. "That is going to be an incredibly difficult thing to try to navigate."

Adding to this pressure, UT Regents voted on Thursday to limit how faculty discuss "controversial" topics in class. The UT System's governing board unanimously approved a new policy that advises professors to avoid such sensitive subjects not "germane" to course material. The policy does not define what is controversial and charges universities — including UT San Antonio — with enforcement.

UT Regents Chairman Kevin Eltife said the measure is intended to restore trust in the classroom while preserving academic freedom.

Student concerns about the consolidation are already surfacing, the faculty member said. They are asking what the merger means for their majors.

"'I just picked this major,'" the faculty member recalled a student saying. "Did I make the right choice?"

The faculty member said they hope alumni and community members remember "the long fought history" of the disciplines, departments and majors.

Across Texas, public universities are navigating growing political pressure over programs that focus on race, gender and sexuality.

Senate Bill 17

In 2023, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 17, which prohibits public universities from establishing or maintaining diversity, equity and inclusion offices and limits certain DEI-related activities and trainings. The law took effect in January 2024.

No state law bars the teaching of race or gender, but university systems have launched audits of courses that teach those subjects.

Universities have been restructuring or eliminating academic units that have become political flashpoints.

UT Austin's College of Liberal Arts plans to consolidate several ethnic and gender studies departments. Texas A&M eliminated its Women's and Gender Studies degree program earlier this year; current students may complete their degrees, but new students will not be admitted. Texas Tech University System also barred faculty from teaching the existence of more than two genders.

Houston Chronicle FEB 23 2026

He's a working class kid who went to space. She's running under a new name. Who will win in the Hispanic 9th?

By Regina Lankenau

I finally watched the proverbial political sausage get made — and inside the offices of a Pasadena meat distributor, no less.

Meat Planet is a Mexican family-owned business with three decades in East Houston. Their Navigation Boulevard headquarters have the glossy, I-achieved-the-American-Dream look of my grandpa's first Laredo office — down to the giant aquarium and the classic bleach smell. There, Samuel Barraza, Meat Planet's charismatic marketing head, earnestly shared the company's struggles with whipsawing tariffs and the federal apprehension of two immigrant employees.

"We've been lied to so much," he lamented, citing President Donald Trump's promises to fix the economy and deport the worst of the worst.

I know the candidate *ha*d to respond with what he said next: "You get me elected in November, I'm going to fight to hold these people accountable and stop the nonsense."

But it was the way Terry Virts said it — slightly awkward and uncomfortable — that made me feel, strangely, a flicker of hope. It made him seem down to earth. Like maybe he really *woul*d stand up for the everyday Texan, and actually stop the nonsense.

Virts, a retired Air Force colonel, flew 45 combat missions over Korea, Germany and Iraq. He's also a former astronaut who has done three spacewalks and spent more than 200 days in the International Space Station, commanding his crew through harrowing life-or-death decisions.

But on Monday, dressed in his suburban-lumberjack best — blue flannel tucked into blue jeans — with sensible black tennis shoes and the sort of sunglasses your dad might wear to a Nascar race, Terry was just … Terry. The kind of guy whose Saturday morning tradition is getting a McDonalds McGriddle. Who drives a Ford Mustang and uses words like "awesome" and "cool" and "heck."

In fact, if it weren't for the name tag pinned to his chest, you might not know he's a Democratic candidate for one of Congress' most hotly contested seats: U.S. House District 9.

A cynical calculation

Terry's the kind of even-keeled guy who sounds sincere when he criticizes tit-for-tat gerrymandering in Texas and California. A former nuclear-certified F-16 pilot, he knows better than most that "retaliating is not a victory. It's mutually assured destruction."

Drawing on his biography, he says some of the things that you might hear another candidate say: That he's running to even the playing field for working-class families like the one he grew up in, and also because he wants Congress to stand up for the ideals he fought for in the Air Force.

But most candidates aren't astronauts. "You can literally see politics from space," Terry told me, showing me a picture on his phone — one of over 300,000 he took from 250 miles above. It was a shot of the Korean peninsula at night. Below the DMZ, the sparkling pinpricks of South Korea's vibrant democracy; above it, the gaping, black void of North Korea's authoritarianism.

Those are the stakes, he said.

Those stakes are especially high here in hotly contested District 9. As Terry's young data-cruncher, Ryan Martinez, puts it, what happens here — in the East End, in Denver Harbor, in Liberty County — will determine whether or not there will be "a temporary check on the next two years of the Trump administration."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "He's a working class kid…"

And with those high stakes, Terry faces long odds. For starters, the district has been drawn specifically so that a Republican can win it.

This year, after Trump requested Texas to redistrict itself unusually early, and to do so in a way that sends more Republicans to Congress, District 9 was dragged eastward, spilling into the Houston Ship Channel's blue-collar Mexican American neighborhoods and swallowing rural, majority-white Liberty County whole. It's about 62% Latino, Martinez said.

He explained that the Texas Legislature drew the map to purposely include low-turnout Hispanic areas. The GOP's cynical calculation is this: If enough reliably motivated (read: conservative Anglo) voters show up to the polls, a Republican will win easy-peasy.

But redrawing the lines that way means spreading Texas' Republican voters thinly, and Democrats hope the plan will backfire.

A lack of trust

Maybe Terry is right; maybe it's possible to convince people to turn out. But I'm afraid we've made politics so soul-crushingly ugly, many people have checked out. I don't blame them. I've met dozens of candidates in my five years doing endorsements for the Chronicle; I'm put off at least as often as I'm inspired. Checking candidates' political baggage is especially exhausting.

In the primary, Terry's most formidable opponent is Democratic frontrunner Leticia Gutierrez, a longtime environmental advocate for Air Alliance Houston. She has earned a slate of impressive progressive endorsements, including from Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia, state Reps. Christina Morales and Penny Shaw, and Houston City Council members Mario Castillo and Joaquin Martinez.

But in political circles, she used to be known as Leticia Ablaza — a name tied to her former Republican precinct chair husband's "Seething Republican" blog (now scrubbed from the internet) and to her own two failed bids for City Council. She also served as chief of staff for Helena Brown, a conspiracy-minded City Council member who was a kooky conservative before it was cool.

Gutierrez said she's never been a "registered Republican voter," not that we register by party down here. She downplayed Brown's Tea Party Republicanism, arguing that her own work with City Council was more on nonpartisan issues such as pushing back on an anti-feeding ordinance and a regressive drainage tax. She ultimately resigned from that post, she said, once Brown's rhetoric no longer aligned with Gutierrez's beliefs.

Gutierrez may well have evolved, as she says. But in 2019, she was also named in a Texas Education Agency report for allegedly participating in a private meeting three years before. At Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen, a group including Houston ISD trustee Diana Davila and Gutierrez/Ablaza improperly pressured a district official to cancel a cleaning contract and steer the contract to the company that Davila wanted.

"Leticia Ablaza demanded that HISD cancel its contract with MetroClean, and award it to Accel Building Maintenance," the TEA report said. That impropriety was one of the reasons that the report recommended that the state take over HISD.

When I asked Gutierrez if she participated in that meeting, she was defensive: "No, that is absolutely false, like there was no — and if there … let's just say I *was*— I don't, I *wasn't*. But again, I didn't, I don't … I didn't have anything to do with anything."

Her response didn't inspire confidence.

Looking for hope

It's hard for me to get behind a candidate who isn't straightforward about their past. I want a candidate who makes me feel hope — "good old corny American hope," as David Foster Wallace once put it. I want someone I trust, someone I can believe in.

Is a middle-aged, middle-American-esque, non-Hispanic astronaut the "right guy" for a gerrymandered Texas district with a big Hispanic population? I don't know. But as we walked through the East End, joined by Terry's longtime friend and fellow astronaut José Hernández, I found myself wanting to believe.

I'm Catholic, and my naive idea of blockwalking was akin to pre-Easter Missions: knocking on door after door, hoping you get a friendly face and not a shotgun. But actually, it's more calculated than that. Terry and José consulted a sophisticated map to narrow down friendlier doors — that is, 3Ds (people who have voted in the last three Democratic elections), 2Ds and 1Ds.

The two men walked up and down the pockmarked streets, chased by barking dogs. Terry's face turned red from the blazing sun as he left leaflets in closed door after closed door. When someone did — miraculously — open, it was José who handled most of the pitch. Terry speaks four languages, but only "un poquito" Spanish.

José is the California-born son of Mexican migrant farmworkers whose extraordinary journey to space was made into a film, and he once ran for U.S. House himself. We're astronauts, José would tell blushing housewives in Spanish, coaxing them to take a picture for their families and playfully batting away their excuses ("I'm not dressed nice!"). Have you seen my movie, "A Million Miles Away"? Watch my movie and vote for this man, he'd say, pointing to Terry and smiling.

"I wouldn't have come all the way from California if I didn't believe in Terry," José said at stop after stop. There wasn't talk of policy or platform. It didn't matter.

"I've never had a candidate — much less an astronaut — knock on my door before," 75-year-old Rosa Cantu said in awe. She, like others, promised to vote for Terry.

Later, talking to another family, Terry seemed more at ease. Instead of trying to sell himself, he keenly listened to Joanna Valadez, 37, as she talked about the fear in her Magnolia neighborhood, where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been repeatedly spotted, and about her kids' struggling public schools. Like Meat Planet's Sam Barraza, Joanna said she was tired of the lies. All she wanted is an elected official sincerely invested in helping families like hers.

"So you're slowly but steadily learning Spanish, eh?" Jaden, her sharp 12-year-old, teased Terry. They chatted about algebra, and Terry shared that he was Jaden's age when he decided he wanted to be an astronaut.

His message was: You too could go to space. You too can dream.

Jaden's dark eyes widened with something like validation. Something like hope.

Mine did too.

The sad irony has always been that the people best suited to lead us are the least suited to promote themselves in the ways that politics demands. And I know that in this gerrymandered district, where voters know terribly little about any of the candidates, having a Hispanic name is an advantage in the Democratic primary. Leticia Gutierrez may well win the nomination. And I don't doubt she would be a fierce environmental advocate for this district.

But what if?

Terry once asked that question, as a boy who could look up at the sky and tell you exactly what plane was soaring above. As a kid who worked as a paperboy and then, for a little while, picked pumpkins before joining the Air Force at 17. As a kid who grew up to reach the stars.

He's dared to dream before. And that time, against astronomical odds, the dream came true.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 23 2026

Texas GOP finds new bogeyman: 'Radical Islam'

By Mark Z. Barabak

Imagine if a candidate for, say, the California Assembly appeared at a political event and delivered the following remarks: "No to kosher meat. No to yarmulkes. No to celebrating Easter. No, no, no."

He or she would be roundly — and rightly — criticized for bigotry and raw prejudice.

Recently, at a candidates forum outside Dallas, Larry Brock expressed the following sentiments as part of a lengthy disquisition on the Muslim faith.

"We should ban the burqa, the hijab, the abaya, the niqab," said the candidate for state representative, referring to the coverings worn by some Muslim women. "No to halal meat. No to celebrating Ramadan. No, no, no."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000030

Cont. from "Texas GOP…"

Brock, whose comments were reported by the New York Times, is plainly a bigot. (He's also a convicted felon, sentenced to two years in prison for invading the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.)

Brock is no outlier. For many Texas Republicans running in the March 3 primary, Islamophobia has become central in their campaigns, as a longtime political lance — illegal immigration — has grown dull around its edges.

Aaron Reitz, a candidate for attorney general, aired an ad accusing politicians of importing "millions of Muslims into our country."

"The result?" he asks, with a tough-guy glower. "More terrorism, more crime. And they even want their own illegal cities in Texas to impose Shariah law." (More on that in a moment.)

One of his Republican primary opponents, U.S. Rep. Chip Roy — co-founder of the Sharia-Free America Caucus — has called for amending the Texas Constitution to protect the state's tender soil from Islamification by "radical Marxists."

In the fierce GOP race for U.S. Senate, incumbent John Cornyn — facing a potentially career-ending challenge from state Attorney General Ken Paxton — has aired a TV spot accusing his fellow Republican of being "soft on radical Islam" and another describing radical Islam "as a bloodthirsty ideology."

Paxton countered by calling Cornyn's assertions a desperate attack "that can't erase the fact that he helped radical Islamic Afghans invade Texas," a reference to a visa program that allowed people who helped U.S. forces — in other words, friends and allies — to come to America after being screened.

There hasn't been such a concentrated, sulfurous political assault on Muslims since the angst-ridden days following the 9/11 attacks.

In one of the latest instances, Democrats are calling for the censure of U.S. Rep. Randy Fine, R-Fla., after he wrote on X: "If they force us to choose, the choice between dogs and Muslims is not a difficult one."

In Texas, the venom starts at the top with Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who's waltzing toward an unprecedented fourth term.

In November, Abbott issued an executive order designating the Muslim Brotherhood and the Council on American-Islamic Relations — the latter a prominent civil rights group — as terrorist organizations.

Not to be out-demagogued, Bo French, a candidate for a seat on the Texas Railroad Commission, called on President Donald Trump to round up and deport every Muslim in America.

Much of the Republican hysteria has focused on a proposed real estate development in a field 40 miles east of Dallas.

The master-planned community of about 1,000 homes — recently renamed The Meadow, previously known as EPIC City — was initiated by the East Plano Islamic Center to serve as a Muslim-centered community for the region's growing number of worshipers. (Anyone could choose to live there, regardless of their religious faith.)

Paxton said he would investigate the proposed development as a "potentially illegal 'Sharia City.'" The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development jumped in with its own investigation — a move Abbott hailed — after the Justice Department quietly closed a probe into the project, saying developers agreed to abide by federal fair housing laws. That investigation came at Cornyn's behest.

The resurgence of anti-Muslim sentiment hardly seems coincidental.

For years, Republicans capitalized on illegal immigration and lax enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border. With illegal crossings slowing to a trickle under Trump, "Republicans can't run on the border issue the way (they) have in the past," said Jim Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin.

What's more, cracking down on immigration no longer brings together Republicans the way it once did.

General support for Trump's get-tough policies surpasses 80% among Texas Republicans, said Henson. But support falls dramatically, into roughly the high-40s to mid-50s, when it comes to specifics such as arresting people at church, or seizing them when they make required court appearances.

"Republicans need to find something else that taps into those cultural-identity issues" and unifies and animates the GOP base, Henson said.

In short, the fearmongers need a new scapegoat.

Muslims are about 2% of the adult population in Texas, according to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, completed in 2024. That's about 300,000 to 500,000 residents in a state of nearly 32 million.

Not a huge number. But enough for heedless politicians hell-bent on getting themselves elected, even if it means tearing down a whole group of people in the process.

Dallas
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Democrats lead early voting surge

By GROMER JEFFERS JR.

As the Texas primary moves into its final frenzy, early voting in Dallas County is surging – and Democrats are leading the way.

In the first five days, 93,079 primary voters in both parties have cast ballots in Dallas County, more than double the 38,867 during the same period in the 2024 primary.

Of that overall county tally, Democrats have accounted for 70,151 votes, and Republicans at 22,928.

Democratic turnout already has eclipsed its full five-day total of 22,805 from 2024. Republicans also are outpacing their previous early count of 16,062 that year.

Dallas is a traditional blue county. Even so, Democrats say the turnout spike in the runup to the March 3 primary reflects more than the usual partisan edge.

Among the reasons: voter anger at President Donald Trump, a competitive Senate race featuring hometown candidate Jasmine Crockett and contested congressional and local primaries.

Early voting ends Friday. While turnout is climbing, the ballot is crowded and complicated. What else to watch:

Who shows up?

The Democratic Senate race between Crockett and state Rep. James Talarico of Austin may hinge on their appeal to key party groups.

Crockett has a huge advantage with Black voters and would benefit if they flood the polls.

Talarico is winning white voters, especially men, and early polling suggests he has traction among Latinos.

Women, often a reliable Democratic constituency, could play a big role.

Solid pre-primary polling has been limited, leaving campaigns to try to take advantage of any public edge.

Talarico gained fresh attention after his interview with talk show host Stephen Colbert was posted online, drawing millions of views. Crockett enters the final days with broad name recognition and strong online presence.

Endorsements

After a 2024 primary season in which he helped oust eight GOP House members who blocked his private school voucher plan, Gov. Greg Abbott is again flexing his political muscle.

This time, the results may be different in key races in which he's at odds with other Republicans.

In the primary for comptroller, Abbott has endorsed former state Sen. Kelly Hancock of North Richland Hills against former state Sen. Don Huffines and Railroad Commissioner Christi Craddick.

Abbott appointed Hancock as acting comptroller and has been central in Hancock's TV ads. Huffines challenged Abbott in the 2022 GOP gubernatorial primary, setting up a rivalry that still lingers.

In another statewide race, Abbott is backing businessman Nate Sheets for agriculture commissioner over longtime incumbent Sid Miller.

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Cont. from "Democrats…"

Abbott has blasted Miller as unfit for office. Miller has dismissed the attacks and defended his record.

Drama in Dallas

The Democratic primary for the 33rd Congressional District in Dallas County largely is a showdown between former Rep. Colin Allred of Dallas and Rep. Julie Johnson of Farmers Branch.

Allred and Johnson have sparred over ethics and policy, with Allred targeting her stock trades and voting record, and Johnson defending her financial disclosures and accusing him of undermining her leadership.

Zeeshan Hafeez, a technology executive, is running an aggressive, albeit underfunded bid that might push the race into a runoff.

Hafeez has been campaigning with Dallas minister Frederick Haynes III, who is running to replace Crockett in the 30th Congressional District.

Crowded GOP race

Nine candidates are vying for the GOP nomination in Congressional District 32, stretching from Carrollton nearly to Longview.

Once a Democratic stronghold, the district was redrawn to favor Republicans and is expected to flip back to the GOP, though it has not drawn major Republican heavyweights.

Top contenders include Jace Yarbrough, a lawyer who sports an endorsement from President Donald Trump.

Among others: Ryan Binkley, a businessman and founder of Create Church, a Christian church in Richardson, who ran for president in 2024, and Darrell Day, a businessman who was the party nominee in 2024, losing to Johnson.

Zombie candidates

U.S. Rep. Marc Veasey of Fort Worth and Andrew White of Houston suspended their campaigns, but are haunting the Democratic races they left.

Veasey is popular in the Fort Worth area, and according to social media accounts, some residents have voted for him for county judge — the office he filed for but then dropped out. It was too late to remove his name from the ballot.

White, a Houston businessman and son of former Gov. Mark White, initially joined the race for governor but then suspended his bid and endorsed state Rep. Gina Hinojosa of Austin. Former U.S. Rep. Chris Bell and Quitman rancher Bobby Cole also are on the ballot.

If Veasey wins March 3, Tarrant County precinct chairs would elect the nominee.

Now, Tarrant County Commissioner Alisa Simmons is considered the Democratic frontrunner against Millennium Anton C. Woods, a private contractor. The winner will face Republican incumbent Tim O'Hare.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 23 2026

UNT to launch new major in artificial intelligence to meet workforce demands

By JESSICA MA

This fall, University of North Texas students will be able to major in something new: artificial intelligence.

The UNT Board of Regents approved the AI major on Thursday, which comes as universities nationwide are making strides to incorporate the rapidly expanding technology into classrooms. The new undergraduate program is an opportunity to drive economic growth in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, school officials say.

"We know this program will prepare students to thrive in a ridiculously rapidly evolving world," Michael McPherson, provost and vice president for academic affairs, said during the meeting. "It will also address a growing and critical need in our society."

The undergraduate program will be housed in the College of Engineering. Students will design, build and deploy AI software and systems, according to UNT documents. The curriculum will also guide students in assessing the social and ethical implications of AI.

UNT President Harrison Keller has made it a priority to identify and meet the region's workforce needs. As North Texas is projected to add 7 million jobs by 2050, employers are struggling to find Texans to fill open jobs.

University officials say there is a demand for professionals in AI and machine learning fields. An analysis found that there are about 2,000 postings per month in the Dallas-Fort Worth region related to artificial intelligence, according to UNT.

The first-year salary for someone with this credential is just above $68,000 a year, and that number jumps to $105,000 after five years. While the average UNT graduate breaks even on their degree in six years, a student with an AI degree is anticipated to recoup their education investment in three, McPherson said.

"It is the Keller way, if I might, to be on the vanguard," McPherson said. "That's where we want to be."

The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas conducted a survey of businesses last year about AI use. Of 318 respondents, about 59% of firms were using AI in some form. About 19% of firms said they were planning to use them in the future.

"If [firms] are implementing AI, they're going to need people who know how to use it," said Pia Orrenius, vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Companies are employing AI in marketing, customer service and business analytics, she said. Researchers have seen a "small negative effect," leading to job displacements in about 5% of firms.

AI most impacts roles where the tool no longer complements the job, but substitutes it, she said. Jobs, like cashiers and janitors, are least exposed to AI, while secretaries and administrative assistants are most impacted, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

"Young workers in occupations that are highly exposed to AI are being affected," she said. "Their employment prospects have gone down in a significant way."

The advent of AI in the workforce will only come down faster, Orrenius said, which will require universities, community colleges and workforce groups to prepare students.

"You don't want to be the victim of the AI," she said. "You want to be the one who can leverage your productivity with AI."

Feeling the boom

So far, three other public Texas universities — Angelo State University, Tarleton State University, and the University of Texas at El Paso — offer undergraduate degrees in AI. Others have dedicated resources to researching and utilizing the tool.

The University of Texas will open a new school focused on AI and computing research in the fall, after regents approved its creation earlier this month. Texas Christian University announced a $10 million commitment to launch an AI initiative in December.

Universities across the country are ramping up AI education, just as companies like ChatGPT creator OpenAI and chip maker NVIDIA see their valuations spike. Tech giants, like Amazon and Meta, have donated billions to help train students in AI.

While the undergraduate program will be new, UNT already has a master of science program in AI, which it launched in 2020 — one of the first degrees of its kind in the state. McPherson cited the success of the master's program, as part of his pitch to open an undergraduate version.

Enrollment in the master's program is "going gangbusters," McPherson said. Forty-one students enrolled in the master's program in its first year and has since surpassed 200 students.

Fiscal pressures

The program's revenues are expected to exceed costs by its second year, which school officials took into consideration amid monetary challenges. UNT is projecting a $45 million shortfall and bracing for budget cuts, said Keller in a Tuesday letter. The "larger than projected" declines in international master's student enrollment

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Cont. from "UNT…"

was a significant factor in the fiscal troubles. The federal government has canceled 8,000 international student visas since President Donald Trump retook office.

UNT routinely examines the effectiveness and efficiency of its offerings, McPherson said. Last year, the university closed 12 degree programs, he said.

For now, he has high hopes and expectations for the new undergraduate degree in AI.

"It is incumbent on us to make sure that we're not going to be hemorrhaging money," McPherson said. "We try our very best to be good stewards of the resources that we are given."

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 23 2026

Texas State, San Marcos partner to boost downtown police patrols

By Richard Webner

The San Marcos Police Department and Texas State University are partnering to boost the police presence in downtown San Marcos after a violent weekend shortly after Halloween drew attention to the district's crime.

The university's police department has allocated $150,000 to help pay for heavier police patrols on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, according to a news release from the city of San Marcos. The courthouse square area is popular among Texas State students.

On Jan. 3, the San Marcos Police Department assigned a dedicated team of officers to the courthouse square, according to the agenda of the Feb. 3 meeting of San Marcos City Council. At that meeting, the council voted to enter into a memorandum of understanding with Texas State, enshrining the university's $150,000 contribution.

The San Marcos Police Department now has four officers assigned full-time to the downtown district, according to the city. Texas State recently approved four new police officer positions to keep up with student enrollment growth.

"This partnership with Texas State University police ... is what smart public safety collaboration looks like," San Marcos Police Chief Stan Standridge said in a written statement. "Their $150,000 commitment allows us to put officers where they're needed most, in the heart of our downtown."

The increased focus on downtown crime comes after a shooting in the bar district the Saturday after Halloween left one person dead and two injured.

Four shootings occurred across the city that night, including another in the bar district, overwhelming the city's police department to the point that the Hays County Sheriff's Office and the police departments for Buda and Kyle sent officers to help out.

As fights continued to break out in downtown bars and people kept walking into the crime scene, Standridge made the decision to close the bars in the courthouse square early.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 21 2026

Plans to build border wall in Texas' Big Bend National Park sparks outrage

By SARAH BAHARI

Plans to build a border wall across a remote stretch of West Texas, including Big Bend National Park, have prompted an outcry among elected leaders and park advocates.

A map published by U.S. Customs and Border Protection revealed plans for construction of a "smart wall" that cuts through the national park and neighboring Big Bend Ranch State Park, as well as private ranch land.

Officials in West Texas said the federal government has provided no details about its plan, but residents and business owners are vehemently opposed to a border wall.

"Nobody wants a damn wall. It serves no purpose," Pecos County Judge Joe Shuster said Thursday. "It would destroy the beauty of Big Bend National Park."

A spokesperson for Customs and Border Protection confirmed the wall could include any combination of physical barriers, technology and road improvements depending on the terrain and operational requirements. Contracts should be awarded in the coming weeks and months, with construction expected to begin by the end of this year. The agency said it will provide more details as they are available and work with stakeholders to minimize impacts "to the greatest extent practicable."

To expedite construction, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security waived 28 laws and regulations, according to a filing in the Federal Register. Those laws protect clean air and water, migratory birds, endangered species and Native American gravesites.

In the filing, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem called the Big Bend region "an area of high illegal entry where illegal aliens regularly attempt to enter the United States and smuggle illicit drugs."

Big Bend sees fewer crossings compared with other parts of Texas due to its harsh desert climate and rugged mountain terrain. Since October of last year, Customs and Border Protection agents reported 734 migrant encounters in and around Big Bend. Agents in El Paso reported more than 4,800; Rio Grande Valley reported more than 5,800. Overall, border crossings have slowed to a trickle as a result of the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration.

Bob Krumenaker, who served as superintendent of Big Bend National Park from 2018 to 2023, said he supports robust electronic detection of the border, but a project of this magnitude would require infrastructure the park does not have in abundance, such as staging areas, roads, electricity and lighting.

One of the nation's largest and most remote national parks, Big Bend is home to the rugged Chisos Mountains and Chihuahuan Desert and is widely considered to have the darkest skies in the continental U.S. The park spans more than 800,000 acres, making it larger than the state of Rhode Island.

Building a wall, Krumenaker said, "would change the park irrevocably."

President Donald Trump made building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border a centerpiece of his immigration policy during his first term. In his second term, he shifted largely to sweeping mass deportations and arrests, but Congress last year allocated more than $46 billion to complete a wall.

Last year, Noem said Homeland Security was building a half-mile of wall every day and painting it black to make it hotter and deter migrants.

Texas Parks and Wildlife, which manages Big Bend State Ranch Park, said it has not received a request from the government for border infrastructure in the state park.

Conservation groups condemned the plans and urged the public to contact their elected leaders in Congress. U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales, a San Antonio Republican whose district encompasses Big Bend, did not respond to an email Thursday from The News.

Cary Dupuy, Texas regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association, said a wall would "choke off vital wildlife migration routes, intensify flooding risks, and inflict irreparable damage to one of our country's most iconic national parks." The park is home to black bears, mountain lions, javelinas and bobcats, among other wildlife.

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Cont. from "Plans…"

"Big Bend is no place for a border wall," Dupuy said in a written statement.

This is not the first time Big Bend has found itself in the crosshairs of immigration. Last year, the U.S. military deployed combat troops and armored vehicles to patrol the region and assist Border Patrol agents with surveillance and intelligence gathering.

In Brewster County, home to Big Bend, residents have been unequivocal in their opposition to a wall, County Judge Greg Henington said. Before he was elected county judge, Henington ran a local river outfitter and lodge outside Big Bend. Tourism, he said, is critical to the region. In 2024, more than 560,000 people visited the park, spending $56.8 million in the region, according to figures from the National Park Service.

"We understand the importance of border security here, but it would be crazy to build a wall in Big Bend National Park," Henington said. "Most people here just find this idea preposterous."

Staff writer Lana Ferguson contributed to this report.

sarah.bahari@dallasnews.com

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 21 2026

Tony Gonzales affair with staffer who later killed herself sparked House ethics probe

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

A congressional ethics watchdog launched an investigation into a reported affair between U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales and one of his staff members months ago, and investigators sought text messages, emails and other communications about the relationship, the San Antonio Express-News has learned.

Gonzales, a Republican from San Antonio, was romantically involved with staffer Regina Ann Santos-Aviles, the Express-News reported earlier this week based on interviews and a text message in which Santos-Aviles acknowledged the liaison. She committed suicide in September.

In a letter to her widower, Adrian Aviles, the Office of Congressional Conduct asked him to provide "all documents and communications" in his possession "relating to Regina Santos-Aviles' relationship with Rep. Tony Gonzales."

The Express-News reviewed a copy of the three-page letter. It said Aviles "has been identified as a third party with information relevant to this review" and asked for "emails, text messages, instant messages and voicemails" from Jan. 1, 2023, until Sept. 14, 2025, the date of Santos-Aviles' death.

The letter also said investigators "may request the opportunity to interview you and any individuals identified in response to these requests." It was dated Nov. 25 and was signed by the ethics agency's staff director and chief counsel, Omar S. Ashmawy.

Aviles told the Express-News on Friday that the congressional watchdog reached out to him unprompted.

His attorney, Bobby Barrera, declined to say whether Aviles responded to the request for information.

It was unclear whether the probe is still underway or what evidence investigators collected. The Nov. 25 letter indicates that it began some time earlier and cleared several internal thresholds to reach the point where agency staff sought information from Aviles.

The nonpartisan Office of Congressional Conduct (formerly the Office of Congressional Ethics) looks into allegations against members of Congress or their staffs, beginning with an initial staff review. Depending on the findings, staff can move on to a more serious "preliminary review" lasting up to 30 days. Staff then present their findings to the agency's six-member board.

If the preliminary review finds "a reasonable basis" to believe allegations are true, the board can authorize a further inquiry called a "second-phase review."

The letter to Avila said Gonzales was the subject of a second-phase review that began Nov. 22. Second-phase reviews are supposed to be concluded within 45 days under agency rules. That deadline would have fallen in early January. It is unclear whether agency staff completed their work and reported to the board within that time frame.

House rules forbid members of Congress from having sexual relationships with subordinates.

"It is a serious matter," said Richard Painter, who was the chief White House ethics lawyer in the administration of President George W. Bush and is now a law professor at the University of Minnesota. "Most federal agencies do not permit a boss to have a sexual affair with someone who's reporting to you. We understand the harm that comes from this kind of thing."

Santos-Aviles went to work for Gonzales in November 2021 as director of his regional district office in Uvalde. She was a Uvalde native and a former executive director of the Uvalde Area Chamber of Commerce. She and Aviles had an 8-year-old son.

On Sept. 13, 2025, Santos-Aviles, then 35, poured gasoline on herself in the backyard of her home and set herself on fire. She was transported to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where she died the next day. Law enforcement agencies found no evidence of foul play. The Bexar County Medical Examiner ruled her death a suicide by self-immolation.

The ethics agency's letter to Aviles says witnesses must certify they have produced all responsive materials and notes that the certification is subject to the federal false statements law. It further cautions that attempts to intimidate witnesses or restrict them from communicating with Congress "may constitute obstruction of justice." The letter says such conduct is punishable by up to five years in prison.

The Office of Congressional Conduct does not take disciplinary action against House members. If the agency's board determines further action is warranted, it may refer the matter to the House Committee on Ethics, which has authority to investigate and impose sanctions.

The board cannot make a referral against a member within the 60 days preceding an election. Gonzales is running for reelection in the March 3 Republican primary. The board can make a referral immediately after an election.

Gonzales' office did not respond to a request for comment.

In an interview with the Express-News on Wednesday, Aviles said Gonzales, a married father of six, "abused his power" by engaging in an affair with Santos-Aviles. He said he discovered the affair in May 2024 after finding, in his wife's phone, explicit text messages between her and the congressman.

According to Aviles and a former Gonzales staffer, after the affair became known within Gonzales' office, Santos-Aviles saw her responsibilities reduced. Meetings she had arranged for Gonzales were canceled, and she no longer accompanied him to events in the district, the former staffer said. Aviles said his wife was "blacksheeped" by Gonzales and his staff in an effort to force her to quit.

Gonzales has accused Aviles and Barrera of trying to "blackmail" him by seeking a monetary settlement in return for Aviles' silence about the affair.

In a social media post on Thursday, Gonzales displayed a partial screenshot of an email from Barrera referring to a potential settlement of up to $300,000 that would include a nondisclosure agreement. The undated excerpt suggests Barrera was contemplating a claim under the Congressional Accountability Act, which gives congressional staffers an avenue to sue if they face discrimination, harassment or labor violations on the job.

Barrera responded by calling Gonzales' post "a last act of a desperate man who is going to do anything but admit what he did."

Barrera confirmed that the screenshot Gonzales posted was from an email he sent to a lawyer for the congressman. Barrera declined to release the full email, saying it was confidential.

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Cont. from "Tony Gonzales…"

Painter, the former White House ethics lawyer, said that determining civil liability in a case where a staffer died by suicide would be complicated, but he added, "The consequences of this type of thing could be very, very severe.

"Congressmen are not above the law," he said.

Gonzales, who is seeking a fourth term representing the 23rd Congressional District, faces multiple challengers in the March 3 GOP primary, including firearms manufacturer and YouTube personality Brandon Herrera. Gonzales narrowly defeated Herrera in the 2024 primary.

President Donald Trump has endorsed Gonzales.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 21 2026

Texas Southern regents tread lightly with spending as Republican lawmakers eye HBCU

By Samantha Ketterer

The Texas Southern University Board of Regents approved about $2.7 million in contracts after some deliberation, careful not to violate Gov. Greg Abbott's order to pause nonessential state funding at the historically Black university.

The board's caution shows how deeply a routine state audit has shaken the university since Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick blasted TSU last fall in a surprise release of the findings that called out "significant weaknesses" in the school's financial processes.

Every contract must now cross President James W. Crawford III's desk before going to the board. The Texas Rangers are investigating potential fraud or waste. And the 2027 legislative session is looming for the university, which is the state's last remaining public university operating outside of a Texas university system.

"I want the public to understand how important this is, and … when I say the public, I mean also the governor and lieutenant governor," Regent Richard Johnson said during the board's first regular meeting of the year. "At the end of the day, we're going to have to argue for our resources in the next legislative session, and I need to be extremely clear on new contracts and extension contracts if the moratorium has not been lifted."

The regents met in executive session after Johnson requested that they publicly disclose whether the contracts had any compliance issues with Abbott's order. That would have required the board to waive its attorney-client privilege, said Lisa McBride, whose law firm provides counsel to the university.

After closed session, the regents approved spending on eight items on the consent agenda, including for police radio services, firewall upgrades and landscaping. It was not immediately clear how much of the contracts were paid with state appropriations exempted from Abbott's executive order and how much was funded by other means.

"Texas Southern University has instituted processes and procedures to ensure compliance with the Executive Order issued by Governor Greg Abbott," university officials said in a statement, which also highlighted exemptions to Abbott's order. "Compliance with the Order has not impaired University operations."

The GOP governor issued his moratorium on Dec. 15, ratifying the Legislative Budget Board's proposal to suspend some of TSU's spending authority during the 2026-2027 biennium. (Patrick and House Speaker Dustin Burrows are joint chairs of the budget board.) According to the order, which was obtained by the Houston Chronicle, no new contracts or contract extensions can be signed until the Rangers complete their investigation, the Legislature reviews the state auditor's final report and the university corrects any issues.

TSU can still spend state funding on certain operational commitments, such as salaries and benefits, debt service, scholarships and general operating costs, according to the order. It exempts ongoing educational services and contracts necessary to support general activities, like utilities, facilities, equipment and emergency response.

"Texans deserve to know that our institutions of higher education are operating as responsible stewards of state funds," Abbott wrote in the order.

TSU did not answer questions from the Houston Chronicle about whether any spending has been stalled or how much.

Audit findings

State Auditor Lisa Collier officially released her audit report on Dec. 31, finding that TSU's financial processes compromised the university's ability to comply with required purchasing procedures for thousands of vendors. Her office reviewed the university's procurement and asset management processes from Sept. 1, 2022, to July 31, 2025, as well as financial reporting processes for fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

Among the issues, the university couldn't locate or determine all of its assets because it lacked a complete and accurate inventory; and it did not submit timely and accurate financial information to the Office of the Comptroller of Public Accounts.

The university also didn't have a process in place to verify that valid contracts were in place before processing payments. According to the audit report, university departments had over 8,100 vendor invoices dated before obtaining the required purchase approvals and nearly 750 invoices paid to vendors whose contracts had expired, which "creates risks of overpayments, duplicate or unauthorized charges."

The report did not include the total cost of those invoices.

Crawford, TSU's president, said in his official response to the audit that the problems partially arose because TSU lost more than 200 positions in critical areas, including in its IT, finance and procurement offices, since its last audit in 2006. He also said a "lack of follow-up" until 2025 contributed significantly to the deficiencies.

Many alumni were shocked by the results and said they needed to be corrected — though some pointed to historical funding inequities for historically Black colleges and universities, and others sensed a grab at TSU's independence. After the audit was released, Patrick said he hoped TSU "could continue" for the sake of the students.

'Political theater'

State Sen. Borris Miles, a Democrat whose district includes TSU, attended Thursday's board meeting. He said he expects challenges as he advocates at the Legislature on behalf of the university's roughly 1,400 faculty and staff and more than 9,000 students.

"It's going to be difficult," Miles said. "The leadership of this state is making it difficult, this political theater."

TSU has agreed with all the auditor's recommendations and is giving regular updates to the board, which formed an ad hoc committee to respond to the audit's issues.

On Thursday, Crawford said TSU has completed a review of its current fiscal, procurement, contract and asset management policies. He also announced the hiring of a new chief human resource officer.

Other work is ongoing. TSU is building a contract inventory, reviewing employees' access to the financial system and implementing a new procurement and contract management platform to improve workflow, from requisition to project completion, Crawford said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Houston
Chronicle FEB 21 2026

Houston midwife Maria Rojas asks appeals court to lift abortion ban injunction

By John Wayne Ferguson

Attorneys for Maria Rojas, a Texas midwife accused of providing illegal abortions, asked an appeals court to reverse a temporary injunction that prevents her from practicing medicine while her landmark case moves through the justice system.

The arguments made in front of the Texas 15th Court of Appeals have no direct bearing on the criminal case involving Rojas. Rather, the hourlong hearing was an early opportunity for her lawyers to attack the work done by the Texas Attorney General's Office in the first-of-its-kind prosecution under Texas' 2022 law that created a near-total ban on abortion.

Marc Hearron, Rojas' attorney and the interim associate director of litigation for the Center for Reproductive Rights, told the justices that the AG's office hadn't done enough to prove that an abortion even happened in order to get a court's injunction.

Rojas last year was indicted and charged with three counts of performance of abortion and 12 counts of practicing medicine without a license. Rojas, a licensed midwife who owned and operated clinics in Harris and Waller counties, is alleged to have given women abortion-inducing drugs after she evaluated them at her clinics.

Eight of Rojas' employees are also accused of practicing medicine without a license.

Along with the criminal charges, Paxton's office is pursuing penalties created by the anti-abortion law, which allow the state to sue Rojas for $100,000 per alleged abortion. The state last year was granted an injunction, prohibiting her from practicing medicine and shutting down her business as the lawsuit moved forward.

In filings leading up to arguments, Rojas' attorneys said the AG's office was relying on anonymous tips and the observations of a Medicaid fraud investigator who staked out her clinics for their charges. Among other things, they argued that the drugs Rojas is alleged to have given women had legal uses, including treating miscarriages.

Much of the hearing involved technical legal arguments.

Hearron focused on arguments that state District Judge Gary Chaney in Waller County didn't include specifics about Rojas' alleged conduct or the injunction against her when he issued his ruling.

"The order is devoid of any underlying facts," Hearron said.

Jeffrey Stephens, an assistant solicitor general, argued that the injunction was within the state's authority and that the injunction was in the state's interest in stopping abortions from happening.

Prosecutors said in charging documents that Rojas was using other people's names to prescribe medications. One of her employees, a Cuban national, allegedly admitted to acting as a doctor, even though he was not licensed in the United States.

There was no testimony or new evidence presented during the hearing.

Chief Justice Scott Brister and Justices Scott Field and April Farris occasionally interrupted the attorneys as they delivered their arguments. At one point, Field said the court record arguing why Rojas should be subject to an injunction was "very thin on the evidence."

"There's not a lot there," Field said, and he suggested the trial court should have explained the merits of the injunction in its order. "Isn't that the very type of case where we need a trial court to explain why there's a probability of success?"

Farris asked Stephens why the state didn't do the "bare minimum" to outline the basis for the injunction.

Stephens argued that Rojas' lawyers didn't properly object to Chaney's decision when it was in his court — making it unable to be appealed — and said the AG is not obligated to prove that it could get a permanent injunction in order to get the temporary order.

Hearron called the allegations against Rojas "baseless" after the hearing.

"The attorney general's office is in such a rush to find and prosecute someone for violating abortion that it conducted a sloppy investigation and jumped to truly wild conclusions," Hearron said.

"We think the state didn't present evidence that showed anything, showed any abortions, any unlawful care," he said.

Stephens declined to comment.

The justices didn't issue a decision from the bench. A ruling based on Thursday's arguments could take weeks or months to be handed down.

Even if the justices reverse the temporary injunction against Rojas, she likely wouldn't be able to return to the work she was doing, Hearron said. Rojas' midwifery license was suspended after her arrest, and she was ordered to stay away from the businesses as a condition of her bail.

Rojas' criminal case is still pending. No trial date has been set for either the criminal or civil cases.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 21 2026

Texas companies win as Supreme Court strikes down Trump tariffs

By Paul Flahive

The Supreme Court's decision striking down President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs program is a victory for businesses in Texas, a state that's strongly dependent on imports from Mexico, Canada and elsewhere.

Among the winners are more than a dozen Texas companies that sued the administration over negative impacts of the import taxes at he heart of Trump's trade war. Yeti Holdings Inc., Kendra Scott and the marketing arm of Valero Energy Corp. all filed suits.

They were among more than 1,000 companies across the U.S. that sued the White House over its use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose tariffs on goods from foreign countries. In a 6-3 vote announced Friday, the Supreme Court said Trump's use of the act was improper.

The victory could have profound impacts on the Texas economy.

"It's going to provide important relief to Texas businesses and businesses across the country who have been paying increasingly the tariffs and taxes on consumers and businesses," said Raymond Robertson, director of the Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics and Public Policy at Texas A&M University.

The pain has been widespread.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York and Columbia University found that U.S. consumers — not the foreign businesses Trump said would be impacted — are carrying 90% of the economic burden. Uncertainty over the on-again, off-again programs has also been linked to delays in corporate decision-making on capital outlays and hiring.

"We need to make decisions, but the ball is constantly moving," a mineral product manufacturing executive told the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas in a survey last year. "This is truly ridiculous. I have been in business for 50 years as of next year and never have I seen such uncertainty in the market."

Small business is taking a hit, too.

When Trump announced reciprocal tariffs in April — a universal 10% tax applied to goods from every country with even higher rates for some — small business owners warned the move would harm their business.

"This is an existential threat to U.S.-based toy companies of all sizes," Robby Pettinato, chief operating officer at Austin-based Toy Joy said after the reciprocal plan was announced. "Ultimately, very few have the capabilities to even weather the cost of goods increase from the tariffs."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000036

Cont. from "Texas companies…"

Because Texas has been the biggest international trader in the U.S. for more than two decades, impacts in the state are outsized.

The reciprocal tariffs have impacted what amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars of business in Texas each year. Mexico, for example, is the state's largest source of imports, with goods from there valued at $157.6 billion in 2024. Imports from Canada that year were near $39 billion while those from China totaled $36 billion.

"We rely heavily on imports and these tariffs were having a significant effect," Robertson said. "I think it's going to help businesses breathe a little bit and this could help the labor market as well, because businesses were holding back."

The Dallas Fed echoed that in a new report Friday.

"State employment is expected to pick up, modestly growing in 2026," it said, after a down year in 2025. "Factors contributing to the hiring slowdown last year included government policy uncertainty, sharply higher tariffs and drastically lower immigration."

Any relief from tariffs may be short-lived, though. While the court's decision removes one legal pathway for imposing tariffs, it does not eliminate the possibility that Trump could pursue alternative avenues. After Friday's ruling, he promised to do just that.

"Even without IEEPA, the president retains ample statutory authority to quickly recreate much of the current trade policy chaos," trade researcher Clark Packard wrote Friday on the blog of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that has been critical of tariffs.

Trump can also use parts of the Trade Act of 1974, the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 and others to impose duties on imports and continue his trade war, according to Packard. Under such a scenario, tariffs could soon be back to nearly the same levels.

According to a new analysis Friday by the Budget Lab at Yale University, the overall effective tariff rate — the average tax owed on all imports — before Friday's ruling was 16.9%. That figure would fall to 9.1% — the highest since 1946 excluding 2025 — if the tariffs the Supreme Court rejected aren't replaced.

Even at that level, tariffs are expected to raise prices by 0.6% in the short run, costing the average household about $800 and households at the bottom of the income distribution roughly $400.

But if Trump follows through on his threat to impose a 10% across-the-board tariff using a different legal authority and if he is able to keep that policy in place, the Budget Lab estimates the effective tariff rate will end up back at 15.4%.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

In Frisco, allegations of 'Indian takeover' plunge community into national battleground

By SARAH BAHARI

FRISCO — For months, the attacks seeped onto social media, often framed as questions. Why do they not assimilate? Where do they work to afford their luxury homes? Is our town becoming an ethnic enclave?

The tensions festering on platforms like Reddit and X erupted this month at a Frisco City Council meeting. Roughly a dozen speakers, some wearing "America First" hats, railed against what they called an "Indian takeover" to raucous applause.

Some argued without evidence that Indian Americans were committing visa fraud, echoing recent charges from Texas Republicans, and stealing jobs from Americans whose ancestors emigrated longer ago. Many said the fabric of their neighborhoods had changed so dramatically they no longer recognized the streets they call home.

That meeting plunged Frisco — an affluent Collin County suburb known for high-ranking schools and a thriving business climate — into the precarious national battleground over race, identity, immigration and opportunity. It also illustrated how legal immigration has come under a microscope as the Trump administration executes a sweeping plan to arrest and deport thousands of migrants.

City leaders and Indian American residents sharply rejected what they called dangerous and divisive rhetoric. Both largely blamed outside agitators, noting that conservative influencers urged people to attend the meeting and several of the speakers came from surrounding towns.

"Hatred and fear are everywhere right now," said Nick Gupta, 48, a real estate developer who moved to North Texas from New Jersey in 2024. "This is not only a Frisco issue, but it has come to Frisco."

Explosive growth

Once a tiny farming town, Frisco's population exploded in recent years. From 2000 to 2026, the city grew from 33,000 residents to more than 245,000, a roughly 640% increase. Asians made up just more than 2% of the town's population in 2000, according to U.S. Census data. Now, they account for 33% of its population.

The boom in the Indian population was not mere coincidence. In 2008, an influential spiritual leader, Sri Ganapathy Sachchidananda Swamiji, blessed a 10-acre piece of old farmland, which he said had "good vibrations." Construction on a temple soon began, and in 2015, the Karya Siddhi Hanuman Temple opened. It is one of the largest Hindu temples in Texas, hosting cultural festivals, faith services and yoga, art and dance classes.

Meanwhile, Collin County emerged as a corporate magnet, attracting companies such as Toyota, T-Mobile, JP Morgan Chase, FedEx and more. This year, AT&T announced plans to leave downtown Dallas and build its global headquarters in nearby Plano, just two miles from the Frisco border. That business growth drew workers, many of whom have science and technology backgrounds.

Muni Janagarajan, a software engineer originally from India, moved to Texas in 1996 and settled in Plano before moving to Frisco in 2013, like many drawn by the reputation of the school district. He is now running for a seat on the school board.

Frisco's schools are central to the city's success. With more than 60,000 students, it is the largest district in Texas to receive an A ranking from the Texas Education Agency. Last year, it was home to the highest number of National Merit semifinalists in the state, and its average SAT score was more than 160 points higher than the state's average. About 85% of students go on to attend a college or university after graduation.

When Janagarajan moved here, corn fields still dotted much of Frisco. But he could see the city was changing, and fast. Since then, those corn fields have been replaced with gleaming office buildings, Indian grocers, high-end shops and luxury subdivisions.

Janagarajan threw himself into the community, volunteering as a school crossing guard and serving as director of his neighborhood's homeowners association. Frisco is his home, he said, which made the anti-Indian rhetoric painful.

"I've been heartbroken and embarrassed by the hateful rhetoric directed toward us," said Janagarajan, 54. "People move to Frisco because of the cultural diversity. This is a strength, not a weakness."

H-1B visas under fire

Marc Palasciano was born and raised around Dallas, and the first thing he wants to make clear is that he is not racist. He does not subscribe to either political party and considers himself "a man of the people."

After leaving his job at T-Mobile in 2023, Palasciano became a self-described independent journalist and whistleblower. He said he is simply tired of the way corporate America treats Americans.

At some point, Palasciano, who lives in Garland, believed social media outlets were shadow-banning him, or restricting his profile's visibility. Frustrated, the 42-year-old got the idea last spring to speak to the Frisco City Council, ensuring his thoughts would be included in a public record. (Frisco is home to his former employer.)

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000037

Cont. from "In Frisco…"

When H-1B visas emerged as a contentious issue, Palasciano urged followers on X to attend the Frisco meeting with him to challenge the program, which he believes hurts American workers. A conservative influencer shared one of his tweets, and he soon found himself in a packed room of residents, some angry and others hurt and disappointed.

"This isn't about race. I have nothing against Indian people," he later said. "But what's going on in Frisco is not diversity. When a specific group of people explodes in population, something is happening."

Alongside Palasciano, speakers assailed the influx of Indian Americans, from accusing them of snatching the American Dream to criticizing their driving skills and even blaming them for traffic. Repeatedly, they said opportunities for themselves and their families had disappeared while Indian Americans prospered.

"Frisco is changing at a speed that no community can absorb without damage. When lifelong residents voice concern, we are told our concern is bigotry," said Dylan Law, a student at the University of North Texas who lives in McKinney. "That is a lie. It's not hate. It's a love of home."

Many focused their ire on H-1B visas, which allow companies to recruit and hire foreign workers in specialized fields. Passed in the early 1990s, the visa program was signed into law by then-President George H.W. Bush with broad bipartisan support to recruit highly skilled foreign professionals.

More than 17,000 new H-1B visas were initially approved in Texas in the 2024 fiscal year, according to federal data analyzed by Bloomberg News. In Frisco, 917 were approved the same year, the eighth-most among Texas cities. In comparison, more than 2,000 were approved in nearby Richardson; nearly 1,900 in Irving and about 1,700 in Dallas.

