First state IG to retire

Search is on to replace Devlin, who will step down this summer. **Connecticut, Page 1**

Sweeping through DC

UConn men, women score road wins against pesky Georgetown squads. **Sports, Page 1**

More sun than clouds



Skies start to clear amid warm-up, with a high of 40. **Insight, Page 10**



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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Lamont lays out wide agenda

Lawmakers asked to solve some of state's most enduring issues, but GOP wants to hear details

By Christopher Keating Hartford Courant

From education to affordable housing to child care, Gov. Ned Lamont is challenging the state legislature to tackle some of the state's most long-lasting problems over the next five months in the 2025 legislative session.

Lawmakers began the session last week with high hopes of craft-

ing solutions, but the veteran lawmakers realize the difficulty of untangling a sticky wicket of competing agendas as scores of divergent interests battle for funding in the next annual state budget that is expected to reach \$27 billion.

Multiple mayors visited the state Capitol on opening day as they collectively seek billions of dollars in operational and bond funds for everything from public schools to paving local roads.

Lamont called on the legislature to tackle the high costs of electricity, health care and housing in a state where rents and mortgages are higher than many others across the nation. In an unusual move during his 28-minute State of the State Address, Lamont called on individual committees by name and asked them to find solutions.

"Insurance committee, very few of the businesses and homes which

Turn to Assembly, Page 2

Gov. Ned Lamont shakes hands with three-term House Speaker Matt Ritter, a Hartford Democrat, after giving his annual State of the State Address on Wednesday at the state Capitol. **AARON FLAUM/HARTFORD COURANT**



With newborns in Connecticut homeless shelters, and as frostbite cases grow for those unhoused in winter's cold, advocates compare situation to 'Hunger Games'



A person dressed for the cold weather pushes a shopping cart down Main Street in Middletown. **AARON FLAUM/HARTFORD COURANT**

WHEN THERE'S NO PLACE TO GO

By Kaitlin McCallum
Hartford Courant

The hardest part, Connecticut advocates say, is turning people away in the cold because we've "got no place for you to go."

This can be the reality, even as arctic air blew recently into Connecticut with its frigid temperatures, and Gov. Ned Lamont activated the state's severe cold weather protocol "to ensure that the most vulnerable populations receive protection from the severe cold, which could be life threatening if exposed to the elements for extended periods of time."

The protocol set into motion an all-hands-ondeck response system, coordinating the efforts of police, hospitals, homeless outreach workers "In parking lots, there are the families in there — three, four living out of the car. That's a sin in one of the richest states in the union."

—State Rep. Geraldo Reyes and shelters through the state's 211 call center. It also released some additional resources to care for

people and get them off the street.

Yet the reality across the state is a system where providers say there are not enough beds, not enough services and people sleeping in cars, outside