Indian applicants accounted for 71% of approved applications that year, according to federal data. About 12% went to applicants from China.

With the program in the political crosshairs, few businesses are willing to discuss how they use or benefit from these visas. Several companies with headquarters or large offices in North Texas, including Infosys, AT&T, Texas Instruments and T-Mobile, declined to comment or did not respond when asked for details.

Immigration experts say these visas are critical, though.

The United States simply does not have enough workers to fill jobs, particularly in science, math and engineering, said Laura Collins, director of the Bush Institute-SMU Economic Growth Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute.

"If a company is taking the time to hire an H1-B worker," Collins said, "there's likely a compelling reason."

Hiring only American workers would require a substantial investment in education and would take years, experts say.

Filing and legal fees to obtain an H-1B visa can amount to tens of thousands of dollars, said Karen Pollak, a Dallas immigration attorney who helps companies navigate the laborious application process. Last year, the Trump administration announced an additional $100,000 fee on some H-1B applications.

The federal government also requires companies it considers "H-1B dependent," meaning they have a large share of these visa holders, to first recruit domestic candidates. Employers are also required to pay H-1B workers at least as much as the wage of similar workers or the prevailing wage.

The lottery program is capped at 65,000 visas per year, with an additional 20,000 reserved for people with advanced degrees.

"The idea that this is stealing jobs from Americans is nonsensical," Pollak said. "We are just in a very anti-immigration climate right now."

In Frisco, many accused the visa holders of scamming the program.

Accusations of widespread H-1B visa fraud have not been substantiated, and cities have no control over the H-1B program, which is administered by the federal government.

The visas have faced growing scrutiny by Republican lawmakers in recent months. Gov. Greg Abbott directed public universities and state agencies to freeze new H-1B visa applications until May 2027 so lawmakers can add "guardrails" to the program. Attorney General Ken Paxton announced he was launching an investigation into three North Texas companies following reports they set up sham businesses to sponsor H-1B visas. Paxton has not publicly disclosed the businesses or where they are located.

MAGA influencers

Coverage of the Frisco meeting extended far beyond North Texas. In India Today , an English-language news magazine in India, a headline read, "Right-wing turns Frisco council meeting into H-1B showdown." The Times of India , the country's largest English-language newspaper, reported "MAGA influencers rallied Frisco residents on social media."

Still, the meeting — and more precisely, where the city goes from here — is being dissected by neighbors, on social media, at places of worship.

Billy Echols-Richter, who founded Grace Avenue United Methodist Church in Frisco in 1999 with his wife, Laura, is part of an interfaith alliance with other Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faith leaders. That work has taken on more urgency.

"We are not suspicious of one another, and we are not afraid of one another," Echols-Richter said.

"We see our neighbors as an asset regardless of religion, race or background."

Danny Mehta, who owns the Game Show Experience in downtown Frisco, runs a Facebook group disseminating information to the local Indian community.

Before the meeting, he said, people were nervous, many asking him if they should worry. "Let's see how our leaders respond first," he told them.

During and after the meeting, most city leaders unequivocally denounced the anti-Indian sentiment. Mayor Jeff Cheney wrote later on Facebook that it was perhaps the toughest meeting he has sat through in his 20 years on the council.

"When you choose to call Frisco home," he said at the meeting, "it will always be our mission that you feel welcome here and safe here."

Mehta, 53, felt palpable relief.

"I'm not worried about going forward. Yes, there is hate. There's a lot of division," he said. "None of that's really new. What matters is how we respond to it."

Community leaders could have more opportunities to respond. Palasciano said he plans to return to Frisco.

Data and interactives intern William Tong contributed to this report.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

UT's Women's and Gender Studies won a department. Then came the political pressure

By Lily Kepner

By any measure, 2023 was a golden year for University of Texas students and faculty studying women's and gender studies. After decades of classes and years of advocacy for more resources, the university approved the field to become an official department.

The move meant WGS would have its own full-time faculty, a chair reporting directly to the dean and more money for programming. Faculty celebrated the milestone as a sign their work — and their place on campus — was finally being recognized as valuable.

"Both new faculty and long-standing faculty were almost in tears with how impactful it was to feel that sense of belonging," said Lisa Moore, the director of UT's Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies department.

Moore and her colleagues did not know then how fleeting that feeling would be.

Conservative pressure and the criticism from UT leadership about "overly fragmented" departments have snowballed in recent years: scrutinizing, at times criticizing and — most recently — dismantling the fields. Last week, UT President Jim Davis announced plans to collapse ethnic and gender studies into a new department and review the courses and majors within it.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "UT's Women's and Gender Studies…"

Faculty and students fear consolidating the department with others could threaten individual degree programs, courses, programming, research and faculty jobs. Though all current students will be allowed to continue in their degree programs, Davis has not said if there will be faculty or majors in the future. It's also unclear when consolidation will occur.

Conservatives criticize the courses of study for veering into activism and often describe the curriculum as "indoctrination." They argue the state shouldn't fund it and students shouldn't be forced to take it as part of required curriculum.

Some also critique the programs as under-enrolled and over-funded. Enrollment is small, and down this year about 30 students from fall 2025, according to the college's data. Last year 19 students graduated with degrees in WGS, representing a tiny fraction of UT's nearly 16,000 graduates.

UT spokesperson Mike Rosen said there are 30 current students majoring or taking a master's program in WGS and 13 faculty working for the department. According to data used by the consolidation committee, 95 students are pursuing majors or minors in women's and gender studies or LGBTQ studies currently. The university doesn't officially track minors until students graduate because they can be "difficult to quantify," Rosen said.

Proponents say women's and gender studies is a long-established discipline that's being targeted and defined without their input or voice.

In more than a dozen interviews with alumni, current students, professors and recent staff hires, the women's and gender studies community defended the program as interdisciplinary and skills-based, taught by award-winning faculty. They say it leads students to meaningful careers and lives, and that small faculty-to-student ratios are a benefit to students.

Alumni — including a nonprofit founder, therapist, professor, aspiring physician and a Rhodes Scholar —said UT courses about women's reproductive health, LGBTQ history and female literature gave them critical-thinking skills and new perspectives that shaped their careers. The coursework helps them empathetically engage with people with different opinions or personal backgrounds.

In announcing the consolidation, Davis did not mention politics. He declined interview requests with the American-Statesman. Moore said Davis has not responded to her messages inviting the UT president, who is not an academic, to her classes and to meet with her about the department.

Moore believes the attacks on her field will eventually force faculty and students to leave the school. WGS enrollment is small, but comparable to other departments such as Middle Eastern Studies with 99 students and Religious Studies with 73 students — neither of which face consolidation.

"I have never seen the Legislature and the Board of Regents so successfully reach into the heart of what we do on campus and twist the guts out," Moore said. "At every level, people in leadership and academic administration are saying 'What is my line in the sand? '"

What classes offer

Students and alumni said they came to UT — and to WGS courses — because they wanted tools to understand people from different backgrounds and to apply that knowledge in other fields. Moore said students earn similar incomes as graduates in other humanities-based fields, evidence that the program prepares them for versatile careers.

Neha Yawalkar graduated in 2025 with a biochemistry major and women's and gender studies minor. She wanted to focus her career on helping LGBTQ people when she started at UT. A fertility and reproduction course in women's and gender studies helped her see how she could pursue that passion through health care.

Yawalkar said her minor taught her about how gender impacts marketing, engineering and health care, she said. Her South Asian migration course taught her to "critique and read with nuance," and an LGBTQ course showed her how queer people historically struggled to find inclusive care.

"It feels like it's radical knowledge," Yawalkar said, "because there's almost an injustice to the fact that you didn't have this information beforehand."

She now works at the Kind Clinic, an Austin-based medical practice specifically for LGBTQ Texans that offers gender-affirming care and HIV prevention pills.

The Texas Legislature banned gender-affirming care for minors in 2023, prompting some families to leave the state. Yawalkar is determined to become a physician in Texas to ensure LGBTQ Texans still get inclusive care.

Isaac James, a 2022 minor in LGBTQ studies and government major, said the program showed him how he could serve his community beyond politics and taught him about the rights queer people have fought for. He cofounded OutVote in 2024, an organization focused on engaging LGBTQ youth in politics, after seeing his peers feel unrepresented in government.

"I really do think without LGBTQ studies, I would not have been able to obtain the same professional and academic success," James said, citing the critical-thinking skills he cultivated and the connections that helped him become a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford in England after graduation.

The classes help students challenge their assumptions about the world and its inequalities, but that doesn't mean they are political or one-sided, faculty and students insist.

In fact, UT's diverse student body allows gender studies students to disagree in fruitful ways that may not be possible at other schools, Paige Schilt, a 2000 graduate, said. Navigating diverse perspectives in women's and gender studies courses directly shapes her work as a therapist and support group leader in Austin today, she said.

"Being a facilitator for ideas to come up and be evaluated from different perspectives… that is something that I do all the time as a therapist," Schilt said. "(Keeping) an atmosphere of respect and openness and curiosity, that's something that I definitely learned, both as a student and a teacher at UT Austin."

Kate Viera, a 1998 graduate, still remembers her course on female authors in the 18th century, where she analyzed how societal expectations for women are reflected in the text: a view that also helped her understand her own life and experiences differently.

Most of all, the women's studies courses taught her that education should contribute positively to society, echoing UT's own mission to "change the world."

"I felt that so strongly," said Viera, who is now a University of Wisconsin education professor. "The idea that learning could be political, not in a partisan way, but in a way that contributes to the well being of society, is certainly something that has impacted my whole career."

A long history

Though gender and ethnic studies have been increasingly scrutinized in recent years, the fields have a nearly five-decade history at UT. The Center for Women's and Gender Studies, a research hub that initially housed the majors before the department gained approval, opened in 1979 after students advocated for an education that included all people and perspectives.

In 1987, the university allowed students to add a concentration in women's studies. Full degree programs were approved in the early 2000s, and more than 500 have graduated with a degree or concentration in the field, Moore said.

Research and courses in the department often focus on maintaining history that is otherwise excluded from traditional archives, such as the stories of LGBTQ people. In a class that studies the history of social revolutions, Moore assigns students founding documents of the U.S., but also, work written by advocates for abolition and equality, she said.

"In every culture where there has been subordination of women, there have been people who understood that was wrong, and who fought it," Moore said. "There were always people who see things a different way, and that's a history that we want to make available to our students."

UT President Davis said new structural changes follow a review aimed at best stewarding the college's resources, correcting "fragmentation" in the college and broadening narrow departments. But faculty say the fields are broad, intersecting with health, disability studies, literature, education, information studies and public policy. They argue the field is increasingly relevant in today's diverse world.

"Gender studies, ethnic studies are actual disciplines born out of the need that wasn't necessarily being met," Nicole Ramsey, a women's and gender studies professor, said. "If you are to have knowledge about the world, it doesn't make sense to only do that through certain frameworks that don't include everybody. It could just never work."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000039

Cont. from "UT's Women's and Gender Studies…"

'A dark cloud'

Change around the department started slowly. Then, fast.

In 2024, UT closed multicultural and LGBTQ student centers in response to a state ban on diversity, equity and inclusion. At the time, the university reassured faculty that their teaching and research would be untouched.

But political pressure intensified as UT's top leadership turned over. In a year, the school had a new chancellor, president and provost. Under Davis's leadership, UT stopped providing gender affirming care that offered hormone replacement therapy for transgender students. His tenure also ended course requirements that brought many students into ethnic and gender studies classes.

Then, efforts to control what was taught in the classroom escalated.

In September, a children's literature professor at Texas A&M University was fired after a video of a student confronting her went viral. The president, dean and department head lost their jobs within days. Texas A&M folded its women's and gender studies department entirely, and the system restricted teaching on race and gender.

Even though no law barred teaching about gender identity, university systems across Texas — including UT — opened audits into courses over gender and race curriculum and promised to "restore trust."

UT's own LGBTQ studies faculty have been harassed online, over the phone and on conservative news sites, but university leaders haven't publicly defended staff's academic freedom, professors said. Last week, UT regents voted on a policy to limit the discussion of "controversial" topics but left it up to university presidents to determine what "controversial" means.

"It's this dark cloud over everything," Ramsey said. "How can you do your best work when you are constantly questioning if your major is going to exist next semester?"

Students are afraid of being videotaped or surveilled during class — a concern made more real by the incident at Texas A&M University.

"This climate of fear around discussing issues of gender, race and sexuality has meant that students… are more scared than ever before to talk about them openly, to debate them with their peers," Gutterman said.

Jo Hsu, associate chair of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, said threats, while discouraging, "affirm the importance of what we do." Hsu is often the first transgender faculty member students have and is teaching subjects they didn't have access to in school. In their trans care class, Hsu tasked students with thinking about how to protect and share lessons learned with those not in the class.

"For me, it's always been the feeling of, this place is ours too," Hsu said about Texas. "We also live here, and (teaching), in part, is a commitment to the version of the state that I've known."

Future unclear

The small lobby of the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies department is marked by a bright mural. Rainbow flags sit in a cup next to the door, and shelves of feminist and queer texts rescued from the since-closed Gender and Sexuality Center line the neighboring wall.

With consolidation, students know they will be able to complete their majors, but don't know if the WGS majors or minors will exist after the university's review.

"The level of fearmongering is at a fever pitch," said Lina-Marie Murillo, a professor in reproductive health. "They're going to lose a deeply engaged and educated citizenry, but I think that's what they want."

But they are not losing everybody. Sofia Gomez, an aspiring educator and UT freshman, took a women's and gender studies class as an elective her first semester. Her introductory course will help her be knowledgeable about how best to support multicultural and multilingual students, Gomez said. She wants to declare a double major in the field and rhetoric and writing.

"This is why my parents wanted me to come here," Gomez said. When she found out about consolidation, she cried. "I feel like I'm grieving."

Sydney Jael Wilson, a UT master's student, traveled 1,000 miles from Georgia to study women's and gender studies at the Forty Acres. Undergraduate courses changed her understanding of the world and her place in it, and her goal is to expand such programs to historically Black colleges and universities.

"It's worth asking ourselves why do we think women's history isn't important," Wilson said. She believes in "protecting something so sacred," and working with others to do so.

Outside of class, Wilson is creating an after-school women's and gender studies curriculum for high school students to expand the learning beyond college.

The department's director, Moore, knows that the field she's spent more than 30 years studying has "already transformed" the country's understanding of itself.

"What happens in our classrooms is something that I would love our harshest critics to be able to witness," Moore said.

Though UT can lose its classes, its reputation and its faculty, it can't lose that knowledge, she said.

"You can't put this genie back in the bottle," she said.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

Trump promised to deport hardened criminals. But most Texans arrested by ICE had no convictions.

By Julián Aguilar

During the first year of the Trump administration's massive deportation campaign, the president and federal officials repeatedly said they would target gang members, murderers and other criminal offenders who are the "worst of the worst."

But a review of federal data shows that a smaller percentage of individuals targeted by immigration agents had criminal convictions compared to former President Joe Biden's final year in office — even as total arrests more than doubled under Trump.

Federal agents reported about 54,000 arrests in Texas during Trump's first nine months in office, compared to about 23,000 under Biden in a similar nine-month period. Yet the share of those with criminal convictions fell from about 60% under Biden to just under 40% under Trump.

Adriel Orozco, the senior policy counsel at the American Immigration Council, said the findings aren't surprising as Trump pushes to set a record in deportations and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency casts a wide net.

"You would have to go after people that don't have criminal histories or who have minor issues in their criminal histories," he said.

Orozco said the aggressive tactics used by ICE officers are still surprising: smashing car windows, forcing their way into homes and businesses and surrounding vehicles on the street. He said the tactics fall in line with the agents' goals of meeting unattainable benchmarks reportedly set by the Trump administration.

An ICE spokesperson said the agency cannot "validate statistics" other than its own but added the Department of Homeland Security was doing the job voters asked of them when Trump was reelected in 2024.

The agency's statement included names and mugshots of fewer than a half-dozen immigrant criminals arrested in Texas. Their crimes ranged from fraud and burglary to assault, kidnapping and rape.

"Under President Trump's and Secretary Noem's leadership, DHS has already removed more than 700,000 illegal aliens," the spokesperson said. "If you break the law, you will face the consequences."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000040

Cont. from "Trump…"

More weekly arrests

The Houston Chronicle's analysis of immigration enforcement uses data compiled by the Deportation Data Project, which collects immigration arrest and detention data through Freedom of Information Act requests. We compared arrests made by federal agents in Texas from Jan. 20 to Oct. 15 during Biden's presidency in 2024 and Trump's presidency in 2025.

During the respective time frames, agents made about 600 arrests per week under Biden. That figure more than doubled during Trump's first nine months to about 1,400.

The weekly average also trended upward under Trump, while it remained comparatively steady during the Biden administration. At its peak, ICE made 2,150 arrests in Texas during the week of Sept. 28, 2025. That's over three times the highest arrest tally recorded during the Biden administration.

The same trend played out locally. In ICE's Houston area of responsibility, which encompasses 57 counties in Southeast Texas, agents made 190 arrests per week under Biden. That figure more than doubled to about 434 arrests under Trump.

The data obtained from ICE sorts individuals into three categories of criminality: those who have been convicted of a crime, those who have pending criminal charges against them, and those who have some other immigration violation without any known criminal convictions or pending criminal charges.

In raw numbers, ICE has arrested more people in all three categories during Trump's presidency. However, a smaller portion of arrestees actually have a criminal conviction, despite the administration's repeated claims that they're getting more criminals off the street.

Over a third of the arrests made by ICE under Trump were of individuals with no criminal convictions and no pending criminal charges, compared to 13% of individuals under Biden.

"The statistics show the indiscriminate nature of the Trump administration's policies around trying to meet its self-defined quotas of 3,000 arrests per day," Orozco said. "Even with the massive detention network that has expanded under this administration, we've seen that it has struggled to really meet its goals."

More detainer requests

Many Democrats, Republicans and immigration advocates agree that targeting criminals should be the main goal of immigration enforcement.

"Most of the people ICE has arrested are individuals who would lead peaceful, productive lives in the United States if they were allowed to," wrote David J. Bier, director of immigration policy at the libertarian Cato Institute.

During a hearing of the U.S. Senate's Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security earlier this month, Bier told lawmakers that the administration's deportation efforts are eroding basic constitutional protections that include the rights to free speech and to bear arms, and guaranteed due process.

Orozco said it's possible to arrest more serious offenders without targeting all unauthorized immigrants. He said cities and states with so-called sanctuary policies that limit cooperation with ICE aren't protecting criminals. They are instead prioritizing enforcement on immigrants with criminal histories.

"There could be smart ways where enforcement could be targeted and be focused on individuals with more serious crimes," he said. "We have had priority enforcement priorities in the past, but unfortunately people with minor criminal infractions or without any criminal histories are being picked up now."

Detainer requests, a tool ICE uses to ask local jails and prisons to hold someone past their release date so agents can make an arrest, bear that out.

Under Trump, ICE made over 31,000 detainer requests, a 33% increase from the number of detainer requests made under Biden.

Yet, under the Trump administration, ICE requests to detain convicted criminals dropped while the number of requests to hold individuals without pending charges or a conviction nearly doubled.

Immigration enforcement data on detainers includes a "most serious conviction charge" for individuals who have been convicted of a criminal charge. Under both administrations, the 10 most common serious conviction charges were the same. But the number of detainers for individuals convicted of some of the most serious crimes on that list decreased from Biden to Trump. In Texas, detainers for assault and crimes related to "dangerous drugs" dropped by 10% and 7%, respectively.

Three of the top charges are directly related to immigration: illegal entry, illegal reentry and "smuggling aliens." Under both administrations, the most common charge was driving under the influence of alcohol, followed by assault.

More local involvement

Where ICE sends those detainer requests has also shifted.

Local facilities, including police departments and county jails, saw an increase in requests under the Trump administration while state prisons, which hold convicted criminals, dropped by almost 50%.

In a Feb. 11 analysis of arrests during Trump's first year, the Brennan Center for Justice argued the administration is ignoring evidence that shows immigrants commit fewer crimes than citizens. In doing so, it's diverting resources to immigration enforcement that could be better spent.

"Federal law enforcement officers have been sidelined from protecting the country from genuine threats, such as child exploitation and drug trafficking, to indiscriminately increase the number of immigrants arrested," the report states.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

Charter school growth reshapes San Antonio's largest districts

By Noah Alcala Bach

In the 11 years Brian Woods led San Antonio's largest school district as superintendent, he oversaw the opening of more than 20 new campuses.

At times, Northside Independent School District couldn't build schools fast enough. But that era of growth is over.

In the past three decades, families' options for school expanded rapidly as charters grew across Texas. Public school districts that were previously the default or only option are now fighting to keep students. Each child who goes elsewhere means less funding for public school districts, forcing hard decisions about how to use limited resources.

Since 2023, three of San Antonio's largest school districts have closed 20 campuses. Now, even Northside ISD — a district that once struggled to keep up with growth — must weigh closures.

The share of San Antonio public school students enrolled in charters grew from 3% to 13% in the past decade.

Charter campuses in the city's four largest districts rose from 40 before the pandemic to 76 today. Nearly every Bexar County district saw the number of students opting out of their public school districts increase since 2018.

While charter schools have been an option since the 1990s, they've grown in popularity since the pandemic — and school districts across the state are feeling the impact of their reach.

"The conversation around people who were concerned about that in both parties — both Democrats and Republicans — was that charters would be very small, that they would take very little state funding, that they wouldn't have any impact on independent school districts," Woods said. "Well, 31 years later, we can see that that's false."

After peaking at 107,800 students in 2017, Northside's enrollment dipped below 100,000 in 2025. Last school year, nearly 16,500 students left Northside ISD for charters — more than double the number that left in 2019. Northside has more charter schools than any other area district, with 32 campuses. When the district was at peak enrollment in 2017, the number of charters open was half of what it is today.

In the competitive landscape of Texas education, Northside ISD is a traditional public school district, meaning it is designed to serves students living in its boundaries with the majority of its funding coming from taxpayer funds raised by a local property tax. In contrast, charter

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000041

Cont. from "Charter school…"

schools have no boundaries and draw their funding almost entirely from the state. But in recent years, the landscape has become muddled as some school districts dropped their boundaries and invited students living elsewhere to attend their schools. Northside ISD is one of the school systems that became an "open-enrollment" district.

So now, public school districts compete with both other nearby districts and with charter schools. Meanwhile, homeschooling and private schools remove students from the public school system entirely.

With more options than ever, parents have to sort out what school fits their students best. The reasons families choose to pull their children out of public school districts are varied — some believe a more specialized curriculum will be a better fit or a school elsewhere might offer stronger discipline.

For Roxanne Rodriguez, it was a feeling that her son, Richard, needed more one-on-one attention than he was getting in his district, East Central ISD.

Rodriguez, a nurse at University Hospital, pulled Richard from his district and put him in a charter after she saw him fall further and further behind his freshman year. The decision was difficult — Rodriguez herself graduated from East Central.

"Freshman year, he just wasn't getting that one-on-one that he needed. He was failing his classes," Rodriguez, 41, said. "My son just needed that extra one-on-one help, and he wasn't getting it."

'Just a number'

Frustrated, Rodriguez began to search for alternatives and found Jubilee Academies, a small charter network with four campuses across the city. Jubilee was founded in 2000 with 60 students at a San Antonio campus and now markets itself as the "premier choice" in education. Its mission is to provide a "nurturing community focused on leadership and educational excellence."

Rodriguez said she chose the school because it allowed her son to catch up to his classmates who were already on grade level while getting the high school experience he wanted playing football. The decision boiled down to having Richard attend a school where he would get more attention from his teachers. Now, he has academic and athletic scholarships waiting for him upon graduation.

"At public school, he was just a number to them," she said.

More and more families are making the same move, said Sarah Cohodes, associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, who researches education policy, charter schools and school choice. She has found in her research that while charter schools have been around for decades, the pandemic spurred higher rates of absenteeism at traditional public schools and drove a "greater willingness" for families to choose other options.

"What I think happened is the pandemic made people reevaluate their relationship to school," Cohodes said. "Maybe they saw what happened in school in a way that they hadn't before, and then had this greater willingness to switch."

Charter schools grow

Texas' charter school system began in the 1990s as a public education experiment. It offered the new school models flexibility in areas like teacher certifications, class sizes and student transportation requirements in exchange for stricter accountability. Charters could receive state funding under tighter state oversight at academically struggling campuses. The goal was to create new options for families who didn't find the right fit with their neighborhood schools.

Over time, distinct differences emerged among charters. Some remained small, stand-alone campuses built around a specific mission or student population. Solo campuses include Celebrate Dyslexia, which focuses on dyslexic students, and Eleanor Kolitz Hebrew Language Academy which offers a Hebrew language immersion program.

Others replicated their model and grew into multi-campus networks — sometimes enrolling as many students as the traditional districts around them.

That network model now largely defines charter enrollment in San Antonio. Most local charter students attend campuses run by large operators. Last school year, IDEA Public Schools served nearly 18,000 students from area school districts; Great Hearts Texas had around 7,000; and KIPP had just over 3,000.

A lack of restrictions from the state has allowed charters to drastically expand, according to David DeMatthews, professor of education policy at the University of Texas at Austin. DeMatthews has studied how charters serve students in comparison to public school districts.

"When Texas first began with charters, like a lot of states, they weren't just allowing anyone to get in in the first place. There were more restrictions around them," DeMatthews said. "What we've seen over time, more recently in Texas too, is that once a charter operator was granted a campus, they were able to expand without many challenges from the state, even if they've had failing campuses."

Even as charters evolved in model and size, the pitch has stayed largely the same: charters offer an alternative to struggling neighborhood schools. When new charter operators apply to open campuses, they must show state officials how nearby schools are performing — part of the case for why another option is needed.

A unique coalition has historically supported charter schools, Cohodes said: Republicans who back school choice efforts and Democrats largely from urban areas who argue schools have failed to support students of color and those from low-income families.

"That sort of coalition came together to say 'ideally … we would reform and improve public education but in the meantime, we shouldn't wait for things to improve in the public system. We need to have options that work for our kids now,'" Cohodes said.

On the city's East Side, IDEA Carver is one of the new charters that opened in recent decades. San Antonio Spurs great David Robinson founded Carver Academy in 2001 as a private school before handing it over to IDEA Public Schools in 2012.

In its final year as a private school, when Carver served 110 students, Robinson said he approached IDEA in the hopes of growing student enrollment.

Today, Carver has more than 1,000 students and is one of 30 IDEA campuses in San Antonio. IDEA Carver pulls its largest group of students from San Antonio ISD.

On a recent Tuesday morning, IDEA kindergarten teacher Shawnee Huerta taught her class of a dozen young children — all dressed in blue polos with bright yellow IDEA logos and khakis — a lesson on how the sun works.

"Can I bring the sun into our classroom? No, right, that's too big. I don't have big enough arms for the sun? Do you always have big enough arms for the sun? I don't think so. I don't even think that if we put all of our arms together, it would carry the whole sun. So we have to make something called a model," Huerta said. "What do we have to make?"

"A model," her students called in response. The class watched Huerta closely as she motioned her arms in the air.

The walls of Huerta's classroom boast the phrases "no excuses," "whatever it takes" and "closing the achievement gap" in murals that emphasize the mission of the school.

"We really wanted to look for communities that had the need for that college-going identity … that's going to help (their) scholar succeed in life," said Carvetta Bohannon, senior regional vice president of talent for the charter district, describing why IDEA chose Carver for a campus.

The school — split between elementary and middle-high school campuses — sits near two San Antonio ISD schools. Bowden Academy, the closest K–8 school, received an F from the Texas Education Agency last year, while the nearest high school, Brackenridge, scored a B. TEA's A–F grades are based largely on student performance on State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, exams.

At Carver, the elementary campus earned a C, and its combined middle-high school campus scored an A. More than 75% of Carver students are economically disadvantaged while both Bowden and Brackenridge enroll more than 85% of students from low-income families.

The advantage of attending IDEA, as Bohannon sees it, is that students receive more individual attention and a tailored education on campus.

"They know that I'm going to go to a place where people care about me as a whole child. I'm going to have a meal. It's safe," Bohannon said. "The teachers are excited to see me. My administrators on campus, they know me by my first and last name."

How districts compete

Bohannon has worked for IDEA for almost 10 years. She started as an assistant principal of operations for Carver. Her own son — who would otherwise attend San

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000042

Cont. from "Charter school…"

Antonio ISD — is now enrolled at the school.

"We all want families to have access to the best education choice for them," she said.

Fighting to keep their students is now part of the job at traditional school districts. Northside ISD has responded by adding more specialized programs like CAST Teach, which prepares students interested in becoming teachers, and by launching a virtual high school. The district also hopes to build a state-of-the-art outdoor classroom for students from all campuses to use in the near future.

San Antonio ISD officials opted to open their own charter schools and expand a "school choice" program to attract more families living outside the district to attend neighborhood schools.

This is an important effort given SAISD's enrollment declines are largely driven by families leaving the city center for suburban districts, according to Diane Fernandez, the district's executive director of enrollment.

When a traditional school district decides to open its own charter school, it can offer specialized curriculum and enroll students living outside district boundaries. Under the charter agreement, the district gives up day-to-day operational control over the campus, instead contracting it out with a third-party who runs the school.

SAISD currently runs 26 in-district charters focusing on specialized areas like Montessori-style learning or medical education. The effort has brought in around 3,800 students from other districts to attend SAISD charters, Fernandez said. Another 3,200 from other districts attend neighborhood schools in SAISD.

In a way, the district is working to plug holes as the boat takes on more water. Students are still leaving the district for other charters not run by SAISD. There are another 26 non-district charters in SAISD boundaries, and students often travel beyond district lines to attend charters nearby. Last year, more than 9,700 students left the district for non-SAISD charters.

As enrollment drops, districts like San Antonio ISD are left with more buildings than students to fill them. SAISD trustees voted to close 15 out of its nearly 100 campuses in 2023, and earlier this year approved the closure of Carvajal Elementary. District officials say more closures may follow as enrollment dips further; one plan proposes cutting the number of campuses by 42%.

"Our local charter schools are very competitive in their marketing efforts," Fernandez said. "So we have to make sure that our (marketing) is aggressive as well, and part of that is being able to tell our story out into the community."

SAISD has branded itself as a "district of choice," running ads on billboards and social media, distributing flyers and even touting the district on school bus banners that crisscross the urban core. Charters often do the same, placing billboards and TV ads in a bid to recruit students to choose them over their other options.

Vouchers up the ante

Next year, a new school choice program will open, adding yet another element of competition to the Texas education landscape.

Texas Education Freedom Accounts will offer families public money to pay for private education costs. Students can get up to $10,500 for private school tuition, and those with disabilities can receive up to $30,000, starting next school year.

After just one week of open applications, more than 87,000 families applied for an education savings account. The program is capped at $1 billion in its initial years, but may balloon with family interest.

Northside ISD Superintendent John Craft believes the new program will be detrimental to public education.

"Family choice — I'm not saying that that is a bad thing — what I am saying, though, is hold on just a minute before we start investing public dollars into this division, I think we need to be really more thoughtful," Craft said.

During a January board meeting when Northside ISD first broached the topic of school closures, Jo Ann Fey, deputy superintendent for administration, said the district was in uncharted territory.

"Even our demographer at the state level is unwilling to predict what is happening in the next school year with the implementation of vouchers and things like that," Fey said. "It's really scary because we're entering into a zone that we're very unfamiliar with."

Those projections show up in the aggregate — but they're based on decisions made one household at a time.

After years of trying different options for her children, Jill Rodriguez pulled her youngest son, Joseph, 15, out of Frank L. Madla Early College High School, part of the New Frontiers charter network. He had been a student there for seven years. Rodriguez — of no relation to Roxanne — put him into South San High School in South San Antonio ISD.

In part, she made the move because she was tired of the strict uniform requirements and the traffic headache around school pick-up. But she also wanted Joseph to experience the more hands-on vocational classes, especially those in electrical work, that South San had to offer.

"Districts now have to step it up because of the charter schools, and I think that's a great thing," Rodriguez said.

She said she isn't against charters — but her decision, like so many others reshaping enrollment across San Antonio, came down to one child's needs.

"At the end of the day," she said, "you want them to be happy."

Houston
Chronicle FEB 21 2026

Thumbs up, thumbs down

[Thumbs up] Lock him up? Turns out that President Donald Trump has been illegally taxing your groceries — and a bunch of other stuff — for more than a year. On Friday, the Supreme Court struck down the president's attempts to unilaterally impose tariffs. That's good news for a port city like Houston, which relies on trade to fuel our economy, and good news for anyone sick of prices being too high.

[Thumbs down] Typically the presidential speechmakers are the only ones ready to go when astronauts perish, but gambling website Polymarket — oops, we mean prediction website — got caught allowing people to bet on whether four brave souls will go up in a fiery ball of death and destruction on the next Artemis mission. Betting on sports was bad enough. It is time to launch an Apollo program aimed at reining in all of this immoral, antisocial behavior.

[Thumbs twiddled] How lucky is James Talarico? On Monday, the Late Show's Stephen Colbert planned to interview the Democratic state representative as he vies to become a Texas senator, but he said bosses at CBS overruled, apparently fearful of reprisal from the Trump administration's Federal Communications Commission. "Then I was told, in some uncertain terms, that not only could I not have him on, I could not mention me not having him on," Colbert told the audience in his opening monologue. "And because my network clearly doesn't want us to talk about this, let's talk about this." Colbert then instructed viewers to look for the interview on Late Night's YouTube channel. And because of the kerfuffle, Talarico got far more attention than if the interview had gone on as planned. The story rattled around national news all day Tuesday, prompting Colbert to return to the subject that night. "So, we obeyed our network and put the interview on YouTube, where it's gotten millions of views," he told viewers. "And I can see why. Talarico is an interesting guy. I don't know if he should be the senator, but it was a good discussion. I wish we could have put it on the show, where no one would've watched it."

[Thumbs up] Consider it the anti-flooding version of the Avengers. The Gulf Coast Protection District is bringing onboard Jim Blackburn in its effort to plan, design and build the Ike Dike — a storm surge barrier intended to protect Galveston Bay from hurricanes. Blackburn is one of Texas' leading advocates for environmental and coastal protection, and getting him involved is a sign of good faith that Ike Dike folks are serious about protecting not just our coastal economic engines, but our ecology as well.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000043

Cont. from "Thumps up, thumbs down…"

[Thumbs down] This week, Chron.com reported on a Houston woman facing felony charges after posing as an immigration officer to allegedly steal thousands of dollars from families seeking citizenship. Why is it that anti-immigration efforts supposedly aimed at criminals seem to have made it a golden age for fraudsters and crooks? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that nearly half of all FBI agents in major offices have been diverted away from fighting cybercrimes, drug trafficking, terrorism and violent crimes, so that they can take on immigration enforcement.

[Thumbs down] Speaking of immigrants, South Africa-born social-media troll Elon Musk is spinning ever deeper into white supremacy. According to the Guardian, the "world's richest man posted about how the white race was under threat, made allusions to race science or promoted anti-immigrant conspiracy content on 26 out of 31 days in January." What, we wonder, was he doing those other five days? And will he manage a full sweep this month?

[Thumbs up] A new documentary looks at the hidden life of Houston-born Billy Preston, the sunny keyboard player who lit up the Beatles' "Get Back" and, maybe just as importantly, helped the Beatles stop fighting long enough to record the album "Abbey Road." Preston's own music ranged from funky gospel to grooves like "Will It Go Round in Circles" to sweet love songs like "You Are So Beautiful." The documentary, "That's the Way God Planned It," focuses on the life Preston hid behind his music: his gay identity, abuse he suffered as a child, and the drug and alcohol addiction that led to his 2006 death by organ failure at 59. The movie opens in theaters this weekend.

[Thumbs down] We're shocked, shocked to find immoral activities at a strip club. Patrons of PoleKatz are complaining that, after dropping into the venue expecting good, honest titillation and tequila served after the 2 a.m. legal cutoff, they were instead drugged and scammed for tens of thousands of dollars. What is the world coming to if you can't even trust your neighborhood after-hours gentlemen's club?

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 21 2026

As early voting continues, our recommendations in Democratic and GOP primaries

Early voting continues in the Democratic and Republican primaries.

Once again, we are offering a list of the Editorial Board's candidate recommendations. This list comes with one notable change from the start of early voting. We are no longer offering a recommendation in the GOP primary for Congressional District 23 following a text message confirming an affair between U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales and a staff member who later died by suicide. Gonzales had said "rumors" about the affair were "untruthful."

Our recommendation in the Democratic primary for the district stands.

To arrive at these recommendations, we met with nearly all of the candidates and conducted background research. We weighed relevant experience, previous public service, policy understanding and priorities. We only make recommendations in contested races.

The Express-News Editorial Board is independent and nonpartisan. It comprises Josh Brodesky, opinion editor; Tony Quesada, deputy opinion editor; and Cary Clack, editorial writer and columnist. Melissa Murphy, commentary and letters editor, and Warren Brown, digital producer, are also members of the opinion team, though they are not on the board. The opinion team is separate from the newsroom and reports to Publisher Mark Medici.

Early voting runs through Friday. Election Day is March 3. Please research the candidates and cast a ballot.

Federal

Senate: Jasmine Crockett

Congressional District 20: Joaquin Castro

Congressional District 21: Kristin Hook

Congressional District 23: Katy Padilla Stout

Congressional District 35: Johnny C. Garcia

State

Governor: Gina Hinojosa

Lieutenant governor: Vikki Goodwin

Attorney general: Anthony "Tony" Box

Comptroller: Sarah Eckhardt

General Land Office commissioner: Jose Loya

Supreme Court, chief justice: Maggie Ellis

Supreme Court, Place 7: Kristen Hawkins

State senator, District 21: Judith Zaffirini

State representative, District 117: Philip Cortez

State representative, District 119: Elizabeth "Liz" Campos

State representative, District 120: Barbara Gervin-Hawkins

State representative, District 125: Adrian Reyna

4th Court of Appeals, chief justice: Velia J. Meza

45th District, judge: Dinorah Diaz

144th District, judge: Michael Mery

187th District, judge: Stephanie R. Boyd

224th District, judge: Marisa Flores

226th District, judge: Marissa Giovenco

436th District, judge: William "Cruz" Shaw

Bexar County

District attorney: Jane Davis

County judge: Ron Nirenberg

County Court-at-Law 8: Cleophus "Cleo" Marshall III

County Court-at-Law 9: Maritza Perez-Stewart

County Court-at-Law 10: Cesar Garcia

County Court-at-Law 12: Lauren Zamora

County Court-at-Law 13: Alicia "Ali" Perez

County Court-at-Law 14: Carlo Rodriguez Key

District clerk: Monica Ramirez Alcántara

County clerk: Lucy Adame-Clark

Federal

Senate: John Cornyn

Congressional District 21: Daniel W. Betts

Congressional District 23: No recommendation

Congressional District 35: John Lujan

State

Governor: Greg Abbott

Lieutenant governor: No recommendation

Attorney general: Joan Huffman

Comptroller: Michael Berlanga

Agriculture commissioner: Nate Sheets

Railroad commissioner: Hawk Dunlap

Court of Criminal Appeals, Place 3: Alison Fox

Court of Criminal Appeals, Place 9: Jennifer Balido

Senate District 19: Marcus Cardenas

State representative, District 118: Desi Martinez

State representative, District 121: Marc LaHood

State representative, District 122: No recommendation

State representative, District 125: No recommendation

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000044

Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

What we learned about Texas politics this primary cycle

It was a long month for us here on the Editorial Board. Over the past few weeks, you've seen our recommendations roll out in more than 40 races from district court judges all the way to governor and the U.S. Senate.

This process is important to us and, we hope, to you, because too many candidates nowadays do all they can to avoid meeting with anyone who might ask a tough question or have them sit down beside an opponent they have been lambasting in the false comfort of social media.

Each election season, we learn something about Texas politics, and we take this space to tell you some of our important takeaways.

So, after inviting more than 120 candidates to visit with us and sitting down with more than 70, here they are.

MAGA doesn't mean conservative

You already know that leading GOP candidates are running on how close they are to President Donald Trump. But you might not know that MAGA-conservative or Trump-conservative bears little to no resemblance to small government principles. Often the opposite. Plenty of far-right Texas conservative candidates today want the state government to intervene on multiple levels. There is advocacy for pushing out locally elected prosecutors, for putting Christian faith more directly into public schools, for expanding private school vouchers, for centralizing election operations under the power of the state. Nowadays, the scariest words in politics aren't "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." They are: "I'm a Texas lawmaker, and I'm here to take control." We were appreciative of what one conservative candidate, Gordon Heslop, said running for House District 32: "Make America Normal Again."

Shariah is the new border

We were wholly convinced that the border was in crisis under the Biden administration and something had to be done. Now that the border is quiet, with credit to the Trump administration, conservative candidates have been twisting for another issue to wake up the base. They have settled on Shariah as the target. Candidate after candidate raised fears that Islamic law is taking root in Texas. But none named a specific instance of Shariah being applied in the state.

Democrats are dropping identity

Democratic candidates had already gotten away from leaning into identity politics in the last round. But with the exception of a bogus dust-up between Senate candidate James Talarico and congressional candidate Colin Allred, it barely exists this cycle. Democrat Taylor Rehmet's surprise victory in a special election for state Senate in conservative Tarrant County cemented most Democrats' messaging — economic populism. Democrats see a lot of space in Texas to win over voters who feel like the economy has left them behind. But they are careful to steer away from calling for tax increases or bigger government. Instead, many talk vaguely about billionaires and corruption.

The border is back in play

Republicans made big inroads with border voters in the last cycle, with President Trump carrying border counties and upending the longstanding Democratic belief that demographics are destiny. But Democrats think that excesses of immigration enforcement have frustrated voters in border communities. Voting results will tell whether that's true, but our read is that the frustration is real and not just along the border, and Republicans will see that now and in November.

Of course the border was a problem

Democrats may be right about border voters flipping. But they've done some flipping of their own. When Joe Biden was president, it was hard to get Democrats to acknowledge the border was an issue. Now, they all acknowledge it was in crisis. But it's fixed, so nothing to see here.

Polarization is wrecking candidate quality

As politics becomes more polarized and gerrymandering locks in incumbents, the overall quality of political candidates continues to decline. We've watched this trend over many cycles. Yes, well-qualified people still stand for public office, but voters have little serious choice in races for state and congressional representatives. Increasingly, there are batches of candidates with no discernible qualifications for public office and many disqualifying characteristics. Even front-runners and incumbents are people who, a few cycles back, would have been considered unprepared or unfit for office. We had one candidate who pulled out his phone before he could answer basic questions about budgets and foreign policy and others whose platforms sounded like AI-generated bullet points.

The right is eating its own

The Texas GOP pushed out almost all moderate conservatives a few cycles ago. Now, many of the people who ran as "true conservatives" are getting challenges from supposedly even more conservative candidates. It's a race to who is more MAGA. But more than a few challengers are people with dangerous ideas about imposing Christian nationalist views on voters. Because the playbook is not to debate ideas but to shout slogans, even ultra-conservative incumbents have little defense against these challenges.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

Key races are decided in the primaries — so vote accordingly

For many of the officials who pass laws, decide how tax dollars are spent and define how well the government works for Texans, the most important election is happening right now.

Not in November. Now.

Early voting began last week and runs through Feb. 27 for the March 3 primaries, where a slew of congressional, legislative and local races will effectively be decided — even as a fraction of Texas voters participate in such primaries.

If you want a say in who governs you, now is the time to cast your ballot.

We've been conditioned to think of November elections as the main event, and that remains true for marquee races such as U.S. Senate and Texas governor.

It's a different story in the Texas Legislature and many local races, however. In the 2022 midterms, a stunning 146 seats in the Texas House were decided in the primary elections, leaving only four seats to be decided that November, according to March Matters, a nonpartisan organization seeking to boost participation in these crucial primaries. With gerrymandered districts drawn to favor one party or another, the precious few voters who show up in the primary have an outsized say in who gets to govern.

In 2022, just 11% of Texas voters participated in the Republican primary. A candidate could win their race with the support of half of those voters, meaning roughly 6% of voters in that scenario could decide the representation for everyone.

Some of the partisan sorting also happens naturally: The voting population of Travis County is so solidly Democratic, for instance, that no Republicans even filed to run for county government seats this year. That means two seats on the Travis County Commissioners Court — which administers a $2 billion budget that funds everything from road projects to the county jail — will be decided in the Democratic primary.

The result is not just fewer people having a say in our leaders. When elections are decided by the most dedicated primary voters, we're more likely to get elected officials who cater to the narrow interests of their political base, not the broadly-held priorities of Texans across party lines.

That's not how representative government should work.

But that can change. You can vote now. You can encourage your family and friends to do the same.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000045

Cont. from "Key races…"

Below is the American-Statesman Editorial Board's list of recommended candidates for the Republican and Democratic primaries. Scan the QR code to reach the online guide with the full endorsements in each race.

Your vote can have a real impact in the races being decided now. Show up and be counted.

U.S. Senate: Congressional races

Governor Lieutenant Governor Attorney General Agricultural Commissioner Comptroller Land Commissioner

Railroad Commissioner

Texas Legislature

Travis County Commissioners Court

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

The Bexar County jail is a black box. Lives depend on opening it up to the public.

That is a simple standard meant to avoid a conflict of interest, and it should be an easy one to meet. Nevertheless, it's a standard the Bexar County Adult Detention Center failed to meet eight times between 2020 and 2022.

In August 2023, the Texas Commission on Jail Standards put the Bexar County Sheriff's Office on notice for handling eight death investigations on behalf of the Bexar County Precinct 2 Constable's Office.

"This practice does not meet the intent of the law," Texas Commission on Jail Standards Executive Director Brandon Wood wrote Sheriff Javier Salazar. "The Bexar County Precinct 2 Constable's Office should be conducting the investigation, not simply reviewing it."

In an interview this fall, Salazar and other officials downplayed the concern. Deputies weren't leading investigations, Salazar said. They were simply taking pictures and collecting evidence to assist outside investigators.

"We were just doing too much work," Salazar said. "We're allowed to do (investigative) work as long as it's at the direction of that (outside) investigator, so that they want that outside investigator physically here."

Perhaps these eight cases were simply a matter of deputies being too helpful, too eager, too willing to lend a hand.

But that is not what the letter from the Texas Commission on Jail Standards says (emphasis added): "Upon review, it was determined that various Bexar County Sheriff's Office investigators conducted and completed the investigation, after which the file was delivered to the Bexar County Precinct 2 Constable for review before they are forwarded to the Bexar County District Attorney's Office."

Were deputies conducting their own in-custody death investigations or simply overzealous in helping outside investigators? This question underscores the need for far greater transparency and accountability at the Bexar County jail.

In previous editorials as part of our "Jailed to death" series, we have given voice to the 85 inmates who died at the Bexar County jail from 2020 to 2025 and how the jail's mortality rate — a measure of deaths per 100,000 people in a given time — surged in those years, making it one of the deadliest jails in Texas, if not the nation.

We have, in turn, argued for significant investments to divert people accused of low-level offenses from the jail, reduce the jail's overflowing population, and treat mental health concerns for people in jail and the broader community.

We have called out deadly redundancy in a yearslong dispute between the city of San Antonio and Bexar County over magistration, an initial hearing when charges are filed and bail is set. People arrested by city police go through this hearing and detention twice — this is called double magistration — wasting time, adding strain and costing taxpayers millions of dollars.

Now, we shift to greater public oversight and accountability. The jail is a black box, and Bexar County officials must open it to the public. Lives depend on it.

Despite the jail being the county's largest expense — more than $112 million is budgeted for this fiscal year — it operates out of sight and mind. Public information is scattered across multiple agencies, not consolidated with the county and made accessible.

Although deaths are often immediately reported, the language is bureaucratic and sanitizing, and the information is incomplete. Filling in the gaps requires filing records requests with other law enforcement agencies.

Basic public records requests made to the county take weeks and months to fulfill. We filed a public records request Jan. 31 for the names of those eight detainees whose deaths deputies investigated. We are still waiting to hear back from the county.

Fortunately, the Texas Commission on Jail Standards provided those names Thursday morning: George Holland, Roberto Cantu, Gilbert Kervlis, Dominga Flores, Lambert Earl Sabrsula, Richard Altamirano, Alexandra Gedminas and Emmitt Byrd. We will review the investigative reports we have, and we will request the ones we don't have from the constable's office.

But Gedminas caught our attention because we had written about her death in our previous editorial addressing deadly double magistration. She died while detoxing in jail. We will return to her case later in this editorial.

To foster a culture of accountability, much of this public information should be consolidated and made available on a Bexar County dashboard.

Additionally, every jail death should be discussed during Commissioners Court meetings, and all county commissioners should be taking semiannual tours of the jail.

We were surprised when Precinct 1 Commissioner Rebeca Clay-Flores, who has been in office since 2021, told us she has never done a full tour of the jail.

"Because of how much I fight for mental health, I just think it's going to be emotionally difficult," she said. "I can't handle that."

Clay-Flores needs to witness the conditions of the unstable mental health unit, where a man died naked and covered in feces.

We're not singling her out. Outside of Precinct 3 Commissioner Grant Moody, who has been leading meetings on the jail, there is a distinct lack of curiosity about and attention to the jail on Commissioners Court. Where is the outrage and urgency from Commissioners Justin Rodriguez and Tommy Calvert?

Finally, San Antonio City Council members and county commissioners should "go through" double magistration to understand the experience. We would join them.

They should wait in the city detention facility for six hours and then wait in the jail's intake for 16 hours, roughly the time it takes to go through magistration twice.

Perhaps experiencing this hell would light a fire to end a practice that Bexar County Judge Peter Sakai described in a Feb. 13 letter to San Antonio Mayor Gina Ortiz Jones as "inhumane, a likely violation of the civil rights of those in custody, and something that can be a contributing factor in jail deaths."

Launch a jail tracker

Although the jail stands prominently on the city's West Side, there is very little awareness of what happens there.

That's why a jail tracker — a public dashboard — is critical to improving conditions.

This tracker could share each month's average daily population, the number of inmates placed in other counties, the cost of housing those inmates outside Bexar County, names of people who have died in jail, the outside investigating agency for those deaths, and links to death investigative reports and state compliance reports.

A dashboard would give the public a basic data snapshot of the jail. Linking to PDFs of outside investigative reports for each jail death — properly redacted, of course — would provide insight almost always missing from initial reports.

When Gedminas died in December 2021, for example, jail officials said in a news release it was from a possible medical episode.

Continued on Next Page

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000046

Cont. from "The Bexar County…"

But a "medical episode" doesn't capture the full story: It doesn't convey that Gedminas had a relapse a week before being arrested. That she told her cellmate she was "detoxing off of heroin." That she apologized for constantly vomiting. That she never was transferred to the infirmary or the hospital, even as she repeatedly fell out of her bunk and hit her head.

It doesn't show how monitoring Gedminas' health, in many ways, fell to her cellmate, who stopped checking on her because she grew annoyed.

All of this is detailed in a Bexar County constable's investigative report. But to read that report, to learn what really happened, to arrive at a more complete understanding than "a medical episode," a person would have to ask the sheriff's office which outside agency is handling the death investigation and then request the report — another layer of waiting.

And, of course, we now know that, at least initially, deputies handled the investigation into her death. Was that investigation complete?

Here is another example: When Francisco Salinas died in jail in April 2024, officials said it was due to a medical episode coupled with withdrawal symptoms.

Again, this isn't complete. He had been held for more than 48 hours — exceeding the state limit — in a temporary holding cell. His death led to the state declaring the jail out of compliance with basic standards in November 2024.

That is much different from "a medical episode." But to read that report, we had to file a request with the state.

Create a jail tracker, and link to relevant death and compliance reports. Open the jail to public scrutiny.

Why we should care

One of the challenges in reporting this series is generating public concern for detainees — people who, when they were alive, engendered little to no sympathy. A lack of public information about the jail only reinforces apathy.

The death of Julian Dena in July 2020 captures this complexity.

Dena is an unsympathetic figure. He was a drug user and drug dealer. He was also a father and a son.

His mother, Lydia Leos, told us he struggled with depression. He was booked in the jail on a felony warrant for possession of a weapon. He died in the jail after ingesting a large amount of methamphetamine during a strip search. This was reported in the media.

What's curious about Dena's death, however, is that a police officer witnessed him ingest the drugs. An investigative report, which we had to request from the Converse Police Department, notes the officer observed a white substance caked on Dena's mouth.

A nurse then examined Dena but, inexplicably, gave him the all-clear. Rather than place Dena in medical care, officials put him in a cell under observation. Only once he began overdosing did medical intervention occur.

"Julian was a grown man that was 34 years old," Leos told us. "He knew right from wrong. He knew what could have been the consequences of putting all those packets in his mouth, but he did it in a facility that should have been ready to step up and provide the proper medical care."

Dena's death is officially listed as "accidental," but Leos said of officials: "They chose not to care."

Throughout this series, we have shown how people have died in the county jail after getting lost at intake.

We told of a man who died covered in feces after waiting for months for a state psychiatric bed. We have shown how people who should have been placed in diversion or a medical setting died detoxing behind bars. We reminded the public about a woman who refused meals for months while locked up on a misdemeanor. She starved before officials' eyes.

The conditions around each death are different, but they are all a product of a collective choice to not care enough to change a broken system.

This failure falls on a community and elected class that allow such a system to persist in obscurity, at great peril for the people caught in it.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 21 2026

Five years after Winter Storm Uri, energy storage is making Texas more resilient

By Matt Welch

This week marks five years since Winter Storm Uri exposed the consequences of a fragile power system.

Texans don't need reminders of why grid reliability matters; we lived it. The question is what we've learned since then, and whether we're building a system that can withstand the next test.

Texas has taken meaningful steps to strengthen the grid since Uri. One of the most effective — and least understood — tools behind that progress is battery energy storage.

Energy storage isn't a political statement or a government mandate. It's an insurance policy for a fast-growing state that demands affordable power and expects the lights to stay on in extreme conditions.

It strengthens the grid we already have by storing electricity when it's abundant and cheap, and releasing it when demand spikes or supply unexpectedly drops.

Since Uri, Texas has added roughly 17 gigawatts of energy storage — enough to power more than 4 million homes during peak demand. That capacity didn't appear because lawmakers picked winners and losers. It showed up because Texas' competitive market rewarded solutions that deliver reliability when it matters most.

We've already seen the payoff.

During Winter Storm Heather in January 2024, battery energy storage reduced power costs in Texas by $750 million, supplied electricity to 434,000 homes and helped avoid grid failure.

Another hot summer in Texas put the electric grid to the test, but increased capacity from solar and battery storage met the call.

Most recently, during Winter Storm Fern, energy storage made up nearly 10% of ERCOT's fuel mix during peak demand, helping drive down energy prices by more than 50%.

That flexibility is increasingly valuable as the state's electricity demand grows.

ERCOT forecasts show demand rising rapidly as manufacturing expands, population increases and data centers come online. Battery storage helps manage that growth efficiently by smoothing peaks and reducing stress on the system — responding in seconds, not hours.

Just as important, battery storage helps keep electricity affordable. By reducing scarcity pricing during tight conditions, batteries lower wholesale power costs.

Battery facilities aren't placed at random.

Sites are chosen after engineering analysis and grid planning to address specific reliability needs, often in areas where transmission congestion or rapid demand growth puts added strain on the system.

Developers must work within local zoning and fire codes, coordinate with emergency responders and ensure projects are located near compatible uses.

Since battery facilities require little land and use no water during normal operations, they can be integrated into communities with minimal disruption while delivering outsize reliability and economic benefits — generating millions in property tax revenue that support schools, roads and emergency services.

Just as important, energy storage allows for stronger security than much of our legacy infrastructure. Many older power assets rely on outdated control systems that were never designed for today's cyber threats.

New energy storage projects, by contrast, are digitally monitored, regularly updated, and designed with supply-chain traceability and access controls from day one. Diversifying suppliers and building components in the U.S. and allied countries further reduces risk.

Five years after Uri, battery energy storage has proven itself as a practical, market-driven tool that strengthens reliability, lowers costs and supports economic growth — helping ensure that when the next storm hits, Texans won't be left in the dark.

Matt Welch is state director for Conservative Texans for Energy Innovation.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

Stop selling Texans a Shariah scare

Peter Johnson

In more primary elections than I can count, I've watched politicians win power by picking somebody to fear. They don't start with facts. They start with a feeling, unease, suspicion, "something's changing," and then they give that feeling a villain. In my lifetime, it has been Black people, immigrants, labor organizers and "outside agitators." Now, in parts of Texas politics, it's Muslims — and the word they wave like a match near dry grass is "Shariah."

In January, The Texas Tribune reported that opposition to Islam has become a key campaign pillar for some Texas Republicans, pushed through ads and messaging aimed at primary voters. It's not subtle. For example, an ad promoting Aaron Reitz, a candidate for Texas attorney general, begins with the statement, "Islam is not compatible with Western civilization."

The point is to frame Muslim neighbors as a threat to American identity, as if a family praying in Arabic is one step away from the reign of mullahs, or teenagers exercising their constitutional right to free speech by passing out pamphlets about Islam in Wylie are plotting the next 9/11.

Yet the scare keeps circulating because fear is useful. KVUE-TV in Austin reported that candidates are running ads and pledging to stop what they call the "Islamification" of Texas. That language is designed to make ordinary demographic change sound like an invasion.

I know what happens when leaders talk this way. Suspicion becomes a hobby. A headscarf becomes "evidence." A mosque becomes "a compound." A foreign-sounding name becomes "a risk." And soon the target is not an idea but a person: the kid in school, the nurse in the clinic, the veteran at the airport, the small business owner on your block.

I know this playbook. In the 1960s, officials called those involved in civil rights troublemakers. Who were the troublemakers? Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Jews and Muslims. Yes, Muslims marched with us and were on the front lines of the movement. Today, some call Muslims a threat. Same playbook: isolate, exaggerate and claim righteousness to win elections.

Our Constitution does not allow America to be replaced by any religious legal system, Christian, Jewish, Muslim or otherwise. Courts operate under civil law. People may voluntarily settle disputes through private agreements, just like any other arbitration, but no one is forced into a separate religious court. "Shariah courts" are not taking over Texas.

So why is this being pushed? Because it's easier to campaign against a caricature than to solve real problems. It's easier to point at a mosque than to fix rural hospitals. It's easier to scare voters than to explain why property taxes keep rising, why housing is out of reach, why schools need help and why families are stretched thin.

And let me say this as a man who has buried friends from the movement: When politicians single out a whole religious community, they don't just win votes, they invite harm. They make Muslim children wonder if Texas is truly home. They make Muslim Texans feel like they must prove their innocence before they can claim their citizenship.

If a candidate has evidence of an actual crime, present it. Prosecute it. Tell the truth with receipts. But if all you have is insinuation stitched into a campaign ad, "they're coming," "they're taking over," "they're different," then be honest: You are not protecting Texans. You are manipulating them.

Texas is big enough for strong debate without manufacturing a religious panic. We can disagree on policy and still refuse prejudice. We can love our state and still reject the old tactic of turning neighbors into enemies.

I've seen what fear does to a community. It hollows out the soul. It makes people cruel and calls it courage. Texans deserve better than that. We deserve leaders who tell the truth today, even when the truth doesn't fit in a 30-second ad.

Peter Johnson has been a civil rights leader in Dallas since 1969. He is a Dallas Morning News contributing columnist. His columns are written with assistance from Don Robinson, executive director of the Peter Johnson Institute for Non-Violence.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

University is clipping wings of students of color

By Mateo Vallejo

I belong in Weslaco, a predominantly Hispanic border town in the Rio Grande Valley. It's where I was born, a beautiful, monocultural bubble where life for a young Mexican American boy can just simply be life.

I was around five years old when I first went through a Border Patrol checkpoint. My dad explained, "Don't look nervous or scared, just smile. They're going to ask you if you're an American citizen. Just say 'yes, sir,' nothing else. Don't say 'sí.' They'll tear the car apart."

We got to the agent, he asked about our citizenship, and we said, "yes." I thought we'd be on our way, but he put his head inside the car to get a few inches from my face. Then he asked, with smirk on his face: "Are you sure you're an American citizen?"

For many students of color at the University of Texas, this memory is emblematic of a collective experience: Existing in a space that you are told you don't belong. We may not walk the roads meant for the "majority," so instead, we fly.

We grow wings.

We strengthen our connection to our racial and ethnic identities. Our cultures. Our languages. We find belonging in the classrooms where our histories are treated as a point of focus, not supplemental information. We find student organizations where members have these shared experiences and we don't have to translate our oppression or our culture.

We fly in resilience and gather the confidence to show up fully in spaces that were not designed with us in mind.

Right now, the University of Texas is clipping our wings. UT has moved to consolidate Gender and Ethnic Studies programs. These moves are framed as administrative restructuring, but for many students of color, they signal erasure.

Departments devoted to African and African Diaspora Studies, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American and Indigenous Studies, and Women and Gender Studies are important, rigorous academic fields. These departments produce scholarship that helps the world understand inequality, democracy and demographic change.

Consolidating these departments sends a clear message: these identities don't belong here.

This move comes in the aftermath of Senate Bill 17 attacking diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programming in Texas public universities. As a Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) representative, I wrote a resolution opposing UT's response to the bill, but UT administration blocked my resolution, saying it would be the type of "political speech" that official university organizations are not allowed to make.

The university then likewise blocked every resolution from the GSA on this topic that followed, letting students know that not only will they move toward dismantling DEI representation, but they will silence students who dare to speak against them.

Recently, UT Austin Provost William Inboden expressed a desire to move the university toward an outlook that emphasizes shared humanity over difference. The rationale for this, he said, is that universities have "deviated from, or even turned against, the fundamental values of the nation and what was once quaintly known as 'the American way of life.'"

Continued on Next Page

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "University…"

Race and ethnicity in the United States continue to structure whose humanity is protected and whose is questioned. Inboden's call to dismiss race and ethnicity in scholarship is a call for erasure.

Colorblindness urges students of color, who have often grown to feel scrutinized in most spaces in the United States, to make themselves smaller and strip away their cultures to join Inboden's view of the "human race."

When UT consolidates Gender and Ethnic studies, it sends a message to students of color: fold your wings and blend in. Be grateful you are here.

To my fellow students of color: your wings will never be a liability to your education. They are your inheritance from your ancestors. Keep celebrating your culture, your history, your identity.

Advocate. Organize. Write. Speak.

Believe that we deserve more than hiding to survive in college.

We deserve to soar. We will soar.

Mateo Vallejo is a graduate student at the University of Texas and a representative in the Graduate Student Assembly.

Austin
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Paxton tried to weaken the Sandra Bland Act. Lawmakers should fix it

Cody Copeland

The 2017 Sandra Bland Act stands as a marvel of bipartisan Texas lawmaking. The bill passed without opposition in both chambers of the Legislature.

It came in response to the 2015 death of Sandra Bland, a Black woman who died by suicide in the Waller County jail three days after being violently arrested during a traffic stop for failing to signal a lane change. Along with requirements for mental health evaluations and treatment for people booked into a jail, the law also requires the Texas Commission on Jail Standards to appoint an outside law enforcement agency to independently investigate any "death of a prisoner in a county jail."

Attorney General Ken Paxton took that literally.

Last year, Tarrant County District Attorney Phil Sorrells sent Paxton's office a request for opinion asking if the phrase applies only to detainees who die within a jail's walls — not, for instance, in an ambulance or at the hospital. On Feb. 12, the office responded: Only deaths that occur at the jail must be investigated.

That would have been a terrible outcome. Among the 653 Texas county jail detainees who died in the past five years, nearly three-quarters took their last breath in a hospital, according to the jail commission. That shouldn't negate the need for an investigation to understand why they died.

Importantly, the jail commission said last week it will continue to use its own rule-making authority to require outside investigations of all in-custody deaths, regardless of where they occur.

"Kudos to the jail commission for doing the right thing," said Michele Deitch, a University of Texas law professor who served as an expert consultant on the Sandra Bland Act. "But if they hadn't done so, the public would be in the dark regarding these deaths."

Still, advocacy groups are watching closely because hard-fought legal protections don't disappear overnight. They erode over time, step by seemingly inconsequential step until we wake up one day to find it's too late.

Lawmakers in future legislative sessions could cite the AG's opinion in a misguided attempt to weaken the protections the Sandra Bland Act provides. To avoid this disservice to Texans, they should instead amend the law and eliminate any ambiguity.

If Paxton's office, which did not respond to an interview request, wasn't sure what the Sandra Bland Act intended, they could have asked Garnet Coleman, the former state representative from Houston who authored the bill.

"It means custody, that was my interpretation," he told me in a phone interview, meaning any detainee, regardless of whether they died at the jail or in a hospital. "They should have called me, at least to ask — whether they used it or not — just to understand what I meant when I wrote it."

Before coming to the American-Statesman, I worked as an accountability reporter at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. I uncovered inconsistencies in the investigations into several deaths in the Tarrant County jail, where the share of those who die off-premises is closer to 85%.

In telling their stories, I met so many wonderful people under the worst circumstances imaginable. The death of a loved one is always a tragedy. When it happens to someone in custody, the loss is often compounded by a spirit-crushing inability to get clarity about what happened in those final moments.

Mourning a loved one requires closure, a prerequisite for which is information. For that information to be contingent on where someone took their last breath would not only deprive grieving families of their ability to mourn but also strip them of access to justice.

If an in-custody death is the result of negligence or undue use of force, those responsible should be held accountable. And county officials will never fix institutional failures that put other incarcerated people at risk if they don't identify individual cases of neglect or mistreatment.

Under Paxton's interpretation of the law, jails would have an incentive to whisk detainees to the hospital to avoid an investigation, and deaths from pre-existing medical conditions induced by neglect would not be investigated, experts and lawyers say.

Jail neglect issues are often overlooked by the general public. Many consider people at the county jail to be convicted criminals, despite the fact that most are awaiting trial and entitled to a presumption of innocence.

But taking a person's freedom is one of the most serious manifestations of governmental power. And for the state's top law enforcement officer — especially one claiming to champion law and order in his campaign for U.S. Senate — to say that the majority of cases in which that power was potentially abused should go unexamined should concern us all.

The law applies just as much to those who enforce it as it does to those accused of breaking it. Regardless of whether they're directly impacted by the criminal justice system or not, Texans should demand accountability on both sides of the badge.

Cody Copeland is an editorial writer for the Austin American-Statesman.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Texas can't afford Trump's rollback on climate change

By Colin Leyden

Last summer's flash floods in the Hill Country claimed 135 lives and caused up to $22 billion in damages. Texas has suffered more weather-related billion-dollar disasters like this than any other state, and it's not close. The cumulative cost since 1980 is up to $440 billion. And counting.

Last week, though, the Trump administration essentially gave away its authority to limit the pollution amplifying the extreme weather that plagues our state.

After the Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has the authority and obligation under the Clean Air Act to regulate climate-altering pollution like carbon dioxide and methane, the EPA gathered mountains of evidence of the threats posed to people's health and safety. The 2009 endangerment finding made it clear why the agency needed to limit this pollution.

Repealing the finding now is not only unlawful, it's unwise. It will make life more dangerous and more expensive when Texans can least afford either.

My colleagues at Environmental Defense Fund found the repeal could force Texans to spend $110 billion more at the pump in the next three decades and suffer $105 billion in health harms. Across the country, the extra pollution could lead to $4.2 trillion in health and climate harms in the decades to come. That includes up to 37 million more asthma attacks and as many as 15 million missed days of school and work.

Electricity prices could get worse, too. Since the cold, hard lessons of Winter Storm Uri, Texas has strengthened our infrastructure to keep power flowing to our homes and diversified our grid. In the last three years, no state has added more clean energy — which doesn't contribute to the problem of climate change — than Texas. But the repeal comes as the Trump administration is also busy handing out millions of taxpayer dollars to help keep expensive, unreliable coal plants afloat while blocking faster, cheaper sources of energy that have helped our prices stay low, even as they've spiked in other states by double digits and our population — and demand — has grown.

And extreme weather is only going to get more extreme. That will push the cost of insurance even higher — if it's available at all in some of the most disaster-prone parts of the state. (At the same time, the Trump administration has openly discussed dismantling FEMA and leaving states to shoulder disaster recovery on their own.) Texas homeowners insurance premiums have increased about 20% in each of the past two years. How are working families going to be able to afford to stay in an increasingly risky place to live?

This week, the American Public Health Association, American Lung Association and more than a dozen other environmental organizations filed a lawsuit to challenge the repeal of the endangerment finding. Though the administration has touted that it "saves" Americans from "crushing regulations," the truth is that it's only shifting costs to working families. Every new car or truck that comes off the line polluting more than it has to, every power plant that keeps burning fossil fuels, forces us to make up the difference in inhalers and insurance premiums and flood infrastructure.

It couldn't come at a worse time. We might be used to dealing with disasters, taking care of our neighbors and helping our communities rebuild, but the Trump administration appears to be taking our sacrifices and suffering for granted, unwilling to see the danger that's bearing down on every single Texan.

Colin Leyden is the Texas state director for Environmental Defense Fund.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

In the yogurt shop murders, exonerations must lead to answers

By Bridget Grumet

The world has forgotten they were just boys.

Forrest Welborn was 15. His best friend, Maurice Pierce, was 16; and their friends Michael Scott and Robert Springsteen were 17 when they first became suspects in the 1991 yogurt shop murders, one of the most horrific crimes in Austin history. By the time police filed charges, they were in their 20s.

When their exoneration proceedings finally arrived Thursday in a Travis County courtroom, those young adults were long gone, replaced by three middle-aged men, balding and gray, who lost decades of their lives to a crime they didn't commit. Pierce died 16 years ago, never seeing the day when his good name would be restored.

How could any court ruling give them their lives back?

"I lost my family. I lost my youth. I lost my early adulthood," Scott, now 52, said Thursday from the witness stand, while a picture of him at 16, in a tuxedo for a school orchestra concert, appeared on the TV screens. He later spent nearly a decade behind bars, missing much of his daughter's childhood.

For the past 35 years, our city has mourned the loss of the four teenage girls who were bound and shot in a north Austin frozen yogurt shop: Amy Ayers, Eliza Thomas and sisters Sarah Harbison and Jennifer Harbison. But we are only starting to reckon with the other set of victims — those wrongfully accused and hassled for years by police, prosecutors and even members of the public who were convinced these men were murderers.

Springsteen spent five years on death row, allowed outside of his solitary cell only one hour a day. Welborn lost the ability to complete his education, to keep jobs or even secure housing, for a time living out of his car. For the three years Pierce was in jail, his young daughter saw her dad in leg chains and visited him only through Plexiglass.

Family members recounted baseless traffic stops, sometimes weekly, plus unannounced police visits to their homes and places of work.

"It just never stopped being an oppressive part of our lives," said Sharon Shipman, Welborn's mother.

The official finding of "actual innocence" entered Thursday by state district Judge Dayna Blazey is an important first step. The declaration, prompted by new DNA and ballistics evidence tying the yogurt shop murders to suspected serial killer Robert Eugene Brashers, clears the records of the four wrongfully accused men and could help them seek compensation.

But inside a courthouse bearing the proud signs of being a "Justice Center," the system is scarcely able to make proper amends. No judge can restore the lost years between 15 and 50. No piece of paper can replace the lives these men should have had.

Crucially, a finding of "actual innocence" cannot become a gesture to ease our communal sense of guilt, or an occasion to simply write a large check for restitution. It carries an obligation to interrogate the practices of police and prosecutors that allowed such an injustice to happen.

Marisa Pierce described how her father decades ago "voluntarily provided his DNA, took a lie detector test and even agreed to hypnosis, all to prove his innocence." It didn't work. Once Austin police in the 1990s coerced confessions, overlooked the lack of physical evidence and allowed suspicion to harden into certainty, the suspects were guilty until proven innocent — a terrifying place for a wrongfully-accused person to be.

Maurice Pierce died in a 2010 altercation with police, which his daughter sees as the culmination of the traumatic years he spent in jail and the continued traffic-stop provocations that served no legitimate police purpose.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "In the yogurt shop murders…"

"Let me be clear, this is not the work of a single monster," Marisa Pierce said. "This is not one moment of evil. This was the result of a justice system that actively hunted my father, harassed him, twisted facts to the narrative, and tried to force a confession to support a story they had already decided to tell. It was the result of officials who were never questioned, never checked and never held to the standards they swore to uphold."

And here's the part we don't want to think about but must: If these kinds of investigative and prosecutorial errors can happen in a high-profile case under this much scrutiny, they can happen in other cases as well.

"Unchecked power cannot continue," Marisa Pierce said. "Tunnel vision cannot continue. Accountability must come."

The exoneration proceedings on Thursday acknowledged the terrible error. It's also important to recognize the exemplary Austin police work in the past few years that solved this cold case, finally delivering answers to the victims' families and clearing the names of four innocent men. But it's not enough to say the system decades ago got it wrong. The people and practices that allowed it to go so wrong must be examined.

Restitution, which these families clearly deserve, will likely come through civil lawsuits. But the outcome must reach beyond a financial settlement. Austinites deserve a clear accounting of how police and prosecutorial practices have improved to ensure another teenager does not grow into middle age under the weight of a false accusation.

The two words these men waited a lifetime to hear — "actual innocence" — cannot be the end of this story. They must mark the start of real accountability.

Reach Opinion editor Bridget Grumet at bgrumet@statesman.com.

San Antonio
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To fix crisis at Bexar's jail, build diversion center, end double magistration

By Alexander Testa

Most residents of Bexar County probably don't often think about what happens to arrested people — until it happens to themselves or a loved one.

Yet the way the criminal justice system processes people after their arrest plays a key role in shaping public safety, taxpayer spending and the health of our community.

Immediately after being arrested, individuals enter into a series of criminal justice processing stages.

This "front door" of the justice system is where critical decisions are made: whether someone is released back into the community on bond or on their own recognizance, whether a person is connected to treatment or programs, or whether someone is held in jail for an extended period.

In Bexar County, these decisions take place at the Justice Intake and Assessment Annex, known as JIAA among public officials. The JIAA serves as the county's centralized booking hub, where people arrested by local law enforcement agencies are brought in.

The JIAA opened in December 2018. Since 2021, the number of people processed daily has nearly tripled, making it one of the busiest intake centers in Texas. Roughly 135 arrestees pass through its doors on a typical day.

In October 2023, the Bexar County Commissioners Court asked our research team at the UTHealth Houston School of Public Health in San Antonio to conduct an 18-month study of the facility's operations.

We observed how the JIAA operated across shifts, interviewed staff from multiple agencies, reviewed documents and analyzed years of processing data. The result was a final report identifying what is working and where improvements are needed.

There is good news. Bexar County has made meaningful investments over the years. Everyone receives a medical screening, mental health professionals are onsite, and arrestees are processed in an open booking area rather than confined to overcrowded cells, as is common in many intake processing centers nationwide.

Staff across the nearly dozen county agencies that work in the JIAA put in long hours under demanding conditions and show a strong commitment to public service, constantly working to innovate and improve the facility.

But our evaluation also found people often spend many hours, sometimes over half a day, in the intake facility before being released or transferred to jail.

Extended stays are more than an inconvenience. They can undermine public safety. Research shows that holding people in pretrial detention rather than booking and releasing them quickly can increase the likelihood of future arrests and missed court appearances. It is also detrimental to the health of the detainees, as individuals can experience medical episodes and extreme stress.

The report details numerous drivers of extended stays, as well as areas for improvement and investment to expedite the processing of arrestees. One key culprit causing delay is the "dual magistration" system.

People detained by the San Antonio Police Department are first taken to a city magistrate, then transported to the county facility to repeat the process with a county judicial magistrate. Staff told us this frequently adds hours to a person's time in custody and creates confusion for families trying to locate loved ones.

We also found that diversion into treatment and rehabilitation for people with mental health needs is used far less than it could be. In 2024, nearly 19,000 mental health screening assessments were completed at intake, yet only 162 individuals received a diversion to mental health or substance use treatment.

Peer counties, including Harris, Tarrant, Travis, Hays and Dallas, have invested in diversion facilities with short-term beds that serve as an alternative to incarceration for nonviolent arrestees with mental health, substance use, or intellectual and developmental disability needs. Without such a facility, Bexar County stands out as a notable exception.

Our report recommends investing in a local diversion center modeled on successful examples elsewhere in Texas. In Houston, the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD has been operational since 2018. It has successfully diverted more than 10,000 individuals to treatment and rehabilitation, resulting in cost savings, and appears to pose no major risk to public safety.

The success of this program has garnered calls for additional investment and expansion from elected officials and criminal justice leaders.

While a diversion center in Bexar County cannot solve every challenge, it would create a meaningful option for those who would benefit more from treatment than punishment. It would also relieve pressure on an increasingly overcrowded jail and support a more targeted approach to public safety.

In addition, the findings from the JIAA evaluation also call for improving communication with people in custody, modernizing outdated paper-based processes, and strengthening coordination between city and county partners to shorten processing times, reduce frustration and improve system efficiency.

Bexar County has demonstrated a willingness to examine its systems and invest in change. The next step is to act on what the data and front-line staff are telling us. Streamlining intake, strengthening coordination and investing in a mental health diversion center can improve conditions at the JIAA and help make Bexar County safer and healthier.

Alexander Testa is an associate professor in the Department of Management, Policy and Community Health at UTHealth Houston School of Public Health in San Antonio.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Win or lose in GOP primary, Tony Gonzales will have to reckon with affair

Josh Brodesky

One of the most vivid memories I have of U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales is from the run-up to the Republican Party primary in 2022. At that time, our Editorial Board asked every GOP candidate whether Joe Biden won the 2020 election.

Many candidates said they didn't think so. Some said they accepted Biden as president but harbored concerns about possible voter fraud. One candidate simply said she needed to win her primary. If she acknowledged the truth — that Biden had won — she would lose. She lost anyway.

Gonzales said, without missing a beat, "Absolutely."

He wasn't the only GOP candidate to affirm the 2020 presidential election, but he was the clearest. I always appreciated that answer because Gonzales was honest when others either couldn't be or wouldn't be.

Honesty is not a word anyone would associate with Gonzales now that a text message confirms an affair in 2024 with Regina Ann "Regi" Santos-Aviles, his former regional district director, who set herself on fire in September.

That text message between Santos-Aviles and another Gonzales staffer, first reported in the Express-News, gives voice to a truth Gonzales had long denied, either by refusing to answer questions or outright dismissal.

"The rumors are completely untruthful," he said in one of his rare public comments about the affair during the Texas Tribune's TribFest in November.

But, of course, this wasn't true.

While an attorney for Santos-Aviles' husband has said he does not believe the relationship played a role in her death in September, it is impossible to separate the affair from this tragedy because it was such a significant part of her life. Whatever might have led to the affair, it was a breaking point in her marriage, and those close to her have said she spiraled in its aftermath.

Gonzales is in the middle of a bruising GOP primary to again represent Texas' 23rd Congressional District, which runs from San Antonio to just outside the city of El Paso and includes much of the Texas-Mexico border.

He has resisted calls to resign from his opponents, notably Brandon Herrera, a social media influencer and gun enthusiast who goes by the "AK Guy" and could very well represent a district that includes Uvalde, where 19 children and two teachers were killed in a mass shooting in 2022.

Such is the state of our cruel politics that surviving families of a school shooting could be represented by someone who treats guns as props. Not that they would feel represented by Gonzales. Not even close.

Whether Gonzales wins this primary despite the scandal is the political question of the moment — voters, these days, have a high tolerance for disgrace — but it's one that misses the larger point.

Win or lose, Gonzales is diminished.

He is no longer the flashy moderate on the U.S.-Mexico border who gave voice to comprehensive immigration reform. He is no longer the member of Congress who broke ranks with his own party on same-sex marriage or modest gun safety reforms after Uvalde — and was censured by his party for those votes.

If those votes reflected a willingness and bravery to stand on certain principles despite blowback, Gonzales is now in free fall. Much like Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton — who has his own affair and associated scandals, though he leads in polls for the U.S. Senate Republican primary — Gonzales is no longer someone to be associated with honesty.

This affair is troubling on so many levels.

Gonzales is the father of six children, and this affair is a violation of that family trust. This aspect of the story is personal, not newsworthy.

The affair is also a violation of U.S. House ethics rules that prohibit members from having sexual relationships with their employees. The relationship was consensual, but the balance of power was unequal.

This aspect of the scandal is newsworthy, which then makes it a violation of the public's trust due to not only Gonzales' actions but also his refusal to be honest about them. He is not a victim in his own story.

Gonzales may yet win and have a long career in politics, but the questions he has refused to answer will persist. His children may very well ask why he had an affair or what impact it had on Santos-Aviles' life.

And what will he say? That the rumors were completely untruthful?

jbrodesky@express-news.net

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

Jesse Jackson was the outsider who opened politics to other outsiders

Cary Clack

The birth and childhood of Jesse Jackson was often used as a metaphor for his life and work.

Jackson was born to an unmarried 16-year-old in his grandmother's house in Greenville, S.C. His father was the next-door neighbor, a married man who wanted a child but was married to a widow with three children who didn't want any more.

Jackson was 6 to 9 years old when he learned who his biological father was and would often be seen standing in his grandmother's backyard staring at his father's house, an outsider wondering what it was like on the inside.

Had Jackson never run for president he would have still been world-famous, given the range of his talents and drive of his ambition.

Still, his two remarkable runs for the presidency in 1984 and 1988 are his greatest legacy, an outsider forcing the inner sanctums of political power to open its doors and make room for him and other outsiders.

The idea of a Black 42-year-old preacher and civil rights leader who'd never run for political office seeking the presidency in 1984 was ridiculous until it wasn't. It was ludicrous until the chant of "Run, Jesse, run" became a rallying cry that turned into more than 3 million votes, won him five primaries and enabled him to finish third in an eight-man race.

In 1988, Southern Democrats devised a Super Tuesday of primaries throughout the South to stop Jackson or any other progressive candidate. But in 21 primaries and caucuses that day, Jackson won or finished second in 16 and captured the largest percentage of the popular vote.

About three weeks later, Jackson stunned the political world when he won the Michigan caucuses in a landslide, and, briefly, became the front-runner before finishing second to Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, the eventual nominee.

Before, between and during his campaigns, Jackson registered millions of voters, inspired first-time officeholders, and forced the Democratic National Committee to do away with its winner-take-all allocation of delegates and adopt proportional distribution. That was the path Barack Obama followed to the nomination and presidency.

Before Jackson, no serious candidate for the presidency had traveled so far from the margins of American society to amass significant political influence as had he.

Jackson could be a caricature of himself; his love for the camera could be annoying and comical. He could be petulant and insensitive — in other words, human. But the essence of the man was a commitment to democratic ideals, inclusion and

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "Jesse Jackson…"

social justice. His Rainbow Coalition reflected his vision of a multiracial democracy and people transcending differences and working together for a common good.

In an Aug. 6, 1999, interview with USA Today, he offered wise words on talking to those who oppose you: "I grew up in the South. I've looked some mean people in power eye to eye all my life. You look at these mean people, and you can attack them violently until they surrender, or you can figure out creative ways to negotiate a way out. You must seek to find out their fears, their hopes, their source of aggravation. Then you ask them what they hope to accomplish."

In "Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson," Marshall Frady wrote about Jackson's ambitions, successes and failures: "So it could come, ultimately, to a parable of a prodigiously gifted outsider who, precisely because of his enduring sense of not belonging despite all his huge gifts, simply tried too much, asserted himself too urgently and extravagantly, to be accepted as wholly genuine by that general American community to which he had hoped histrionically to belong by becoming a moral-heroic figure in its life."

That's not a bad thing to aspire to if it moves you to compassion and empathy, and animates you with the purpose of helping others. With the understanding that we all fail in living up to the best we imagine ourselves to be, there's nothing wrong with continuing to use that imagined, idealized self as the measure by which we live and help others.

Jackson never ceased trying to be the moral hero of his time, and in trying, he did far more good than bad.

In a column on Tuesday, the day Jackson died, I wrote that hearing him speak when I was 18 inspired me to change my life.

The last time I heard Jackson speak in person was in 2022, and it saddened me. It was in Selma, Ala., during the annual commemoration of "Bloody Sunday." Jackson was suffering from progressive supranuclear palsy, a neurological disorder that affects movement and voice. His speech was slurred and stuttering, and his words hard to understand. People around me gasped and looked at each other in surprise but gave him rousing applause when he finished.

I recorded that speech, but after playing it back in the hotel room, I erased it. The voice of Jesse Jackson I wanted preserved in my mental playback was that of the most electrifying speaker I ever heard, the voice telling my childhood self that "I am somebody" and the one reminding my adult self to "Keep hope alive!"

cary.clack@express-news.net

San Antonio
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AI regulations are needed, but humanity has always been a threat to itself

By Tony Quesada

The Express-News Editorial Board recently concluded dozens of interviews with political candidates running in the primary elections, including for several for seats in Congress and the Texas Legislature, as we formulated our recommendations in contested races.

One topic that we raised with congressional candidates, as well as with some legislative hopefuls, was how lawmakers should approach artificial intelligence.

The vast majority of candidates responded in terms of AI's potential to change industries, economies and national security, as well as the imperative to defeat China in the global AI development race. Some focused on the need to deal with the massive strain on infrastructure — namely energy and water — that AI brings.

We were disappointed only a handful of candidates expressed concerns about the threats AI poses to child safety, or how it could be used for revenge porn, reputational destruction, financial scams and myriad other nefarious activities.

In a devious application of AI known as vishing, or voice phishing, scammers simulate the voice of a loved one — often a child, parent, spouse or sibling — saying they are in trouble. They've been arrested and need money wired for bail or a lawyer. They've been in an accident and need money for emergency care. Or even as drastic as they've been kidnapped — and don't call the police.

Businesses have been scammed by vishing, with employees tricked by simulated voices of CEOs into executing urgent money transfers for bogus deals.

I'm constantly amused by doomsdayers warning that AI will destroy humans as the systems become self-aware and break free like Skynet in "The Terminator."

Such fretting ignores that we're the only species that has used our considerable ingenuity to create new devices — or new ways to use existing ones — to hurt each other.

That being said, it's horrifying how AI chatbots have turned on those engaging with them — advising users to end relationships, instructing children how to start fires, and even suggesting that people kill others or themselves.

When automobiles displaced horse-drawn carriages, undoubtedly some people were displaced from their livelihoods. But no one worried about combustion engines being used to empty bank accounts.

AI is going to disrupt many industries, likely including journalism. I expect that collectively, people will adapt as best they can, and we bear a moral obligation to minimize detrimental effects on those left behind.

But while we grapple with what AI can and will be able to do in place of humans, now is the time to spend more brainpower considering the mean and sinister things people can, and will, do with AI.

We need to understand AI's capabilities and envision its future ones while being intentional about what we don't want it used for and implementing technical, regulatory and behavioral safeguards toward those objectives.

When Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, he revolutionized civil construction with a better way to blast through rock. But he also created a new way to kill a lot of people at one time, as well as a way for people to kill themselves accidentally.

Accordingly, the ability to buy dynamite and other commercial explosives — legally, at least — is restricted and requires a federal explosive license or permit.

That's fine for limiting the dissemination of a tangible material such as C4, the manufacturing of which is also regulated. But it's not a practical strategy for managing the proliferation of potentially harmful AI.

Unlike a box of bullets, the packets of data and strings of code that we take for granted as we type and click are intangible and seemingly innocuous. But in malicious hands, they have great destructive power, and AI stands to multiply it.

Along with the potential for using AI to scam individuals is how it is used to falsely portray public figures in an attempt to turn opinions against them.

In 2022, a video showing then-President Joe Biden inappropriately touching a girl and calling him a "sick pedophile" was actually an altered video of him placing an "I Voted" sticker on his granddaughter, who had just cast a ballot for her first time. And this was not created with what is considered AI. It was a so-called cheap fake rather than a deepfake.

And in May 2024, a political consultant was indicted in connection with a fake robocall imitating Biden's voice and discouraging people from voting for him in New Hampshire's Democratic primary.

In a twisted result, the man was acquitted after he admitted to perpetrating the calls but insisted he did so not to suppress voting but to alert people to the dangers of AI in political campaigns.

Things that make you go hmmm, right?

Nevertheless, we all are subject to being bombarded with false AI-generated content — images, audio and video — that can alter our decisions about so many things as consumers and voters. Congress has yet to pass any substantive laws in this area, although some say existing commercial and political regulations can be applied.

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Cont. from "AI regulations…"

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump issued two executive orders last year regarding AI:

• One in January, titled "Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence," was geared toward our country's "global AI dominance in order to promote human flourishing, economic competitiveness, and national security."

• And one in December, titled "Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence," directed the U.S. attorney general to challenge state laws inconsistent with that objective. It also called for withholding federal funding under the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program from states with AI laws deemed too onerous.

Both orders exalt AI with hardly a mention of its risks, other than to say states remain free to enact laws for child safety.

In any event, the technology is far ahead of any attempts to corral its misuse.

If we hope to catch up, there are so many questions — some have not been conceived — that demand sufficient consideration before we can determine what the biggest risks are and how to thwart them.

That begins, though, by acknowledging people are the threat and AI is merely the latest technological advancement in the devolution of our humanity.

tony.quesada@express-news.net

Dallas
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Virginia Democrats will try to reshape US House districts in counter to Trump's redistricting push

By The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Democrats passed a new congressional map through the Virginia legislature on Friday that aims to help their party win four more seats in the national redistricting battle.

It's a flex of state Democrats' political power, however hurdles remain before they can benefit from friendlier U.S. House district boundaries in this year's midterm elections.

A judge in Tazewell, a conservative area in Southwest Virginia, has effectively blocked a voter referendum on the redrawn maps from happening on April 21 by granting a temporary restraining order, issued Thursday.

Democrats are appealing that decision and another by the same judge, who ruled last month that Democrats illegally rushed the planned voter referendum on their constitutional amendment to allow the remapping. The state's Supreme Court picked up the party's appeal of the earlier ruling.

The judge's order prohibits officials from preparing for the referendum through March 18. But early voting for it was slated to start March 6, meaning Democrats would have to get a favorable court ruling within two weeks to stick with that timeline.

If Democrats get to carry out a referendum, voters will choose whether to temporarily adopt new congressional districts and then return to Virginia's standard process after the 2030 census. Democrats wanted to publish the new map ahead of the April vote.

President Donald Trump launched an unusual mid-decade redistricting battle last year by pushing Republican officials in Texas to redraw districts to help his party win more seats.

The goal was for the GOP to hold on to a narrow House majority in the face of political headwinds that typically favor the party out of power in midterms.

Instead, it created a burst of redistricting efforts nationwide. So far, Republicans believe they can win nine more House seats in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio. Democrats think they can win six more seats in California and Utah, and are hoping to fully or partially make up the remaining three-seat margin in Virginia.

Democratic lawmakers in Virginia have sought to portray their redistricting push as a response to Trump's overreach.

"The president of the United States, who apparently only one half of this chamber knows how to stand up to, basically directed states to grab power," Virginia's Democratic Senate Majority Leader Scott Surovell said in February.

"To basically maintain his power indefinitely — to rig the game, rig the system."

Republicans have sounded aghast. House Minority Leader Terry Kilgore described the remap as a way for liberals in northern Virginia's Arlington, Fairfax and Prince William counties to commandeer the rest of the state.

"In southwest Virginia, we have this saying ... They say, 'Terry, you do a good job up there, but you know, Virginia stops at Roanoke," Kilgore previously said, referring to how some people across Virginia's Appalachian region feel unrepresented in state politics. "That's not going to be the same saying anymore, because Virginia is now going to stop just a little bit west of Prince William County."

Virginia is currently represented in the U.S. House by six Democrats and five Republicans who ran in districts imposed by a court after a bipartisan legislative commission failed to agree on a map after the 2020 census.

Legislation that would put the Democrats' more gerrymandered map into effect if voters approve the referendum now awaits the signature of Democratic Gov. Abigail Spanberger, who has indicated that she would support it.

"Virginia has the opportunity and responsibility to be responsive in the face of efforts across the country to change maps," Spanberger said as she approved the referendum.

Democratic candidates are already lining up in anticipation. "Dopesick" author Beth Macy and former U.S. Rep. Tom Perriello launched campaigns in red areas that would be moved into districts with more registered Democrats.

Virginia Del. Dan Helmer and former federal prosecutor J.P. Cooney, who helped investigate Trump and was fired by him, have launched campaigns in a formerly rural district that would now mostly include voters just outside the nation's capital.

And former Democratic congresswoman Elaine Luria is mounting a comeback against Republican Rep. Jen Kiggans, who ousted her in 2022, in a competitive district that the map has made slightly more favorable to Democrats.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 21 2026

White House pressure leads universities to cut ties with nonprofit that helps racial minorities

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Trump administration said Thursday its campaign to end diversity programs in higher education has led dozens of universities — including the University of North Texas and Rice — to cut ties with an organization known as The PhD Project, which helps racial minorities earn doctorate degrees.

The PhD Project was a little-known nonprofit group until it caught the attention of conservative strategists last year and became the focus of an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education. The Republican administration says school diversity programs often exclude white and Asian American students.

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Cont. from "White House…"

The investigation, opened in March 2025, has resulted in 31 universities agreeing to end partnerships with the group, the department's Office for Civil Rights said Thursday. Negotiations are continuing with 14 additional schools, it said.

The department said in its statement that The PhD Project "unlawfully limits eligibility based on the race of participants" and that institutions partnering with it violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bars discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in education programs and activities that receive federal money.

"This is the Trump effect in action: institutions of higher education are agreeing to cut ties with discriminatory organizations, recommitting themselves to abiding by federal law, and restoring equality of opportunity on campuses across the nation," Education Secretary Linda McMahon said.

Many of the schools promptly cut ties with The PhD Project after the investigation was opened, in order to avoid entanglements with the administration.

It had undertaken the inquiries after warning schools they could lose federal money over "race-based preferences."

The PhD Project is one of many nonprofits that helps underrepresented groups gain access to higher education.

"The PhD Project was founded with the goal of providing more role models in the front of business classrooms and this remains our goal today," the organization said in a statement Thursday.

The website says it has "helped more than 1,500 members earn their doctoral degree."

The group of 31 colleges listed by the department included major public research universities such as Arizona State, Ohio State and the University of Michigan, along with prestigious private schools like Yale, Duke and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In Texas, Rice University in Houston and UNT in Denton are also on the list.

MIT, like many of the schools cited in the investigation, had paid The PhD Project "a nominal fee" to participate in the group's university fairs or conferences, allowing MIT to send representatives to answer questions about attending their school, spokesperson Kimberly Allen said.

MIT informed the government in April 2025 it had ended its participation in such conferences and was notified months later that the Office for Civil Rights had found it in violation of Title VI. The school signed a "resolution agreement" with the department about a week ago to resolve the matter "but explicitly did not admit any liability, wrongdoing or violation of any law or regulation," Allen said.

The University of North Dakota said it, too, promptly ended its membership with The PhD Project two weeks after the investigation was announced last year.

"The University became a member of the PhD Project to have access to the PhD Project's member directory and applicant database, to be able to recruit a larger pool of qualified applicants for faculty positions," spokesperson David Dodds said in a statement.

The University of Utah said it had a table at annual conferences hosted by the nonprofit in the 2024-25 school year and two previous years.

It cut ties with the project in October after settling with the department, university spokesperson Rebecca Walsh said.

Out of 170 PhD students admitted to Utah's business school over the past 14 years, just two were involved through the PhD Project, Walsh said.

The Education Department said that all of the 31 universities have also agreed to review partnerships with other organizations "to identify any that violate Title VI by restricting participation based on race."

The administration has targeted a wide range of practices that it has labeled as diversity, equity and inclusion.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 21 2026

Dallas mayor, city manager announce NYC trip to lure more corporations to 'Y'all Street'

By EVERTON BAILEY JR.

Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson and City Manager Kimberly Bizor Tolbert say they'll lead a group of business and civic leaders to New York next week to lure more corporations to Texas — just as the city prepares for a pivotal debate over the future of its aging City Hall.

But when pressed Thursday about the timing, funding and targets of the trip, officials offered few answers, ending the news conference without taking questions from reporters.

Tolbert said during the news conference that the trip is planned for next Thursday and Friday, days after City Council members plan to publicly discuss a long-awaited report assessing City Hall's structural condition, repair needs and possible relocation.

City staff estimated last fall that it could cost up to $345 million to fully repair City Hall after years of neglect.

The independent report from the Dallas Economic Development Corp. could drop as early as Friday and will be discussed publicly at the City Council's Finance Committee meeting on Monday.

At the City Hall news conference, Johnson and Tolbert touted Dallas' rise as a financial hub dubbed Y'all Street. They pointed to expansions by Goldman Sachs and Scotiabank, as well as the launch of three new stock exchanges, including the Texas Stock Exchange.

"Dallas has built a strong fiscal foundation with disciplined budget practices and a business-friendly climate that supports targeted, sustainable growth," Tolbert said during the news conference.

They framed the New York trip as a chance to attract more investment, but declined to specify after the news conference which businesses they're targeting or how much the trip will cost.

"There's no connection with the timing," the mayor said when asked by The Dallas Morning News about the overlap with the City Hall report as he was leaving.

"This is when we could coordinate the delegation on making the trip. It's a lot of people to coordinate, and it's an important trip. We want to make sure we get everybody in there and these are the dates that work."

After photos ops and a chant of "Y'all Street" with some of the announced members going to New York, Tolbert was ushered out of the flag room to a nearby elevator by city staff and didn't answer any questions.

The New York trip announcement comes as Texas' financial scene is heating up, with Dallas at the heart of it.

The Texas Stock Exchange is set to start trading this year in the city's Knox-Henderson area. The New York Stock Exchange opened a Dallas branch last year and has been adding dual listings. Nasdaq is also joining in, planning dual listings and a regional headquarters in North Texas.

The group to New York will include:

Ray Washburne, a developer who is also chairman of Sunoco LLC and vice chairman of Gillon Capital and Gillon Property Group

Cynt Marshall, former Dallas Mavericks CEO and now president and CEO of Marshalling Resources

Craig Davis, president and CEO of Visit Dallas

Gilbert Gerst, chair of the Dallas Economic Development Corporation

Chris Heinbaugh, EDC member and chief advocacy officer at AT&T Performing Arts Center

Jay Hartzell, president of Southern Methodist University

Vipin Nambiar, founder and managing partner of HN Capital Partners

Nina Vaca, founder, chairman and CEO of Pinnacle Group

Wayne White, president and CEO of Communities Foundation of Texas

During the news conference, the mayor said that Dallas is competing with other major cities for investment by top businesses and financial institutions.

He said the city is "determined to win this competition" and the New York trip represents an opportunity to start doing that.

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Cont. from "Dallas mayor…"

He said the impact could mean new investments from companies similar to Goldman Sachs and Scotiabank, creating jobs and stimulating further economic growth, which in turn would benefit local businesses, expand the tax base and allow the city to maintain services such as parks and police.

"With the rise of Y'all Street, we know that the future of the financial services industry is right here in Dallas," Johnson said.

"And we're going to leverage that fact to build a more prosperous city for everyone."

everton.bailey@dallasnews.com

Dallas
Morning News FEB 21 2026

In Fort Worth, Jasmine Crockett tells voters 'judge me on my qualifications'

By GROMER JEFFERS JR.

FORT WORTH — U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett on Thursday forcefully pushed back against the notion that she can't win the Senate general election, a narrative that persists in the run-up to the March 3 primary against state Rep. James Talarico of Austin.

Crockett said as a civil rights lawyer, small-business owner, former state representative and sitting member of Congress, she has more experience than Talarico, her Democratic rival who is a white man. Crockett said Texas' population is 61% people of color who can influence general elections.

"When you say I'm not electable, what do you mean?" Crockett asked during a news conference after an appearance at the Potter's House in Fort Worth.

In remarks at the Potter's House, she said it was important to judge her on her qualifications.

"I'm not running because I am Black or because I'm a woman. I'm running because I am the most experienced person in this race," Crockett said.

Crockett also evoked the name of Ann Richards, the last Democrat to serve as Texas governor.

"If you know your history, there also was this 'she's not electable thing,' " Crockett told supporters. "It tends to be said about women."

Crockett, who lives in Dallas, entered the Senate race with a lead over Talarico, which most polls show she maintains.

But Talarico gained steam this week when late-night talk show host Stephen Colbert posted a segment with the candidate online after CBS said it was advised that broadcasting the segment on the regular show could trigger Federal Communications Commission equal time rules, requiring other candidates in the race be given similar exposure.

The segment racked up millions of views on YouTube, and Talarico raised $2.5 million in 24 hours.

Meanwhile, a super PAC backing Talarico has aired negative ads questioning Crockett's electability and using a grimy filter, prompting Crockett to accuse the group of "darkening my skin" and saying the attacks are "straight up racist" and undermine party unity.

In response, Talarico reiterated his support for eliminating super PACs but declined to criticize the ads, saying, "Legally, I cannot do anything about what any super PAC does." He added that adding he avoids watching outside spots "for my own mental health."

On Thursday Crockett criticized Talarico for not standing firmly against the super PAC ads.

"Any elected representative needs to always be very clear on certain things," Crockett said. "Granted, we are not allowed to coordinate with super PACs whatsoever, but it's not like they're not watching."

"It's just frustrating," Crockett said of the ads. "As a Black woman and a civil rights lawyer, I stand up, I speak out on behalf of everyone."

Crockett, who is juggling her duties in Congress with running for Senate, had a full day of campaigning in North Texas. She had "conversations" with voters in Fort Worth and Richardson, as well as appearances in Irving and Waxahachie.

In Fort Worth, Crockett urged her supporters to tune out the noise and vote.

"We need to focus on things like actually increasing turnout," Crockett said. "I connect with people that are not OK with politics as usual … leaning in and grabbing those folk up and getting them involved, that is where the win comes from."

Forest Hill resident Nicole Pruitt said Crockett is the best choice to win the Senate seat.

"She stood for us when others were too afraid to do so," Pruitt said. "She is tough."

gjeffers@dallasnews.com

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 21 2026

Is it legal to declaw a cat in Texas? What state law says after Austin's ban was overturned

By Marley Malenfant

Have a cat that won't stop scratching the couch?

Some pet owners consider declawing as a solution. But is it legal to declaw a cat in Texas?

Here's what state law says.

Is it legal to declaw a cat in Texas?

Yes. Cat declawing is legal in Texas.

While the city of Austin passed a ban on declawing in March 2021 — becoming the first Texas city to do so — that local ordinance was later overturned.

In 2023, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 2127, known as the Texas Regulatory Consistency Act, which limits cities' ability to enforce local regulations that go beyond state law. The law effectively nullified Austin's declawing ban.

Texas state law does not prohibit declawing. According to the Texas Humane Network and Legal Clarity, neither the Texas Health and Safety Code nor the Texas Penal Code bans the procedure.

While declawing is legal in Texas and most of the country, it's illegal in several states: New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

What is declawing?

Declawing is a surgical procedure that removes a cat's claws.

Because a cat's claws are attached to bone, the surgery involves amputating the first joint of each toe to prevent regrowth. If the joint is not fully removed, the claw can grow back.

The procedure is formally known as an onychectomy.

Is declawing cats ethical?

Many pet owners and animal-rights groups oppose declawing since it is technically an amputation, and experts argue it can cause negative side effects ranging from aggression and joint stiffness to litterbox aversion. It also impacts cats' ability to climb or defend themselves.

What are alternatives to declawing a cat?

Suggested alternatives for declawing a cat include durable scratching posts and pads made from materials cats favor, such as sisal rope or cardboard, which can help redirect scratching behavior. Routine nail trimming — whether done at home or by a veterinarian — can dull the claws and minimize damage. Another common alternative is applying soft plastic nail caps, which are glued over the claws and typically need replacement every four to six weeks.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Houston
Chronicle FEB 21 2026

Texas could be sued for blocking Islamic schools from vouchers, Democrats say

By Isaac Yu

A group of Texas Democrats say the state may be discriminating against Islamic schools by blocking them from its $1 billion private school voucher program.

The callout comes two weeks after Hearst Newspapers reported that not a single Islamic private school has been allowed to participate in the program. Several Islamic institutions had been removed from the state's approved map, and other schools had been effectively barred by a review by the comptroller's office. The block is a "troubling pattern of exclusion with serious constitutional and statutory implications" and could result in lawsuits against the program, the Democrats warned in a letter to acting Comptroller Kelly Hancock, whose office is overseeing the program.

"Texas was promised 'Education Freedom' for all — but Muslim Texans are currently being locked out," state Rep. Salman Bhojani, one of two Muslim members in the state House, wrote on social media. Bhojani's suburban Fort Worth district includes several affected schools.

Hancock's office began inviting schools to apply in December, though several Islamic school leaders have been hesitant to say whether they believe religious discrimination is playing a role. Some are still hoping to be invited to the program, which closes its application window for families in under a month. More than 100,000 families had already applied as of this week.

The continued freeze on at least two dozen Islamic schools started when Hancock sought legal approval to block what he says are foreign terrorism-linked schools from accessing the program. Program leaders have confirmed an ongoing "due-diligence review" of some schools but have not provided details on how the review is being conducted or evidence for why specific schools have been blocked. Some non-Islamic schools are also caught up in the freeze.

Hancock, who has touted the terrorism block on the campaign trail for a full term as comptroller, has not publicly said whether all he believes all Islamic schools have terror links. Attorney General Ken Paxton confirmed last month that Hancock has the authority to block some schools, though the Democrats say his actions have exceeded the exact eligibility requirements laid out in the law authorizing the program.

Several schools say they have received no information about their lack of invitations and stressed that they have no ties to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, an advocacy group Hancock and other GOP leaders have labeled as a terrorist organization.

CAIR is suing the governor over the terrorism designation. The organization's Texas chapter also said in a statement last week that they see the ongoing block as "religious gatekeeping."

The letter notably lacks signatures from Austin state Reps. Gina Hinojosa and James Talarico, members of the House Public Education Committee who led the legislative fight against the voucher program and are currently running statewide campaigns for governor and U.S. Senate, respectively. Neither immediately responded to a request for comment.

There is no deadline for schools to apply, meaning they will continue to be added throughout the spring. Students who receive a voucher don't need to confirm their choice of school until the summer. But students must apply to the program before March 17 and separately be admitted to a private school.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 21 2026

Texas poised to become world's top data center market by 2030

By Karoline Leonard

From rural counties to fast-growing suburbs, data center projects are spreading across Texas, often drawing local opposition. Now, thanks in part to its business-friendly regulatory climate, Texas could soon surpass Virginia as the world's top data center market by 2030, according to new research from real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle.

Northern Virginia has long been the nation's data center capital, serving the U.S. government and major companies like Google. But developers are increasingly turning to the Lone Star State.

Jones Lang LaSalle's research found that more than half of all data center construction in the U.S. is happening outside of the industry's traditional hubs. Texas, along with Tennessee and Ohio, is considered among the top emerging markets.

Texas already has 6.5 gigawatts of data center capacity under construction, according to the study. That accounts for a fifth of the 35 gigawatts of data center capacity the U.S. added to its pipeline last year. One gigawatt can power about 750,000 homes on average.

Data centers are large facilities that provide critical infrastructure to support digital activity and the growth of artificial intelligence.

Big tech companies like Amazon, Microsoft, Google, OpenAI and Meta plan to spend more than $600 billion on AI infrastructure this year, even as Wall Street expresses concern about the AI bubble bursting.

But these facilities require massive amounts of power and water to operate.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the state's main grid operator, said data centers will cause Texas energy demand to surge 71% by 2031. Recent research suggests that training and using AI could consume more water than the global bottled water industry, largely because of data center operations.

An average 100-megawatt data center in the U.S. consumes about 2 million liters of water a day, according to an April report from the International Energy Agency — roughly the same as 6,500 households. The report projects global data center water use could reach 1.2 billion liters a year by 2030. Some facilities use even more. Large data centers can draw up to 5 million gallons a day, according to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute — about as much as a town of 50,000 people.

In Northern Virginia, data centers consumed 1.85 billion gallons of water in 2023 — two-thirds more than in 2019. In Georgia, construction of a Meta data center led to sediment buildup in water infrastructure that affected nearby homes.

Why Texas?

Texas has long cultivated a regulatory and tax environment favorable to business, attracting major corporations with incentives and abundant land.

For data center developers, it's a big draw.

These massive facilities require extensive land and cost billions of dollars to build. Because they house millions of computer servers, they consume large amounts of power and water and often require detention ponds and diesel generators for backup power.

In recent years, state leaders have discussed the need to accommodate these large facilities via infrastructure expansion and new grid management strategies. Texas is also home to one of the largest renewable energy markets in the country, drawing developers to the area.

Another major draw is a lack of zoning regulations in counties.

A relatively new state law allows developers to de-annex property from the city, meaning that because Texas counties generally lack zoning authority, developers have a much easier path to approvals and permitting.

Central Texas has emerged as the top secondary data center market in the country, with the American-Statesman identifying at least 55 completed or planned projects between Temple and San Antonio in 2025.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000057

Cont. from "Texas poised…"

Opposition

While developers and big tech want to build in Texas, not all residents are happy about these data centers.

Across Texas, community members have spent hours speaking during public comment periods at city council and county commissioners meetings.

After nearly a year of pushback, the San Marcos City Council this week voted down a proposed $1.5 billion data center planned for land partially within city limits. Hundreds of residents packed City Hall, filling nearly nine hours of public comment with pleas to block the project.

Pushback there has also led Hays County Judge Ruben Becerra to suggest a moratorium on water-intensive industrial projects like data centers. The Hays County Commissioners Court will discuss the temporary ban Tuesday.

Round Rock approved a data center project last week, despite pushback from residents in another hours-long meeting.

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 22 2026

Hood County residents mobilize to rein in data centers

By Elizabeth Campbell

Hood County residents aren't backing down in their fight against proposed data centers that they say are encroaching on their rural way of life.

During a town hall Tuesday at a community center in Tolar, people sang the national anthem and prayed for clarity as they discussed the need for a moratorium. They also talked about urging Gov. Abbott to call a special session before the Legislature convenes in 2027 to discuss regulating data centers.

Precinct 2 County Commissioner Nannette Samuelson told the audience that five of the six data centers proposed for Hood County are in the Mitchell Bend area, where residents lost an election in November to incorporate in hopes of regulating noise and pollution from several gas power plants and a bitcoin operation, Mara Holdings.

"I hear you. I've been working on this ever since I took office," Samuelson said.

On Feb. 10, Hood County commissioners turned down on a 3-2 vote a proposal for a six-month moratorium on industrial development. That would have allowed officials to have time to study how data centers would impact the predominantly rural county, which also has protections in place because of the Paluxy River watershed.

Shortly before the vote, commissioners received a letter from state Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, which was also addressed to Attorney General Ken Paxton stating that counties don't have the authority to regulate and that the moratorium would violate state law.

However, Precinct 4 Commissioner Dave Eagle put "reconsideration" of the moratorium back on the Feb. 24 agenda after Van Zandt County commissioners voted on Feb. 11 in favor of a temporary moratorium on "green energy" projects such as battery storage facilities over concerns that components used in hardware and software could come from China, Venezuela and North Korea, and could damage critical infrastructure such as the power grid.

Van Zandt County was the impetus for my putting the moratorium back on the agenda, he said.

Eagle also said he wants another moratorium similar to Van Zandt County to include data centers, which would have to prove that components did not come from China.

During the town hall, members from the group Protect the Paluxy Valley and officials from Hood and Somervell counties told the audience that data centers are taking advantage of abundant land, a business-friendly climate and few regulations when making decisions to build data centers in Texas.

Greg Harrell, the Hood County Republican Party chair said, "Why are these guys coming to Texas, because Texas is absolutely the energy giant."

"We love liberty and a lack of regulations. They are taking advantage of it," he said.

Harrell said it is crucial for people to contact Gov. Abbott's office concerning a special session because the companies know the Legislature won't meet until next year.

He also described organizing a trip to Abilene so that county commissioners could see the massive Stargate project, a 4-million square foot complex on approximately 1,000 acres.

Stargate is part of a nationwide $500 billion build out of AI infrastructure backed by Oracle and Open AI. Stargate, Abilene and Taylor County agreed to a generous tax abatement package, abating 85% of property taxes for the next 10 years.

Harrell said, "what I saw was devastating." He described a conversation with the Taylor County sheriff who told Harrell that he could no longer see the stars at night.

Samuelson said she went to Abilene and was also concerned by the increased traffic and influx of workers.

The hotels are full, and people are renting their homes on Airbnb, she said.

There are concerns that if projects such as the 2,100-acre Comanche Circle are approved in Hood County, the mostly rural area could see similar issues.

"These types of issues will change rural Texas forever unless we get some way to put the brakes on this," she said.

Samuelson also talked about Granbury as a tourism destination, and what would happen if the hotels were full of workers instead of tourists.

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Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 22 2026

UT System approves first building of UTA's upcoming west Fort Worth campus

By Samuel O'Neal

The University of Texas System Board of Regents on Thursday, Feb. 19, approved funding for the first building of the UT Arlington campus in west Fort Worth during its quarterly meeting. The vote clears the way for construction to begin on UTA West, which will be off Interstate 30.

The vote also advances the UTA West project to phase two after the board approved initial funding in November for site preparation and parking to support future expansion.

"UTA West represents the kind of strategic investment that strengthens opportunity and economic growth in Texas," said UT System Chancellor John M. Zerwas. "I know how important this project is to the Board of Regents and to the future of this fast-growing region. This funding moves UT Arlington closer to expanding access to a leading research university and helping meet the workforce needs of North Texas."

The campus is now approved as a 51-acre space within the Walsh development on the edge of Fort Worth near Aledo. UTA West will begin welcoming students starting in fall 2028, according to the university.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000058

Cont. from "UT System…"

UTA West comes at a time when population in west Fort Worth and Parker County is rapidly growing. From 2020-24, Parker County's population increased by almost 20% which makes it the one of the top five fastest-growing counties in Texas. Fort Worth is also one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. Fort Worth will also welcome Texas A&M Fort Worth in downtown Fort Worth later this year, adding another higher education institution to the city.

"This investment marks a defining moment for our university and the region we proudly serve," said UTA President Jennifer Cowley. "I am deeply grateful to our Board of Regents for their steadfast belief in what UTA West will mean for generations of students. Their meaningful support will help turn our big dream into a tangible reality."

The UT System is estimating that UTA West will generate more than $200 million in economic impact during its first year after opening. University leaders also hope UTA West will help supply Fort Worth and Arlington with high-skilled homegrown students who can enter the workforce.

UTA West first broke ground in Fort Worth in April 2025 after announcing the campus in August 2024. It is expected to cost a total of $150 million by the time of completion. The university estimates it will serve at least 10,000 students.

UTA West is set to become UTA's third campus in Fort Worth after the research center in east Fort Worth and its satellite campus downtown. With 41,000 students, the university is one of the largest in Texas. About 162,000 alumni live in North Texas, who contribute about $23 billion in economic impact, according to university data.

UTA achieved Tier One status as a research institution in 2021 after it surpassed thresholds set by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. The school has also been recognized as the No. 1 public school in the Metroplex by the Wall Street Journal in previous years.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

Court upholds Ten Commandments law

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM and REBECCA BOONE -- Associated Press

A U.S. appeals court has cleared the way for a Louisiana law requiring poster-sized displays of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms to take effect.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals voted 12-6 to lift a block that a lower court first placed on the law in 2024. In the opinion released Friday, the court said it was too early to make a judgment call on the constitutionality of the law.

That's partly because it's not yet clear how prominently schools may display the religious text, if teachers will refer to the Ten Commandments during classes or if other texts like the Mayflower Compact or the Declaration of Independence will also be displayed, the majority opinion said.

Without those sorts of details, the panel decided it did not have enough information to weigh any First Amendment issues that might arise from the law. In other words, there aren't enough facts available to "permit judicial judgment rather than speculation," the majority wrote in the opinion.

In a concurring opinion, Circuit Judge James Ho, an appointee of Republican President Donald Trump, wrote that the law "is not just constitutional — it affirms our nation's highest and most noble traditions."

The six judges who voted against the decision wrote a series of dissents, with some arguing that the law exposes children to government-endorsed religion in a place they are required to be, presenting a clear constitutional burden.

Circuit Judge James L. Dennis, an appointee of Democratic President Bill Clinton, wrote that the law "is precisely the kind of establishment the Framers anticipated and sought to prevent."

The ruling is the result of the court's choice to rehear the case with all judges present after three of them ruled in June that the Louisiana law was unconstitutional. The reversal comes from one of the nation's most conservative appeals courts, and one that's known for propelling Republican policies to a similarly conservative U.S. Supreme Court.

Republican Gov. Jeff Landry celebrated the ruling Friday, declaring, "Common sense is making a comeback!"

The ACLU of Louisiana, one of several groups representing plaintiffs, pledged to explore all legal pathways to continue fighting the law.

Arkansas has a similar law that has been challenged in federal court. And a Texas law took effect on Sept. 1, marking the widest reaching attempt in the nation to hang the Ten Commandments in public schools.

Some Texas school districts were barred from posting them after federal judges issued injunctions in two cases challenging the law, but they have already gone up in many classrooms across the state as districts paid to have the posters printed themselves or accepted donations.

The laws are among pushes by Republicans, including Trump, to incorporate religion into public school classrooms. Critics say it violates the separation of church and state, while backers say the Ten Commandments are historical and part of the foundation of U.S. law.

Joseph Davis, an attorney representing Louisiana in the case, applauded the court for upholding America's "time-honored tradition of recognizing faith in the public square."

Families from a variety of religious backgrounds, including Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, have challenged the laws, as have clergy members and nonreligious families.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, another group involved in the challenge, called the ruling "extremely disappointing" and said the law will force families "into a game of constitutional whack-a-mole" where they will have to separately challenge each school district's displays.

Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill said after the ruling that she had sent schools several correct examples of the required poster.

In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled that a similar Kentucky law violated the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which says Congress can "make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

The court found that the law had no secular purpose but served a plainly religious purpose.

And in 2005, the Supreme Court held that such displays in a pair of Kentucky courthouses violated the Constitution.

At the same time, the court upheld a Ten Commandments marker on the grounds of the Texas state Capitol in Austin.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

Have questions about H-1B visa numbers in Texas? Here's why they're difficult to measure

By WILLIAM TONG

H-1B visas, which allow specialized foreign employees to work in the U.S., are under heavy scrutiny in North Texas. Last month, Gov. Greg Abbott froze new H-1B applications from public universities and state agencies, and some public speakers alleged, without evidence, widespread visa fraud this month at a Frisco City Council meeting.

At the same time, various narratives about the scale and growth of H-1B visa holders in Texas have spread across social media and online, fueling controversy and confusion about a complicated and often misunderstood process.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000059

Cont. from "Have questions…"

Publicly available sources of H-1B data mainly measure raw change in visa numbers — they don't reliably indicate the scale or impact of H-1B workers at a given time, a review by The Dallas Morning News found. And, depending on which stage of the visa application process the records come from, there's even more variability in what those numbers say about the scope of H-1B workers in the U.S.

Here's a look at some widely circulating data points about H-1B visas, and why they don't tell a full, accurate story about skilled foreign labor in North Texas.

Applications

Some online commentary cites Labor Condition Application data collected by the U.S. Department of Labor to argue there's too much foreign labor in Texas. LCAs certify that prior to an employer hiring a foreign worker under an H-1B, there are not enough qualified domestic workers to take a job. They also certify that the foreign worker's employment "will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of similarly employed U.S. workers," according to the Department of Labor's website.

As part of the LCA process, employers are required to physically post the certification filing at job sites and send it to potentially affected domestic employees.

One conservative advocacy group, Take Action Texas, posted a graph on Feb. 10 showing LCA and Permanent Labor Certification data from 2020-25 on its Facebook page. Under the caption, "This is a hostile takeover," a lone stacked column shows more than 240,000 "Distinct Cases" from LCAs in that five-year period for the D-FW metro area.

That does not necessarily mean 240,000 new H-1B workers came to North Texas during that time span, however.

An LCA is a single component of the broader H-1B application. Just because the Department of Labor certifies one does not automatically mean an individual was granted an H-1B. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which processes H-1B applications, can deny them even if they contain certified LCAs, according to USCIS.

New H-1B employees aren't the only people who need LCAs. For example, when a worker transfers employers or adds a second job, they might need another LCA certified. That means the same H-1B visa holder might have multiple LCAs attached to their work history.

Consider fiscal year 2024 as an example. According to USCIS H-1B data obtained by Bloomberg News, about 17,000 petitions for new employment were initially approved in Texas during that period. More than 78,000 LCAs were certified, by comparison.

The major takeaway: LCA data doesn't reflect how many H-1B visa holders are moving to or starting work in a community, much less how many are already living there.

Employer Hub

Other sources have looked to the USCIS's H-1B Employer Data Hub in an attempt to draw conclusions about H-1B visas. The Dallas Express, in a Feb. 11 article, attempted to rank Texas' top 25 H-1B employers using the USCIS numbers. The outlet showed technology company Cognizant in first place.

That ranking becomes tricky because the USCIS data categorizes approval statistics by the employer's location, not an employee's, according to the agency. Of the nearly 2,000 H-1B visas for new employment initially approved in FY 2024 for Cognizant and its subsidiaries, more than 100 were for worksites outside of Texas, according to Bloomberg data.

Similarly, the Employer Data Hub doesn't show Texas H-1B workers who work for out-of-state companies. Amazon and its subsidiaries received at least 300 H-1B initial approvals in FY 2024 for Texas jobs, even though the company is based in other states.

So while the USCIS data hub can help more correctly estimate the number of H-1B visas approved in a year compared to LCA data, it's geographically imprecise.

Recent reporting

The Dallas Morning News' most recent reporting uses H-1B visa lottery and petition data obtained by Bloomberg from USCIS through a Freedom of Information Act request and lawsuit, which the outlet used in its investigation of unfair visa practices published July 2024. The data itself, which spans FY 2021-24, was updated again in the summer of 2025.

Because Bloomberg's data contains granular records of H-1B petitions, it can show the distribution of initial application approvals according to where employees would actually work.

Datasets

None of these datasets can capture a current headcount of H-1B visa holders because they only track annual approvals. Without a base H-1B population or understanding of how many workers are shedding H-1B status — whether due to visa expiration, moving to a different work authorization or departing the U.S. for some other reason —it's difficult to calculate a total.

Nor do these datasets alone indicate the existence or scope of widespread H-1B fraud, since they all refer to stages of the visa application process leading up to initial approval.

Given the complexity and cost of the H-1B application process, immigration attorney Karen Pollak said she doesn't think there's rampant fraud in the system.

"It's a significant amount of work and money for the employer," she said. "Why would they go through all of this if they could get an American worker and not have to pay or do all of this?"

The U.S. Department of State, one of the primary agencies responsible for investigating visa fraud and revoking visas, has announced some statistics about visa revocations in the past. However, it does not publish consistent data in its visa statistics reports about revocations or enforcement actions that indicate the scale of H-1B fraud.

william.tong@dallasnews.com

Dallas
Morning News FEB 22 2026

FWISD students see gains. Will Texas keep the leader behind them?

By JACOB SANCHEZ -- fortworthreport.org

The call caught FWISD mother Adrienne Haynes off guard.

A Dunbar High School counselor was checking in about her son's academic progress — something she said she had not experienced before then.

"I give credit to the superintendent," Haynes said. "Before her, a lot of times we wouldn't know what was happening in the schools."

Each grade level saw improvements on recent midyear exams that track students' progress. The average reading score increased by 1 to 8 points while the average math score bumped up 1 to 5 points.

Are recent improvements enough to keep Karen Molinar as superintendent?

As Texas takes control of Fort Worth ISD, the future of Molinar, and the reforms parents say are driving gains, remain uncertain. Education Commissioner Mike Morath hasn't said what his criteria for district leadership are, leaving one question hanging in the balance.

Whether the educator who's spent nearly three decades in FWISD stays rests with Morath, who is expected to reveal the answer sometime this spring. The commissioner has said Molinar is a candidate.

Haynes already knows her choice as she echoes the sentiments of others from parents, and teachers to the mayor.

"She needs to remain," she said. "She knows our community. She's been around to know our needs."

Trustees went over the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress exam results at a Feb. 10 meeting.

Average scores are encouraging as students appear to be moving in the right direction, said Leila Santillán, chief operating officer for the Fort Worth Education Partnership. She focused on scores because they're a consistent yardstick, while other measurements changed.

"That is real progress for our students and should be celebrated," Santillán said.

The test compares students against peers nationwide. NWEA updated its comparison last year to reflect post-pandemic student performance.

The refreshed metric shows the nation's downward shift in student achievement since 2020, according to NWEA.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000060

Cont. from "FWISD…"

Molinar presented FWISD data that showed year-over-year gains in students meeting growth goals and improvement on how they performed compared nationally. However, she stressed that comparing those factors to last year's results is complicated because of the test's updates.

Trustee Kevin Lynch asked whether the district can predict performance on this spring's STAAR, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, based on the midyear results. An internal district report does project gains, Molinar responded.

The tests measure different aspects of student learning. MAP examines how kids improved throughout the year, while STAAR evaluates mastery of state standards.

"There are great things going on (at) these campuses every single day," Molinar told trustees. "We saw that in our data, but we're seeing it every day."

Raises hope, concerns

Haynes has been talking with other parents about the takeover. Many are hopeful the intervention could bring stronger academic improvements for their children.

They've seen the gains in Houston ISD, which the state took over in 2023.

No F-rated schools. Three years ago, 56 Houston campuses were failing state academic accountability standards.

Now, nearly half of third graders read proficiently. Students outperform state averages in algebra.

Fort Worth students deserve similar progress, Haynes said. They've seen improvements in the past year. Third-grade reading proficiency is now 41% — an 8-point gain from 2024.

The district now has 11 F schools, a drop of 20 schools. Texas intervened in FWISD after a now-closed campus was rated F for a fifth year.

And two more campuses teeter toward triggering the takeover law.

"We want our kids to stop having the crumbs at the end of the bag," Haynes said.

But Houston's wide-sweeping reforms had a downside, FWISD board President Roxanne Martinez said: teachers left in droves.

In 2024, Houston had a teacher turnover rate of 19.7%, according to state data compiled by the Dallas-based Commit Partnership. That was slightly higher than the state's 19.1% and FWISD's 16.9%.

Houston's most experienced teachers left following the takeover. State data show the district lost 881 teachers with at least six years of experience between 2023 and 2025. At the same time, Houston gained 562 first-year educators and 355 second- to fifth-year teachers.

"Our teachers are aware of what has happened in Houston," Martinez said. "There's been a lot of anxiety and concerns around what's going to happen here."

The number of uncertified teachers skyrocketed in Houston, according to a University of Houston report. Before the intervention, Houston employed fewer than 100 uncertified teachers in a given year.

Now? Thousands — 2,149 to be exact, state data show.

Fort Worth ISD has 58 uncertified teachers.

"That will create more disruption in our classrooms directly affecting our students," Martinez said. "That's the last thing we need right now."

'Not by accident'

FWISD's improvements reflect Molinar's leadership as she ensured lessons are uniform across the district and renewed focus on phonics, Martinez said.

At a recent workshop, trustee Anne Darr praised new reading and writing lessons for showing results. "These academic gains are not by accident," Martinez said. "They are intentional."

Trenace Dorsey-Hollins, an FWISD mother who leads the parental advocacy group Parent Shield, acknowledged the new scripted lessons initially came with some grumbling from some teachers and staff.

"It's about what's actually working for kids," Dorsey-Hollins said.

"Clearly, some of what Dr. Molinar is doing is working."

Nevertheless, the takeover will result in nine new managers appointed by Morath to govern the district, which worries Martinez and Dorsey-Hollins.

They said students and parents need stability.

That depends on keeping Molinar, they argue.

"At least we know there is somebody here who is committed to our district, who is a resident, who knows Fort Worth and whose receipts are showing improvements," Dorsey-Hollins said.

Parents and teachers need leadership they can trust, Martinez said.

Many community members do not trust the state due to a lack of transparency and communication about the takeover, she said.

"Keeping Dr. Molinar in place will alleviate the community's concerns," she said. "At least there will be some trust there."

Fort Worth Report is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news source dedicated to providing free, fair and local reporting for our community.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

Could a TV comedian in New York ultimately decide the Texas U.S. Senate primary?

John Moritz

Democratic U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett, D-Dallas, had comedian and television host Stephen Colbert and his "The Late Show" audience in the palm of her hand. Her string of one-liners aimed at President Donald Trump and his fellow Republicans drew loud cheers and robust laughter. Her detailed policy explanations, delivered with a fiery flair, were met with hearty applause.

The only drawbacks, the passage of time would later show, were that the eight-minute appearance was seen mostly on television and that she was not yet a candidate for the U.S. Senate.

Crockett's visit with Colbert on May 12 last year was forgotten almost as soon as the closing credits rolled at the Ed Sullivan Theater on Broadway in Manhattan. It's only significant now because of the frenzy that erupted in the predawn hours of Tuesday after Colbert interviewed Texas state Rep. James Talarico, Crockett's principal opponent in the March 3 Democratic primary.

Colbert, whose show on CBS will come to an involuntary end in May, ignited a firestorm when he told his audience for Monday's show that the network wouldn't let him put Talarico on TV for fear that the Federal Communications Commission would invoke the so-called equal-time provision, which would require him to extend similar invitations to Crockett and long-shot candidate Ahmad Hassan.

Instead, the interview before the studio audience was relegated to "The Late Show's" YouTube channel. As it turned out, "relegated" proved to be a colossal misnomer. Before most Americans had finished breakfast on Tuesday, the 15-minute clip had received a couple of million views online. That would soon double. And by Friday, the number would balloon past 8.3 million as Talarico and his allies — many of them brand-new allies — shared and reshared it.

It wasn't long before the political shows on cable and broadcast networks engaged in almost wall-to-wall coverage of Colbert's battle with his own network over the role of the FCC in weighing in on who may appear on non-news shows and under which circumstances.

The big winner in all this appears to be Talarico, who, even though he had already proved to be a magnet for attracting what political pros call "earned media," was trailing Crockett in most polls. As it happened, the controversy blew up on the first day of early voting in Texas. The swirling controversy brought Talarico his single best day of fundraising, with $2.5 million finding its way to his campaign.

That unexpected windfall allows Talarico to devote resources he wasn't expecting to have to TV and online advertising. He can also use it to underwrite the less

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000061

Cont. from "Could a TV comedian…"

glamorous grunt work of contacting persuadable voters and making sure they find their way to the polls, either before early voting ends Feb. 27 or on March 3.

For Crockett, the Colbert-Talarico-FCC sideshow put the two-term Dallas congresswoman in the unfamiliar posture of playing defense. On the Colbert show, Crockett was in command as the host served up questions and didn't get in the way as she swung for the fences with her answers. That's been Crockett's style dating back to her single term in the Texas House, and it amplifies the "I'm a fighter" image she has been honing as a statewide candidate in a race with national implications.

While Talarico was able to bask in the warm light of the mostly favorable reviews after accusing the FCC and a major network of trying to limit his exposure and silence his voice, Crockett found herself trying to explain a more nuanced and somewhat more complicated version of the events.

The FCC didn't stop Talarico from appearing on the air with Colbert, Crockett told reporters. It was CBS's call, and it wasn't so much an order as it was a suggestion, she said, later acknowledging that Colbert's decision to pick a fight with his own network and take the Talarico segment straight to YouTube turned out to be a priceless stroke of luck for her rival.

"I think it probably gave my opponent the boost he was looking for," she told MSNOW host Jen Psaki.

And truth be told, her opponent's campaign needed a boost in the two weeks leading up to the Colbert interview. Talarico had been doing the explaining ever since a one-time supporter accused him of calling former Senate hopeful Colin Allred a "mediocre Black man" in a private conversation. Allred, a former congressman who was defeated in his 2024 campaign against Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, was Talarico's chief obstacle to this year's Democratic Senate nomination before he dropped out of the race just as Crockett had joined it.

Hoping to defuse the controversy, Talarico said he hadn't called Allred himself "mediocre" and didn't intend any racial implications. Instead, he said he meant that Allred's campaign against Cruz was mediocre. All that had worried Texas Democrats, who are hoping to finally break their decadeslong losing streak in statewide elections, that whoever emerges with the Senate nomination would have to begin the last leg of the 2026 campaign mending what could turn out to be a crippling racial divide within the party.

So far, there's been no public polling to measure whether the Colbert controversy is having any effect in the race between Crockett and Talarico, although most previous surveys have shown the congresswoman with single-digit leads. But it would be ironic if the deciding event of the Democratic primary in Texas took place in a studio in New York — and first reached voters through a streaming link.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

UT System approves new school focused on computing, AI

By Lily Kepner

A new school focused on artificial intelligence and computing research will open at the University of Texas in the fall.

UT Regents approved the creation of the School of Computing at a meeting Thursday. The new school will combine the Department of Computer Science, Department of Statistics and Data Sciences and School of Information, which will become a department.

A school groups parts of campus with a unified academic focus and operates with more visibility and resources than a department. UT has 18 schools and colleges in total, including a School of Law, School of Architecture and a School of Nursing.

At a time when AI is rapidly evolving and challenging employers and educators, the new school will allow UT to more deeply explore artificial intelligence's use for public benefit, not corporate interests.

David Vanden Bout, dean of the College of Natural Science, said in an interview that his college will aim to add 50 faculty in five years while growing student opportunities for research and classes.

"Bridging those groups together, I think we have the opportunity to ensure that all of our technology advances are aimed in the right direction," Vanden Bout said. "That's a huge role and opportunity for us to play as a public university."

The new school will increase opportunities for students across colleges by creating new courses in AI literacy and allowing more students to enroll in each major.

The new Department of Information — which previously operated as a school — will retain its degree programs and also add new faculty, Vanden Bout said. The information studies focus will add an important "human element" to the college's artificial intelligence research, and the new structure will allow for easier collaboration between the fields.

"Bringing in information in the way that we use computing and organize information in the world — the real human aspects of computing, we get that human element that's often missing in computer science," Vanden Bout said.

UT's goal is to eventually have the School of Computing stand on its own, but the placement under the College of Natural Sciences will allow for easy sharing of resources in the meantime, the dean said. The School of Information is far smaller than the college and has fewer students than the Computer Science department, which means it would have been difficult to fold the departments under the school, he said.

The new school will expand the visibility of UT's work on computing and collaborate closely with Texas Advanced Computing Center and the Oden Institute for Computational Engineering and Sciences, Vanden Bout said. The Texas Advanced Computing Center at UT is a research center that boasts the most powerful academic supercomputer in the country. UT also has an undergraduate Texas Robotics program, a machine learning research lab and an AI Health lab.

"These are very popular majors that we want to ensure we're providing ample opportunities," Vanden Bout said. "While we are bringing some of those units together under this umbrella in (the College of Natural Sciences), computing and computing power is really driving lots of things across campus."

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 22 2026

Many Texas schools are named after Black leaders

Michael Barnes

From the outset, "Edward L. Blackshear at Prairie View," a new book by John A. Adams Jr. (Texas A&M University Press), answers a question that had lodged in the back of my mind for decades: Who was the namesake of the historically African American Blackshear Elementary School in East Austin?

Born into slavery in Alabama in 1862, the educator, strategist, poet, essayist, agriculturalist and community advocate Edward Blackshear studied at progressive Tabor College in Iowa. During the late 19th century, Blackshear helped lead a widespread campaign to educate emancipated African Americans, 80 percent of whom had been kept in illiteracy by their enslavers.

The American Missionary Association, a Congregationalist group, populated many of those first teaching efforts — Blackshear attended one of their schools in Montgomery, Alabama, before college. Their initiatives were followed in the 20th century by the Rosenwald Schools, a partnership between Jewish businessman and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and self-sufficiency advocate Booker T. Washington.

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Cont. from "Many Texas schools…"

Adams offers much more background on Blackshear, who in Austin served as principal at the Eighth Ward School and the Wheatville School before he was named superintendent of all local Black schools. He was appointed the third educator to lead Prairie View A&M University. His years at that leading historically Black institution of higher education in the state are the primary focus of Adams' straightforward biography.

Early in the book, author Adams shares this particular local-history gem: One of Blackshear's Tabor College classmates was Hightower Theodore Kealing, namesake of Kealing Middle School in Austin. A native Austinite, Kealing might be the prime reason Blackshear landed in Texas. He also preceded Blackshear as principal of Austin's segregated African American high school.

Why did I not know more about this pair of classmates and trailblazing educational leaders? Since childhood, I had been curious about the frequency of names such as Dunbar, Wheatley and Bethune for historically Black schools, before and after segregation.

Time to disambiguate some of the namesakes for historically Black elementary and high schools in Texas. Please send further suggestions to mbarnes@statesman.com. Expect a follow-up column with more histories.

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New records reveal ICE agent fatally shot a San Antonio man during traffic incident last year

By Bayliss Wagner

Months before immigration agents killed two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis and triggered nationwide protests, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent fatally shot a San Antonio man during a traffic incident on South Padre Island, according to newly released records.

The ICE agent fatally shot 23-year-old Ruben Ray Martinez, a U.S. citizen, in March 2025, according to internal records watchdog group American Oversight obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request and made public this week. Newsweek first reported on the agency's role in Martinez's death, which had not been previously disclosed.

Federal immigration officials confirmed the shooting to Hearst Newspapers on Friday and said the use of force was necessary because Martinez hit another officer.

In the internal report, an ICE agent wrote that Martinez appeared intoxicated or impaired and disobeyed verbal instructions to stop and exit his vehicle. After Martinez accelerated and hit an agent, another ICE agent "discharg(ed) multiple rounds" through the driver's side window. A passenger in the vehicle, also a citizen, was taken into police custody.

At the time of the incident, on the night of March 15, 2025, Homeland Security Investigation special agents had been in the area for "immigration enforcement activities," but were assisting local police with traffic control after a major accident.

In a statement to Hearst Newspapers on Friday, DHS said the federal agent fired "defensive shots" and claimed Martinez "intentionally ran over a Homeland Security Investigation special agent." The DHS spokesperson said that the agent sought treatment at the hospital for a knee injury.

The agency said the incident is under active investigation by the Texas Rangers and directed all further questions to the Texas Department of Public Safety. DPS did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

On Friday, several Texas Democrats questioned the agency's account and called for a federal investigation.

U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, a San Antonio Democrat, accused the Texas Department of Public Safety, Texas Rangers and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security of an "organized cover-up" for sitting on the information for so long.

"It's very unusual that for almost a year they would not disclose that it was an ICE agent that shot and killed this person," Castro said in a virtual news conference.

He, along with U.S. Rep. Greg Casar, D-Austin, and state Sen. Roland Gutierrez, D-San Antonio, pressed for a federal probe.

Castro pointed to the killings of Alex Pretti and Renée Nicole Good by ICE agents in Minneapolis as the reason for his skepticism.

After the Jan. 7 shooting of Good, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem initially said the mom of three tried to hit an agent with her vehicle. But community members and lawmakers said video evidence called into question that narrative, and her death became a flash point in the debate over federal immigration enforcement.

Similarly, Noem claimed Pretti "approached U.S. Border Patrol officers with a 9mm semi-automatic handgun" before he was shot at close range on Jan. 24 in Minneapolis. Video footage taken by bystanders later showed he was disarmed before the killing.

At the time of Martinez's death, local news outlets reported he was killed in an "officer-involved shooting," but the officer's affiliation and name were not publicly released.

In a 2025 obituary, Martinez's family said they were "deeply saddened and shocked by his sudden death," remembering him for his "fun-loving outlook," his enthusiasm about cars and his faith in Jesus.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

HISD school closings to spur job cuts

By Nusaiba Mizan

Houston ISD's state-appointed Board of Managers is expected to vote on a list of school closures next week, but hundreds of affected teachers won't find out about their future employment until April 17, according to district statements and communications.

Texas' largest school district announced 12 school closures and co-locations for the upcoming school year, abruptly reversing a previous commitment in November 2025 not to close schools.

The proposal could affect about 500 employees who work at the schools slated for closure, or are affiliated with them, according to October 2025 district records.

Teachers rated "Progressing 2" or higher for the 2025-26 school year will still have a job in the district, state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles said Thursday.

Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, said if teachers with acceptable scores are not placed in the new school, they will be placed in a priority pool for another job in HISD.

"We have good teachers, and we have teachers that are certified," Anderson said. "So I hope that they are going to do their very best to place those teachers in jobs, so that they won't lose their jobs. We want to keep as many teachers as possible hired."

Certified teachers

Teachers at campuses slated to close will be prioritized for positions at campuses receiving students from those schools, HISD said.

They'll learn their 2025-26 evaluation ratings in April, and teachers who earn at least "Progressing 2" will receive their school reassignments by April 17, according to an HISD statement.

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Cont. from "HISD…"

The receiving school's principal will decide whether to hire a teacher from a closing school who was rated "Progressing 1," just above the "Unsatisfactory" rating.

In HISD, teachers are rated "Unsatisfactory," "Progressing 1," "Progressing 2," "Proficient 1," "Proficient 2," and "Exemplary 1." The district does not keep its "unsatisfactory" teachers or many teachers rated "Progressing 1."

Certain district employees, including certified teachers, can complete what's called a "priority placement survey" by March 6, according to HISD. The survey asks for the employee's preferred geographic area or division; type of school (for example, within its reform model, the New Education System); grade levels; subject areas; and maximum commute times.

It also asks employees to prioritize factors such as location, position, campus level and division.

Teachers can also apply during the district's open transfer window, from April 27 to May 16, when educators can request to be placed at a different HISD school.

HISD will issue contracts to eligible employees by May 15, according to the district, but contracts may be issued afterward as employees are placed.

The district said school administrators who are under contract and meeting performance expectations can stay in HISD. HISD plans to place those administrators at campuses receiving students or in open positions around the district.

At-will employees

HISD will try to place at-will employees, including most uncertified teachers, into positions during the spring. But if they don't get an available position at a receiving campus, they must apply for other openings in the district.

Families at schools slated to close are already thinking about the fate of their teachers.

Damentra Spell, whose grandson attends pre-K at Burrus Elementary School in Independence Heights, praised his teachers, saying that's the only thing she's sad about with the potential closure. She wasn't sure what would happen to Burrus' teachers, since her grandson and other students would go to Kennedy Elementary School.

She praised the school's teachers and administrators and noted Burrus' jump to an A rating in 2025 in the state's A-F school accountability ratings. She said her grandson, who is on the autism spectrum, was nonverbal and learned to speak around 25 words, thanks to his teachers at Burrus.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

Meet the candidates for Texas' 18th Congressional District

By Ryan Nickerson

With the March 3 primary approaching, candidates in both parties are making their cases to a reshaped electorate in Texas' 18th Congressional District, where newly redrawn maps have altered who the district represents.

The primary will be the first election conducted under congressional boundaries that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld late last year, forcing candidates to campaign to a different base of voters.

Under the new map, Texas' 18th Congressional District now includes a large portion of what was formerly the 9th Congressional District, long represented by U.S. Rep. Al Green. The district loses significant parts of central Houston while absorbing neighborhoods that for nearly two decades voted in CD-9.

The current officeholder, former Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee, was chosen under the old CD-18 map. In January, voters elected Menefee in a special election runoff to fill the remainder of the term vacated by former Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, who died after taking office in March. That term runs through January 2027.

The March 3 primary, however, will determine who represents the new CD-18, setting up a scenario in which an incumbent must immediately defend a seat drawn around a different constituency.

Former Houston City Council member Amanda Edwards, who lost the January runoff to Menefee, announced Monday that she is suspending her full-term campaign. Because of filing deadlines, her name will still appear on the March primary ballot.

Early voting for the March primary runs from Feb. 17 through Feb. 27. Election Day is March 3. Search your address in the Houston Chronicle's Voter Guide to see if the race falls within your district.

Christian Menefee

Christian Menefee, 37, was elected in January's special election to fill the remainder of Sylvester Turner's term, becoming the district's first new member after nearly a year of vacancy.

A former Harris County Attorney, Menefee built his political profile through lawsuits against the Trump administration, election-related litigation, and consumer protection cases tied to disasters and price gouging. He has framed the March primary as the second of two races voters asked him to run back-to-back, arguing continuity and momentum matter as the district adjusts to new lines.

Menefee has criticized the Supreme Court's decision allowing the map to take effect, calling it racially discriminatory, but has said his campaign remains focused on voter outreach and constituent services across the newly configured district. In a statement to the Houston Chronicle, Menefee said the redistricting has not changed his connection to the communities now in CD18.

"I spent time at my grandmother's house in South Acres, sat with seniors at Tom Bass Park helping them understand wills and estate planning, and fought for stronger clean air protections in neighborhoods like Sunnyside," Menefee said. "No matter what lines get drawn on a map, we're all in this together, and I'm committed to fighting for a better future for the people who call this district home."

Menefee is running on a progressive platform centered on affordability, health care access, and voting rights. His campaign supports Medicare for All, abortion rights, criminal justice reform, and stronger protections for workers and immigrants. He has also emphasized environmental justice, gun violence prevention, public education funding, and reinvestment in historically underserved neighborhoods.

Al Green

Al Green, 78, has represented Texas' 9th Congressional District since 2005, but under the newly redrawn map, much of his longtime base now falls inside the 18th District.

"I didn't move to the 18th. The 18th moved to me," Green has said in response to the redistricting, which effectively relocated his original constituency.

Green is one of Houston's longest-serving members of Congress and has built a national profile as an lawmaker willing to confront President Trump. Green repeatedly introduced articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump during Trump's first term and for being removed from the House chamber in 2025 after interrupting Trump's address to Congress, an act that later led to his censure by the House.

Green recently received an endorsement from Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo just days after she supported Menefee in the January special election runoff. In her endorsement, Hidalgo cited Green's seniority and his role in securing federal funding for disaster recovery and public health initiatives in Harris County.

Green's platform emphasizes civil rights, voting protections, and preserving the social safety net. His platform supports protecting Medicaid and Social Security, expanding access to health care, defending reproductive rights, and advancing immigration reform. He has also highlighted affordable housing, LGBTQ+ rights, and support for veterans as priorities.

Green declined to be interviewed for this story.

Gretchen Brown

Gretchen Brown, 55, a first-time candidate and longtime federal contractor, said she is running for Congress because she believes the basic needs of Houston's historically overlooked neighborhoods have been ignored for decades.

Brown, who was raised in South Park and attended Houston ISD schools, said she spent much of her career in Washington working with the Department of Defense and learning how federal funding

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Cont. from "Meet the candidates…"

moves through Congress. Brown said her experience allowed her to understand how to leverage federal funding and "deliver results for communities."

After returning home after the pandemic, she said she was struck by persistent problems such as food deserts and illegal dumping.

Brown argues federal leverage can help force accountability and steer resources into underserved areas, including through existing U.S. Department of Agriculture and Environmental Protection Agency programs. She said she supports basic universal health coverage and wants to expand community-based approaches to issues like Black maternal health. Brown said she is running a grassroots, self-funded campaign and has avoided major donors to keep her platform independent.

Elizabeth Vences

Elizabeth Vences, 70, a former middle school teacher who now runs a tax preparation and insurance office, said her day-to-day work helping people navigate paperwork, government forms and basic services inspired her to run for Congress.

Vences said immigration is her top issue. She said she supports mass deportations of people in the country illegally, while also backing legal status for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children and have lived, worked and paid taxes in the country.

Vences said she has no prior experience working in government or for an elected official, aside from serving as an election judge and precinct chair. She described her campaign as focused on constituent services, saying she would prioritize an "open door" congressional office to help residents connect with agencies and resources. She said she supports the Trump administration's approach on several issues but acknowledged she is still learning federal policy and the role of Congress.

Ronald Dwayne Whitfield

Ronald Dwayne Whitfield, 59 is also running in the Republican primary.

During the November special election, Whitfield told the Chronicle Editorial Board that his campaign centers on public safety and civic education.

Houston
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Agency continues push for flood control dams on Guadalupe River

By Liz Teitz

At the request of Kerr County officials, a federal agency is moving ahead with a study into whether building dams on the upper Guadalupe River could lessen the effects of flooding.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, plans to complete a preliminary feasibility report for flood detention dams near the river's headwaters in Kerr County.

The study was requested by local officials in the wake of last summer's deadly flooding, which killed 119 people in Kerr County.

The Upper Guadalupe River Authority, which manages the river's watershed in Kerr County, submitted a request in September to the federal agency's watershed program, seeking planning assistance for potential flood detention dams.

The conservation service responded in January, agreeing to proceed, river authority General Manager Tara Bushnoe said.

Building even one of the dams would likely take years and tens of millions of dollars, but officials say the feasibility study is a necessary first step.

Flood detention dams function by allowing the typical flow of a river to pass through during normal conditions, but they are able to hold back larger volumes of water when needed, releasing it slowly to reduce flooding downstream. Detention dams often don't have gates to release water that require operators raising and lowering them. The flow of water is controlled by the design of the dame and size of the opening that lets water pass through.

The next steps toward building a dam or dams on the Guadalupe River are publishing a required 45-day notice for other federal agencies to comment, which is currently underway, then requesting funding from the agency's national headquarters, said Shane Ice, the federal agency's state conservation engineer for Texas.

Ice said he couldn't estimate how much the study would cost.

If funding is approved, the process of completing the preliminary report can take up to a year.

The report would not attempt to determine how many dams would be needed to provide flood protection, or potential locations and sizes, Ice said.

"It's basically to determine if a potential project has any obvious obstacles within that watershed that would prevent it from qualifying for the actual program itself," Ice said.

That includes looking at the initial economics, he said. "Is there a cost benefit for that watershed, to spend that kind of money for the amount of protection it would give?"

Once the report is completed, the local sponsor can decide whether to move on to the next step, which is a watershed plan. That requires repeating the process. The Upper Guadalupe River Authority would submit a request to the conservation service, which would then have to request and receive funding.

That plan would include more detailed assessments, including some preliminary work on the number and location of structures, as well as other alternatives that could provide flood protection in the area. It typically takes another 12 to 18 months to complete, Ice said.

Natural Resources Conservation Service staffers would then meet with the local sponsor to discuss implementing some or all of the plan. If they agree to move forward with any kind of structure, the agency would, once again, submit a funding request for the design phase.

Funding availability is "where the timeline gets affected the most," Ice said. That money is allocated through congressional discretionary spending, he said, so it can vary year to year.

The same would be true for funding the actual construction of a project, which would require some local money in addition to a federal allocation.

"If funding isn't available, it's hard to proceed," Ice said.

While the agency has completed several repair and rehabilitation projects in Texas, the last new structure in the state was finished in 2009, he said.

Despite the uncertainty of funding and timing, the river authority's board agreed to proceed with the initial feasibility report as a first step, because ultimately building any kind of structure would be require money from other sources.

"If we're going to potentially look for design or construction funding from a federal program in the future, our understanding is that this needs to be done," Bushnoe said.

The river authority's 2026 annual budget is about $3.5 million, including $1.5 million that was moved last year from reserves to use for flood prediction and control projects. San Antonio River Authority officials who have worked on Natural Resources Conservation Service dams previously estimated that a new flood control dam would cost $20 million to $50 million.

Mike Hughes, an engineer and former UGRA board member, has urged the river authority to pursue dams on the Guadalupe's tributary creeks and on the main river, calling them "the only way" to reduce the severity of flash flooding.

He encouraged the board to request the study in September, but last month, said he was discouraged by the pace of the agency's work.

A sample feasibility report provided by the federal agency showed "a nine-year process to get to the beginning of construction," Hughes said. "I personally am not satisfied with that amount of progress."

Despite that, he said the preliminary report was still important to complete, because it could provide information that would help with future steps.

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Cont. from "Agency continues…"

Bushnoe said the Guadalupe Regional Flood Planning Group has also discussed using some of its funding to look at flood mitigation projects in Kerr County.

The group is one of 15 across the state tasked with identifying and assessing flood risks and creating regional flood plans with potential flood control projects. Its members include representatives from river authorities, counties, state agencies and industries, including agriculture and electric utilities. The Region 11 group covers the Guadalupe River basin from the headwaters to the coast.

"They were very keen to have a project in Kerr County," she said of the group, and pursuing that avenue could open up future funding opportunities from the Texas Water Development Board.

The planning group is interested in approaches beyond just physical flood detention structures, Bushnoe said.

"They were keen to explore options that would help flood control, whether they'd be structural like a dam, or non-structural like conservation easements or nature-based infrastructure or buyouts of repetitive loss properties," she said. The conversation was only an initial discussion, and the group's members would have to vote to allocate money toward that planning effort.

She told the river authority's board members they should continue pursuing both paths to gather more information.

"It's prudent to find out more, to keep answering that question because it will always come up in the future, of 'why didn't you ever consider that?" Bushnoe said. "I think it's prudent to say we did, and these were the results of those findings."

Houston
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Houston ISD to convert two elementary schools into AI-focused K-8 campuses in 2026-27

By Nusaiba Mizan

State-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles said Houston ISD will convert Gregg and Clemente Martinez elementary schools into "Future 2 Schools" in 2026-27, launching new programs aimed at skills related to the rise of artificial intelligence.

HISD will expand these elementary campuses into AI-focused schools, offering kindergarten through eighth grade, according to a Thursday evening announcement.

The plans came as Miles also revealed a sweeping plan to close or consolidate 12 other schools, in an effort to address declining enrollment, aging buildings and strained finances.

Gregg, in southeast Houston, and C. Martinez, in the Northside area, are about the same size, with 251 and 244 students respectively.

Miles did not say whether there will be community meetings or other opportunities for feedback from the Gregg and Clemente Martinez communities.

HISD said Friday that, after board approval, the schools will open in August as K-8 schools, and students from across HISD will be invited to enroll. According to the district, it communicated with principals, staff and the schools' families before the Feb. 12 board meeting.

"Future 2 combines strong academic foundations with an increased emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, and real-world learning experiences," HISD said in a statement. "The Future 2 instructional model will begin in grades 3 and 4, with coursework and programming carefully designed to be developmentally appropriate and aligned to grade-level expectations. K through 2nd grade students will continue to receive a strong foundational academic experience that supports early literacy and numeracy development."

Students proficient in core subjects will access accelerated coursework on an online platform, Miles said in January. Fifth- and sixth-graders will take semester-long courses focused on AI tools, design-thinking, the study of cultures, and "how things work." The students will take those four courses over two years.

Students will also be required to learn a musical instrument to advance from sixth grade, according to Miles. After school, students would play music, participate in team sports, complete community service projects or learn how to swim. Students will have "experiences" centered on skills Miles said are valuable as AI spreads.

In January, the superintendent referenced a "Future 2 Schools" concept paper he gave to the appointed board in January. HISD has not yet fulfilled the Chronicle's request for this paper.

Miles tacked this announcement to the end of a presentation on 12 school closures, which the board will vote on in 14 days at a meeting that is usually focused on employee hearings.

Accelerated math

The state's largest school district also announced that all middle school students will be enrolled in accelerated math next year as part of its goal to enroll eighth graders into Algebra I, according to an announcement Thursday.

"Taking Algebra I in 8th grade is one of the strongest predictors of long-term academic opportunity and economic mobility," the announcement said. "Students who complete Algebra I in 8th grade are 14 percentage points more likely to earn a college degree and 25 percentage points more likely to earn a living wage six years after high school."

HISD is also launching a new districtwide virtual school with live instruction for ninth- and tenth-graders who perform on grade level, according to the announcement. Students in this virtual school will be formally enrolled in their home campuses.

The program will expand to more grade levels after the 2026-27 school year.

"The program expands learning opportunities for students whose life circumstances can make a traditional school schedule challenging," according to the announcement. "By offering a flexible yet rigorous learning environment to students who meet a set of academic readiness criteria, the Virtual School is designed to increase access and academic success while preparing students for college, careers, and living-wage jobs."

Students can apply to the new virtual school in March.

Houston
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New details emerge in Austin yogurt shop murders exoneration hearing

By Austin Sanders

The courtroom focus Thursday was on the men who lost decades of their lives.

Maurice Pierce, Robert Springsteen, Michael Scott and Forrest Welborn were formally exonerated in the 1991 yogurt shop murders, their names cleared after more than 30 years of suspicion and legal battles. Much of the hearing centered on the toll the accusations took on them and their families.

But the proceeding also pulled back the curtain on a cold case investigation that had largely faded into the background until about five months ago. When Austin cold case detective Dan Jackson took the stand Thursday, he shared several little-known details about the case and the serial killer who was ultimately identified as the sole suspect in the murders of Jennifer Harbison, 17; her sister, Sarah Harbison, 15; Eliza Thomas, 17; and Amy Ayers, 13 inside a I Can't Believe It's Yogurt! shop on West Anderson Lane.

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Cont. from "New details…"

Jackson, who was instrumental in breaking the case, also shared interesting personal details about himself.

'Clever' criminal

After advanced DNA and ballistics testing identified Brashers, investigators began reconstructing his criminal history. What emerged, Jackson told the court Thursday, was the portrait of a transient and calculating offender who operated across multiple states and evaded law enforcement for years.

Investigators now believe Brashers' crimes spanned at least 14 years and several states, including:

• An attempted sexual assault in Florida 1985, believe to be his earliest offense

• A sexual assault and killing in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1990, about 18 months before the Austin murders

• A burglary and sexual assault in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1997

• A sexual assault and murder in Portageville, Missouri. in 1998

• An attempted home invasion and assault in Dyersburg, Tenn. in 1998

• A sexual assault and murder in Lexington, Kentucky in 1998 — a case that later proved pivotal in linking him to the yogurt shop murders.

Although Brashers served two stints in prison in the 1980s and 1990s, Jackson said the man, who died by suicide in 1999, deployed a range of tactics to evade law enforcement.

According to Jackson, the man changed his name, had multiple aliases and birth certificates, traveled in multiple states and "rarely" committed crimes where he lived.

At one point, Jackson said, Brashers even wrote an obituary for himself that he had published in several newspapers.

"He was clever," Jackson told the court Thursday. "He was able to evade justice for many years."

Not on the radar

Despite thousands of leads over 34 years — including hundreds of tips, dozens of false confessions and extensive DNA testing — Brashers' name never surfaced during the original investigation.

"Robert Eugene Brashers was never in the yogurt shop case files," Jackson said from the witness stand Thursday.

Given the steps investigators now believe he took to conceal his identity and movements, his absence from the file underscores how effectively he avoided scrutiny.

Right man for the job

After Thursday's hearing, Dennis Farris — an officer who worked the 1991 crime scene and now serves as president of the Austin Police Retired Officers Association — described Detective Jackson as the "perfect" detective to lead the cold case review.

Jackson's path to homicide investigator was unconventional. He holds a master's degree in anthropology and joined the Travis County Medical Examiner's Office in 2005 as a forensic investigator. Over nine years, he authored more than 4,000 forensic reports and developed expertise in analyzing skeletal remains.

He left the medical examiner's office in 2014 to join the Austin Police Department, was promoted to detective in 2020 and transferred to the cold case unit in 2022.

On his first day there, he was handed the yogurt shop file.

When beginning his investigation, he said he made a point of not watching videos of the interrogations that led to the false confessions of the men exonerated Thursday.

"I didn't want to put myself in a position where I had a confirmation bias," Jackson said.

Three years later, decisions he made about renewed forensic testing would identify a brand new suspect — and bring long-delayed resolution to one of Austin's most haunting crimes.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

HISD's failed bond would have sent $400M to these schools. Now they are slated for closure.

By Megan Menchaca

Houston ISD has proposed closing 12 schools, but under the district's failed $4.4 billion bond, those campuses would have received more than $400 million in taxpayer funds for upgrades, including several complete rebuilds.

In November 2024, HISD put the largest school bond in state history on the ballot. If passed, it would have invested in facility improvements at all of its 273 campuses. It aimed to rebuild or renovate more than 40 campuses and fund lead remediation, security upgrades, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning improvements, but voters rejected the measure.

Less than two years later, as enrollment declines accelerate and facilities further deteriorate, state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles aims to close a dozen campuses, including four that would have seen full rebuilds under the bond. HISD said in a statement that "replacing aging facilities in a district serving fewer students" would not be financially responsible.

"Closure allows HISD to focus resources on instruction and student opportunities rather than maintaining underutilized buildings," the district said.

According to HISD, the bond proposal aimed to replace aging facilities and address critical infrastructure needs. The district said that if the bond passed, it would not necessarily have eliminated the future need to consolidate smaller campuses.

If the state-appointed Board of Managers approves the closure proposal at its Feb. 26 meeting, eight schools will be completely absorbed by their reassigned campuses, while four other schools will be "co-located" with an existing campus and move to another building.

"HISD has seen continued enrollment declines over several years, making it increasingly harder to fully staff schools, offer robust programming, and maintain safe, vibrant learning environments across all campuses," the district said.

In the bond, HISD had proposed rebuilding four schools that are now targeted for closure: Fleming Middle School and Cage, Franklin and Hobby elementary schools. In total, the district planned to allocate about $360 million for these rebuilds.

However, under the new closure proposal, Fleming Middle School's students are expected to be co-located to the Mickey Leland College Preparatory Academy for Young Men. Hobby Elementary School will be co-located with Lawson Middle School, while Cage Elementary School will share facilities with Lantrip Elementary School.

In addition to rebuilding those four schools, HISD had planned to invest at least $3.5 million of bond revenue in facility improvements at each of the remaining campuses now targeted for closure or consolidation, except for Middle College High School at Houston Community College Gulfton, which is not housed at a district facility.

Under the bond, HISD had also proposed co-locating Port Houston and Pleasantville elementary schools into a rebuilt Holland Middle School. Now, the district is proposing to close Port Houston and send its students to Pleasantville's campus starting in the 2026-27 year.

In addition to Port Houston, HISD said it had considered co-locating several other campuses in the 2024 bond proposal — including Alcott, Briscoe, Burrus, N.Q. Henderson and Ross elementary schools. But the district ultimately opted not to include them for consolidation in the final ballot measure. They are now slated for closure.

To decide which campuses to close in 2026, HISD said it considered enrollment, building use, operating costs, proximity to nearby campuses, facility conditions and long-term repair needs.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000067

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

Anti-fascist group denies Paxton's terrorism allegations

By Caroline Wilburn

A Houston-based anti-fascist organization denied allegations that it violated Texas law after Attorney General Ken Paxton announced he was suing the group over claims it incited "violent terrorism."

On Feb. 6, Paxton said he was launching an investigation into the Screwston Anti-Fascist Committee to determine whether the group engaged in unlawful activity, including terrorism and "doxxing," or the act of publishing a person's personal information to encourage harassment or violence. He said the group was self-admittedly associated with Antifa, which was designated as a terrorist group by President Donald Trump in September.

In a statement posted to its website on Wednesday, the organization said it was being targeted by the attorney general and called the lawsuit a "blatant act of intimidation."

"This assertion of authority should concern everyone in Texas and beyond," the statement read. "He has used this tool against any perceived 'enemy' of his agenda, including organizations that provide valuable and fully legal services to marginalized groups across the state. We fully condemn this cynical erosion of rights to score political clout."

Paxton claimed that merchandise sold by the group "promotes the death" of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and encourages "violence by mentally ill 'transgender' individuals."

"Radical leftists have engaged in coordinated efforts to militantly attack our nation and undermine the rule of law," he said in a news release announcing the lawsuit. "Screwston and related groups have illegally doxed Texans and encouraged violent terrorism against fellow citizens."

The organization's online shop sells merchandise and items with phrases such as "anti fascist territory" and "make racists afraid," as well as a poster depicting a somewhat buried skeleton lying next to an "ICE" hat. The group said its online shop will remain active and orders will continue to be processed and shipped as usual "until further notice."

"The Attorney General's attack against the SAFC sends a clear message: Paxton is more interested in working to protect fascist organizations and their members than he is in helping Texans," the group's statement read.

Paxton has also alleged that members of Screwston participated in a July 4 ambush at the ICE Prairieland Detention Facility in Alvarado that left one officer wounded.

The group did not address the allegations in its statement but said, "please read about and support the Prairieland Defendants in Dallas that are being locked away on trumped-up charges, as the connection between the state's repression of them and us cannot be ignored. Similarly, the state is attempting to suppress SAC by creating false accusations and claims just like they did with the Prairieland Defendants."

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

Council Member Pollard calls for Houston ISD superintendent to appear before City Council

By Nusaiba Mizan

Houston City Council Member Edward Pollard is asking Mayor John Whitmire to formally invite Houston ISD's state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles to appear before City Council and answer questions about proposed school closures.

Families felt blindsided when Miles announced his proposal to close seven campuses and relocate five others, citing lower-than-expected enrollment and aging facilities. The plan, which the state-appointed board may approve on Thursday, marks an abrupt change from the district's November commitment not to close schools next fall.

Pollard, whose District J includes one of the campuses slated for closure, told Whitmire in a letter that council offices are receiving questions from residents seeking answers.

"Given the magnitude of this decision, and the fact that no prior public indication suggested that 12 campuses would be closing, I believe it would be appropriate and beneficial for the Superintendent to appear before City Council to provide context and answer questions in a public forum," Pollard wrote.

The Houston Chronicle reached out to the mayor's office for comment and did not immediately receive a response.

While the city of Houston has no authority over Houston ISD, council members can ask Miles to share information at a council or committee meeting. In September, Miles gave a presentation to council members about schools' accountability ratings, which drew audible disagreement from the crowd at City Hall. It was his first presentation to council members in more than a year.

District B's council member Tarsha Jackson said there was "little evidence of a willingness to fully engage families in shaping the future of their neighborhood schools" in a Wednesday statement.

"Parents deserve a seat at the table before decisions are finalized, not after," Jackson wrote, who added that the schools she attended — East Houston Elementary School and Kirby Middle School — no longer exist.

"Before any campuses are closed, HISD leadership must slow down, listen to parents and community members, and explore every possible alternative," Jackson said. "Our children deserve stability. Our families deserve respect."

Families told the Chronicle they were shocked by the announcement, and at least one school community — Port Houston Elementary School — has already protested the plan. Elected officials said they opposed a fast-tracked process to close schools. Elected HISD trustees, who have no decision-making power under the state takeover, have called for more robust community engagement before finalizing any closures.

State Rep. Ana Hernandez wrote the state-appointed board on Tuesday "in strong opposition" to the proposed closures, four of which are in her district. She wrote that she heard from parents, students, educators and residents concerned about the impact of these closures.

"Many of the families in District 143 already navigate barriers including language access, economic insecurity, and limited transportation options," Hernandez wrote. "School closures would compound these challenges and disproportionately impact minority and working-class communities."

HISD is hosting meetings at affected schools to brief families about the potential closures. The district has not publicly released the schedule of community meetings, which the Chronicle has requested to attend.

"These meetings are designed to provide a personal setting where families can speak with campus and district leadership and receive important information specific to their school transition," a district spokesperson said in a statement. "At this time, HISD is focused on supporting families. Parents at individual campuses have received information for their specific meetings via ParentSquare."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

Texans don't prejudge Christians for sex scandals. They owe Muslims the same respect.

Chris Tomlinson

On average, a Christian pastor is arrested for a sex crime involving a Texas child twice a month, raising questions about whether churches are safe places for young people.

On Valentine's Day, Amarillo police arrested Baptist minister and former Fritch Mayor William "Billy" Robbins for alleged possession with intent to promote child pornography, television station KVII reported. A week before that, Irving police arrested Troyce Hernandez of Arlington's True Grace Church for alleged indecency with a child.

The relentless drumbeat of arrests, confessions and convictions reveals a disturbing pattern of Christian clergy abusing children. Denominations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church to the Southern Baptist Convention have a documented history of protecting pedophile preachers.

Does this mean the Christian faith and Christians condone pedophilia? No. Does it mean we should shut down churches? Of course not.

Most Texans understand that criminals sometimes cloak themselves in clerical vestments. Yet Texas Republicans in tight elections this year are promoting bigotry and discrimination against Muslims because of a handful of evildoers.

Politicians who crowed about religious freedom now want to violate the rights of those who don't share their beliefs.

State Comptroller Kelly Hancock, who is struggling to win his election, has manufactured excuses to deny school vouchers to Islamic institutions. Attorney General Ken Paxton keeps suing Muslims interested in constructing a housing development outside Dallas.

Gov. Greg Abbott and U.S. Senate candidates John Cornyn and Wesley Hunt are all stoking fears of Islam in campaign ads. Others, like Railroad Commission candidate Bo French and attorney general candidates Chip Roy, Mayes Middleton, and Aaron Reitz, have promised legal action against Texas Muslims for their religion.

"Islam is not compatible with Western civilization," Reitz declared in one of the most hateful and ignorant ads of this election. "Politicians have imported millions of Muslims into our country. The result is more terrorism, more crime, and they even want their own illegal cities in Texas to impose Sharia law."

None of that is true; it is pure bigotry. GOP candidates are trying to gain traction from a fake Islamic threat that Christian nationalists implanted in the imaginations of Republican primary voters.

"The Muslim community is the boogeyman for this cycle," Texas GOP consultant Vinny Minchillo told Politico. "One hundred percent this message works — there's no question about it. This has been polled up one side and down the other, and with Texas Republican primary voters, it works. It is a thing they are legitimately scared of."

But there is nothing legitimate about those fears. No jurisdiction practices Islamic law, known as Sharia, and no serious politician has suggested making Sharia the law of the land.

No foreign Islamic organization has carried out a violent attack in the United States in more than a decade, while the eight attacks and 46 disrupted plots since 2020 were by self-described, homegrown jihadists with no external support, according to research by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Radical Islam is rare.

"Jihadist terrorism in the United States does not merit additional special attention from policymakers or law enforcement beyond the high levels it already receives," the CSIS researchers concluded.

Neither are Islamists a threat to Texas culture. Muslims make up about 2% of the Texas population, and most are socially conservative advocates for traditional family values, which makes them natural GOP voters.

Most of the imams I've met and interviewed over the decades share the same values as my grandmother's Southern Baptist minister in East Texas.

"Muslims don't believe in same-sex marriage," Nafees Asghar, a Republican voter in Richmond, told my colleague Haajrah Gilani. "We don't believe in gender modification. We do not believe in mid-term or long-term abortions. We don't believe in that, and the Republicans don't believe in that. So, if what we believe is Sharia law, then that makes me think that these Republicans also believe in Sharia law."

As for all of those social media posts showing American imams saying shocking things, well, fringe Christian pastors easily outdo them with their crazy beliefs.

Every religion has rules and standards of behavior. Whether Jewish Halachic law, Islam's Sharia or the first five books of the Old Testament, religious laws agree more often than they conflict. Within Islam, there is intense debate on what is Sharia, what is cultural custom, and what is political manipulation.

Texas Republicans know all about political manipulation.

Fear-mongering is an effective campaign tactic that cynical politicians have deployed for generations. Conservative politicians have slandered, defamed and mistreated Jews, Catholics, Mormons, Germans, Mexicans and African Americans across the generations because fear of those not like us wins elections.

The GOP's Islamophobia is ignorant, disgraceful and anti-American. A political party whose success relies on ignorance and hatred toward fellow Americans is in a sad, debased condition.

Award-winning opinion writer Chris Tomlinson writes commentary about money, politics and life in Texas. Sign up for his "Tomlinson's Take" newsletter at houstonchronicle.com/tomlinsonnewsletter or expressnews.com/tomlinsonnewsletter.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 22 2026

How the Space Commission divided $150 million in grants, from inland launch pads to fake moon soil

By Andrea Leinfelder

The Texas Space Commission has announced a $14.2 million grant for Rice University to create a new center for space technologies, marking the final recipient of the $150 million the commission received from lawmakers in 2023 to stimulate the state's space ecosystem.

The funding, divided among 24 projects unveiled throughout 2025 and early 2026, will support initiatives that include potential inland launch pads, data centers in space, fake moon soil, lithium-ion battery packs and STEM education.

Communities were awarded grants to conduct local feasibility studies. Universities were selected to beef up their research and space education. And companies were offered funding to support a variety of projects.

Larger recipients such as SpaceX and Blue Origin, founded by billionaires Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, respectively, likely didn't need the money to stay in business. But smaller companies could use the grants to help sustain themselves, said Norman Garza Jr., executive director of the Texas Space Commission.

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Cont. from "How the Space Commission…"

These companies are receiving calls from other states, he said. And some have told Garza they'll submit applications in the next round of grant funding in hopes of ignoring those calls and remaining in Texas.

"This is momentum building," Garza said during an interview in December. "We have just created a process, thankfully with resources provided by the Legislature, to really make some opportunities come to fruition. That is what is underway today."

The Texas Space Commission was created in 2023 to help Texas compete with Florida, Alabama, Colorado and other space states.

The Texas Legislature gave it $150 million that year to award as grants, and it provided an additional $300 million last year. The Space Commission has not announced when it will begin accepting applications for the $300 million.

"The fact that we now have the Space Commission, and that there are funds in the Texas Space Commission through the SEARF (Space Exploration & Aeronautics Research Fund) trust, is very appealing," Gwen Griffin, chair of the commission, said in December. "Companies are considering Texas as a place to do business or to grow."

First round of grants

The Space Commission received 280 applications — from 140 entities, as several submitted multiple applications — for its first round of grants. Each application was reviewed by the commission's nine-person board unless there was a conflict of interest.

The board members individually evaluated and scored the proposals based on five criteria: return on investment, team and expertise, innovation, broader impact and financial sustainability. Applications that averaged 80% or higher were considered by the full board for funding.

They ultimately approved grants ranging from $175,000 to $19.8 million. The Space Commission also provided $705,000 to the Texas Aerospace Research and Space Economy Consortium, which was created as part of the Space Commission to connect academic institutions, government agencies and industry leaders.

The largest grant was for the Borderplex Alliance, a regional economic development nonprofit for El Paso, Las Cruces, N.M., and Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. The money was awarded to create a Space Innovation Hub with a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility that can be used for viewing certain classified information in the aerospace defense sector.

In an email sent to the Space Commission's mailing list, Garza called this a "significant step in expanding defense-related aerospace infrastructure in West Texas."

Blue Origin and SpaceX were approved for midrange grants.

Blue Origin was awarded $7 million to develop subcooling upgrades for an engine test stand in West Texas, enabling the use of subcooled liquefied natural gas and liquid oxygen for its BE-4 engines. SpaceX was awarded $7.5 million to build the foundation of its Gigabay Starship facility that's used to manufacture and test its Starship rocket in South Texas.

The smallest Space Commission grant went to the West Central Texas Council of Governments for a feasibility study that would examine the economic and workforce potential for space-related activities.

Inland launch pads

Other government organizations in West and Northwest Texas — the Concho Valley Council of Governments and the South Plains Association of Governments — were awarded grants to study inland rocket launches.

In the United States, rockets are typically launched near oceans to avoid flying over communities. But launch pads on the East and West coasts are reaching their capacity. And if a hurricane were to decimate Cape Canaveral in Florida, the U.S. and NASA could lose much of their launch capabilities.

"Inland launch, be that West Texas or another part of the country, is a real conversation," Garza said. "The communities of West Texas have heard that on their own, as well, and they want to talk about it. And so if we're able to enable those conversations through funding for a feasibility study, then we're anxious to learn what they learn."

Phil Smith, a space industry analyst with BryceTech, said inland launch pads are feasible. Kazakhstan and China support inland rocket launches.

But safety will be a top concern. Smith said there was an incident in China in 1996 where a wayward rocket hit a town. "Casualties were believed to have been high," Smith wrote in an email, "but not surprisingly China has officially said the number of killed and injured was low."

The regulatory burden for inland rocket launches will be higher in the U.S., he said, and air traffic is very dense. But Smith noted that operational rockets have become increasingly reliable.

"Our nation's not going to put American communities at risk for launch operations," Griffin said. "That's one of the things I'm hopeful that these studies will help us understand. Is it even possible in Texas?"

Houston recipients

Ten of the Space Commission's grants were awarded to organizations in the Houston area.

Starlab Space was offered $15 million to create labs for testing its commercial space station components.

Rice University was awarded $14.2 million to create a center for space technologies within the Rice Space Institute. This center would provide workforce training, space-focused education and research opportunities, with the latter including how to use resources found on the moon to support human exploration.

Intuitive Machines and Aegis Aerospace were each awarded $10 million. Intuitive Machines is using the money to develop an Earth reentry vehicle, where its partners are working on semiconductor and biotech manufacturing that could fly on the vehicle. Aegis Aerospace is similarly creating an in-space manufacturing platform for advanced materials that include semiconductors.

As of December, Griffin did not know when the Space Commission would begin accepting its next round of applications. But she said receiving $300 million from Texas lawmakers should send a clear message.

"Texas is open for business and wants to support the growth of the space economy," Griffin said.

San Antonio Express-News FEB 22 2026

San Antonio students face suspensions, extracurricular sanctions over anti-ICE protests

By Scott Huddleston

East Central Independent School District suspended dozens of high school students for walking out of class last week to participate in demonstrations against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations.

Some students who participated in a Feb. 13 walkout at East Central High School have been temporarily barred from participating in extracurricular activities or given other disciplinary actions, East Central ISD confirmed. District spokesman Brandon Oliver did not confirm details of student suspensions.

"Approximately 30 students received suspensions as disciplinary consequences, and no students were expelled. Consequences were determined on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the Student Code of Conduct and established campus procedures," Oliver said in a statement.

Claire Lewis, executive director of San Antonio Students for Peace, said her group has tracked more than 50 school walkouts across the city in the past month but hasn't seen a district go to the lengths of East Central in disciplining participants.

One East Central student told her the protesters, mostly juniors and seniors, were suspended for three days from campus and given a10-day in-school suspension during which they can't attend classes and must sit quietly, doing their school work.

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Cont. from "San Antonio…"

"They also told the senior high school students that they could not go to prom or walk the stage for graduation," said Lewis, a college sophomore whose group formed two years ago to advocate on behalf of high school and college students.

"When we heard about East Central, I was very shocked to hear about their response," Lewis said.

The district also was unusual in sending a school bus to pick up the protesting students and return them to school. The students, carrying protest signs, walked more than a mile from campus. None of them boarded the bus back to school, Lewis said.

Depending on their attendance record, a student is subject to prosecution under Texas law if they are absent for 10 or more days within a six-month period or three or more days within a four-week period, according to the district's website.

Hundreds of students at schools across the country, including Oklahoma and Virginia, have reportedly been suspended or handed detentions following anti-ICE protests. The Texas Education Agency recently threatened districts and individual educators that encourage or help facilitate students protests with consequences — including financial penalties or revocation of teaching certifications.

Consequences

Students from at least a dozen schools in San Antonio participated in largely peaceful walkout demonstrations on Jan. 30. Those who participated received an unexcused absence.

Several students at North East ISD also faced disciplinary consequences.

"Our high schools had an above average number of unexcused absences occur during the identified student demonstrations, ranging from 100 to 150 students per high school," district spokeswoman Aubrey Chancellor said in a statement.

A handful of NEISD students received in-school and out-of-schools suspensions, she said.

The recent school walkouts have coincided with nationwide political opposition to the Trump administration's roundups and deportations of immigrants. In separate incidents in January, federal agents shot and killed two U.S. citizens who were documenting ICE operations in Minneapolis.

Jaime Aquino, San Antonio ISD superintendent, said some students with multiple absences may have faced disciplinary action as a result of the protest — not because of the walkouts, but as part of state laws and district and campus policy related to attendance. Attendance policy varies by campus, and the district has not actively tracked the number of students disciplined as a result of the protests.

Letter to families

In a letter to families a day before last month's walkout, Aquino said the district was aware of the planned demonstrations and encouraged parents to talk to their children about "your feelings and the potential consequences.

"We respect our students right for freedom of expression. If we want to do this on campus, we can find them a way to do this," Aquino said Friday.

SAISD officials "take truancy seriously," district spokeswoman Laura Short said.

"To address truancy, campuses may use time-owed strategies such as detention or Saturday school, in-school suspensions, or loss of participation in extracurricular activities," Short said in a statement.

Northside ISD, the largest San Antonio district with about 97,000 students, also gave demonstrating students who left campus an unexcused absence, but the district is not tracking figures on the number disciplined. Students were warned that aside from being marked absent, "disciplinary action could be issued" for other infractions during a walk out such as destruction of property or impeding traffic, Northside spokesman Barry Perez said.

North East ISD is one of four Texas school districts under investigation for allegedly facilitating student protests, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton announced Monday. Dallas ISD and Manor ISD near Austin also are being investigated "for facilitating and failing to keep students safe and accountable during various student protests against lawful immigration enforcement." Paxton launched an investigation into Austin ISD over student protests.

School district officials and teacher union officials have said districts and educators take no part in organizing or facilitating the protests, but cannot keep students on campus if they choose to leave.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

Hill Country city setting aside land for a Texas history center

By Ricardo Delgado

After evicting a nonprofit from city-owned land, Fredericksburg officials have decided to allow a state agency to develop a Texas history museum on the site.

The Fredericksburg City Council this week approved the transfer of the 12-acre property to the Texas Historical Commission for the development of an "interactive heritage center" aimed at teaching children about history.

The city had previously set aside the property to be used for a museum complex dedicated to the history of the Texas Rangers law enforcement division.

However, city officials terminated their economic agreement with the Former Texas Rangers Foundation and evicted the nonprofit from the property, saying it failed to meet the terms of the agreement.

The proposed Texas Historical Commission project on the site would be an extension of the neighboring Fort Martin Scott, which is considered the first Army outpost in Texas, according to the city. The state agency took over operations of the fort in May 2024.

In a presentation led by Chris Elliot, the Texas Historical Commission's chief historic sites officer, the agency said the project could be called "Texas Untamed" and "A Frontier Experience at Fort Martin Scott."

Elliot said the new facility would be an indoor-outdoor center with interactive exhibits, including animals like longhorns and camels "trained to interact with the students."

The site could also include a year-round greenhouse, along with exhibits highlighting the history of indigenous peoples and the Texas Rangers. Gillespie County residents will get free admission to the center.

The agreement with the city calls for the agency to present plans for the center within three years, start construction within seven years and achieve "substantial completion" within 10 years.

The contract also requires semi-annual reports to the city council.

'A great opportunity'

Violation of the agreement could force the commission to return the land to Fredericksburg.

Fredericksburg City Council Member Emily Kirchner spoke in favor of the project, saying residents often lament the lack of activities for children in town.

"I think this is a great opportunity; we can utilize the land of the people and give something to them," she said.

Fredericksburg had agreed in 2011 to lease the property to the Former Texas Rangers Foundation for $1 a year. In exchange, the nonprofit was required to build and open a 28,500-square-foot museum celebrating the history of the Texas Rangers, which was projected to bring in 40,000 visitors per year, according to city documents. The project was called the Texas Ranger Heritage Center.

The foundation is the fundraising arm of the Former Texas Rangers Association, a nonprofit aiming to preserve and promote the history of the Texas Rangers law enforcement division. Neither nonprofit is officially affiliated with the Texas Department of Public Safety.

In 2018, the city granted the foundation a seven-year extension to give it more time to finish the project.

The foundation built a 50-foot-tall bell tower, a Ranger ring of honor, an 8,000-square-foot outdoor pavilion and an amphitheater on the site, but never started work on the museum.

Foundation evicted

The city evicted the foundation and sued it in February 2025, alleging it breached the terms of an agreement by failing to hand over records of how it used public funds and "(obstructed) the city's right to oversight and accountability," according to the lawsuit. Fredericksburg Mayor Jeryl Hoover previously said it had become apparent that the foundation

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Cont. from "Hill Country…"

wasn't holding up its end of the agreement.

In a countersuit, the foundation alleged the city wrongfully terminated the lease and economic development agreement, and claims the city is unjustly profiting from nearly $10 million in improvements the foundation made to the property.

The lawsuit is ongoing, according to Gillespie County court records.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

San Antonio ISD considers more in-district charters to boost enrollment, academic outcomes

By Scott Huddleston

San Antonio's oldest and third-largest school district may soon convert more neighborhood schools into in-district charter campuses in an effort to improve academic ratings and enrollment.

Schools operating under district-charter partnerships can operate with flexibility like open-enrollment charter schools, while still being within the boundaries of a traditional public school district. The San Antonio Independent School District was among the first districts in South Texas to embrace the model.

SAISD now leads the state with 26 in-district charter schools, with most operating through partnerships created under Senate Bill 1882. Passed in 2017, the Texas law incentivizes districts to partner with charter operators by giving campuses that repeatedly score failing grades from the state more time to show academic improvements before facing consequences. The law also provides additional funding for in-district charters.

SAISD's in-district charters include Rodriguez Montessori Elementary School, Advanced Learning Academy and CAST Tech High School.

Trustees voted Tuesday to initiate talks with three potential charter partners, including Colorado-based Third Future Schools, which was founded by Mike Miles, the controversial state-appointed superintendent of Houston ISD. SAISD officials did not name which campuses the district would consider handing over to Third Future if the partnership is approved.

Texas school districts must tell the Texas Education Agency about potential new in-district charter partners by March 31. Trustees may consider potential contracts at a March 23 meeting. Depending on how the state grades campuses on its letter grade scale in 2026, SAISD's new charter operators could be tasked with quickly improving student performance at struggling schools.

Third Future Schools

Nineteen SAISD schools scored a failing grade in the 2024-25 state accountability ratings, which rely heavily on student scores on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR exams. Third Future Schools could operate an unspecified number of elementary or middle schools that the TEA has labeled "improvement required" due to poor academic performance.

Alejandra Lopez, president of the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, said Tuesday that the SAISD employee union has "particular concerns" about Third Future "and the way it has conducted itself with other districts it has partnered with." Beaumont ISD contracted with the nonprofit in 2023 to operate three schools, but Third Future "pulled out" of the three-year contract a year early after BISD declined to pay an additional $3 million, she said.

"This kind of behavior does not inspire confidence that Third Future Schools would be a reliable partner for our district," Lopez said, adding she'll continue raising concerns as negotiations evolve.

Zach Craddock, superintendent of Third Future Schools, told SAISD trustees he was directed by his board in 2025 to renegotiate the Beaumont ISD contract, which had been drawn up by Miles, his predecessor. Craddock defended the move, saying, "we were educating 10% of the Beaumont population, yet they were keeping 25% of our revenue.

"Bottom line is I couldn't even make payroll with the revenue they were giving me," Craddock said.

Third Future operates 12 campuses in Colorado, Texas and Louisiana, including six 1882 partnerships. It has handed control of four schools back to their districts, and specializes in "turnaround work" but is not authorized for stand-alone charters, Craddock said. Miles "took the TFS instructional model and applied it full scale" in Houston, he said.

In Houston ISD, Miles implemented a model he called the "New Education System," at dozens of district campuses. The schools differ from other district campuses in offering a standardized curriculum, longer school days, timed lessons and higher pay for educators. Proponents say the model has helped the district achieve significant gains in math and reading.

Craddock was hopeful the charter network could improve accountability ratings in SAISD and stabilize its declining enrollment.

The San Antonio district's student population has declined by 30%, from 61,112 students in 1998 to 42,500 currently, with nearly 2,000 fewer students forecast to attend in the 2026-27 school year. While declining birth rates and lack of affordable housing have been cited as factors, an Express-News analysis found the number of independent charter schools in the district have expanded quickly, from eight in 2015 to 26 in 2025.

"We would not recruit SAISD students. I'm going to go after your charter schools," he told trustees, specifically mentioning KIPP and IDEA Public Schools, which both operate as stand-alone charter networks with campuses across the city.

Trustees voted 5-2 to negotiate with Third Future. Board members Jacob Ramos and Stephanie Torres voted in opposition. Ramos said he had concerns about SAISD students leaving traditional schools for in-district charters, and he objected to the appearance of "back door deals" without specific schools being named.

Other board members countered that the schools to be run by Third Future will be named before any contract is approved. Superintendent Jaime Aquino said any approved 1882 partners "would have to meet enrollment targets every year."

After visiting Mendez Middle School, a campus Third Future runs in Austin, board vice president Christina Martinez said she feels the operator has "the best track record out of all the three partners that have come to us this evening" and is the only "approved TEA turnaround partner."

"There is data to show that they are moving the needle," Martinez said.

Potential partners

SAISD trustees also will consider partnering with the Latino Educational Equity Partnership, or LEEP, to operate Graebner Elementary School near Burbank High School. The University of Texas at San Antonio, which runs four SAISD schools under 1882 alliances, is relinquishing its affiliation with Graebner this summer after the school received its third straight F rating from the state.

Ramos, who was the lone trustee to vote against partnering with LEEP, raised concerns about the nonprofit, which operates a school in Brooklyn, New York, but lacks experience in Texas. But Aquino said Graebner, one of the largest elementary campuses in the district with more than 600 students, would lose some $500,000 in 1882 state funding if a new partner isn't hired.

"They're one of our priority schools that are trending in the right direction," with potential to be rated a C or D campus this year, Aquino said.

"Taking that funding away will be challenging for the district," he added.

The board unanimously supported letting staff initiate talks with Texas A&M University-San Antonio to operate Young Men's Leadership Academy on the East Side, which is much smaller with about 200 students. The campus scored a B in 2025. TAMUSA's Institute for School and Community Partnerships runs two 1882 campuses in Edgewood ISD and will operate one next school year in Harlandale ISD.

Derrick Brown, principal at YMLA, said the school's resources are "stretched thin." It has a partnership with McMurry University in Abilene for online learning but would benefit from staff training and other support provided by an institution with a local presence, he said.

"We know we can do greater work with a partner right here in town," Brown said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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San Antonio
Express-News FEB 22 2026

Bexar County gets early victory in fight with Ken Paxton over immigrant legal defense

By Saul Pink

A judge ruled on Friday that Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton can't represent the state in his lawsuit against Bexar County for using tax dollars to pay for legal defense for immigrants, handing the county a victory that threatens to shutdown the lawsuit.

The ruling comes just over two weeks after Paxton sued the county to stop it from funding a $1 million program that assists immigrants by hiring legal defense to fight their deportation cases.

District Court Judge Mary Lou Alvarez delivered a major blow to Paxton's case before even getting to his main claim that the county had violated the Texas Constitution's "gift clause," which bans governments from giving public money to private entities if it's not clearly in the public interest.

Paxton had asked the court to temporarily, and ultimately permanently, block the county from paying for the program.

The county's lawyers argued that Paxton didn't have the authority to bring the case in state district court. They cited a clause in the Texas Constitution that limits the attorney general's power to litigate on the state's behalf.

"He doesn't have the authority to just sue counties whenever he disagrees with their discretionary funding decisions," said Lisa Cubriel, the assistant district attorney who represented the county.

Alvarez scheduled a hearing for Feb. 27 where the attorney general can send someone outside of his office to represent the state in the lawsuit. But the county's current contract with American Gateways — the nonprofit that administers the program — ends on Feb. 28. That means that one day after the hearing, there would be no more money flowing into the immigrant defense program that Paxton could try to stop.

County commissioners started work on a plan to pay for immigrant legal defense in July 2022, and they voted 4-1 to allocate $1 million to it in May 2024. The five-member Commissioners Court devoted $500,000 each to two nonprofits to administer the program.

One of the organizations, Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, or RAICES, ended up deciding not to participate. So, in December, commissioners approved an additional $566,000 contract with the other nonprofit, American Gateways.

Paxton sued Bexar County on Feb. 4. He had filed a nearly identical lawsuit against Harris County for its immigration assistance program in November. In December, a judge denied Paxton's request to temporarily halt the program in Harris County.

"Leftists in Bexar County have no authority to use taxpayer dollars to fund their radical, criminal-loving agenda," Paxton said in a statement.

The Bexar County District Attorney's office dismissed Paxton's claims in a 38-page response filed Thursday. It painted the lawsuit as a politically motivated maneuver that is "legally meritless and factually unsupported."

"Only now, as early voting is underway in the Bexar County primary elections, as the agreement approaches its scheduled expiration, does the State claim 'emergency' relief is warranted and that payments under the program should be immediately halted," it read.

But none of those arguments played out in court on Friday. Instead, Bexar County attorneys turned to a procedural move that forced Paxton's lawyers to prove they had the constitutional right to be in the courtroom at all. The judge ruled that they did not.

"Why are you here? Why this court?" Alvarez asked Anthony Dolcefino, the assistant attorney general representing the state.

Dolcefino said Paxton's office routinely brings similar cases to state district courts, citing the lawsuit against Harris County.

The lawsuit named County Judge Peter Sakai, the four county commissioners and Jim Bethke, the director of the county's Managed Assigned Counsel office, which administers the immigrant legal defense program.

"I believe that the constitution has won and that we will move forward," Sakai said after the ruling. "And I believe that this issue, in legal terms, will be moot in a few days."

Paxton's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000073

OUT OF STATE

New York
Times FEB 21 2026

A Fatal ICE Shooting Occurred in Texas Months Before Renee Good's Killing

By Pooja Salhotra and Edgar Sandoval

Months before Renee Good's killing at the hands of an immigration agent in Minneapolis set off nationwide protests, a federal officer shot and killed another American citizen in his car in South Texas, according to internal reports made public this week.

The victim, Ruben Ray Martinez, 23, was shot multiple times in South Padre Island by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer after he did not follow commands to exit his vehicle, according to internal ICE documents reviewed by The New York Times. ICE's connection to the shooting was first reported by Newsweek this week.

The episode, which occurred around 12:40 a.m. on March 15, 2025, was reported by local media at the time as a shooting carried out by a law enforcement officer. It was not clear which agency was involved until the internal incident reports were made public this week.

The documents did not name the officers involved in the encounter, but the description of the victim matched that of Mr. Martinez. Charles Stam, a lawyer for the Martinez family, confirmed that his client was the victim mentioned in the ICE report.

Mr. Martinez's mother, Rachel Reyes, described her son as a hard-working young man who did not have a history of confronting law enforcement officials. In a phone interview, she said that her son was celebrating his birthday in South Padre Island with a friend he had known since elementary school when he was killed, five days after he turned 23. Ms. Reyes said her son worked at an Amazon warehouse in San Antonio.

"He was a good kid. He doesn't have a criminal history," she said, adding: "He never got in trouble. He was never violent."

The ICE documents state that Homeland Security Investigation agents from Harlingen, Texas, were helping the South Padre Island Police Department control traffic near a car accident when a blue Ford approached the area.

Mr. Martinez initially did not follow officers' instructions but eventually slowed to a stop after receiving verbal commands. Agents surrounded the vehicle and told him to get out of the car before Mr. Martinez accelerated and hit a federal agent who landed on the roof of the car, according to the documents. Another agent then fired multiple times through the driver's side window. Mr. Martinez was transported to a hospital in Brownsville and later died.

When asked about Mr. Martinez's killing, the Department of Homeland Security described the shooting as an act of self-defense, saying the agent had "fired defensive shots to protect himself, his fellow agents, and the general public" after the driver "ran over" a Homeland Security Investigation special agent.

The agent who was hit by Mr. Martinez's vehicle was released from the hospital after he was treated for a knee injury, according to the incident report.

In the more recent killings in Minneapolis of Ms. Good and Alex Pretti, another U.S. citizen who was also killed by an immigration agent, official accounts were later challenged by videos recorded by bystanders. No footage of Mr. Martinez's killing has surfaced.

In a statement, Mr. Stam and Alex Stamm, another lawyer for the family, said that eyewitness accounts were not consistent with the government's report and called for accountability.

"It is critical that there is a full and fair investigation into why H.S.I. was present at the scene of a traffic collision and why a federal officer shot and killed a U.S. citizen as he was trying to comply with instructions from the local law enforcement officers directing traffic," they said.

Ms. Reyes also said she disagreed with the government's description of her son.

"What they're saying is different from what they told the family, so that's adding insult to injury," she said, without elaborating. "They are making it sound different. I don't appreciate their language."

Mr. Martinez is at least the third U.S. citizen who was shot and killed by federal immigration officers since the start of President Trump's second term. His presidency has been marked by a significant push to maximize deportations.

Ms. Good, a Minneapolis mother, was killed in her car by masked federal agents on Jan. 7, and Mr. Pretti, an intensive care nurse, was killed on a South Minneapolis street on Jan. 24 during a surge of immigration agents in the Twin Cities. Bystander videos of both killings circulated quickly and helped fuel protests across the country.

Since September, federal agents have fired at vehicles at least 10 times in six different cities. Two of the shootings were fatal.

An immigration enforcement agent is supposed to use deadly force only if the officer "has a reasonable belief that the subject of such force poses an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury," according to the Homeland Security Department's policy. The policy also states that officers should avoid placing themselves in positions in which they have no other option but to use deadly force.

The shooting of Mr. Martinez is under investigation by the Texas Rangers, a state agency that reviews shootings involving law enforcement officers and oversees border security for the Texas Department of Public Safety. Sheridan Nolen, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Safety, said in an email on Friday that the investigation was ongoing, but declined to provide any additional information.

In a statement, a spokeswoman for the city of South Padre Island directed questions about the shooting to the Texas Rangers. The statement confirmed that an officer involved shooting "by an outside agency" took place on March 15 while officers were responding to a traffic accident.

One incident report in the ICE documents indicated that the driver had appeared intoxicated or impaired. It also said that the passenger, whose identity is unknown, also appeared intoxicated or impaired and was arrested by the South Padre Island police. The police did not respond to requests for comment.

According to Ms. Reyes, the information in the ICE documents is different from what the family was initially told, though she declined to provide further details.

"Since Ruben's death a year ago, all we have wanted is justice for him, and we have struggled with the silence surrounding his killing," Ms. Reyes said in a statement sent by her lawyers. "Now, the country is in crisis and, terribly, heartbreakingly, other families are enduring what we have."

Emma Schartz and Alexandra Berzon contributed reporting. Georgia Gee contributed research.

Pooja Salhotra covers breaking news across the United States.

Edgar Sandoval covers Texas for The Times, with a focus on the Latino community and the border with Mexico. He is based in San Antonio.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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OUT OF STATE

New York
Times FEB 22 2026

South Texas Democrats Will Steer Party's Direction, Left or Center

By Edgar Sandoval

Most people who trickled into a historical movie theater in the border city of McAllen, Texas, this week had heard of Bobby Pulido, the Latin Grammy Award-winning Tejano singer running for Congress in the oddly shaped district jutting from the border to the outskirts of San Antonio, some 250 miles straight north.

But on this day, the candidate they had come to hear was the one breathing fire about dismantling Immigration and Customs Enforcement, legalizing abortion and challenging the insular Democratic Party in the Rio Grande Valley. That wasn't Mr. Pulido, the favorite of the party. It was Ada Cuellar, an emergency room doctor running considerably to his left.

Alex Cantu, 42, said Mr. Pulido's run was "a fame grab" by "basically what I would refer to as an establishment politician." Mr. Cantu had organized a vigil after federal agents killed Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, and he said he wanted real change.

The fight for the Democratic nomination to challenge Representative Monica De La Cruz, the Republican incumbent in Texas' 15th District, gets to the struggle for the soul of the party in 2026. Democratic primary voters in Texas began voting Tuesday ahead of the March 3 primary, and their choice, like many Democrats around the country, is whether they want to push their party to the left in a year when the wind is at Democrats' back, or elevate centrists who traditionalists say can win swing districts like the 15th in November.

The Democratic primary for the seat of Texas' senior senator, John Cornyn, holds a similar dynamic, pitting Representative Jasmine Crockett, a firebrand intent on mobilizing the Democratic base, against State Representative James Talarico, who is appealing to the center and disaffected Republicans.

But far from the glare of that spotlight are Democratic voters in El Valle, as the Rio Grande Valley is known. And there, another question looms: Where will the Hispanic voters who flocked to President Trump in 2024 go in 2026, amid the Trump administration's aggressive immigration crackdown, and which type of candidate do they prefer?

Cine El Rey is known as the Mexican Apollo because its advocacy of Mexican cinema parallels the Apollo Theater's advocacy of Black artists in Harlem, and inside, Dr. Cuellar, who recently added a law degree to her medical résumé, was doing some advocacy of her own. She promised to push for the dismantling of ICE and had harsh words for Democratic Party stalwarts who have made their preference for Mr. Pulido clear.

"I'm told I'm a progressive," Dr. Cuellar said in an interview.

Mr. Pulido, with his endorsements, name recognition and a ground game that has touched all 11 counties in the district, appears to be the favorite, but not necessarily with the voters most frustrated with Mr. Trump's return to power, like Mia Diaz-Aleman.

"We need someone who is a fighter," Ms. Diaz-Aleman, 42, of McAllen, said of Dr. Cuellar, adding, "We've done the central view before, and that has gotten us nowhere."

Over the summer, the Republican-controlled state legislature redrew the 15th District to favor their candidate, but if Latino voters are shifting, Democrats believe the district is still in play — with the right candidate.

Dr. Cuellar, who has poured a lot of her own money into her campaign, said she supports codifying Roe v. Wade, expanding access to health care to all and pushing for federal immigration authorities to confine enforcement actions to criminals. She also has the endorsement of Ms. Crockett.

She describes herself as a "mama bear" and a "fighter," a single mother who decided to run after years of frustration with the local political system and its "compadrismo," or cronyism, where only those with political connections are supported.

"People want somebody outside of the establishment," she said.

Mr. Pulido is less categorical and more circumspect. He wants a secure border but opposes agents going after otherwise law-abiding immigrants. He wants to expand health care, but especially to those in poor or rural communities, where people often have to drive long distances to find a hospital. He wants to do away with some tariffs, the ones that hurt agriculture.

The race has also turned personal, in large part thanks to ads and social media posts for Dr. Cuellar and social media posts that attack Mr. Pulido for his views on abortion and ties to Democratic Party leaders.

"People are just waking up right now," Dr. Cuellar said. "I'm the one who is pro-choice and he wants to leave it to Texas politicians."

In an interview this week in his native Edinburg, Texas, Mr. Pulido said that while he personally opposes abortion, he also opposes his state's near-total ban on abortion, without exceptions for rape and incest. Pushed again, he went much further, saying women should be able to make their own medical decisions.

"It's not my place to tell a woman what she can do with her body," he said. "Policy is different than my personal beliefs."

He said he also has his eyes on the general election. He has decided not to run negative ads against his opponent and said he'll continue to rely on events that attract far larger crowds than the two dozen or so that came to Cine El Rey to see Dr. Cuellar.

Democratic leaders in the area have said that they will not endorse anyone in the race until after the primary, but some expressed confidence that Mr. Pulido's more socially conservative stances could bring back voters from the Republican camp. Mr. Pulido, a father of four and a generational Texas Latino with two Latin Grammy Awards, said people see him as a rugged cowboy-hat-wearing Spanish-language performer with rural sensibilities.

Outside an early polling site in Edinburg, Ernesto Rosales, 48, a gun owner and longtime Democrat, said he agreed.

"When you decide to run normally, people don't know who you are, right? And you have to spend a lot of time and a lot of money and a lot of effort to build that name recognition," Mr. Rosales said. "Bobby didn't need to do that. He's a name brand here and with the Latino community."

"To me he resonates, because he's a middle of the ground kind of guy," he said. "He speaks to me."

Edgar Sandoval covers Texas for The Times, with a focus on the Latino community and the border with Mexico. He is based in San Antonio.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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OUT OF STATE

Wall Street
Journal FEB 23 2026

The 36-Year-Old Bible Scholar Trying to Flip a Texas Senate Seat Blue

BY ELIZABETH FINDELL AND SABRINA RODRIGUEZ

AUSTIN, Texas—Midway through a campaign rally at a quinceañera venue, Democratic Senate hopeful James Talarico brought up, as he often does, teachings from his Baptist preacher grandfather.

"Jesus could have told us to love our immediate family members or our close friends," Talarico said. "But he told us to love our neighbors. That's an inherently public thing."

Talarico, a 36-year-old state representative now in seminary, is stirring fascination as he tests whether progressivism wrapped in a faith based message can excite Democrats and draw moderates and disaffected Republicans. At stake is whether Democrats achieve their hopes of winning a major seat in Texas after more than 30 years.

The March 3 primary is also a test case for whether Democratic voters in the nation's second-largest state embrace the outspoken style that has lifted winning candidates elsewhere or opt for a gentler approach that aims for the center, in midterm races that will decide which party controls Congress.

Talarico's main opponent, U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett, has established a national brand with her willingness to spar with President Trump and Republicans at a time when polls show the Democratic base is eager for politicians to mix it up with the ad--ministration. When Crockett entered the race on the last day for candidate filing in December, political strategists expected her name recognition and ability to energize Democratic voters to help her eclipse Talarico. But since then, they have been surprised by Talarico's momentum.

Talarico has outraised Crockett and the Republican Senate primary candidates, bringing in more than $7.5 million in the first six weeks of 2026 compared with Crockett's $2 million. Since September, Talarico has raised more than $20 million. He got a boost this week when talk show host Stephen Colbert released an interview with him on YouTube. Colbert said CBS had blocked the interview from being aired on the show out of concern over a Federal Communications Commission rule giving equal time to political candidates.

Although Crockett is ahead in polls, the closer-than-expected race is increasingly being viewed as a toss-up.

Whoever prevails will face the winner of a heated Republican primary in which incumbent Sen. John Cornyn is facing challenges from state Attorney General Ken Paxton and U.S. Rep. Wesley Hunt. The race is widely expected to head to a runoff in May.

Talarico has presented himself as a fresh-faced foil to firebrand politicians. He often refers to his time as a middle school English teacher on the west side of San Antonio, a predominantly Hispanic and working-class part of the city.

He began to gain national name recognition, particularly on social media, as a result of viral moments captured from his time in the Texas Legislature. One involved Talarico citing Bible passages to battle against religion in schools, and Texas Democrat James Talarico, seen at a December rally in San Antonio, has presented himself as a fresh-faced foil to firebrand politicians. He has outraised rivals in a close race.

in another he pointedly questioned Republicans about their embrace of an unsubstantiated rumor that schools were installing litter boxes for children. In July, Talarico sat for an interview with right leaning podcaster Joe Rogan, who told him he should run for president.

Talarico can be read as a study in contradictions for how he delivers left-wing orthodoxy in centrist packaging and fights Christian nationalism with Scripture. He is quick to remind his listeners that religious Democrats weren't unusual in past generations.

"You had Jimmy Carter and Dr. [Martin Luther] King and Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez," Talarico said in an interview. "It's just over the last 50 years you've seen that fall away and you've seen my party cede religion almost entirely to the far-right. That's a travesty."

He talks about religion, he said, so his supporters know what gets him out of bed in the morning: His fight when it comes to policy is for a separation of church and state.

Several Democratic strategists said they view the race as less about traditional ideological divides—progressive versus moderate—and more about who voters perceive to be the biggest changemaker.

"Talarico can credibly say he is turning the page on the politics of anger and vitriol that is coming from Donald Trump and Ken Paxton," said Kristian Ramos, a Democratic strategist based in Washington, D.C. "And Jasmine Crockett can speak to change from a much different place—a place of much more urgency and passion and turning the page on a lot of what's coming out of this administration."

"The question is going to be who voters think will actually deliver change for them," Ramos added.

Some Democratic and Republican strategists view Talarico as Democrats' best shot to win the general election. Mike Madrid, a Republican strategist and co-founder of the anti-Trump Lincoln Project, said Talarico shows a different way to be a fighter in today's political environment.

"His message is it's better to be a fighter contrasting good and bad and right and wrong" than "being a better cheater than the cheaters," said Madrid, who added that the appetite is growing for that message as Americans are "fighting ourselves to exhaustion."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000076

From: DPS Government Relations
Subject: 0224 Legislative Clips
Date: Tuesday, February 24, 2026 7:29:25 AM
Attachments: image001.jpg
0224.pdf

Good morning,

Attached are February 24, 2026, Legislative Clips.

Thank you,

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Tuesday February 24 2026 26-035

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Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

Unhappy with Democrats' performance, a wave of union members is running for office in Texas

By Benjamin Wermund

Newly elected state Sen. Taylor Rehmet flipped a heavily Republican Fort Worth district with a campaign that stressed his working-class roots.

The Democrat's yard signs described him as a machinist, veteran and Texan — in that order. His campaign stressed that the signs were union-printed.

Rehmet is part of a wave of labor leaders and union members running for public office this year, challenging state Democrats they say have lost touch with working Texans.

"They have done so poorly by our standards that we have members sitting on the couch literally going hungry," said Marcos Vélez, a steelworkers union leader running for lieutenant governor. "We're fighting for our lives. We have lost so much when it comes to working people in this country. We really feel like if we don't do something drastic, there won't be anything left."

Vélez, who is up against state Rep. Vikki Goodwin of Austin in the March 3 Democratic primary, is one of at least 16 union members running campaigns this cycle, according to the Texas AFL-CIO, the state's largest labor group.

The AFL-CIO says it is the largest slate of labor candidates in recent memory and comes as union membership in Texas has reached its highest level in 25 years. New figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that Texas now has the fourth-most union members in the United States: 673,000, behind California, New York and Illinois. The growth came as polling shows unions have record-high favorability nationally as workers seek greater control in a time of economic instability.

The candidates argue that Democrats could gain ground in the GOP-dominated state by keeping a laser focus on pocketbook issues, such as cost of living and wages. The labor-backed candidates also come with a built-in boost from unions' aggressive get-out-the-vote efforts.

"We're tired. For I don't even know how many election cycles now, we've been ignored by the Democratic Party," said Kyle Rable, a Democrat running for Congress in a rural West Texas district long held by Republicans. "They keep putting career politicians in place instead of real people, then we have to teach these politicians what it means to be labor. We kind of all decided instead of waiting for a savior, the working class is just going to save itself."

Labor unions have long been aligned with the Democratic Party in Texas, especially as Republicans in control of the state have pushed right-to-work laws and other policies meant to weaken labor. But the relationship has frayed in recent years.

In Houston, the Gulf Coast chapter of the AFL-CIO has had a messy falling-out with state Rep. Harold Dutton, a Democrat the union long supported. The group has backed his Democratic primary challengers for the last couple of cycles, arguing that the 81-year-old lawmaker is not receptive to the group's concerns, especially over the state's takeover of Houston schools, which was made possible by legislation Dutton authored a decade ago.

"He seems to think he is entitled to our support whether or not he's with us on the issues working people care about," said Hany Khalil, the union's executive director.

Some Texas labor groups have started to look beyond the Democratic Party. Gov. Greg Abbott — a Republican who has long had a rocky relationship with unions — scored the backing of the Teamsters and a slew of other Houston-area labor groups this month.

"The Teamsters do not care if you have a D, an R or an I next to your name," Brent Taylor, vice president of the union's southern region, which includes Texas, said during an event with Abbott at the time. "We're interested in one thing: Are you ready to help us tackle big issues to improve the lives of working families."

It is part of a broader trend that has seen labor groups such as the Teamsters seek to capitalize on President Donald Trump's overtures to working-class voters.

"Trump has opened a door at least discursively around a kind of right-wing, working-class nationalism that speaks to segments of the labor movement, particularly in the building trades," said Kristoffer Smemo, a historian of labor and politics at the University of California, Los Angeles.

At the same time, he said, rank-and-file members are increasingly jumping into primary races to put pressure on Democrats they see as complacent.

"There's a sense that there are possibilities that can come from this bottom-up door knocking, not taking corporate money, not relying on the DNC to parachute in your consultants and funding and things like that," Smemo said. "It sounds like a renewed sense that this is something that has to happen at the grassroots level — that politics in general has to happen at the grassroots level."

National polling of workers by the AFL-CIO found trust in both parties is equally low. Just 36% said they trust the Democratic Party, while 35% trust Republicans, according to the August survey. But 55% said they trust labor unions.

"It's supposed to be about who is going to take care of you," said Jose Loya, a United Steelworkers representative running for land commissioner. "We've gotten to the point where it's been party over everything else, and I don't think that's right. We do have to look at who's going to fight for us."

Loya said he decided to run after fellow union members urged him to.

"It came from the floor. Our members started asking, 'Why don't you run for office?'" he said. "We're seeing that more and more every day where organized labor is asking for real people to represent them — not only at the bargaining table, but in the government."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000078

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

Rep. Gonzales' pursuit of staffer is revealed in sexual text messages

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

In the spring of 2024, U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales was in the midst of a bruising primary campaign, fighting to hang on to his congressional seat. But politics was not on his mind when he began trading text messages with a staff member at 12:15 a.m. on May 9.

"Send me a sexy pic," he texted Regina Ann Santos-Aviles, then director of his regional district office in Uvalde, according to messages obtained by Hearst Newspapers.

Santos-Aviles replied that she'd had a rough week and "you don't really want a hot picture of me."

"Yes I do," Gonzales texted, adding, "Hurry."

"No, I just don't like taking pictures of myself," Santos-Aviles responded a few minutes later.

Gonzales persisted: "I'm just such a visual person."

The Republican congressman from San Antonio went on to ask Santos-Aviles about her favorite sexual positions and to fantasize about having sex with her. Twice, she told Gonzales he was going "too far." But at his urging, the two made plans to meet up two days later, when he would be campaigning in the Uvalde area.

"Will be lots of fun," Gonzales texted, adding that they should rendezvous at the agreed-on place "at check-in time."

The third-term Republican congressman, a married father of six, pursued a romantic relationship with Santos-Aviles despite U.S. House ethics rules that bar lawmakers from engaging in sexual liaisons with staff members, the message chain shows. Santos-Aviles, 35, killed herself in September by setting herself on fire. She was married and the mother of an 8-year-old boy.

Adrian Aviles, her widower, provided the May 2024 texts to Hearst, which authenticated them.

A separate set of texts from a different source show that on two occasions that same month, Gonzales and Santos-Aviles arranged to spend time together in a vacation cabin in the Hill Country owned by the family of a former Gonzales staff member. The cabin is in Concan, a resort town along the Frio River 25 miles northeast of Uvalde.

Gonzales did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

News reports on the affair between Gonzales and Santos-Aviles have roiled this year's Republican primary in Texas' 23rd Congressional District. Gonzales, 45, faces, among other challengers, Brandon Herrera, a firearms manufacturer and YouTube personality who nearly unseated him in 2024.

In response to the furor, Gonzales has accused Aviles of trying to "blackmail" him. Aviles' lawyer, Robert "Bobby" Barrera of San Antonio, acknowledges that he tried for months without success to negotiate a confidential settlement with the congressman over the affair and Santos-Aviles' death.

Hearst was the first news organization to uncover documentary evidence of a relationship. Hearst on Feb. 16 published an image of a text in which Santos-Aviles told a colleague she'd had an "affair with our boss." The message was from April 2025.

The string of newly obtained texts from 2024 were extracted from Santos-Aviles' smartphone by a digital forensics company.

Barrera said he paid Exhibit A Computer Forensics to retrieve the data in anticipation of using it in civil litigation against Gonzales. The San Antonio-based company employs advanced software to capture the contents of electronic communications, along with phone numbers and timestamps. Its clients include law firms and law enforcement agencies.

Aviles shared with the Express-News 34 texts sent between 12:15 a.m. and 1:09 a.m. on May 9, 2024. He said he had withheld other texts because they were even more graphic and he did not want his son to see them.

Barrera described the unreleased texts "as sexually grotesque."

'This is going too far'

The message chain made available by Aviles begins with Gonzales asking Santos-Aviles for "a sexy pic."

Seven seconds later, he sends a message in which the text field is empty — an indication the transmission was a photo or video.

Santos-Aviles replies at 12:19 a.m.: "I swear my life has been a Telenovela for the past seven days. You don't really want a hot picture of me"

Gonzales says he does. After a break, the exchange resumes. At 12:48, Gonzales texts: "Favorite position"

"Yours first?" Santos-Aviles replies.

"on top pinning your legs," Gonzales writes.

"This is going too far boss," she replies.

Gonzales persists, asking: "What do you like"

He follows up with a description of a sex act.

"never," she responds.

"This is too far Tony," she texts a minute later.

Thirteen minutes later, the conversation shifts from sexual banter to arranging a private meeting.

"Do you want to spend Saturday together," Gonzales asks at 1:07 a.m.

"Yeah we can find us a cute place tomorrow," Santos-Aviles replies.

"Will be lots of fun," Gonzales texts. "I say let's meet there at check in time"

"Deal," she replies.

Aviles and Barrera declined to say whether they had provided or planned to provide the messages to Hererra's campaign or the Office of Congressional Conduct, which enforces congressional ethics rules and which began investigating the affair several months ago.

Aviles asserted that he was not releasing the messages as part of a legal strategy. He said he was acting in response to Gonzales' accusation of blackmail, which he said he interpreted as suggesting that he had fabricated evidence of an affair.

"I'm releasing them now because I don't want to be called a liar and don't want her to be called a liar," Aviles said. "I also want to show proof to everybody the type of person that he is. He's a predator. He took advantage of a very vulnerable woman."

The texts about the vacation cabin in Concan were provided by a former staffer whose family owns the rental property. They indicate that Santos-Aviles arranged for Gonzales to have access to the cabin on May 11, 2024, and again on May 20. Text messages and social media posts place Gonzales in Concan on both dates. At the time, he and Herrera were hustling for votes in a close primary runoff campaign.

The former staffer said Gonzales and Santos-Aviles spent several hours together in the cabin on both dates.

He shared a May 7 text from Santos-Aviles in which she asked: "Hey … can you send me photos of the places in Concan for the boss? He wants to see them."

On the afternoon of May 11, Gonzales sent the staffer a text thanking him for the use of the cabin. "Appreciate today, I'm back on the road," he wrote. "Cleaned up, minus a dirty towel. Everything turned off."

Other texts from Santos-Aviles to the former staffer show her arranging for Gonzales to use the cabin on May 20, 2024, after a fundraiser.

That evening, the staffer texted Gonzales, asking, "Do you need anything over there at the cabin?"

Gonzales replied, "I'm all set. Just wanted to get some rest before getting on the road."

He eked out a victory over Herrera in that year's May 28 runoff, winning by 324 votes out of nearly 30,000 cast.

'Black-sheeped'

Santos-Aviles, a Uvalde native, did not have a college degree, her husband said. She got her start as finance manager for the Uvalde County Fairplex and later served as executive director of the Uvalde County Chamber of Commerce before joining Gonzales' staff in 2021.

Aviles said he discovered the affair on the evening of May 31, 2024, when he returned home from a jujitsu class to find his wife texting with Gonzales. When he confronted her, he said she replied: "You're not going to like what you see."

Two days later, he used his wife's phone to send a group text to Gonzales and seven members of his district staff. He identified himself as "Reginas (sic) soon to be ex husband" and said he had learned from texts and pictures on her phone "that she's been having an affair on me with

Continued on Next Page

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000079

Cont. from "Rep. Gonzales' pursuit…"

your boss Tony Gonzales for some time now."

Aviles and the former Gonzales staffer said Santos-Aviles was treated differently from that point on. She no longer was invited to accompany Gonzales to meetings in the district, and appointments she had arranged for him were canceled, they said. Aviles said the congressman and his staff "black-sheeped" her to try to make her quit.

Santos-Aviles and her husband separated. Aviles and the former staffer recalled that she grew despondent. In August 2025, Uvalde police went to her house on a welfare check after Aviles reported that she appeared suicidal, records show. The responding officer wrote in an incident report that he found no indication that she intended to harm herself.

On the evening of Sept. 13, first responders rushed to Santos-Aviles' home after receiving a call about "an individual who was on fire." She had "doused herself in gasoline" and set herself aflame, according to a fire department report. She was taken to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where she died the next day.

The Bexar County medical examiner ruled the death a suicide by self-immolation. Police said they found no evidence of foul play.

Barrera said he believes Avila's discovery of the affair, combined with what he described as workplace ostracism, "put into place a series of events" that led to Santos-Aviles' emotional decline and suicide.

Barrera said Aviles retained him to explore potential claims under the 1995 Congressional Accountability Act, which brought Congress under the same anti-discrimination and workplace safety laws that apply to other government agencies and private employers. The act allows congressional staffers to pursue claims against House members and senators for harassment, retaliation and other violations of employment law.

Ethics inquiry

Though Santos-Aviles did not file a complaint against Gonzales before her death, Barrera said Aviles could bring a workplace harassment or wrongful death claim against the congressman as his late wife's "legal representative." A 2018 update makes members of Congress personally liable for violations of the accountability act.

Media reports about the affair caused Gonzales to come under scrutiny by a congressional ethics watchdog last fall, the Express-News reported last week.

As part of its inquiry, the Office of Congressional Conduct sent Aviles a letter in November requesting text messages, emails and other communications related to the relationship. The letter cited a statutory deadline of 45 days. Barrera said he did not submit any materials before the deadline.

Depending on what the staff inquiry finds, the agency could refer the matter to the House Ethics Committee, which can recommend disciplinary action against a member by the full House. It is unclear whether the OCC has concluded its investigation. House rules prohibit the agency from making a referral within 60 days preceding an election, but it could do so immediately after the March 3 GOP primary.

Bayliss Wagner contributed to this report.

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 24 2026

'We need it now:' Protesters urge special legislative session on TX data centers

By Eleanor Dearman

Attendees of a Monday protest want Texas to Gov. Greg Abbott to call a special session to address the effects of data centers on the state.

About 40 people — including visitors from the Paluxy Valley and a slate of speakers — rallied outside the Capitol on Monday, asking for the special session as data centers pop up across Texas. In North Texas and across the state, people have sounded the alarm over existing and planned sites, raising concerns over noise, water use and possible environmental impacts.

Attendees stood outside in front of the Austin building, holding signs in opposition of data centers. One read "you can't drink data." Another advocated for the protection of farmland. "Say no to data centers," declared a sign, accompanied by a drawing of a microphone.

Only Texas Gov. Greg Abbott can call the Legislature into special session. The next regularly scheduled legislative session starts on Jan. 12.

"Our star filled skies will be gone," said Brian Crawford, a retired Lockheed Martin employee who shares a fence line with a planned the Comanche Circle data center project. "Our quiet nights of only hearing wildlife will be gone. Our two lane farm-to-market roads will be incredibly dangerous."

Crawford, whose property is in Somerville County, was representing Protect the Paluxy Valley Inc. as a speaker at the event. He said Abbott should take a "sober look" at the impact data centers and power plants on the state.

The governor should convene a special session where lawmakers could issue an immediate "statewide moratorium or rural industrialization" so that the effects of such projects can be analyzed, Crawford said. Legislators should also consider letting counties regulate industrial development to protect citizens, he said.

"My message is that we need a special session, and we need it now," said Joanne Carcamo, a co-founder of the Paluxy Valley group who attended the protest. "We cannot wait. This is an invasion of rural Texas. This is an invasion in Hood County."

Hood County commissioners recently rejected a proposal to put a six-month moratorium on industrial development, which would have given officials time to study the impact of data centers. Residents have raised concerns about the centers encroaching on their rural lifestyles.

Ahead of the vote, Hood county commissioners received a letter from Sen. Paul Bettencourt, a Houston Republican, that said the moratorium would have violated state law. The letter was also addressed to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

The proposal is expected to be reconsidered on Tuesday, following the approval of a moratorium on "green energy" projects in northeast Texas' Van Zandt County.

There are multiple planned projects in the Hood County area. Among them is a 2,600-acre data center complex called Comanche Circle that has gotten pushback from ranchers, landowners and conservationists near Glen Rose.

A $10 billion data center is also planned in southeast Fort Worth, though it hit a speed bump earlier this month when zoning requests for the project were put on pause as the city awaits a report on data centers from city staff.

Senate District 22 Republican candidate Rena Schroeder was among the speakers at the Monday protest. A campaign staff member helped organize the event in her capacity as an individual. The Senate district includes part of Tarrant County. Speakers from Round Rock and Waco area groups also addressed attendees.

"Our way of life in Texas is being torn apart by these data centers," said Gary Oldham with Protect Round Rock. "Whether we're in the suburbs, a small farm, a large working ranch, or even in the middle of Fort Worth or Houston, they're impacting us all."

In a statement, a spokesperson for Abbott didn't address whether Abbott would consider a data center related special session.

"Texas leads the nation in strategically and methodically attracting tech investments that create jobs and drive innovation," spokesperson Andrew Mahaleris said. "Governor Abbott was proud to sign Senate Bill 6 into law to support long-term grid planning, protect ratepayers from transmission costs, and ensure system reliability. Governor Abbott will continue to work with the Legislature to ensure Texas remains the nation's leader in innovation while ensuring sustainable growth."

Continued on Next Page

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "We need it now…"

He noted that governments and groundwater conservation districts have existing tools to regulate water usage, and that the Public Utility Commission has been tasked with studying how much water data centers use and what it's used for.

A spokesperson for Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick didn't immediately return an email seeking comment.

"Data centers have become an issue of national security," Speaker Dustin Burrows said in a written statement. "The Texas House is committed to working to balance private property rights and economic growth while ensuring responsible planning that protects our communities. Given the statewide and long-term impacts of this issue, I look forward to engaging with members throughout the interim and next session."

Dallas
Morning News FEB 24 2026

'People are not happy.' Dallas County's separate primaries bring less privacy for voters

By TRACEY MCMANUS

Voting has always been a private tradition for Michael Ray, and he doesn't care to flaunt his political affiliation to the world.

This year he didn't have a choice.

When he walked Friday into Josey Ranch Lake Library in Carrollton to vote early, Ray, 34, was surprised to be greeted by an election worker directing voters toward check-in tables and machines for Republicans on one side of the room and Democrats on the other.

Being forced to publicly identify their party inside voting centers has rattled some voters, a shift triggered by the county GOP's decision to break from a jointly administered March 3 primary with Democrats. That means separate check-in tables, workers and voting machines for each party inside shared locations, during early voting and on election day.

"I deeply feel your vote is your own and the fact you have to split up in an obvious way … it feels like another way they're trying to split the country in two," Ray said.

Republicans defended the move, saying it protects party control and prevents conflicts between workers from different parties.

Onsite, the setup has stirred tension and raised concerns about privacy.

Liza Hameline, the Democratic election judge at Josey Ranch Lake library, said she has seen neighbors get outed to one another while voting and others outraged at having to announce something they consider personal.

When voters push her on why they are required to vote this way, Hameline said she's directing them to the county Republican Party chair, Allen West.

"This whole separate but equal thing is making it like we're not a unified community and that's jarring for them just because it's like we're on one side and you're on the other," Hameline said.

At Northway Christian Church, a large early voting site, the separation is on full display.

Strips of red and blue tape run across the floor, guiding voters in different directions before they even reach the check-in area. The arrows lead to distinct tables, where election workers sort them based on their party ballot.

The last time Dallas County voted in this manner was in 2018, said county Commissioner Andrew Sommerman, a Democrat.

In subsequent joint primaries, voters shared election workers and equipment, and the only time a person had to declare their party affiliation was at the poll book during check-in to print their ballot style.

More than 200 Republican Party precinct chairs voted in September for the separate primary, a decision that affected voters of both parties.

West, in an interview Monday, said the arrangement keeps each party in charge of its primary and avoids friction that has occurred when clerks from different parties worked side by side.

"Everyone needs to take a big chill pill and stop overreacting," West said.

In the primary Texans are picking nominees for the U.S. Senate and House, governor, statewide and county offices, the Legislature, judges and more.

Because the county controls the early voting period under the election code, officials kept universal voting centers in place for the 10-day period in which voters can cast a ballot at any location regardless of address.

That will change on the March 3 election day, when residents will be required to vote at their assigned neighborhood precinct for the first time in nearly a decade due to the separate primary.

On Election Day 173 locations will be shared by Democrats and Republicans but 177 others will be party specific.

County officials have worried the change will cause mass confusion and are encouraging people to vote early.

More than 102,000 early votes had been cast through Sunday in Dallas County, three quarters of which were by Democrats, according to Elections Department data.

Holding separate primaries with that margin has strained voting centers because parties cannot share workers or equipment.

Election judge Juzar Hasta, a Democrat, said there have been periods at the Valley Ranch Library in Irving in which Democrats have had to wait in line for one of the party's nine voting machines to be freed up while the nine reserved for Republicans sat empty.

"People are not happy. This is a useless way to do it," Hasta said. "It's not in the best interest of voters when there are machines just sitting idle."

Luis Medina, 68, and his son Gabriel Medina, 23, both Republicans, said Friday they were uncomfortable when they went to vote early at the Josey Ranch Lake library.

Medina said he's been a voter his whole life and instilled that in his son, but this year "felt very off."

"You can look over and say, 'Oh, I didn't know she was a Democrat or Republican,'" Luis Medina said. "The main thing in my opinion is voting is supposed to be a private thing."

Laura LaTurner, also a Republican, wasn't so fazed: "No big deal," she said while walking out of the library.

Despite backing the change to precincts for election day to reduce "fraudulent activity," West, the GOP chair, cast his ballot on the first day of early voting at the South Garland Library.

Based on his voter registration, his March 3 polling place would have been a nearby middle school instead.

West said he was setting an example to encourage people to get out and vote.

In a social media post, West also found issues with the separate setup. He said it was "quite disturbing" that a greeter was asking voters about their party and then "editorializing about her views on the matter."

He said voters don't need to announce anything: "Just go off in two different areas."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000081

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 24 2026

Fort Worth ISD to consider new prayer policy during school day for students

By Lina Ruiz

A new state law requiring Texas school boards to vote on whether to create designated prayer time during the school day is on the agenda in Fort Worth on Tuesday.

Fort Worth ISD staff is recommending the board vote no, because the district already has a policy allowing students to pray and engage in religious expression during the school day and on school property.

Senate Bill 11, passed during last year's legislative session, requires Texas school boards to weigh a decision on creating a prayer policy by March 1. The bill, authored by Republican Sen. Phil King of Weatherford, said boards must vote on the issue, but they aren't required to adopt it.

King also wrote the law requiring schools to hang the Ten Commandments in a "conspicuous place in each classroom of the school." That legislation has been challenged by several lawsuits.

Fort Worth schools' policy on prayer

Fort Worth ISD's existing policy says "a public school student has an absolute right to individually, voluntarily, and silently pray or meditate in school in a manner that does not disrupt the instructional or other activities of the school. A student shall not be required or coerced to engage in or refrain from such prayer or meditation during any school activity."

The policy also allows students to organize prayer groups and religious clubs or gatherings before, during and after the school day. A student's religious viewpoint must be treated the same way as a student's secular viewpoint, and district officials are barred from discriminating against a student based on their religious views.

The restrictions of a new policy, as outlined in Senate Bill 11, require parents to submit a consent form waiving their right to take legal action against the district in regards to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prevents the government from establishing a religion. Students must also engage in the prayer or reading outside the presence of a student who doesn't have a signed consent form.

The Fort Worth ISD school board meets at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

Grapevine-Colleyville ISD will consider the same resolution during a Monday meeting at 5:30 p.m. The district's administration is recommending the board not adopt the resolution, for the same reason as Fort Worth ISD.

"With the logistical complexities of determining the students that have approval from their parents and monitoring students to ensure the rules involving separation, etc. are not violated, the administration does not recommend that the Board adopt such a resolution," staff wrote in agenda documents. "State law, federal law, and GCISD Board Policy allow students to engage in prayer, reading of religious text, and religious expression on school property and during the school day."

In September, the Keller school board sparred over the issue before voting 4-3 in favor of the resolution.

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 24 2026

'Too far boss': Texts show Tony Gonzales pressed female staffer for 'sexy pic'

By Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson

In the spring of 2024, U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales was in the midst of a bruising primary campaign, fighting to hang on to his congressional seat. But politics was not on his mind when he began trading text messages with a staff member at 12:15 a.m. on May 9.

"Send me a sexy pic," he texted Regina Ann Santos-Aviles, then director of his regional district office in Uvalde, according to messages obtained by the San Antonio Express-News.

Santos-Aviles replied that she'd had a rough week and "you don't really want a hot picture of me."

"Yes I do," Gonzales texted, adding, "Hurry."

"No, I just don't like taking pictures of myself," Santos-Aviles responded a few minutes later.

Gonzales persisted: "I'm just such a visual person."

The congressman went on to ask Santos-Aviles about her favorite sexual positions and to fantasize about having sex with her. Twice, she told Gonzales he was going "too far." But at his urging, the two made plans to meet up two days later, when he would be campaigning in the Uvalde area.

"Will be lots of fun," Gonzales texted, adding that they should rendezvous at the agreed-on place "at check-in time."

The third-term Republican congressman, a married father of six, pursued a romantic relationship with Santos-Aviles despite U.S. House ethics rules that bar lawmakers from engaging in sexual liaisons with staff members, the message chain shows. Santos-Aviles, 35, killed herself in September by setting herself on fire. She was married and the mother of an 8-year-old boy.

Adrian Aviles, her widower, provided the May 2024 texts to the Express-News, which authenticated them.

A separate set of texts from a different source show that on two occasions that same month, Gonzales and Santos-Aviles arranged to spend time together in a vacation cabin in the Hill Country owned by the family of a former Gonzales staff member. The cabin is in Concan, a resort town along the Frio River 25 miles northeast of Uvalde.

Gonzales did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

News reports on the affair between Gonzales and Santos-Aviles have roiled this year's Republican primary in Texas' 23rd Congressional District. Gonzales, 45, faces, among other challengers, Brandon Herrera, a firearms manufacturer and YouTube personality who nearly unseated him in 2024.

In response to the furor, Gonzales has accused Aviles of trying to "blackmail" him. Aviles' lawyer, Robert "Bobby" Barrera of San Antonio, acknowledges that he tried for months without success to negotiate a confidential settlement with the congressman over the affair and Santos-Aviles' death.

The Express-News was the first news organization to uncover documentary evidence of a relationship. The newspaper on Feb. 16 published an image of a text in which Santos-Aviles told a colleague she'd had an "affair with our boss." The message was from April 2025.

'This is going too far'

The string of newly obtained texts from 2024 were extracted from Santos-Aviles' smartphone by a digital forensics company.

Barrera said he paid Exhibit A Computer Forensics to retrieve the data in anticipation of using it in civil litigation against Gonzales. The San Antonio-based company employs advanced software to capture the contents of electronic communications, along with phone numbers and timestamps. Its clients include law firms and law enforcement agencies.

Aviles shared with the Express-News 34 texts sent between 12:15 a.m. and 1:09 a.m. on May 9, 2024. He said he had withheld other texts because they were even more graphic and he did not want his son to see them.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cont. from "Too far boss…"

Barrera described the unreleased texts "as sexually grotesque."

The message chain made available by Aviles begins with Gonzales asking Santos-Aviles for "a sexy pic."

Seven seconds later, he sends a message in which the text field is empty — an indication the transmission was a photo or video.

Santos-Aviles replies at 12:19 a.m.: "I swear my life has been a Telenovela for the past seven days. You don't really want a hot picture of me"

Gonzales says he does. After a break, the exchange resumes. At 12:48, Gonzales texts: "Favorite position"

"Yours first?" Santos-Aviles replies.

"on top pinning your legs," Gonzales writes.

"This is going too far boss," she replies.

Gonzales persists, asking: "What do you like"

He follows up with a description of a sex act.

"never," she responds.

"This is too far Tony," she texts a minute later.

Thirteen minutes later, the conversation shifts from sexual banter to arranging a private meeting.

"Do you want to spend Saturday together," Gonzales asks at 1:07 a.m.

"Yeah we can find us a cute place tomorrow," Santos-Aviles replies.

"Will be lots of fun," Gonzales texts. "I say let's meet there at check in time"

"Deal," she replies.

Aviles and Barrera declined to say whether they had provided or planned to provide the messages to Hererra's campaign or the Office of Congressional Conduct, which enforces congressional ethics rules and which began investigating the affair several months ago.

Aviles asserted that he was not releasing the messages as part of a legal strategy. He said he was acting in response to Gonzales' accusation of blackmail, which he said he interpreted as suggesting that he had fabricated evidence of an affair.

"I'm releasing them now because I don't want to be called a liar and don't want her to be called a liar," Aviles said. "I also want to show proof to everybody the type of person that he is. He's a predator. He took advantage of a very vulnerable woman."

Hill Country cabin

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That evening, the staffer texted Gonzales, asking, "Do you need anything over there at the cabin?"

Gonzales replied, "I'm all set. Just wanted to get some rest before getting on the road."

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Santos-Aviles, a Uvalde native, did not have a college degree, her husband said. She got her start as finance manager for the Uvalde County Fairplex and later served as executive director of the Uvalde County Chamber of Commerce before joining Gonzales' staff in 2021.

Aviles said he discovered the affair on the evening of May 31, 2024, when he returned home from a jujitsu class to find his wife texting with Gonzales. When he confronted her, he said she replied: "You're not going to like what you see."

'Black-sheeped'

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Bayliss Wagner contributed to this report.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000083

Houston
Chronicle FEB 24 2026

Doug Rogers for 36th Congressional District in Democratic primary

By attempting to gerrymander in a few more red U.S. House seats in Texas, the state Legislature made winning the 36th Congressional District a bit less daunting for Democrats.

Incumbent Rep. Brian Babin acknowledged his vulnerability in the Wall Street Journal recently, noting that President Donald Trump won his district by 25 percentage points in 2024 but would have won only by 11 percentage points based on the redrawn boundaries.

That may not sound like a huge difference, but it's just enough of an opening to give a candidate like Doug Rogers hope in an election year that looks favorable for Democrats. Rogers, 58, is a forensic accountant who conducts financial investigations "for folks who have been ripped off and taken advantage of." That skill set could be a great fit in an oversight role in Congress, particularly well suited for probing an administration replete with allegations of self-dealing and corruption.

Rogers thinks he can make inroads with voters across the political spectrum by emphasizing how Republicans in Congress are interested only in economic prosperity for the wealthiest Americans. He frames this populist message by pointing to the struggles of rural hospitals, of which there are many in his district. He said if there's one bill he would prioritize in Congress, it's restoring the federal cuts made to the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

"We have to save these rural hospitals, I mean, people are going to die," Rogers said. "I plan to have a health care summit once the primary is done, a rural health care summit where we sit down with hospital administrators and really understand the impact of what is about to occur."

Rogers can also play up his bipartisan bona fides. After college, he moved to Washington and worked on the presidential campaigns of George H.W. Bush and Bob Dole, both Republicans. He was raised as a Southern Baptist, traditionally a very conservative body of congregations, and believes he can still connect with religious voters disenchanted by how far right the party has shifted.

First Rogers will have to fend off Rhonda Hart, an Army veteran who was defeated in the 2024 general election by U.S. Rep. Randy Weber. Hart, who lost her 14-year-old daughter in the 2018 mass shooting at Santa Fe High School, told the Houston Chronicle editorial board she is suspending her campaign because of fundraising struggles. Her name remains on the ballot.

Rogers gives Democrats the best chance to win a long-shot seat this year. He's our pick in the primary.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 24 2026

Brian Babin for the 36th Congressional District in the Republican primary

U.S. Rep. Brian Babin has served his district for six terms, occasionally with distinction.

We've given him credit in the past for his support of NASA funding and research and for authoring the Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety Act, which would provide states with behavioral threat assessment training as a way to prevent shootings. He has also been an advocate for critical coastal infrastructure, such as building the Ike Dike. Last year, he was even named Port Person of the Year by the American Association of Port Authorities.

But often, Babin, 77, acts more interested in being a partisan warrior than a conscientious public servant. He has authored bills to end birthright citizenship. He engages in baseless speculation that Tylenol causes autism in children. He infamously attended a meeting at the White House in December 2020 where an adviser to President Donald Trump presented a plan to have the vice president overturn the election results. He then voted against certifying the 2020 election results. The nation would be well served if Republicans stopped indulging these sorts of antics.

Luckily for Babin, his district is one of the reddest in Texas. He has won his last two general election races with nearly 70% of the vote. Realistically, the best shot of unseating him is in the primary, but his opponent lacks the polish, platform and funds to mount a successful challenge.

Jonathan Mitchell, 35, is a pipeline technician from Liberty County whose political idol is Ron Paul. He ran against Babin in the 2024 primary and lost by a large margin. Mitchell's primary motivation for challenging Babin is because he authored the TAPS Act, one of the things Babin has done that we agree with. He has some ideas worth attention such as permitting reform for energy projects. Unfortunately, they're overshadowed by some outlandish positions such as abolishing the IRS and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and repealing commonsense federal gun regulations.

By default, Babin is the only credible option in this race.

Houston
Chronicle FEB 24 2026

Texas House 150 is red and R.L. Beatty is green. Democrats should still pick her.

R.L. Beatty has seen the difference that state and other policies can make in everyday life. As a former reentry case manager for people leaving the criminal justice system, Beatty believes in making that system work better for everybody.

"I know that you can change lives with that desk," she said.

She wants to do the same as the representative for House District 150, a ruby red swath of Harris County that includes Spring and Klein and has been represented by Republican Rep. Valoree Swanson since she won in 2017.

Swanson has championed anti-trans, anti-abortion and dubious "voter integrity" legislation. She's also served on the juvenile justice committee in the past, which is an area where Beatty has the most potential legislation in mind.

"People don't understand the stress behind the gate," she told the Houston Chronicle editorial board, explaining how the Legislature can properly staff and equip prison in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice prisons. Beatty, 62, said she wants better tracking of inmates during transit, database upgrades, staff pay raises and higher hazard pay for employees — and better retirement benefits for former employees like her. She'd likely find bipartisan support for those changes.

But she's hopeful her bread and butter platform will reach even more voters. She wants to make sure special education is fully funded, that the electric grid can better withstand storms and that the district is protected with sufficient flood mitigation in the Cypress Creek and Spring Creek watersheds. Still, she lacked much of the policy knowledge, on-the-ground civic engagement and political experience that voters should want even in a first-time candidate.

Beatty would first have to get past Democratic challenger A'Yonna Kellum. Neither had much online presence, and Kellum did not meet with us. Beatty presented herself as a serious candidate, if a bit of a green first-timer. We see potential in her and urge Democrats to send her to the general election.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000084

Houston
Chronicle FEB 24 2026

Saturday event helps educate dozens of Houston families about Texas school voucher program

By Ashley Soebroto

More than 70 parents gathered Saturday at a northwest Houston community center to learn how Texas' school voucher program could benefit them and their children.

The new $1 billion program, known as Texas Education Freedom Accounts, gives families state dollars to spend on private education — whether for private school tuition, tutoring, homeschooling or other expenses. The application period opened this month and they will be accepted until March 17. More than 30,000 private school voucher applications were submitted on the first day.

Representatives from the comptroller's office and private schools set up booths on Saturday at the Freed Community Center to answer questions and mitigate any issues in the application process. Families arrived with notebooks and pens in hand, asking various question ranging from how much funding they could receive to how to submit an individualized education program through the online portal.

Some parents said they wanted to apply for a voucher to help offset costs of private tuition and other academic opportunities.

Mercy Astorga, who has one child in middle school and two in elementary, said her children attend a private school in Humble. With a school voucher, she said, her family would be able to afford the tuition to enroll her kids at a larger private school with more resources and extracurriculars.

She said she's hoping to enroll her kids at Westbury Christian School next school year.

"They've all been in private school, but with this (voucher) program, they would be able to go to an even better private school with more opportunities," Astorga said. "They have the robotics, they have the chemistry labs, they have the band instruments, stuff that our small private school can't afford."

Sasha Thomas, who homeschools her three children, said she attended Saturday's event because she wanted to learn more about how much funding her kids would qualify for. She said the state's voucher program would help pay for homeschool curriculum costs and any additional tutoring.

"Any aid that helps with three almost-high schoolers makes a big difference in our budgeting," said Thomas, who has kids ages 13, 15 and 16. "Homeschooling is quite expensive."

Other parents said they were looking into applying for a voucher to help pay for additional educational support for their children with disabilities.

"My son has dyscalculia, so he generally has additional tutoring and things," said Debbie Munoz, whose 15-year-old son attends St. Pius X High School. "So I wanted to see kind of how this best supports kids who have learning differences, and whether or not there's any funding or not."

Munoz said she also attended Saturday's event to learn about funding for those with learning disabilities.

For Chan Morton, getting state funding would help ensure her 7-year-old daughter can stay in private school and get the services she needs for a speech disability. Morton said her child recently transferred from a public school at New Caney ISD to the Monarch School and Institute.

"I'm pretty much here because she does have a disability, so just to give her more of an opportunity in a private school," Morton said. "It's funny to say it, but we haven't had the resources that we needed in public school, and it's like pulling teeth to try to get those resources."

San Antonio
Express-News FEB 24 2026

Gov. Abbott orders DPS surge along border after killing of cartel leader 'El Mencho'

By Raul Trey Lopez

Gov. Greg Abbott has directed the Texas Department of Public Safety to ramp up safety and homeland security operations across Texas in response to the escalating cartel violence in Mexico that officials say poses a threat to Americans.

Abbott, in a Monday news release, said Mexican drug cartels present a significant risk to public safety and national security, adding that they are vowing to take steps to prevent spillover violence into the country.

"By increasing proactive efforts to defend against cartel violence, Texas will continue to utilize every tool and strategy to protect our state and our nation. We will not cower to criminals who impose terror on our fellow Texans and Americans," Abbott said.

The preventive direction will have DPS use resources from the Texas Highway Patrol, Texas Rangers, criminal investigations division, and special operations group at the border to detect, interdict, and arrest criminals, officials say. There will also be an increase in the tactical marine unit and aircraft operations division patrols along the border.

The Homeland Security division and Texas Fusion Center will monitor social media and suspicious activity around the clock, according to Abbott.

Abbott urged Texans currently in Mexico, and those with family or friends traveling there, to closely follow travel warnings from the U.S. Department of State amid ongoing security operations, road blockages, and criminal activity.

Texans who need immediate assistance can contact the U.S. Department of State at 1-888-407-4747 (from within the U.S.) or 1-202-501-4444 (from outside the U.S.), or call the Texas Fusion Center at 1-844-927-0521.

The governor's order comes after a wave of violence in Mexico following the killing of Jalisco New Generation Cartel leader Nemesio Osegura Cervantes, known as "El Mencho," during a military operation aimed at capturing him, according to an Associated Press report. He was shot during the shoot-out and died while being taken to Mexico City, officials said.

On Monday, Mexico's Security Secretary Omar García Harfuch said 25 National Guard members were killed in six separate attacks in Jalisco after Oseguera Cervantes was killed.

El Mencho led one of Mexico's most powerful and fastest-growing criminal organizations, widely known for trafficking fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine into the United States. He is also known for staging attacks against government officials who went against him on several occasions.

The U.S. Government had offered a reward of up to $15 million for information leading to the arrest of the cartel leader.

After his death, cartel members set fires and blocked more than 250 roads across 20 states, leaving at least 14 others dead, including seven National Guard troops. Several states canceled school, and the U.S. Embassy told personnel in eight cities and the state of Michoacán to shelter in place.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000085

Dallas
Morning News FEB 24 2026

Railroad Commission Chair Jim Wright faces four GOP challengers in March primary

By AARÓN TORRES

Republican Jim Wright toppled the incumbent at the Texas Railroad Commission six years ago. Now he's fighting to avoid the same fate.

Wright, who has served as chair of the state agency that regulates the oil and gas industry since 2025, is running again and faces four GOP challengers in the March 3 primary.

On a podcast hosted by the Texas Alliance of Energy Producers, Wright said he first sought the office because, as an oilfield waste services company owner who dealt with the commission weekly, he believed it didn't enforce rules consistently.

He said he is seeking another term because six years is not enough time to make the changes he wants, hampered by the pace of government.

He said he could move faster "having my own companies and my own business. But, he said, "politically, decisions don't work like that."

His opponents say the commission is too soft in overseeing the oil and gas industry and too intertwined with it financially, echoing the same criticisms Wright made when he first ran.

The challengers are Hawk Dunlap, a fourth-generation oil worker, Katherine Culbert, a chemical engineer, Jim Matlock, a consultant for the oil and gas industry, and Bo French, the former Tarrant County GOP chair.

State Rep. Jon Rosenthal of Houston is unopposed in the Democratic primary.

Wright's priorities include cutting regulatory red tape so permits can be issued quicker, plugging orphan wells and building out the state's energy infrastructure. His campaign did not respond to interview requests.

Most of his rivals say the agency is not aggressive enough in regulating the oil and gas industry.

Commissioners also receive campaign donations from the industry, a practice critics say raises concerns about the agency's independence.

Wright has a clear fundraising advantage, with more than $443,000 cash on hand, according to recent reports.

French is next with more than $135,000. When he launched his campaign, he said he would defeat the left and stop an "Islamic invasion," though the agency has no role in Muslims living in Texas.

Last summer, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, also a Republican, denounced French and called on him to resign as Tarrant County GOP chair after he posted a social media poll asking whether Muslims or Jews posed the "biggest threat to America."

While French did not resign, he deleted the poll and said he regretted posting it. He also came under fire for social media posts in which he targeted his opponents using slurs for gay people and people with disabilities. He did not respond to an interview request last week.

Two others tried for the commission in 2024. Culbert was the Democratic nominee against Commissioner Christi Craddick, and Dunlap ran as the Libertarian candidate. Craddick won.

Culbert is seeking it again because she believes the Railroad Commission is often reactive and "flat-footed" instead of being proactive.

She pointed to the growing list of orphaned wells, more than 11,000, a 20-year high. These are wells that are not actively maintained or operated and are the state's responsibility to clean up.

"What can we do to make sure nothing else gets on that list while we're cleaning up the 11,000 that are currently on the list?" Culbert said. "That's my mindset."

Culbert said she ran as a Democrat as a way to break in. A former registered Republican in Massachusetts, she said she is not fully aligned with either party.

Dunlap said he ran as a Libertarian because he was asked to do so. He uses social media to explain how the commission operates and has more than 130,000 followers on TikTok.

Among his priorities is changing the agency's name because the Railroad Commission no longer regulates railroads, focusing instead on oil and gas, pipelines, natural gas utilities and certain mining activities.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 24 2026

UNT to offer buyouts, could cut academic programs amid budget shortfall

By MILLA SURJADI

The University of North Texas (UNT) will offer buyouts to eligible faculty and could eliminate some courses and programs as the school aims to close a projected $45 million shortfall.

UNT President Harrison Keller announced plans to pullback spending and reallocate funds Friday as university officials eye a long-term plan to increase student enrollment. The university's shortfall is driven in part by a steep drop in international student enrollment amid federal policy changes.

In a letter to the UNT community, Keller said near-term cost-saving measures could include the consolidation or possible elimination of low-enrollment courses and programs and hiring freezes. Faculty could see increased teaching loads and larger class sizes. The school could also convert courses with large enrollment into hybrid ones, according to an FAQ on UNT's website.

The school will also soon launch a voluntary separation program for eligible faculty. More information about the program will be shared at a later date, according to Keller's Friday letter.

The cutbacks and reallocations of funds will "significantly impact academic affairs," which accounts for about 80% of UNT's available central funding, Keller wrote.

"While these strategies for increasing student enrollment hold great promise for UNT, they will take time to produce significant revenue," Keller wrote.

The school's finances took a hit after international master's student enrollment dropped by half in the past year due to visa challenges and federal policy changes. International students contribute significantly to a university's revenue because they typically pay higher tuition rates and receive less financial aid.

The school projected a $47.3 million, or about 10% decrease in tuition revenue this fiscal year, according to an August UNT System budget document. Its international graduate student population plummeted from about 6,200 in fall 2024 to around 3,400 in fall 2025, university officials said Thursday at a quarterly Board of Regents meeting.

The school is also facing a $32 million reduction in state funding, which is largely calculated based on enrollment, for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

Keller's long-term plan to stabilize the university's finances will primarily rely on increasing student enrollment and improving student retention. UNT will also look at revamping how it teaches large enrollment courses, including using technology to redesign courses and "personalize the learning experience," Keller wrote in his letter.

Keller said the university will expand its online and professional programs that are aligned with high-demand workforce needs and bolster the number of transfer students from North Texas community colleges.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000086

Cont. from "UNT…"

Both of those measures are part of Keller's five-year strategic plan for the university, which he unveiled in November. The plan maintains a focus on fortifying UNT's finances and developing new revenue streams.

One focus is bolstering the number of first-year students who re-enroll for a second year, Keller told *The Dallas Morning News* in November. Tuition dollars are left on the table each year as only 77% of first-year students continue their education at UNT, university data shows. Keller said he planned to invest in new advising models, mental health services and improvements to the first-year experience to raise that retention rate to 90%.

He also promised to focus on increasing nontraditional student enrollment and building stronger partnerships with community colleges across the region to bolster the number of transfer students.

"We have to rethink who we understand ourselves as being responsible for serving," he said at the time. "Not just the more traditional-aged undergraduate and graduate students, but to lean much more into serving non-traditional students and students who are already working."

UNT is not the only North Texas school facing budget challenges amid changes in federal policy.

The University of Texas at Arlington, which has faced increased funding challenges amid federal restrictions on research support and international student visas, began offering buyouts to faculty and staff last month. About 17% of the school's funding comes from the federal government, according to a June email from President Jennifer Cowley to the UTA community.

The University of Texas at Dallas lost around $10 million — about 5% of its annual research expenditures — in the Trump administration's federal research funding cuts. The Richardson school saw around 1,000 fewer international master's students in fall 2025, a loss that amounts to nearly 20% of the school's 5,600 international students it had in fall 2024.

UTD offset some of the lost international student tuition revenue with gains in undergraduate enrollment, release of previously earmarked reserves and cost containment measures.

Dallas
Morning News FEB 24 2026

Xcel Energy ordered to replace poles, conduct inspections after Texas wildfire lawsuit

By LANA FERGUSON

Xcel Energy will replace damaged and dilapidated utility poles and conduct large-scale inspections, as part of an agreed-upon temporary injunction in a lawsuit against the company.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office announced the deal Monday morning — following a legal action filed in December against the Southwestern Public Service Company, which operates Xcel Energy, for its role in the 2024 Smokehouse Creek Fire.

The historic fire — which burned over 1 million acres in the Texas Panhandle, and killed three people — is the state's largest-ever wildfire. The incident took nearly three weeks to contain.

Weeks after the fire, Xcel Energy said its facilities appeared to have been involved in igniting the flames, but disputed that it acted negligently in maintaining and operating its infrastructure.

In Monday's announcement, Paxton called the injunction "critical for protecting" Texans.

"This win is the first part of holding Xcel accountable and ensuring preventative measures are being taken as the case continues to move forward," Paxton said, adding that he "will continue to fight to ensure that justice is served and that wildfires will no longer be sparked by the negligence of a utility provider."

The lawsuit Paxton brought against the company sought compensation for economic losses, civil penalties and a court order compelling the company to take corrective measures in an effort to prevent future tragedies.

In addition to replacing damaged utility poles in the Panhandle, the injunction mandated Xcel to continue to inspect and replace high-risk poles in an expedited timeline.

Xcel will be required to replace the most critically damaged poles in as little as one day after inspect, according to the AG's office. The company will also be expected to inspect 35,000 poles per year in its Texas service area.

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 24 2026

US Senate candidate James Talarico schedules Dallas rally

By Rachel Royster

State Rep. James Talarico is headed to Dallas on Wednesday for his Take Back Texas Tour, where he'll focus on voter turnout and taking billionaires and corruption out of Texas politics.

Talarico is up against U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett and Ahmad Hassan in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate.

Whoever wins on March 3 will go on to face one of the Republican candidates in November. The three most popular candidates on the Republican ballot are incumbent Sen. John Cornyn, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton or U.S. Rep. Wesley Hunt.

Wednesday's event starts at 7 p.m. and will go until 9 p.m. at the Longhorn Ballroom, 216 Corinth St. Doors will open at 6:30 p.m.

The Take Back Texas Tour began on the first day of early voting in Austin and has since gone to El Paso and Lubbock. Talarico is set to visit three more cities before heading to DFW. The tour will end on Election Day in Round Rock.

The event comes about a week after CBS barred Steven Colbert from broadcasting an interview with Talarico, citing Federal Communications Commission guidelines on equal opportunity for political candidates.

Crockett rallied voters in Fort Worth on Feb. 19, where she argued that she is Democrats' best chance to defeat a Republican on the November ballot.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000087

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 24 2026

Grapevine-Colleyville school board unanimously rejects 'misguided' prayer period

By Fousia Abdullahi

Grapevine-Colleyville school board trustees voted unanimously Monday night to reject Senate Bill 11, which requires districts to vote before March 1 on whether to provide a period of time for prayer and reading of religious texts during the school day.

The bill would require parents who want their kids to participate to waive their right to sue the school district for violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which blocks the government from establishing a religion.

The board members said they voted against the prayer period because of the amount of work it would create for the schools when students are already able to pray at their own discretion on campuses.

Trustee Matt Foust, said that he thinks the bill was "well-intentioned" but is "misguided" for many reasons.

"I also think that this unnecessarily invades on the parent's role in providing that guidance and faith, one that I hold dearly," Foust said.

Other restrictions include that the prayer and religious text cannot be provided in the physical presence of or within the hearing of students whose guardians have not signed a consent form.

"With the logistical complexities of determining the students that have approval from their parents and monitoring students to ensure the rules involving separation, etc. are not violated, the administration does not recommend that the Board adopt such a resolution," staff wrote in the agenda item. "State law, federal law, and GCISD Board Policy allow students to engage in prayer, reading of religious text and religious expression on school property and during the school day."

GCISD joined other Tarrant County districts that rejected the prayer option, including Lake Worth, Hurst-Euless-Bedford, Arlington, Mansfield, Northwest, Kennedale and Everman .

Both Keller and Aledo schools have voted in favor of adopting the prayer period, with the Keller trustees vote of 4-3 becoming contentious during debate.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas said in a release on Monday that it's important for schools to be neutral when it comes to religion.

"School districts should reject S.B. 11 because inviting state-organized prayer into public schools will only cause division, pressure students to conform, and distract schools from their core educational mission," said Caro Achar, engagement coordinator for free speech at the ACLU of Texas in the statement. "This law risks violating students' and families' constitutional rights and blurring the critical separation between church and state. Texas students already have robust rights to pray or read religious texts during their own time during the school day. "

Howard Rosenthal, associate director of the Jewish Federation of Fort Worth and the former president of Beth Israel in Colleyville, said the wording of the bill is ambiguous about which religious texts and versions are allowed.

"I feel it is wrong to allow school staff to encourage students to pray or not to pray in any way that may contradict their families beliefs and practices," Rosenthal said. " Injecting the school into the mix can and surely will cause difficulties and confusion."

Rosenthal said students may feel compelled to participate because of peer pressure.

"Decisions about whether, when or how to pray and read scripture should be left to parents, students themselves and faith communities," he said.

Adrian Higginbotham, a parent against prayer periods, said schools already provide opportunities for prayer.

"Our teachers are already battling for every minute of instruction time to meet state standards," Higginbotham said. "Carving out a specific block of the school day for this purpose is inherently disruptive to educational flow and creates an unnecessary burden for teachers and staff."

Sayeda Syed, a resident of GCISD said the district is very diverse and passing the consideration would "open a pandoras box."

Syed said if it passed the board should not be surprised if her kids bring their religious books to school.

"Now this is the time to give this choice to the parents," Saeed said. "We have Saturday school, Sunday school to teach our kids."

Beverly Mavis, a resident, said voting in favor of the prayer period would be another intrusion by GCISD board members

"I would hope that the same board members who ran on parental rights, the need for parent control over student academic choices and teaching morals and values at home as the optimum situation would recognize the imposition of religious activities such as prayer time as part of the daily school structure violates those very principles," Mavis said.

Fort Worth ISDs administrators also recommended not adopting the period ahead of its board meeting, scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Fort Worth
Star-Telegram FEB 24 2026

Saginaw Boswell students, parents say ICE walkout punishment is unfair

By Samuel O'Neal

Students at Saginaw Boswell High School who participated in anti-ICE walkouts earlier this month and their parents are pushing back against the district after receiving two days of in school suspension as punishment.

The punishment came after the district previously said in phone calls and emails to students and their parents provided to the Star-Telegram that disciplinary action was still under consideration.

The Texas Education Agency previously advised school districts to treat ICE walkouts like unexcused absences. But students and their parents say two days of suspension is "over the top" for skipping class and violates TEA rules.

TEA explicitly prohibits schools and administration from encouraging school walkouts, but also does not allow for over-the-top punishments that are not consistent with typical punishments for skipping school.

Before the TEA guidance, Eagle Mountain-Saginaw officials told students and parents they could lose their prom or the ability to walk at graduation if they participated in ICE protests during school hours. But students and parents told the Star-Telegram those punishments were never handed out.

A spokesperson for Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD wrote in a statement to the Star-Telegram that each student disciplinary action is based on specific circumstances of the student's conduct.

"While individual student discipline matters are protected by privacy law and cannot be discussed publicly, each situation is reviewed individually," the spokesperson wrote. "Any disciplinary action taken is based on the specific circumstances of the student's conduct and is administered in accordance with the district's Student Code of Conduct and applicable state law."

TEA's guidance, which came after students at hundreds of schools across Texas held anti-ICE walkouts during school

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000088

Cont. from "Saginaw Boswell…"

hours, says students must be marked absent if they participate in walkouts and schools also risk daily attendance funding if they allow or encourage students to walk out of class. The agency also said that teachers who facilitate walkouts will be subject to investigation and possible sanctions that could include revoking their licenses.

Students at dozens of districts across DFW walked out in protests in recent weeks, but Boswell High has been caught in a firestorm after students say they felt betrayed by leadership.

Students previously said Principal Ryan Wilson gave them tips on how to stay safe during their first planned ICE walkout on Feb. 2. Video obtained by the Star-Telegram showed Wilson talking to a group of protesting students over a megaphone encouraging them to stay safe when taking a stand against something "they clearly feel passionate about."

Boswell students organized a second anti-ICE protest on Feb. 9 at the Effie Center across the street from the school — notably after school hours and off campus grounds unlike the Feb. 2 protest.

The district sent a letter to parents in the days leading up to the second protest detailing that walking out of school during class hours would lead to disciplinary action. Those punishments included threats of losing prom or walking the stage at graduation.

Several parents of Boswell High School students told the Star-Telegram some students who walked out have received two days of in-school suspension, while others who participated have not yet heard from the school on disciplinary actions.

"It seems like they have no rhyme or reason as to which students get in trouble and which ones don't," a parent told the Star-Telegram, speaking on condition of anonymity because she feared retribution against her child.

Another parent of an EMS student who has yet to hear about punishment said if their child receives an in-school suspension for participating in the walkout, they would refuse the punishment and pull their child out of ISS.

Several students who received ISS and their parents told the Star-Telegram that teachers who monitored the ISS classroom told students that they "did not know what they were protesting for," and were "just looking for a way to get out of class."

In statements to parents during the last few weeks, EMS leaders said they encourage students to exercise their First Amendment rights, but consequences must be given if students leave school grounds during learning hours.

"Leaving school without authorization and substantially disrupting the educational environment is a violation of the student code of conduct, and the students who chose to participate could face consequences including suspension, truancy filings, and a loss of other privileges," the district wrote in a message to parents.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

Federal court rejects GOP-led Utah Legislature's latest try to block House map that helps Democrats

By David A. Lieb -- Associated Press

New Utah voting districts that give Democrats an improved shot at winning a U.S. House seat can be used in this year's election, a federal court ruled Monday while turning aside a Republican request to block the new map.

The ruling marked the second setback in recent days for Republicans, who also lost an appeal at Utah's state Supreme Court.

A Utah judge imposed the new districts in November after striking down the congressional districts that the Republican-led Legislature had adopted after the 2020 census. The judge ruled that the Legislature had circumvented standards against partisan gerrymandering that were approved by voters in 2018.

The judge's ruling thrust Utah into a national redistricting battle being waged among states ahead of the midterm elections. President Donald Trump has pressed Republican-led states such as Texas, Missouri and North Carolina to redraw their districts to give the GOP an advantage in the November elections, prompting Democratic-led states such as California and Virginia to respond with their own redistricting plans.

Republicans currently hold all four of Utah's U.S. House seats.

The new map imposed last fall by Judge Dianna Gibson improves Democrats' chances of winning a seat by keeping Salt Lake County almost entirely within one district, instead of dividing the heavily Democratic population center among all four districts, as was previously the case. The map had been submitted to the court by the League of Women Voters of Utah and Mormon Women for Ethical Government — the plaintiffs who challenged the previous districts.

"We're pleased that the court protected the fair map," Katharine Biele, president of the League of Women Voters of Utah, said Monday. "We only wish that the future attempts to undermine this fair map would cease, so we could focus on what is important to Utahns."

Earlier this month, Republican U.S. Reps. Celeste Maloy and Burgess Owens joined with nearly a dozen local officials to file a federal lawsuit arguing that the state judge did not have legal authority to enact a map that wasn't approved by the Legislature.

But a panel of three district court judges denied their request for a preliminary injunction against using the new map in this year's election. The federal court said they weren't likely to prevail in their argument and it was too late for judges to intervene in the election.

The filing period for Utah's congressional candidates opens March 9, party caucuses are scheduled for March 17, and state party conventions are to be held April 25. Some candidates already are campaigning, the court noted.

"An active primary is ongoing, and the election has drawn too close for the court to get involved," the court wrote, adding, "The possibility of voter confusion is a considerable risk were the panel to enjoin the current election map."

The Congress members and local officials who sued issued a joint statement expressing "profound disappointment but respect for the court's careful review."

Republicans still are pursuing other means of undoing the new maps. A Republican-backed group recently submitted petition signatures to try to get a measure on the November ballot repealing an independent redistricting commission and the provision against partisan gerrymandering.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000089

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

After yogurt shop exonerations, what justice might look like for the four cleared men

By Tony Plohetski and Austin Sanders

After an emotional exoneration hearing last week, lawyers for the four men wrongfully accused of the 1991 yogurt shop murders said they were focused squarely on securing public declarations of innocence for their clients: Robert Springsteen, Michael Scott, Forrest Welborn and Maurice Pierce.

Now, with those exonerations in hand, the attorneys are turning toward what they describe as the next phase of justice: Some type of restitution for the men and their families who at Thursday's hearing detailed decades of unfounded agony, upheaval and harassment.

"Justice is a very important word, and justice demands follow-up," Springsteen's attorney, Tony Diaz, told the American-Statesman Monday. "Justice also requires accountability. I think it would be very reasonable and rational to believe there will be follow-up in the quest for accountability."

But the path to that justice is likely to look different for each man and their family.

Although the four men were swept into the same investigation, their legal histories diverged — a distinction that will likely shape any effort to obtain restitution.

Springsteen and Scott were convicted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely based on confessions that courts later ruled were improperly obtained. Both men spent years in prison — about a decade each — before appellate courts overturned their convictions. Prosecutors ultimately dismissed the charges, but the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, the state's highest criminal court for criminal cases, never formally declared them innocent at that time.

Welborn and Pierce were charged but never tried. Charges against them were dismissed before trial.

That procedural history matters.

The Tim Cole Act

Under the state's Tim Cole Act, people who are wrongfully imprisoned can receive $80,000 for each year they spent behind bars, along with a lifetime annuity, tuition assistance at public colleges and universities and access to certain counseling and reentry services. The law is named for Tim Cole, who died in prison in 1999 while serving a 25-year sentence for a rape he did not commit.

Since 2009, Texas has paid about $118 million to at least 147 people deemed wrongfully convicted, according to the state comptroller's office.

But Welborn would not be eligible for compensation under the Tim Cole Act because he was never convicted or imprisoned, said Charlie Press, director of the wrongful conviction clinic at the University of Texas School of Law. Pierce's family would likewise not qualify under the statute. (Pierce died in 2010 during an unrelated confrontation with police.)

If eligible, Springsteen and Scott could each receive roughly $800,000 for the time they were incarcerated, in addition to annuity payments and benefits.

However, eligibility is not automatic. Historically, most people compensated under the Tim Cole Act were either declared actually innocent by the Court of Criminal Appeals or pardoned on the basis of innocence.

In this case, the Court of Criminal Appeals never made such a finding. Instead, a Travis County district judge declared the men "actually innocent" last week after police publicly renounced the case against them and identified the deceased serial killer Robert Eugene Brashers as the sole suspect in the case.

Because the exonerations took an atypical route, attorneys and legal experts say it is unclear whether the comptroller will determine that Springsteen and Scott qualify under the statute.

Potential litigation

Another possible avenue is civil litigation.

Experts say the three surviving men and Pierce's family could pursue lawsuits against the city of Austin over the police investigation and against Travis County over prosecutorial decisions. Unlike the Tim Cole Act, civil lawsuits do not have statutory caps on damages.

"There is no ceiling in civil litigation," Press said. "It's what a jury or judge determines is appropriate. But prevailing in a civil rights case is not straightforward."

Austin civil rights attorney Jeff Edwards previously represented a man named Richard Danziger in a wrongful conviction case stemming from a 1988 Austin murder. Danziger, who was beaten by another inmate while incarcerated and suffered a severe brain injury, was later exonerated through DNA testing. He received a $9 million settlement from the city of Austin and Travis County.

Edwards said he could "conceive of a credible claim" arising from the yogurt shop arrests and incarcerations, particularly for Scott and Springsteen, who were convicted and imprisoned.

"This is the kind of injustice that could result in a civil action," Edwards said.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

Texans stuck in Mexico after cartel violence erupts: 'Puerto Vallarta is on fire'

By Dante Motley

Texans vacationing on Mexico's Pacific coast woke up to a kind of travel nightmare: thick smoke in the distance and hotel staff telling guests it wasn't safe to leave.

The U.S. government has advised Americans in parts of Mexico to shelter in place after Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho," the longtime leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, died during a federal security operation in western Mexico.

Travelers across the resort corridor — including Puerto Vallarta — are being urged to stay alert and follow federal guidance after cartel violence erupted following the killing of one of the country's most powerful drug leaders.

"Texans' safety is my top priority, whether they are here at home or traveling abroad," Gov. Greg Abbott said Sunday. "I urge all Texans in Mexico to follow the guidance of U.S. officials, stay alert, and ensure they are in contact with the U.S. Embassy or nearest U.S. Consulate. Situations on the ground can change quickly, and staying informed can save lives."

Abbott encouraged Texans in Mexico — and those with family members traveling there — to closely follow State Department warnings as security operations and road blockages continue.

The governor's office said the Texas Department of Public Safety is coordinating with federal partners, including the State Department and FBI, to monitor the situation and share information about safety risks.

Officials also encouraged Texans needing assistance to contact:

- The U.S. State Department at 1-888-407-4747
- The Texas Fusion Center at 1-844-927-0521

Travelers stranded

The violence has already disrupted travel between Texas and Mexico. Airlines canceled or paused flights to Puerto Vallarta and nearby airports as unrest spread, leaving some travelers unable to return home.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000090

Cont. from "Texans stuck…"

WFAA-TV in Dallas reported a North Texas traveler, Juanita Cano, stranded in Mexico as airport operations and road access were disrupted. Cruise operators also canceled planned stops in the region amid security concerns.

Another Dallas traveler, TJ Perry, posted a series of TikTok videos describing what he said was a sudden lockdown at his hotel.

"Puerto Vallarta is on fire right now," Perry said in one video, adding that hotel staff told guests not to leave and that his scheduled flight home had been canceled.

In a later video, he described the uncertainty around road access and said many local workers were unable to travel because of the blockades. Perry asked his viewers to pray for fellow travelers, locals, and hotel workers during the uncertainty.

How El Mencho died

Mexican officials said Oseguera was located in Tapalpa, Jalisco, and wounded during a confrontation with special forces before dying while being transported for treatment.

According to updated reporting from The New York Times, authorities said intelligence from someone close to Oseguera helped lead them to his location, and U.S. officials provided additional information supporting the operation.

Mexican authorities said the raid and violence that followed left dozens dead, including suspected cartel members, security personnel and civilians.

Why violence spread

After confirmation of Oseguera's death, coordinated violence broke out across multiple regions. Authorities and witnesses reported burning vehicles, road blockades and attacks meant to disrupt security forces and restrict movement.

The tactics can quickly affect major highways and airport access, which helps explain why travelers in tourist areas such as Puerto Vallarta were impacted even if violence was not widespread there.

Tourist warning

The U.S. Embassy advised Americans in affected states to:

• Shelter in place until further notice

• Avoid areas where law enforcement or military operations are underway

• Limit road travel, especially on highways

• Monitor official alerts and local news

• Keep family and friends informed of their location

The guidance does not mean violence is occurring everywhere, but officials say conditions can change rapidly.

Traveling this week

Travel experts say Texans planning trips to Mexico should closely monitor updates from the airlines and government alerts.

For those already in the region, officials recommend following hotel guidance and using official information sources.

Austin
American-Statesman FEB 24 2026

CBP to build 100+ miles of border wall through Big Bend region of West Texas by 2028

By Marley Malenfant

A border wall being built through the Big Bend region of West Texas is slated for completion in 2028, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

On Feb. 17, the DHS announced that Parsons Government Services Inc. will be awarded the contract for completing the border wall project, part of a broader federal border infrastructure effort.

The planned construction has drawn criticism from environmental advocates and local activists, who are urging Congress to halt the project.

Here's what to know.

Where will it be?

U.S Customs and Border Protection plans to construct more than 100 miles of new border barriers in the Big Bend region, including Big Bend National Park and parts of Big Bend Ranch State Park and the Chihuahuan Desert. It's also expected to stretch into remote ranchland and small West Texas communities.

The project is part of President Donald Trump's "Smart Wall" initiative, which combines physical barriers with surveillance and technology.

Environmental groups argue the wall could disrupt wildlife migration and damage sensitive desert ecosystems.

How many are crossing?

According to data from the Pew Research Center, Border Patrol reported 237,538 migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border during fiscal year 2025, which spanned from October 2024 through September 2025.

That marked a sharp decline from more than 1.5 million encounters in fiscal 2024, over 2 million in fiscal 2023 and a record high of more than 2.2 million in fiscal 2022.

According to historical Border Patrol data, the 2025 figure was the lowest annual total since 1970.

"Smart Wall" plan

The "Smart Wall" refers to a border security strategy that includes physical fencing, surveillance systems, sensors and other technology.

DHS says the goal is to enhance border enforcement in high-traffic areas while incorporating modern monitoring tools. The Big Bend expansion is one of the most geographically remote sections of the U.S.-Mexico border.

A protest

A petition on Change.org has noted that there is a planned protest on April 4 at the Texas Capitol and the governor's mansion. The petition, started by Drew Heugel, said that local organizing and nationwide protests are needed.

"This move would take our land away from future generations forever," the petition reads.

"The government is waiving dozens of legal protections to construct a physical border zone and wall through Big Bend, an area with such vast physical boundaries that locals agree no boundary is needed at all."

How is it funded?

Following the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in July 2025, the federal government allocated $46.5 billion for border wall construction.

DHS said the funding will support multiple border barrier projects nationwide.

Galveston County
Daily-News FEB 20 2026

Middleton would pick up right where Paxton left off

By Dan Freeman

I was dozing during the evening TV news, when I was startled awake by an ad by Mayes Middleton.

I watched and the ad was about him, his adoring wife and several cute-as-buttons children.

At the end, I could not figure out what political office he was seeking or his beliefs other than that he was madly MAGA. So, I searched for his website.

Sure enough, it's a flashy site touting his candidacy for Attorney General of Texas. It displays him smiling fondly, next to our bloviating president.

I learned he is foursquare for the administration's border security agenda. It's not clear whether it's focused on convicted criminals or just anyone in the country without proper documentation.

He mimicked Secretary Kristi Noem's ignorance about everyone's constitutional rights of habeas corpus.

He says nothing about the Fourth Amendment, which explains his not opposing breaking into people's homes without judicial warrants. I guess he skipped that material in law school.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000091

Cont. from "Middleton…"

He says he wants to protect babies and children. I thought this meant providing better nutrition for infants and childcare.

Instead, he wants to protect a fetus until it is born. As for the mother, he wants to control her health-care decisions.

He is against low bond for dangerous criminals but does not define a dangerous criminal.

If a person has not been convicted of a crime, how are they a criminal?

I guess he skipped classes about being innocent until proven guilty. He skipped the Eighth Amendment class, "Excessive bail shall not be required … ," as well.

He and I are both against men invading women's private spaces. I checked the Houston Chronicle. Other than a few perverts using cameras in restrooms, the invasion seems to have been averted. Maybe his morality police will be given ICE's misplaced body cameras.

We both want to enforce election laws but other than for a few confused voters, the elections have been found honest and well run.

Perhaps his grandparents raised him on woeful tales of Landslide Lyndon in the '40s.

I sure do not want federal observers hanging around Texas voting booths. Why would we want that when the Constitution specifically mandates states to run our national elections?

He is proud of his Second Amendment Bonafide's. He had no comment on the deaths of school students in Santa Fe or Uvalde. He has no comment about the gunfire on our streets due to armed drunks on weekends or on our highways.

So that was my visit to MAGA Mayes Middleton's website. It lacks any evidence of a legal mind or training.

He has no solutions for important problems in Texas. He revels in his cluelessness about our laws and Constitution. He is long on slogans and his servile obedience to conspiracy theories certainly makes him an ideal MAGA candidate.

In sum, he seems well qualified to fill the slimy shoes of Ken Paxton.

Dan Freeman lives in Galveston.

Longview
News-Journal FEB 20 2026

Oil & Gas Results, Not Rhetoric, Drive Progress in Texas

By Todd Staples

As Texas enters 2026 amid global volatility, persistent inflation pressures, and renewed political debate over how we power our economy, one fact remains clear: progress in Texas is driven by results, not rhetoric. After more than 20 years in public service and over a decade representing Texas' oil and natural gas industry, I can tell you that talk does not grow jobs, stabilize energy markets, or keep the lights on and houses warm during times of uncertainty. Performance does. Investment does. Innovation does.

And once again, Texas oil and natural gas have proven to be the power behind Texas' progress.

According to TXOGA's 2025 Energy & Economic Impact Report, despite lower oil prices and ongoing market headwinds in 2025, the industry remains a stabilizing force for the Texas economy – supporting millions of high-paying jobs, strengthening energy security at home and abroad, and generating historic revenues for schools, roads, first responders, and essential public services across the state.

In fiscal year 2025 (FY25), the Texas oil and natural gas industry paid $27 billion in state and local taxes and state royalties – the second highest total in Texas history. The industry is the single largest generator of tax-like revenues per employee, paying 7.5 times more per employee than the rest of the private sector. Twenty-several billion dollars exceeds the entire tax revenues of 34 states and translates to nearly $74 million every day to fund what Texans rely on, whether you live in the oil patch or not.

Since 2007 when TXOGA first started compiling these data, the Texas oil and natural gas industry has paid more than a quarter of a trillion dollars in state and local taxes and state royalties. This figure does not include the hundreds of billions of dollars paid annually in payroll for some of the state's highest paying jobs, the royalties paid directly to Texas families, or the taxes paid on office buildings and personal property--nor does it capture the enormous economic ripple effects across the broader economy.

Nearly 500,000 Texans have a direct job in oil and natural gas, earning an average of $133,000 dollars per year – 68 percent more than the average paid by the rest of Texas' private sector. Conservatively, these jobs generate approximately two more jobs, with 1.4 million total jobs supported across the Texas economy.

In FY25, Texas school districts received $2.6 billion in property taxes from mineral properties producing oil and natural gas, pipelines, and natural gas utilities, while counties received an additional $1 billion.

Oil and natural gas revenues also remain the primary source of new capital for the Permanent School Fund and Permanent University Fund, which received $1.4 billion and $1.72 billion, respectively, in FY25. Together, these education endowments now exceed $100 billion. The Permanent School Fund alone is larger than Harvard's endowment and is the largest educational endowment in the nation.

That same year, Texas' Rainy Day Fund and State Highway Fund each received $2.7 billion dollars from oil and natural gas production taxes.

Despite market challenges, the oil and natural gas industry shattered another string of performance records in FY25 including record production of crude oil, natural gas and natural gas liquids (NGLs). This production "triplet" – combined with increased direct use of NGLs in petrochemicals, refining inputs, and record-low crude oil imports – demonstrates how Texas continues to adapt by increasingly utilizing resources produced here at home. Continued expansion of pipeline and LNG export infrastructure further strengthened U.S. energy security and supported global energy stability.

This performance is no accident. It reflects Texas' long-standing commitment to reliability over rhetoric and pragmatism over politics. Policymakers recognize that science-based rules and free-market principles deliver affordable energy and broad-based economic opportunity. Sustaining this progress requires policies that build on success and encourage investment in innovation and infrastructure of all kinds.

At a time when energy debates are often driven by competing narratives, the industry's continued strong performance and unmatched economic impact underscore a simple truth: Texas runs on oil and natural gas – made possible by hundreds of thousands of skilled men and women who rise before the sun to keep our economy moving and our communities secure. By building on what works, we can ensure that this progress continues for every Texan, well into the future.

Editor's Note: The above commentary was provided by Todd Staples, president of the Texas Oil & Gas Association (TXOGA).

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000092

Lufkin
Daily News FEB 20 2026

Looking ahead to the water needs of the state

By Trent Ashby

In East Texas, water isn't just a resource — it's part of our way of life.

From our farms and timber operations to our small towns and growing communities, our water sustains our economy and defines our future. That's why this week's Natural Resources Committee hearing in Austin was so important.

With that, here's an update from your State Capitol.

On Tuesday, the Texas House Committee on Natural Resources met to examine the future of water policy in Texas and the long-term demands being placed on our supply. The committee heard from state agencies, groundwater conservation districts, river authorities, and regional planning groups about groundwater management, infrastructure needs, and updates to the State Water Plan.

One thing was clear: as other parts of the state face increasing strain on their water supplies, attention naturally turns toward regions with greater availability — including East Texas.

That reality makes preparation essential.

Our region is blessed with strong aquifers, steady rainfall, and significant surface water resources. Those resources support our farmers and timber producers, sustain local manufacturers and small businesses, and help preserve the quality of life that makes this area so special to call home.

But water is not simply a commodity. It is foundational to our land, our livelihoods, and future generations. Once long-term commitments are made, they are difficult to reverse. That is why these interim hearings matter. They allow us to ask careful questions, review the science, and fully understand the consequences before permanent policy decisions are made.

Locally governed groundwater conservation districts play a critical role in this process. Decisions about our water are best informed by the communities closest to it. Protecting local control while planning responsibly for the future must remain a priority.

Texas will continue to grow. Demand will continue to rise. Protecting East Texas water is not about resisting progress — it is about ensuring that growth is thoughtful, balanced, and respectful of the communities that depend on these resources every day.

As your State Representative, I remain committed to protecting our region's water, supporting private property rights, and ensuring East Texas has a strong voice in these discussions at the Capitol. Stewardship requires steady leadership, and I will continue working to safeguard the resources that we rely on and that make our corner of Texas strong.

The mobile office is on the road again in February, and our District Director will look forward to seeing you on the following dates, in the following locations: Feb. 18 at the Houston County Courthouse Annex in Crockett from 9:30-11:30 a.m. and at the Trinity County Courthouse in Groveton from 1:30-3:30 p.m.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact my office if we can help you in any way. My district office may be reached at (936) 634-2762, and our Capitol office at (512) 463-0508. Additionally, I welcome you to follow along on my Official Facebook Page, where I will post regular updates on what's happening in your State Capitol and share information that could be useful to you and your family: https://www.facebook.com/RepTrentAshby/.

Trent Ashby represents District 9, which includes Trinity County, in the Texas Legislature.

Longview
News-Journal FEB 23 2026

Texas needs a boring Senate race. In fact, we all do

By Abby McCloskey

Why can't the Texas Senate race be between John Cornyn, the Republican incumbent, versus James Talarico, a Democratic state representative? Because that would be too sane for the times we're living in.

Instead, a recent University of Houston poll shows Ken Paxton, the state's firebrand Republican attorney general, and Jasmine Crockett, an equally fiery Democratic U.S. Representative, in the lead for their respective parties. Paxton holds a seven-point lead, with 38% of likely voters saying they will support him, while 31% say they will vote for Cornyn. (A third GOP candidate, U.S. Representative Wesley Hunt, has 17%.) On the Democratic side, Crockett leads 47% to Talarico's 39%, with 12% undecided.

In an era with stronger party bosses, Paxton would never have been allowed to challenge Cornyn, full stop. Over a steep pour of whiskey at a billionaire's ranch in West Texas, the party bosses would have cited Paxton's long list of scandals and said, "This is the end of your political career, not an invitation to take it to the national stage."

And the bosses of the Democratic Party, perhaps over martinis at a spa resort outside Austin, would put their hand heavily on the scale for Talarico. Not for policy's sake. There are few obvious policy differences between him and Crockett. But because Crockett's strategy of turning out energized progressives across the state simply will not work. There simply aren't enough of them. Dallas, Austin, Houston — these are still blueberries in the tomato soup.

The goal for Democrats has to be to bring in the suburbs, the moderates, and the people who are disengaged from politics because they find the whole thing so divisive and angry. There's more of them than usual. Trump is under water with Texas likely voters on his handling of key issues; 55% disapprove of his handling of inflation and the cost of living. And Democrats did recently win a special election outside of Fort Worth, flipping a deep-red seat.

Even so, the hypothetical polling match-ups still have Cornyn or Paxton beating either Crocket or Talarico every time. That's why my imaginary Democratic bosses would say, "We respect Crockett's political talent. But Talarico can flip a Trump district, and his unfavorability numbers are significantly lower. That means people won't show up to vote against him."

But my party bosses aren't real. Although Trump's endorsement seems to matter to a surprising degree, overall political party infrastructure is weak. "They can't make decisions about who should represent them and who their candidates ought to be. All they can do is act as stages for narcissists," said AEI constitutional scholar Yuval Levin. "And [the parties] pride themselves in this. They say, 'Anybody can get on the debate stage, anybody can make it through a process.' That's actually not a good thing." And on top of that, the media temperature is hot, news is fragmented, money is flowing in from all sides and people are angry.

I watched the first televised debate between Talarico and Crockett. In the strange times in which we live, I (a center-right conservative) found myself agreeing with their calls to end Trump's protectionist tariff racket, which is driving up costs and punishing our allies. I found myself nodding when Talarico called out the historic level of self-enrichment occurring in Trump's inner circle. I was soothed that neither of them called for abolishing ICE, but rather refocusing Immigration and Customs Enforcement on its original mission: pursuing violent immigrant criminals within our borders. (I hope they are telling the truth.) I, too, am appalled by the AI data centers in our backyard and worried about their impact on water and energy. You don't have to go all Al Gore to want a little caution.

I found myself predictably frustrated at other parts. You think health care is expensive now? Wait until you see the massive tax hikes Medicare For All would require — no, taxing only the rich can't cover it — and lose your employer plan. Universal

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000093

Cont. from "Texas needs…"

healthcare systems in peer countries like the UK are breaking or broken; people can't get into emergency rooms. (Although I've long believed there should be universal catastrophic health insurance paired with health savings accounts. Still waiting on a politician to adopt that one.)

Talarico's focus on public education is also good, especially early literacy efforts and tutoring. But school choice works, too; it shouldn't be treated like a punching bag.

And no one seems to want to talk about the federal deficit, the historic liability that drags behind us like a ball and chain, rattling particularly loudly for progressives given their proclivity for large government spending programs, from health care to universal child care.

A closing word for my rabble-rouser friends. I know that decades of "boring politics" is how we got to this anti-establishment moment. Archaic institutions (and people) didn't do enough. Things were too polished and buttoned up. But if the last 10 years have taught us anything, it's that different isn't always better. Raw is not more virtuous. Someone telling you lies and abusing the office in plain daylight is bad, too.

There are worse things to wish for than a boring primary.

This column reflects the personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

Abby McCloskey is a columnist, podcast host, and consultant. She directed domestic policy on two presidential campaigns and was director of economic policy at the American Enterprise Institute.

Beaumont
Enterprise FEB 20 2026

Gov. Abbott rallies Beaumont voters during campaign stop

By Tessa Noble

Texas Governor Greg Abbott, along with several other state candidates and officials, visited Jefferson County on the campaign trail during a Wednesday stop in Beaumont.

Abbott participated in a campaign event at Madison's restaurant with Texas Speaker of the House Dustin Burrows, Texas Commissioner of Agriculture candidate Nate Sheets, Texas Comptroller Kelly Hancock and Senate District 4 candidate Brett Ligon.

They urged attendees to vote, while also speaking about their accomplishments and plans for the future. Abbott specifically touted his work in controlling the border and removing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs from schools and government across the state. He also spoke about what he wants to do if reelected, advocating for property tax relief.

"We've been increasing that homestead exemption year after year after year, and there's not yet one single person that comes up to me and says, 'I'm perfectly happy with my property tax bill,' because you're not," Abbott said. "It still costs too much. I've talked to people in Beaumont…in urban, suburban and rural areas across the state, and I put together the following plan that I want to get passed this next session. The only way I can get it passed is if I have the support of the people of Texas."

Abbott advocated for lowering the homestead exemption, eliminating school property taxes and keeping appraisals low. He said the state should fully fund public schools, not homeowners. Abbott said he wants Texas to be at the top in education.

"We're number one in so many different ways, but I said it's time to set our sights on another number one ranking," Abbott said. "Texas must rank number one for educating the children of our great state."

Abbott outlined his plan to accomplish that, which included school choice along with increased education funding, teacher pay raises and banning DEI from school curricula — much of which he's already worked to implement.

Early voting in the primary runs through Feb. 27. Election day is March 3.

Galveston County
Daily-News FEB 20 2026

UT Regents OK 'Blue Zone' meant to make Galvestonians live longer

By Mason H. Lerner

The University of Texas System Board of Regents this week approved an agreement authorizing a multi-year initiative that healthcare experts think might lead islanders to live much longer, much healthier lives.

The approval allows the University of Texas Medical Branch to move forward with launching the Blue Zones Project in March. The effort will begin with a six- to nine-month phase focused on hiring local staff, reviewing data, building partnerships and developing an implementation plan before a public kickoff later this year.

The project is a population health initiative based on research identifying regions of the world with unusually high concentrations of long-lived residents.

The hope is to incorporate those life-extending habits into Galveston's institutional, social and individual fabric, advocates said.

The model focuses on shaping environments — including schools, workplaces, grocery stores, restaurants and public spaces — to make healthier choices easier and more accessible.

"UTMB has been part of Galveston's story for nearly 135 years, and our commitment to the health and vitality of this community runs deep," UTMB President and CEO Dr. Jochen Reiser said. "Our mission extends well beyond the walls of our hospitals and clinics."

The medical branch invested $100,000 to fund the initial readiness assessment phase. That payment came from UTMB Health hospital revenues and not from state-allocated educational funds, he said.

The assessment examined Galveston's health data, infrastructure, policies and organizational capacity across three categories Blue Zones defines as "People, Places and Policy." Reiser described the resulting report as "extensive."

Full implementation costs for the three- to five- transformation phase have not yet been publicly disclosed. Blue Zones projects typically operate under a multi- funding structure supported by community sponsors such as health systems and foundations.

The city of Galveston isn't financially committed to the project at this stage, City Manager Brian Maxwell said.

"We are committed to participating to help make the project successful, but we aren't involved with its financing," he said.

Because the agreement exceeded certain financial thresholds, it required approval by the UT System Board of Regents.

"We obviously have a public responsibility to report exactly what it is that we are doing," Reiser said.

If Galveston moves into full implementation, certification as a Blue Zones Community would require meeting a series of measurable benchmarks.

At least 20 percent of residents — roughly 10,000 people — would have to sign a Blue Zones Personal Pledge and complete at least one health-related action. The community would have to demonstrate statistically significant improvement in its Community Well-Being Index, measured through Gallup surveys.

Organizational milestones would require certification of at least half of the community's top 20 employers as Blue Zones worksites, along with certification of at least 25 percent of public schools and 25 Percent of locally owned restaurants.

In addition, at least a quarter of grocery stores would have to participate with measures such as stocking healthier checkout options so impulse purchases aren't as junk-food driven.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000094

Cont. from "UT Regents…"

Policy milestones typically include adoption of improved walkability and bike-ability, increased access to healthy food and strengthened smoke-free policies in public spaces.

Certification is generally granted for five years and requires re-certification to demonstrate sustained results.

The six- to nine-month readiness phase included meetings with community leaders, employers, educators and residents, a key to the project's success Executive Vice President & Chief Development Officer of Blue Zones Dan Buettner Jr. said. More than 700 residents attended engagement events, he said.

"After a year of getting to know each other, we understand that Galveston is ready to be the next demonstration in America for what can be done around well-being and health in the community," Beuttner said.

The collaboration represents the first time Blue Zones has partnered with an academic institution. Buettner is excited about how the shared expertise could help reshape what healthy living means in Galveston. And the answer isn't just working out and eating healthy food, he said.

"The longest-lived people on Earth don't pursue health," Buettner said. "They live in environments where the healthy choice is the easy choice."

Blue Zones focuses on redesigning those environments rather than relying on individual willpower.

"In America, the unhealthy choice is the ubiquitous choice, it's the marketed choice, it's the default choice," Buettner said. "What we've found is you can reverse engineer environments where the healthy choice becomes easier, and that has a compounding effect — not just on health, but on productivity and community vitality."

Buettner believes Galveston's geographic boundaries and institutional structure — including a single primary school district and a major academic medical center — make coordination more manageable than in larger metropolitan areas.

"Having one main policy body and one main school district allows you to move faster," he said. "An island in a contained environment like this lends itself to faster follow-through."

Then medical branch will establish internal oversight aligned with its four pillars — education, research, clinical care and innovation — to track progress and measure outcomes, Reiser said.

"We want to measure incidents and prevalence of common disease," he said. "We would like to see it come down over time."

The initiative reflects a broader shift toward prevention, Reiser said.

"In America, we are very focused on treating disease, and we are very good at it," he said. "Through Blue Zones, we are shifting the disease spectrum toward health."

During the foundation phase, Blue Zones will recruit and hire staff from Galveston to lead the local effort, including an executive director and sector leads focused on people, places and policy. A local steering committee comprised of local leaders will develop a community blueprint tailored to the island.

"It's not work you do to a community," Buettner said. "It's work the community runs. We're there as a quality partner, but at the end of the day, it's a Galveston story."

A public meeting about the project is scheduled for March 5 from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. at Levin Hall, 1006 Market St.

The initiative will depend on sustained participation from residents, employers and civic leaders over several s.

"This is a long-term partnership," Buettner said.

Mason H. Lerner: mason.lerner@galvnews.com; 409-683-5247

Lubbock
Avalanche-Journal FEB 20 2026

Texas AG Paxton launches election fraud tipline in March 2026 primaries

By Mateo Rosiles

With early voting now under way for the Texas 2026 March primaries, a state official has launched a tipline in an effort to shore up election integrity in the state.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton launched an email tipline where the public may report suspected violations of Texas election law and issued a legal advisory on election integrity.

"Significant growth of the noncitizen population in Texas and a pattern of partisan efforts to illegally weaponize voter registration and the voting process to manipulate electoral outcomes have created urgent risks to local, state, and federal elections," Paxton said. "The following guidance clarifies and emphasizes several key aspects of election law."

According to the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), Paxton will thoroughly investigate any suspected voter fraud and protect the integrity of our elections.

In an advisory, Paxton also issued the following guidelines as part of his Election Integrity Initiative.

Who can vote in elections in Texas?

The OAG said an individual must be a United States citizen and a Texas resident to vote, citing the U.S. Constitution for the definition of a U.S. citizen:

- An individual born in the United States.
- Born abroad to United States citizens.
- A naturalized United States citizen.

"It is a crime to vote in Texas if you are not a United States citizen and a Texas resident or to help someone vote who is not. You can be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison and pay up to a $10,000 fine," reads the advisory.

The OAG further clarified that an individual is not a U.S. Citizen because they are or have been any of the following:

- Residing in the United States.
- Lawfully present in the United States.
- Legally permitted to work in the United States.
- Granted asylum or are seeking asylum from the United States.
- Issued a social security number.
- Issued a driver's license or other state-issued identification card.

"It is a crime in Texas to lie about your citizenship when you register to vote or to help someone else do so. You can be sentenced to up to two years in a state jail and pay up to a $10,000 fine," reads the advisory.

When headed to the polls, the OAG also states that it is illegal to misrepresent your residence on an application for voter registration, an application for ballot by mail or poll check-in forms.

OAG issues warning about vote or ballot harvesting

"Beware of individuals who offer to help you apply for a mail-in ballot, offer to help you fill out your ballot, or offer to mail your ballot for you," reads the advisory. "To ensure no one attempts to vote criminally in your name, Texas law limits who can help you with casting your ballot."

According to the OAG, vote harvesting refers to attempts made to secure votes for a specific candidate under the pretext of helping you submit a ballot in areas with a high density of voters, including senior living facilities and group housing such as apartment buildings, being potential targets by vote harvesting operations.

What are my rights under Texas election laws?

According to the OAG, you have the right to:

- Vote independently.
- Decide how to vote.
- Vote your ballot in private.
- Seal and mail your ballot yourself.

If you are a disabled voter, the OAG states that Texas law prohibits anyone who assists you with a mail-in ballot from influencing how you vote.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000095

Cont. from "Texas AG Paxton…"

Individuals can ask others for assistance —as long as they complete an oath attesting that they have not tried to influence your vote — unless they are the following people:

- Your employer.
- Your employer's agent.
- An agent of a union to which you belong

Texas prohibits government officials in electioneering

"Public officials and employees, including school district officials, may not use public resources to advocate, support, or oppose a candidate or measure," reads the advisory.

According to the OAG, it is a crime for public employees and officers to use public personnel, equipment, internet, email or facilities to distribute political advertising.

The OAG has defined "Political advertising" as a written communication that supports or opposes: a candidate for nomination or election to public office; a candidate for nomination or election to an office of a political party; a political party; a public officer; or a measure.

How to report an election violation in Texas?

If you suspect an election violation you may file a complaint with:

- The Texas Attorney General's Office at illegalvoting@oag.texas.gov.
- The Texas Secretary of State at VoteTexas.gov.
- Your local district attorney.
- Your local law enforcement agency.

For more information on reporting a complaint visit texasattorneygeneral.gov/initiatives/election-integrity.

Mateo Rosiles is a reporter for the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal and USA TODAY Network in Texas. Got a news tip for him? Email him: **mrosiles@usatodayco.com.**

McAllen
Monitor FEB 20 2026

Six deaths in six weeks: What to know about ICE detentions in Texas

By Lomi Kriel and Colleen Deguzman

The 911 call reported an apparent suicide.

A 55-year-old Cuban "tried to hang himself," a federal contractor alerted emergency responders last month from a sprawling El Paso immigrant detention center.

By the next day, records show that Geraldo Lunas Campos had died at the facility, marking the second fatality in weeks at the hastily constructed Fort Bliss Army tent structure known as Camp East Montana. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials attributed his death to "medical distress."

But the medical examiner ruled his death a homicide — he was suffocated. The autopsy found that Lunas Campos became "unresponsive while being physically restrained by law enforcement."

His death, which has so far prompted no criminal investigation or charges, has renewed scrutiny not only on that camp, but on conditions at the nearly two dozen ICE detention sites in Texas.

In the span of just six weeks between December and January, six people died while detained by ICE in Texas — three of them at Camp East Montana. The deadly period began with a 48-year-old Guatemalan, Francisco Gaspar-Andres, who ICE said died on Dec. 3 of liver and kidney failure after being hospitalized for more than two weeks following detention.

Detention facilities are seeing more overcrowding and understaffing as the Trump administration ramps up enforcement in the interior of the country, experts said. Unlawful border crossings have plummeted due to the administration's restrictions. Federal data shows that most current ICE detainees are not accused of crimes beyond civil immigration offenses.

The expansion of ICE detention is "coupled with a dissolution of oversight, a reduction in detention standards, and draconian restrictions on releases," said Claire Trickler-McNulty, a former senior ICE official during the last three administrations. "That appears destined to lead to more deaths, medical issues and trauma for detainees."

Thirty-two people died in ICE custody nationwide last year, surpassing the previous high of 20 in 2005, according to federal data. Nearly a quarter of last year's deaths occurred in Texas.

Scott Shuchart, a former head of policy at ICE under Biden and senior adviser under Trump's first term to DHS' Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, said the agency "struggled to ensure adequate medical care" when its detainee population was 35,000. Now it is more than doubling that number.

The government last October also temporarily stopped paying many medical providers due to bureaucratic changes under the administration. As a result, ICE for months has been unable to reimburse health care officials, including for prescription medication, dialysis and chemotherapy, according to redacted ICE documents first reported by Popular Information.

Spokespeople for the Department of Homeland Security and ICE did not respond to detailed questions.

Texas is the last stop for most immigrants caught in the administration's dragnet, with more than 18,700 people detained in the state's ICE facilities as of February the nation's highest share, according to federal data analyzed by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a nonprofit that analyzes government data obtained via public records requests. Over the past six months, an average of four deportation flights have departed the state daily, the most in the country, according to ICE Flight Monitor, a nonprofit that tracks them. And a significant percentage of growing unlawful detention cases filed in federal courts stem from Texas.

The state is the "blueprint and the epicenter of the country's immigration enforcement system, acting as the deportation funnel," said Kristin Etter, director of policy and legal services at the statewide advocacy group Texas Immigration Law Council, "Texas is where immigration enforcement begins, where it ends, and sometimes, where it does both."

What's happening at Camp East Montana?

The massive East Montana tent camp is currently the country's largest ICE detention center, holding more than 3,000 men and women on a military base that's seen as a model for what the administration plans to build.

Constructed in a record two months last summer after the government granted a $1.2 billion contract to Acquisition Logistics, a small Virginia corporation with no listed experience running detention facilities, the camp has been plagued with problems since it opened. Claims of medical neglect, spoiled, insufficient food and unsanitary conditions are rife and advocates call it an "unfolding humanitarian crisis."

More than 45 people detained there alleged abuse and serious injuries to attorneys, according to a letter advocacy groups sent to DHS and ICE supervisors in December. Those allegations included a teen hospitalized after he accused staff of slamming him to the ground and beating him. The detention staffers blocked the security cameras, he said, and "grabbed my testicles and firmly crushed them."

ICE's own inspectors found at least 60 violations at the facility shortly after it opened, the Washington Post first reported in September, including that the contractors had employed little more than a half of the security personnel it had promised. DHS spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin, who did not respond to repeated requests from The Texas Tribune, said in a statement that "any claim that there are 'inhumane' conditions at ICE detention centers are categorically false." She said detainees are provided "proper meals," medical treatment and clean clothing.

Two officials who viewed that ICE investigative report or were briefed by the agency additionally told the Tribune that the facility had no policy detailing when or how contractors can use force. It lacked a compliance manager designated to oversee sexual assault allegations, required under federal regulations. Contractors were also

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provided only 40 hours of training, a fraction of at least 42 days typically required of regular ICE agents, according to those officials who were not authorized to speak publicly.

Acquisition Logistics and two of its contractors in charge of detention and medical care did not respond to questions so it is unclear if those conditions have since improved and if new policies were instituted.

U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar, an El Paso Democrat who has visited the site at least a half dozen times, said the conditions at East Montana are rapidly "deteriorating."

After tuberculosis and COVID-19 cases, both highly infectious contagions, were confirmed there, Escobar said that employees told her not to enter a certain area because detainees had yet to be tested. Few people wore masks.

"All it takes is one major public health issue where there's not been enough oversight, where human life and safety and welfare is not prioritized, for there to be a massive health impact on the community," Escobar said in an interview. "Americans should care when these massive tent cities or massive warehouses are very quickly put up and filled with thousands of human beings and are run by corporations that are prioritizing profits, not people."

What happened to Lunas Campos?

Despite the crescendo of complaints at East Montana, none have resonated publicly as much as the death of Lunas Campos.

Six El Paso detainees described in federal court statements that the father of three, who lived in Rochester, N.Y., for nearly 20 years before ICE detained him in July, begged for days to receive his asthma medication. Detention staff refused and threatened him with solitary confinement, inmates said.

After Lunas Campos was dragged in shackles to an isolation unit, detainees recalled "what sounded like the slamming of a person's body against the floor or a wall." They said they heard him gasp that he could no longer breathe. Then, "silence."

Chris Benoit, a lawyer for his children suing the government, said they "want to establish the truth about what the guards did to their father and demand accountability for his death."

Local and federal prosecutors have yet to say whether they would seek criminal charges following the medical examiner's ruling that the death of Lunas Campos, who had long–standing previous criminal convictions including child sex assault, was a homicide. Experts said that state prosecutors have precedent to pursue such charges despite the death occurring on military property, which is under federal jurisdiction. It remains under internal investigation.

The federal government tried to deport detainees who witnessed Lunas Campos' last moments. A federal judge in Texas so far has blocked that attempt.

Trickler-McNulty, the former senior ICE official, said that instance was the first immigrant death linked to a homicide involving ICE staff that she could recall in at least 15 years.

Fatalities in ICE custody are typically the result of poor medical care or suicides, said Shuchart, the former Trump oversight official.

"Deaths from staff violence are another level," he said, calling them "preventable, and the result of training and supervision failures."

What about the other ICE detention deaths?

Eleven days after Lunas Campos died, 36-year-old Victor Manuel Diaz marked the third fatality in six weeks at the El Paso tent camp.

The 911 call was similar: "We got a situation here," a contractor told emergency responders. "They found someone who tried to commit suicide." Guards, he added, found the Nicaraguan man with pants tied around his neck.

Unlike Lunas Campos, Diaz's body was sent to a U.S. Army hospital rather than the local medical examiner, where a military spokesperson said that the agency would not make his autopsy public.

His family does not believe his death was a suicide, according to their attorney Randall Kallinen.

Of the nine people who died in Texas ICE facilities since Trump's second term, many were in their mid-forties. Although the agency declared that they mostly died of natural causes, investigations are pending in several cases and many autopsies have not been released.

Tien Xuan Phan, a 55-year-old Vietnamese man held at the Karnes County Immigration Processing Center outside San Antonio, for example, died last July. ICE claimed he experienced seizures and vomiting, then became unresponsive.

Eight months later, the Bexar County District Attorney's office declined to release Xuan Phan's autopsy, citing a "pending" federal investigation.

What is supposed to happen if someone dies in ICE custody?

Congress imposed strict rules on how deaths in ICE custody should be reported, which include publicly posting "relevant details" within two business days and requiring ICE's Office of Professional Responsibility to investigate each death and provide a report to senior management. Within 90 days, ICE must make the reports public.

But under Trump's second term, experts said, death reports from ICE detention have often been delayed.

After Lunas Campos died at East Montana, for example, ICE waited nearly a week to issue the release claiming he died from "distress." Only after the medical examiner advised his family that it might be a homicide, did ICE officials allege a suicide attempt.

Authorities without ties to the federal government should investigate ICE deaths and conduct autopsies, said Angélica César, a Human Rights Watch official monitoring ICE deaths in Texas.

Doing so "would ultimately protect both the families and the integrity of the investigative process," she said.

ICE lacks protocols for how and when to conduct autopsies after a detainee's death, according to a 2024 analysis of thousands of government records and interviews obtained and conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union, Physicians for Human Rights, and American Oversight, an investigative nonprofit group.

The agency, for example, did not initially order an autopsy on Ronald Cruz, a 39-year-old Honduran who died in 2018 while at the South Texas Port Isabel Detention Center. Only when his family said that they would pay for one, did ICE reveal that Cruz had died of bacterial meningitis. Whistleblowers called his medical care "grossly negligent" and experts later said Cruz could have survived with appropriate care, according to the ACLU's report. If he had been given antibiotics or sent to the emergency room sooner, he "likely" would not have died," according to a doctor who specializes in correctional health and reviewed the evidence.

ICE at times fails to preserve evidence needed for required death investigations, said Andrew Free, a lawyer and researcher who specializes in such detention deaths. Civil lawsuits have revealed that detention officials at times destroyed relevant video footage that would aid investigations, he said.

Attorneys and whistleblowers said that appeared to be the case with Gourgen Mirimanian, a 54-year-old Armenian who died in 2018 at the Prairieland Detention Center, 44 miles south of Dallas, according to the ACLU report. Found unresponsive in his bunk, his death was ruled due to hypertensive and cardiovascular disease. But ICE officials later reported that some security footage of his last hours was hard to see clearly and other crucial video "not retained."

At Camp East Montana, officials there have so far refused to release video related to Lunas Campos' death, his lawyer said.

What medical care do ICE detainees receive?

Although claims of abuse and poor medical care have plagued ICE detention facilities for years, conditions for immigrants there under this administration are deadlier, according to half a dozen former officials who oversaw ICE under Trump's first administration and the Biden administration.

Historically, many deaths in ICE custody likely could have been avoided with better medical care, experts and advocates said, a pattern that sparks concerns given the government's skyrocketing detention.

The ACLU examined the deaths of 52 people in ICE custody between 2017 and 2021 and found that 49 of them were "likely preventable," most often resulting from faulty medical diagnoses by detention staff. In 40% of those deaths, ICE staff failed to provide timely care, the report found.

Lawyers and congressional representatives say conditions have worsened at such centers, including the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, 70 miles south of San Antonio, which drew widespread attention after photographs of 5-year-old Liam Conjeo Ramos went viral

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following his detention last month in Minneapolis. More than 1,300 parents and children are currently at that facility, congressional representatives have said. At least 1,000 complaints of poor medical care have been lodged since the administration reopened the detention center last April, according to Faisal Al-Juburi, co-chief executive at the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, a Texas nonprofit that works in that facility. Last month, at least two cases of measles were confirmed at the facility.

Among the many cases of alleged medical neglect is a 2-month-old boy detained there for three weeks who was hospitalized in the past few days after "choking on his own vomit," according to U.S Rep. Joaquin Castro, a San Antonio Democrat. The infant had bronchitis, he said, and was unresponsive for hours before being discharged. Late Tuesday, he and his family were suddenly deported despite attempts by Castro and lawyers.

"To unnecessarily deport a sick baby and his entire family is heinous," said Castro, who in recent weeks has escalated concerns about the nation's only facility currently holding parents with their children. He called ICE's decision "monstrous," pledging to seek details. DHS officials said on X that the mother "chose to take her child into custody with her" and "enter and remain in the country illegally."

Attorneys, echoing complaints in an ongoing lawsuit seeking to prevent the Trump administration from terminating a decades-old settlement governing the rights of children in detention, describe at Dilley impotable water, barely any schooling and detainees forced to sleep under fluorescent lights. Medical care is lacking even for those with terminal conditions such as a 6-year-old with leukemia who was detained along with his family last year. He had little access to care, his lawyers said, before they were able to free him.

Brian Todd, a spokesperson for CoreCivic, the private company that runs ICE facilities in Texas including the one in Dilley, said allegations of poor medical care "do not reflect the hard work our staff does every day to help people in our facilities get the care they need."

"Comprehensive, around-the-clock care is delivered by licensed physicians, dentists, advanced practice providers, nurses, and mental health professionals," Todd added.

He said claims of poor drinking water at Dilley are "patently false" because detainees and staff consume the same water as the community.

At the Prairieland detention center outside Dallas, a New Jersey woman who was arrested after a 2024 Columbia University Gaza protest was hospitalized this month following a fall in the bathroom. Leqaa Kordia, 33, said in a statement through her lawyers last week that the facility's "filthy" conditions made her ill and that the fall induced a seizure. Her lawyers and family did not know where she was as she remained chained for days to the hospital bed.

Detained alongside her are pregnant women and those with terminal cancer and severe disabilities, said Travis Fife, an attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project, a statewide advocacy group. "Overcrowded, inhumane" conditions threaten what he called a "civil rights disaster."

Although the ICE Health Service Corps is responsible for detainees' medical care, it provides direct treatment at just 17 of more than 200 facilities across the country, including six in Texas. The majority of immigrants held by ICE are in facilities where private prison companies or their contractors provide medical care at profit.

During this administration, more ICE health staffers and their government liaisons have quit, citing concerns about the quality of care they are able to provide, according to NPR.

Charlotte Weiss, an El Paso attorney for the Texas Civil Rights Project, said that poor medical treatment forces immigrants into choosing between grave health conditions in hopes of staying in the U.S. or giving up and returning to danger "just so they can get out."

Are there more detention centers coming to Texas?

Despite growing resistance from some state and local leaders, the administration seeks to open additional ICE facilities in warehouses across Texas and the country to handle an exploding detainee population.

Several of the state's ICE centers were at or near capacity last year, according to ICE data.

The government needs more detention space in part because a bottleneck of nearly 4 million immigration court cases hamstrings the administration unless it incites or forces people to leave on their own. It has offered $2,600 to those who voluntarily depart. After a 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling this month upheld a Trump policy seeking to deny bonds for detained immigrants, many in Texas will remain locked up throughout their deportation proceedings, which can take years, unless they choose to return.

Some cities have protested ICE's expansion. Residents vehemently denounced ICE's plan to lease a warehouse in Hutchins, outside Dallas, that was slated to hold more migrants than the city's 8,000 residents. This weekend, the real estate company owning the building said that it "will not enter" into any ICE agreement.

The administration is also pursuing an El Paso County site expected to hold up to 8,500 people, although city officials last week approved a motion seeking to prevent that. At least two facilities are planned in McAllen and San Antonio, In the latter, U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales, a Laredo Republican who represents a sliver of the city, promised that it would bring "good paying jobs," although San Antonio Mayor Gina Ortiz Jones, argued otherwise in demanding more transparency.

The mounting concerns at the El Paso camp are just a fraction of what will occur as the administration multiplies its detention capacity, said Escobar, the El Paso Congress member.

Such an expansion would be problematic to "not just the people in custody," she said, "but to the communities that are going to have to grapple with the health risks, with the demands on their emergency services, the impact to their hospitals" as a result of the increased needs.

"Rapidly proliferating the problem," Escobar added, "will be a nightmare."

San Angelo
Standard-Times FEB 20 2026

San Angelo City Council mulls new data center guidelines, noise limits

By Rosanna Fraire

The San Angelo City Council discussed the guidelines and conditional uses that could be used for data center type projects in its meeting Tuesday.

In the Feb. 17 evening meeting, Planning and Development Director Aaron Vannoy was getting direction on design guidelines and conditional uses for the center.

The site is northeast of the city near U.S. Highway 67 North and City Farm Road on city-owned property. The company looking to buy the property for the center is Skybox Data Centers.

The City Council approved the rezoning of a district from the ranch-and-estate zoning district to the light-manufacturing zoning district, making way for the possible data center in its Jan. 13 meeting.

The city staff is in the next step of the planning process for this area and wanted the City Council members and public to have input on the guidelines.

These conditions would also apply to future data-center type developments.

What is under consideration?

The proposal would be to implement a conditional use permit process for properties zoned as light manufacturing and heavy manufacturing for a data center site exceeding 3,000 square feet, council documents stated.

The site and design guidelines under consideration are the following:

- Setback buffer zones
- Landscape
- Noise
- Lighting
- Traffic circulation and parking
- Fencing, Screening and Retaining walls

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Vannoy discussed these items in detail and what conditions would be placed on each one, including fencing type, parking lot sizes, lighting direction and more.

Noise levels and data centers

One item discussed was noise.

The conditions recommended that the maximum sound level at the property line be 60 dBa in daytime and 55 dBa at nighttime. The dBa decibel is an A-weighted sound level that is perceived by the human ear.

It also suggested generator testing only be conducted between 9 a.m.-4 p.m. unless approved by the Planning and Development Services director. There would also be noise studies pre- and post-construction of the center.

The nonprofit Center for Hearing and Communication said this about noise: "Continued exposure to noise above 70 dBA over time will cause hearing loss. The volume (dBA) and the length of exposure to the sound will tell you how harmful the noise is. In general, the louder the noise, the less time required before hearing loss will occur."

Reaction from the public

Public comment on the agenda item mentioned adjusting some numbers and conditions.

"I don't know that a conditional use is the right thing," Russell Gully said during public comment. "If you're wanting to encourage a data center to come to San Angelo, let's scale this back and look at what really protects San Angelo and its citizens."

Vannoy said the conditional use process would be presented to the Planning Commission on March 16, and then the commission would make recommendations to the City Council on March 17 with a second reading April 7.

Rick Weise, chief project officer with the city, said the public can contact him for more recommendations.

The public can email Rick at rick.weise@sanangelo.gov.

Galveston County
Daily-News FEB 21 2026

UTMB Health to more than double ER capacity in $300M League City expansion

By David Mercado

UTMB Health will more than double emergency capacity, add inpatient beds, expand diagnostic imaging and enlarge pharmacy and laboratory services at its League City hospital campus in a $300 million project aimed at meeting growing demand in north Galveston County.

The University of Texas System Board of Regents approved the multiphase expansion Friday, clearing the way for staged construction. Services will open as each phase is completed, and the full project is expected to be finished by 2030, officials said.

"The regents and I are very proud of the extraordinary role UTMB plays in offering world-class health care to the coastal communities," UT System Chancellor John M. Zerwas said. "The board's action is one example of that."

The project will build a new 40-bed emergency department to replace a 17-bed emergency room. The larger emergency department is intended to reduce crowding and improve patient flow as demand increases, according to the university.

The League City campus has 97 beds and handles about 42,370 emergency visits annually, according to university records. The hospital, 2240 Interstate 45, opened in 2016, and a five-story tower added in 2020 brought 60 additional beds.

The emergency room will be converted into a 20-bed observation unit for patients who need short-term monitoring without full admission. Administrative offices, training facilities and the outpatient rehabilitation clinic will move to newly constructed space, allowing those areas to become a new 20-bed medical-surgical unit.

The expansion also adds magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography, ultrasound and fluoroscopy in emergency and inpatient settings, along with expanded procedural imaging. UTMB Health will enlarge its inpatient pharmacy and renovate laboratory space to improve medication delivery and speed diagnostic testing.

The expansion comes as League City's population continues to grow. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the city's population at 118,456 as of July 1, 2024, up from 114,392 in 2020.

City officials expect additional residential growth as construction advances on state Highway 99, also known as Grand Parkway, extending through western League City. The city's population is projected to reach and perhaps exceed 200,000 in coming decades, city staff said.

"This expansion represents a major investment in the health and well-being of League City and the surrounding communities," UTMB Health President and CEO Dr. Jochen Reiser said.

"As our region continues to grow, so does the need for timely access to advanced emergency and inpatient care. This project ensures we are not only keeping pace with that growth but leading with innovation, efficiency, and an unwavering commitment to exceptional patient care."

Regents also approved an agreement allowing UTMB Health to launch the Blue Zones Project in Galveston, a multi-year initiative aimed at improving residents' health and longevity by reshaping local environments. The effort will begin with a six- to nine-month planning phase funded by UTMB Health, with full implementation contingent on meeting participation and health benchmarks, officials said.

"UTMB has proudly served our local communities for generations," Reiser said. "This expansion strengthens our ability to deliver high-quality, coordinated care close to home, ensuring that families have access to the advanced services they need today and in the decades ahead."

David Mercado: 409 683-5230; david.mercado@galvnews.com

Longview
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State Rep. Jay Dean's GOP primary challenger files defamation lawsuit related to his campaign claims

By Jordan Green

State Rep. Jay Dean's Republican primary opponent has filed a defamation lawsuit against him, claiming he falsely accused her of wanting to eliminate the state's teacher retirement system.

Melissa Beckett filed the suit this week against Dean, R-Longview, in Gregg County's Pct. 1 Justice of the Peace Court. Beckett is seeking an unspecified amount of damages, though JP courts can handle cases involving $20,000 or less.

The lawsuit came one day after early voting began for the March 3 primary for the House District 7 race and other county, state and federal offices.

The lawsuit accuses Dean of stating on social media that Beckett wants to eliminate the Texas Teacher Retirement System (TRS), a claim Beckett said has damaged her reputation and influenced voters. The lawsuit states Dean's actions amount to defamation with actual malice.

"He is using teachers to win an election," Beckett told the News-Journal on Thursday. "He is stirring up anxiety and fear in an entire voting block. And that, more than anything, really angers me because they don't deserve that."

Dean said Thursday that he has not seen the lawsuit yet but is not concerned about it.

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Cont. from "State Rep. Jay Dean's…"

"Everything I've said is the truth," he said. "They do the same thing, the Democrats, to our President Trump. When they can't beat him on policy, they can't beat him at the ballot box, they make up lawsuit after lawsuit against him. That's all this particular situation is."

On Feb. 16, Dean made a post on his official Facebook page that includes a screenshot of a December post from Texas Education 911, a parental rights advocacy organization that Beckett founded.

Beckett has not been a part of the organization or its social media posts since 2023, she told the News-Journal, though the organization has endorsed her for election.

The Texas Education 911 post from December read: "If Public Education were genuinely DOGEd, we could cut so much waste and return the money to the people. Maybe it's time to retire the TRS and switch to 401Ks." That post has since been deleted.

In his Monday Facebook post, Dean included a photo of that post and wrote above it: "Calling for the elimination of TRS isn't bold – it's reckless and irresponsible. It threatens the financial security of educators who have dedicated their lives to our kids and our communities. And let's be clear: (Beckett) knew it was wrong – that's why she deleted the post. When someone shows you who they are, believe them."

Although Dean did not name Beckett in his post, he made comments below the post that made clear that he was referring to "his opponent," according to the lawsuit.

Beckett commented on the post and said, in part: "I have no desire to touch [teacher] retirement. … Shame on you JAY DEAN!"

Beckett told the News-Journal that she does not support abolishing the retirement system.

Texas Education 911 commented on Dean's post and stated Beckett is no longer affiliated with the organization and had nothing to do with the original post or its deletion.

Beckett's lawsuit states: "Accusing a candidate of seeking to eliminate TRS would reasonably cause teachers, retirees, and their families to view that candidate as threatening their financial security and retirement benefits."

According to the lawsuit, Dean commented on his post that he was unaware Beckett was no longer affiliated with Texas Education 911. But after learning that, he continued to say Beckett had suggested eliminating TRS, the lawsuit states.

On Feb. 17, Dean made another Facebook post that includes photos of posts made by Texas Education 911. The Texas Education 911 posts level criticisms of perceived problems in public education. Dean did not say Beckett remains a member of the organization but wrote: "These screenshots are real posts from the organization my opponent founded and still promotes in every piece of her campaign material. Now that voters in HD7 are seeing what that organization actually says about public schools, teachers, administrators, school board members and parents, she's trying to distance herself."

In a comment below the post, Dean referred to the organization as "Melissa Beckett's organization."

The lawsuit states Dean's statements caused reputational harm to Beckett and influenced voters.

"As a direct result, Plaintiff suffered damage to her reputation, standing in this community, and electoral prospects," the lawsuit states.

Beckett told the News-Journal on Thursday: "I am winning the election. There's no doubt in my mind. And so I know (Dean is) desperate. … He has crossed a line, and he does not get to be the bully anymore."

Dean said Beckett has been endorsed by Texas Education 911.

"You're telling me that she is the founder, obviously the leader of, Texas Education 911, and she had absolutely no knowledge of what they were posting about DOGE-ing public education and funding and suggesting the removal of TRS to a 401K plan?

"I think common sense people know exactly what she's trying to do here, their campaign of spewing misinformation."

The lawsuit also accuses Dean of blocking constituents on his official Facebook page after they attempted to correct him, conduct that raises "constitutional concerns and underscores the deliberate nature of his conduct." The lawsuit cites a 2024 Supreme Court ruling, Lindke v. Freed, which states that a government official who restricts someone's access to his or her public social media accounts is, in some cases, engaging in state action.

Dean said he has blocked people who harassed his supporters and used vulgarity, and public officials are allowed to do so.

Early voting continues through Feb. 27. Election Day is March 3.

McAllen
Monitor FEB 21 2026

School districts in Hidalgo County passing on school prayer bill

BY OMAR ZAPATA

Hidalgo County school districts are voting to opt out on Senate Bill 11 (SB 11), a state legislative option for prayer during the school day.

SB 11 passed during the 89th Texas Legislature and gives the school boards across the state the choice to adopt a policy that requires every campus to provide students and employees an opportunity to participate in a period of prayer or reading of a religious text each school day.

Participation requires parental consent and any religious activity must not be conducted over loudspeakers or in the presence of students without consent.

School districts are required to vote on the

policy by March 1.

On Monday, several school boards opted out of the bill, including the Weslaco and Edcouch-Elsa school districts.

During the WISD meeting, Superintendent Richard Rivera shared that 13 campus principals were against the bill, with five being for it.

WISD board member Benjamin Castillo took time to explain SB 11 more in detail since he has been dealing with the bill for the last two weeks as part of his law firm that represents several Valley school districts.

He said most school districts are opting out of the bill due to procedures and extra work placed on schools to be in compliance with the bill if passed.

"(SB 11) … allows schools to designate prayer time," he said. "It can't be during instruction, it has to be during non-instructional time, either in the morning or the afternoon. There's also a bunch of local campus administrators and teacher requirements. For example, we would need to get waivers from every student and every employee that would want to participate."

"We have to maintain a database … if we do move forward with this, we would have to have a separate area in the campus and make sure that nobody who doesn't have a waiver is not within an earshot. Most districts, which are for prayer, and we already have clubs in schools and stuff that allow for prayer, are opting out of these specific procedures."

Several school districts voted on the bill last week, with most voting to opt out.

Those include the Donna, Edinburg and the La Joya school districts.

Last week, the La Joya school district said in a news release that the decision not to adopt SB 11 does not change existing rights for students.

It also states that under state, federal and local board policy, students already have the right to voluntarily pray, read religious texts, express religious viewpoints and organize student religious groups before, during and after school.

The press release also listed examples of student-led groups and activities such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), FCA's national "Fields of Faith" event, Students With a Testimony, and student-led team prayer before and after athletic events.

School districts that have not voted on SB 11 have two weeks until the deadline to vote on the policy.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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McAllen
Monitor FEB 21 2026

Why Texas' redistricting plan isn't a sure bet

BY MAYA SWEEDLER, LEAH ASKARINAM AND SIMRAN PARWANI - Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Texas set the stage for this year's redistricting battle by drawing a new congressional map intended to boost Republicans in the midterm elections. Now, with primaries underway, the party's hopes hinge on a key question — whether voters who helped elect President Donald Trump two years ago will show up for other Republican candidates when he's not on the ballot.

The new map is supposed to help Republicans pick up five Democratic-held seats, a target set by Trump. If they succeed, Democrats will represent only eight of the state's 38 districts, down from their current 13.

Republicans pursued this goal with a tactic called "cracking," which means spreading Democratic-leaning voters across districts that include more Republican-leaning voters. This way, it's harder for Democrats to patch together a majority in individual congressional races.

But the math behind this isn't so simple. Predicting whether certain voters lean left or right, or whether they'll cast a ballot, is complex, and getting it wrong can have consequences.

One common approach is to look at the most recent general election. The logic is simple: As the latest expression of voter preferences, it offers the most up-to-date snapshot of the electorate.

The new map is more likely to deliver those five seats to the GOP if Texans vote the same way they did in the 2024 presidential election — that is, Trump voters stick with Republicans and Kamala Harris voters stick with Democrats. Under that assumption, seats like the new 28th and 34th Districts, which are currently represented by Democrats, would flip to Republican control.

But any single election is also shaped by its broader political environment. Was the incumbent party unpopular? How did voters feel about the economy?

In the case of 2024, those answers are "yes" and "bad." The election was a strong one for Republicans nationwide, and especially for Trump. An Associated Press analysis finds that if voters in 2026 were to cast ballots the same way they did in the 2024 presidential race, most of those races would not be particularly close. Only four would have margins within 15 percentage points.

However, applying the results of a more Democratic-leaning election to the new districts makes the picture appear more muddled. If voters revert to their 2020 presidential preferences, Republicans will have a harder time gaining all five seats.

When looking at 2020 presidential results on the new map instead of 2024, districts along the southern border, which have a high proportion of Hispanic voters, shift from narrow Republican

margins to narrow Democratic ones. Others, such as districts in and around Dallas, move from strongly Republican to more competitive, though still GOP-leaning. Under 2020 voting patterns, nine districts would have margins within 15 points.

To be clear, some seats — like a Dallas-area seat currently held by Democratic Rep. Marc Veasey, which has been stretched to include more Republican-leaning voters — include enough Republican-leaning areas that even 2020-style voting would not keep them in the Democratic column.

Rather than seek reelection in the redder version of his district, Veasey is retiring from Congress.

"The city of Fort Worth has no Democratic representation," Veasey said of the new maps.

"It's going to be sad," Veasey added. "I feel terrible."

The question will be whether voters Trump picked up in 2024 will stick with his party in the midterms. While the country as a whole shifted to the right in 2024 compared with 2020, some demographic groups moved more sharply than others. Hispanic voters in particular — who are heavily represented along the border and in several Texas cities — supported Trump at higher rates than they had four years earlier.

There are warning signs for this plan, particularly in heavily Hispanic areas: Even as Trump made double-digit improvements in his margins along the southern border, those voters also returned Democratic incumbent Reps. Henry Cuellar and Vicente Gonzalez to Congress. Both are running again in reconstituted districts.

Midland
Reporter-Telegram FEB 21 2026

Texas nears permits to reuse produced water, Sen. Perry says

By Mella McEwen

State Sen. Charles Perry has led the charge toward turning produced water into a new source of water for industry and municipalities alike.

He reflected on that effort and the progress made during a luncheon speech at the recent Produced Water Society conference in Houston.

"There were no surprises," he told the Reporter-Telegram. "I knew on the front end we could clean the water. I had no doubt — we just hadn't done it before. We've funded the science and checked all the boxes."

He sponsored legislation creating the Texas Produced Water Consortium, hosted by Texas Tech University.

Oil and gas producers are a significant part of the effort because the 26 million barrels of water produced daily alongside oil and natural gas has created significant challenges, he noted.

"We're still injecting water, but we're running out of pore space. If we can't move the water, we can't drill wells," he explained.

Operators say the Permian Basin has as much as 100 years of oil and gas to produce and that managing water is a critical piece of perpetuating that output, he said. The objection has been that it costs too much to clean the water compared to disposal. "My point is, when we run out of pore space, how much is too much?"

Today, technological advances have placed cleaning costs closer to disposal costs, he added.

"We've now come to the point we're getting close to getting permits at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to allow beneficial reuse," Perry said. "Science has shown produced water is cleanable, it's usable" and there will soon be large-scale treatment facilities.

He said he has pictures of sorghum and cotton grown over the last three or four years that were watered by hand or with well water, rainwater or treated produced water. The crops watered with produced water are about 2 feet taller, he said.

"I remind everyone this is not new, that this has been done elsewhere. It's just not been done on the scale of 26 million barrels of water a day," Perry said.

Beyond beneficial reuse, produced water could serve as an organic source of essential minerals like lithium and ammonium nitrates.

He predicted TCEQ permits for land applications is about a year away and could benefit farmers. Beneficial reuse could be a way to organically feed crops while reducing costs for farmers.

His original timeline was 10 years and efforts are now in their sixth year, he noted.

"It will be interesting to see how this develops. It's happening quicker than I thought," he said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000101

Victoria
Advocate FEB 21 2026

Texas AG suing Dow for 'habitual' environmental and pollution violations at Seadrift plant

By Lindsey Plotkin

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has filed a lawsuit against Dow, alleging repeated pollution violations at a chemical plant in Seadrift, according to a report by Inside Climate News.

The plant, one of the largest chemical manufacturing facilities in the country, is operated by Union Carbide Corporation, a subsidiary of Dow Inc., which owns the facility.

Diane Wilson, a Seadrift resident and director of San Antonio Bay Waterkeeper (Waterkeeper), criticized the state's action, saying she believes the lawsuit could result in reduced penalties for the company. The organization had previously filed a notice of intent to sue Dow on Dec. 17 over alleged pollution concerns and had been preparing its own legal action.

"Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) works closely with state and federal regulators to ensure compliance with all existing laws and regulations," Dow said in a statement. "While UCC cannot comment on the specifics of pending litigation, the company is committed to responsible operations."

Wilson disputed that characterization, saying she has documented thousands of plastic pellets she attributes to Dow along multiple areas of the bay. She also said the company recently filed permit applications with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality seeking to increase discharge flow into nearby waters. She also described the state's lawsuit as a "sweetheart deal" and said her group will now have to wait before proceeding.

Waterkeeper has been opposed to Dow and Formosa Plastics' disposal into the water, and has advocated for a zero discharge policy from both.

"We are looking at numerous options right now regarding the lawsuit with Texas versus Dow, and we are not letting up on Dow, no matter what TCEQ is doing at this time," Wilson said. "We personally have a real concern that this is a sweetheart deal to shield Dow and Union Carbide from stricter penalties and from zero discharge of plastic."

Wilson said that currently, Dow has a "trace amounts" permit, which allows for some dumping into the water, but Dow is arguing that trace amounts are too vague, and that it wants to be able to dump more.

She and Waterkeeper feel that this lawsuit from Paxton's office will allow Dow and UCC to get off with lighter penalties than if Waterkeeper were to sue them. Wilson said that Waterkeeper was just days away from filing its own suit, and she feels that the Texas suit looks worse than it is.

"If you look on the surface, it's like, 'Wow, Texas is suing (Dow),'" Wilson said. "But the thing is, if you see what they were blocking, I mean it was literally days before we filed, and there hasn't been action from (Texas) before. In the decades that Dow and Union Carbide (have run the plant), what enforcement action has there been? None."

Looking back, Wilson wants Calhoun County to continue to uphold its zero-waste policy, which she was a part of enacting with the Calhoun County Commissioners' Court. "On May 13, 1996,the Calhoun County Commissioners' Court passed a resolution that the Commissioners' Court supports and encourages all industry to pursue the development of zero pollution discharge technology," Wilson said. "That was way back when, and I think that needs to be revisited. I remember when I was in Commissioners Court and that was passed. I remember, I believe it was, upper management from Union Carbide was sitting in the audience and he said, 'You have no idea what you just passed.'"

Wilson and Waterkeeper are going to continue to advocate for a zero-waste policy.

This is an ongoing story, and the Advocate will continue coverage.

Lindsey Plotkin is a multimedia reporter for the Victoria Advocate. Contact her at lindsey.plotkin@vicad.com.

Longview
News-Journal FEB 23 2026

Texan shot dead by ICE agent months before killings in Minneapolis, records show

By Alejandro Serrano and Ayden Runnels

Three months into President Donald Trump's mass deportation undertaking, an ICE officer shot and killed a U.S. citizen in South Padre Island, long before immigration agents killed another American in Minnesota that prompted outrage across the nation, according to records released this week that were not previously disclosed by the government.

Agents assigned to a Department of Homeland Security subagency fatally shot 23-year-old Ruben Ray Martinez of San Antonio multiple times in the early hours of March 15 while they helped local police direct traffic at the scene of a car crash, records released by American Oversight, a nonprofit government watchdog, show.

In a statement Friday, DHS confirmed the shooting and accused Martinez of "intentionally" running over an agent, who was taken to a hospital for a knee injury and later released, according to records of the incident.

Local media had reported on the shooting but it was not clear until this week that federal immigration officers were involved. At least half a dozen other people have died during the nations' immigration crackdown under the Trump administration.

American Oversight released a trove of records on Tuesday related to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's use of force, training and oversight after suing for the documents. The records also detail another non-fatal and previously unreported incident that occurred in Beaumont a month before Martinez's shooting.

"Since Ruben's death a year ago, all we have wanted is justice for him and we have struggled with the silence surrounding his killing," his mother, Rachel Reyes, said in a statement. "Now, the country is in crisis — and, terribly, heartbreakingly, other families are enduring what we have. It's my hope that attention being raised now into Ruben's death will help bring the justice we want for him and the answers we haven't had."

The DHS incident report chronicles a chaotic scene that resulted in death. DHS agents wrote in the report that Martinez failed to follow traffic instructions, so they surrounded his car. When he accelerated, according to the report, Martinez allegedly struck an agent who ended up on the hood — which prompted another agent to unload an unspecified number of rounds through the driver's side window.

"The vehicle came to a stop and both driver and passenger were immediately secured," the report states. Federal agents took Martinez to a hospital in Brownsville, where he later died.

The Texas Department of Public Safety's Rangers are investigating the shooting. A DPS spokesperson said the agency is not going to comment on the incident since it's an active investigation.

Gov. Greg Abbott's office also declined to comment and referred questions to DHS. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Speaker of the House Rep. Dustin Burrows did not respond to questions for comment on Saturday.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

TX-DPS-26-0449-A-000102

Cont. from "Texan shot dead…"

In a brief interview Friday, American Oversight's Executive Director Chioma Chukwu said it was concerning how blatantly the one shooting contradicted DHS' official messaging about the president's mass deportation effort, characterized by the administration as being mired by attacks on officers, and how unforthcoming federal authorities were about the killing of an American.

"What they're telling the public is very different than what they're doing behind closed doors. The only reason why we're able to make these connections and really call into question the public statements that they're making to mislead the public is because we're able to get our hands on these documents," Chukwu told The Texas Tribune. "That should deeply concern everyone."

News of the shooting arrives as the nation reels from federal agents, assigned to carry out the president's immigration crackdown, shooting to death two other Americans in Minnesota.

In Texas, Democratic leaders have been raising alarms about the clampdown across the country and the state's involvement, thanks in part to Republican state leadership that is politically aligned with the Trump administration.

State Rep. Gina Hinojosa of Austin said Friday night that she had requested a legislative oversight inquiry to release the body cam footage of Martinez's shooting. U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro called for a thorough probe into the shooting, "including why there was an 8-month cover up."

San Antonio Mayor Gina Ortiz Jones also weighed in, calling for a congressional investigation into the shooting.

"In normal times, I would call upon the appropriate departments to investigate this matter," she said in a news release on Saturday. "However, we're not in normal times, and it's unclear any department-led investigations would be fairly executed, as evident by the delay in getting answers at this point."

In recent years, Texas DPS, which is investigating the shooting, has pushed the boundaries of a state law enforcement agency's involvement enforcing immigration law.

After Abbott deployed troopers to the Texas-Mexico border during the Biden administration, the agency has under the Trump administration shifted its resources to helping federal immigration authorities apprehend thousands of undocumented people far from the border and in the state's largest cities — marking an unprecedented use of state resources for immigration enforcement.

Colleen DeGuzman contributed reporting.

Lubbock
Avalanche-Journal FEB 23 2026

Texas Tech awarded $149 million to strengthen cybersecurity, EMP testing

By Mateo Rosiles

Texas Tech University will receive nearly $150 million in state funding to help bolster its electromagnetic pulse testing site and cybersecurity infrastructure.

Gov. Greg Abbott announced this month that his Public Safety Office had awarded $149 million to Texas Tech University, noting that the strategic investment strengthens ongoing efforts to safeguard the nation by advancing research that addresses escalating threats to critical infrastructure across Texas and the United States.

'This $149 million investment in cybersecurity will ensure that our state's critical infrastructure systems are capable of withstanding attacks from hostile foreign adversaries,' said Governor Abbott. 'The researchers at Texas Tech lead the nation in safeguarding critical infrastructure from hackers and hostile foreign actors.'

In 2025, Texas Tech announced that the former Reese Air Force Base just west of Lubbock was renamed Texas Tech University Reese National Security Complex to house the university's expanding research portfolio in national security and critical infrastructure The renaming also comes after the passage of House Bill 5092 during the 89th session of the Texas Legislature — authored by state Rep. Carl Tepper, R-Lubbock, and sponsored by state Sen. Charles Perry, R-Lubbock.

'This investment cements Texas Tech's role as a national leader in protecting our critical infrastructure from emerging threats,' said Perry. 'Lubbock has long been a place where hard work and innovation meet, and this EMP testing site positions West Texas at the forefront of defending our electric grid, water systems, and military

assets. I am proud to see Texas Tech advancing research that strengthens our national security while creating opportunity and workforce development right here at home.'

Advertisement

According to the governor's office, the grant will expand initiatives aimed at identifying vulnerabilities and reinforcing the protection of essential infrastructure systems, including:

- The electric grid.
- Water utilities.
- Communications networks.
- Military systems.
- Other assets vital to Texas' economic stability and national security.

Texas Tech will also collaborate with the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Energy This comes on top of Texas Tech signing a landmark Cooperative Research and Development Agreement to advance U.S. national security, cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection with the FBI in 2025.

"Texas Tech has established itself as a leader in advancing critical national security initiatives through its worldclass research and innovation," said Texas House Speaker Dustin Burrows. "This investment strengthens that momentum, expanding cutting-edge initiatives at Reese National Security Complex to better protect our critical infrastructure and strengthen our nation's defense capabilities."

Texas Tech responds to Abbott's funding announcement

Following the announcement of this grant, Texas Tech released the following statement to the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal, thanking the governor for the grant.

This award advances work at the Texas Tech University Reese National Security Complex, expanding EMP testing capabilities and strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure to help safeguard our nation's critical assets.

It also positions us to deepen partnerships with state and federal agencies while delivering applied research and workforce development that support Texas and national security.

We are grateful to Governor Abbott and the Governor's Public Safety Office for this significant investment.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

OUT OF STATE

New York
Times FEB 24 2026

Texas Lt. Governor Says Camp Mystic Shouldn't Receive License to Reopen

By Ruth Graham

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick of Texas sent a blistering letter on Monday asking the Texas Department of State Health Services not to issue a new camp license to Camp Mystic, where 27 girls and the camp's executive director died in flooding last July.

"I would not feel comfortable sending my grandchildren to a camp where 27 young girls lost their lives less than a year ago," Mr. Patrick wrote in the letter, which he also posted on social media. "It would be naive to allow Camp Mystic to return to normal operations before all of the facts are known."

The letter was addressed to Jennifer Shuford, the commissioner of the agency charged with inspecting and licensing summer camps in the state. Ms. Shuford was also named in a lawsuit filed Monday by the parents of nine campers and counselors that accuses the agency of issuing licenses to the camp annually for years even though it did not have an evacuation plan as required by the state.

Lara Anton, a spokeswoman for the Department of State Health Services, said the agency did not comment on pending litigation.

Mikal Watts, a lawyer for Camp Mystic, called the suit against the agency "without merit" and timed to apply pressure immediately before licenses are set to be handed out. "This is nothing more than power politics at its worst," Mr. Watts said. He added that the camp has complied with all state laws, and spent millions of dollars on new safety technology since the flood.

Camp Mystic has not submitted a license renewal application this year, according to Ms. Anton. But the camp announced months ago that it will partially reopen this summer, and opened registration to families in January. Camps in the state have until March 31 to apply for a renewal license without paying a late fee.

In his letter on Monday, Mr. Patrick also gave an update on the state investigation he opened last fall into what happened at Camp Mystic. Investigating committees in the State Senate and House of Representatives will meet this spring, he said.

"I expect, after those facts are determined, there may be necessary corrective actions for Camp Mystic to take to make sure future campers and counselors are safe and do not lose their lives," Mr. Patrick wrote.

The letter concluded with a plea: "Please do not renew a 2026 license for Camp Mystic until all legislative investigations are completed and any necessary corrective actions are taken."

The camp invited Mr. Patrick and the investigative committees to tour its grounds last fall, but they have not visited yet, Mr. Watts said.

"The lieutenant governor of the state of Texas is either the most powerful man in Texas or the second most powerful, and when he issues his verdict before the investigation has begun, it is not helpful," Mr. Watts said.

Mr. Patrick, a conservative Republican who is running for re-election this year, has described himself as deeply affected by the tragedy at Camp Mystic, an all-girls camp in Central Texas. He has met multiple times with many of the families whose daughters died at the camp.

He supported a package of laws toughening safety requirements for youth camps in the state that passed the State House and Senate overwhelmingly just months after the flood, and was signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott in September. The new laws require camps to move cabins away from floodplains, to operate emergency warning systems and public address systems that function even if there is no internet, and to post clear evacuation routes, among other provisions. Other states, including Missouri and Alabama, are now considering similar legislation.

Speaking at the laws' signing in front of the governor's mansion in Austin, Mr. Patrick choked up. He made an impromptu suggestion there that portraits of the two counselors who died, Chloe Childress and Katherine Ferruzzo, should hang in the capitol, one in the Senate and one in the House.

Others in the state have criticized the reforms as too expensive and onerous for some camps, particularly the requirement for two sources of internet access, including a fiber-optic connection.

Camp Mystic's leaders announced weeks after the signing that the camp would partially reopen this summer, a decision that surprised and divided alumni and parents. The campus along the Guadalupe River, where the girls who died were staying, will remain closed, but a newer campus at higher elevation is set to reopen in May.

"We are not only rebuilding cabins and trails, but also a place where laughter, friendship and spiritual growth will continue to flourish," the email to past campers read. "We look forward to welcoming you back inside the green gates."

Soon afterward, Mr. Patrick and the speaker of the State House, Dustin Burrows, a Republican, announced the creation of committees in the House and the Senate to investigate the flooding at the camp. In the announcement, Mr. Patrick questioned Mystic's plans to reopen. "I was shocked to see Camp Mystic begin signing up campers for next year with so many questions unanswered about what happened that fateful morning," he wrote.

"In my 10 years as lieutenant governor, we've had a lot of tragedies and I've attended a lot of funerals and memorial services," he said in an interview with The New York Times last fall. "But this was by far the hardest."

He attributed the difficulty to the loss of so many young lives, and also to the fact that many parents had to wait for days before getting confirmation that their daughters had died.

One girl, Cile Steward, is still missing. Her parents are seeking an emergency order to stop the camp from reopening, arguing that the restoration process is destroying physical evidence related to their daughter's death. Families whose daughters died have filed multiple other lawsuits against the camp, accusing its leaders of gross negligence.

The suit filed Monday against Ms. Shuford also names five other department officials, including the inspector who visited Camp Mystic annually since 2015 to ensure compliance.

State regulations require camps to have written emergency plans, including procedures for the "evacuation of each occupied building." But the agency's own detailed written criteria allowed for the approval of any kind of emergency plan, whether or not it included specific evacuation plans, the suit claims. Mystic's plan did not mention evacuation.

"As the waters rose in the early hours of July 4, the camp staff panicked and delayed moving girls to safety until it was too late," the suit asserts. "The lack of the state-required evacuation plan created chaos that cost 27 young lives."

Mystic devoted one brief paragraph to floods in its one-page emergency plan submitted to state officials in past years. During a flood, campers in the lower section of camp along the river must "stay in their cabins unless told otherwise by the office," the plan stated. "All cabins are constructed on high, safe locations."

An inspector visited Mystic and approved its emergency plans just two days before flooding devastated the Hill Country of Central Texas.

"The D.S.H.S. officials responsible for licensing youth camps deliberately looked the other way," Paul Yetter, a lawyer representing the families, said in a statement. "While Camp Mystic bears responsibility and is also being sued, state officials knew the emergency plan lacked a required evacuation component and still licensed the camp as safe."

A lawsuit filed against the camp last year by some of the families whose daughters died said that counselors had been told "by the camp" to stay in their cabins during a flood. Ultimately, some counselors pulled young girls through windows and scrambled up a rocky hill to safety. Others waded with their campers to a large recreation hall. Edward Eastland, the camp's director, told The New York Times last year that he had not instructed anyone to stay in place during the evacuation.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cont. from "Texas Lt. Governor…"

On its website, Camp Mystic said that the campus that plans to reopen this summer will have illuminated pathways to a designated meeting place on higher ground, and that evacuation drills will be conducted within 48 hours of campers' arrivals.

The camp will mark its 100th anniversary in April. It has a long history of summer flooding, although no one at the camp had died in floods before last summer.

Ruth Graham is a national reporter, based in Dallas, covering religion, faith and values for The Times.

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Key Witness Who Disputed ICE Account of Fatal Texas Shooting Dies in Car Accident

By Edgar Sandoval

The only passenger in the car when an American citizen was shot and killed by a federal officer in South Texas last year had planned to speak up and contradict the government's account of the shooting. However, the passenger, Joshua Orta, died in an unrelated car crash over the weekend.

Mr. Orta, 25, was in the passenger seat on March 15, 2025, when his childhood friend, Ruben Ray Martinez, 23, was shot multiple times in South Padre Island by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer after the authorities said he failed to comply with commands to exit his vehicle.

In a written statement obtained by The New York Times, Mr. Orta said that the two men had offered no resistance to law enforcement officers and were trying to comply with commands to turn around the car when the situation got out of control and Mr. Martinez was shot.

Mr. Orta had provided his version of events in the statement, which was taken in September by lawyers representing Mr. Martinez's family to be used for future legal proceedings. He was planning to sign the statement and cooperate with investigators hired by the family before he died Saturday in a car crash on a San Antonio highway.

The stepfather who raised him confirmed his death to The Times on Sunday.

"First and foremost, Joshua's death is an awful tragedy for his family and friends, and the Reyes family is grieving with them," said Alex Stamm, a lawyer for Rachel Reyes, the mother of Mr. Martinez. "In terms of Ruben's death, the world has also now lost a critical eyewitness."

"We believe Joshua's account, and, as we have seen recently in Minneapolis, Chicago and elsewhere, it is critical that the public be shown every piece of evidence in the government's possession, and that any witness come forward," Mr. Stamm added.

When asked about Mr. Martinez's killing last week, the Department of Homeland Security described the shooting as an act of self-defense, saying the agent had "fired defensive shots to protect himself, his fellow agents and the general public" after the driver "ran over" a Homeland Security Investigation special agent.

In a statement Sunday, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security said, "We stand by our original statement."

In an interview in the family's San Antonio home Sunday afternoon, John Arriaga, 47, a landscaper, said Mr. Orta had shown signs of trauma since he had witnessed his friend's killing. Mr. Arriaga said Mr. Orta had planned to talk to lawyers and investigators about what he saw.

"He told me that he was involved and that he was going to testify," Mr. Arriaga said. "He said, 'I need to do whatever I have to do because of my friend.'"

The episode involving ICE occurred around 12:40 a.m. on March 15, when, according to internal agency documents reviewed by The Times, Mr. Martinez initially did not follow officers' instructions to stop his vehicle. He eventually slowed to a stop after receiving verbal commands. Federal agents then surrounded his vehicle and told him to get out of the car before Mr. Martinez accelerated and hit a federal agent who landed on the roof of the car, according to the government documents.

A different agent fired multiple times through the driver's side window. Mr. Martinez was transported to a hospital in Brownsville, Texas, where he died. The documents did not name the officers involved in the encounter. Charles Stam, another lawyer for the Martinez family, confirmed that Mr. Martinez was the victim mentioned in the ICE report.

In the September statement, Mr. Orta contradicted the federal agency's description of what happened in South Padre Island. In it, Mr. Orta wrote that he and Mr. Martinez had driven to the island to celebrate his friend's 23rd birthday. On that day, they came upon the scene of a car crash and Mr. Martinez appeared concerned because they had an open container of alcohol in the car. Moments later, one of the officers at the scene told them to turn around, according to the statement.

Mr. Orta added that because the traffic was backed up, there was no room to move and added that he did not see his friend run over an agent. Instead, he wrote, "As we inched forward in traffic to get turned around, another officer, a state trooper, walked up to our car" and "slapped the hood."

Moments later, Mr. Orta said in the statement, an officer at the scene "seemed to be trying to get in front of the car." That's when the scene got out of control and other officers yelled at them to stop and drew their guns, according to Mr. Orta's written account.

Mr. Orta described a federal agent firing "multiple shots," through the driver's open window, "without giving any warning, commands or opportunity to comply." The bullets struck Mr. Martinez's chest, he said in his statement.

"I heard Ruben say, 'I'm sorry,' and then he slumped backward," Mr. Orta said in the statement.

Mr. Orta said he then saw the officers place Mr. Martinez face down on the ground and handcuff him.

"Ruben was unarmed, nonviolent, not fleeing and not resisting at the time he was shot. His killing was unjustified and excessive," Mr. Orta said in the statement.

The shooting of Mr. Martinez is under investigation by the Texas Rangers, a state agency that reviews shootings involving law enforcement officers and oversees border security for the Texas Department of Public Safety. Several local, state and federal elected officials have called for more investigations.

The agent who was hit by Mr. Martinez's vehicle was released from the hospital after he was treated for a knee injury, according to the ICE report.

Mr. Orta died in a fiery car crash at around 1 a.m. on Saturday when he lost control of the vehicle he was driving and struck a utility pole. The car caught on fire and Mr. Orta died before the three other people in the car, including a stepsister, were able to pull him out, Mr. Arriaga said. The crash over the weekend had no connection to the shooting last March.

According to a preliminary San Antonio police report, which did not name Mr. Orta, the person behind the wheel was driving "at a high rate of speed" when he attempted to exit the highway and lost control of the vehicle.

Mr. Arriaga got an alert on his phone about the crash and headed to the scene. When he arrived at around 1:30 a.m., he saw a charred vehicle and his injured daughter. "The three of them got out and they were trying to pull him out, but then it exploded," Mr. Arriaga said.

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Cont. from "Key witness…"

Mr. Orta's stepsister, who suffered several bruises and burns, remained at the hospital, Mr. Arriaga said.

It is unclear if the absence of the passenger witness will hurt the investigations going forward.

Mr. Martinez's mother, Rachel Reyes, said in an interview on Sunday that Mr. Orta's description matched what investigators had initially told her. Ms. Reyes described her son as a hard-working young man who did not have a history of confronting law enforcement officials.

"I was very surprised when I saw what the government document said about my son," she said. "That's not what they told me. I was shocked and insulted."

Mr. Martinez's killing occurred months before two other fatal shootings in Minneapolis set off nationwide protests against ICE and the Trump administration.

The killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, both American citizens, sparked widespread controversy after official accounts were undermined by bystander videos. No footage of Mr. Martinez's killing has surfaced.

Ms. Good, a Minneapolis mother, was killed in her car by masked federal agents on Jan. 7, and Mr. Pretti, an intensive care nurse, was fatally shot on Jan. 24 during a surge of immigration agents in the Twin Cities. Bystander videos of both killings circulated quickly and helped propel protests across the country. Since September, federal agents have fired at vehicles at least 10 times in six different cities.

Mr. Martinez is at least the third U.S. citizen shot and killed by federal immigration officers since the start of President Trump's second term. His presidency has been marked by a push to maximize illegal deportations and to confront those who oppose his actions.

An immigration agent is allowed to use deadly force only if the officer "has a reasonable belief that the subject of such force poses an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury," according to the Homeland Security Department's policy. The policy also states that officers should avoid placing themselves in positions in which they have no other option but to use deadly force.

Mr. Arriaga said that his son changed after he witnessed his friend's killing on March 15. Later that day, they found him in the couch, pale and "out of it," his father recalled. "He just hugged us and cried."

Georgia Gee contributed research.

Edgar Sandoval covers Texas for The Times, with a focus on the Latino community and the border with Mexico. He is based in San Antonio.

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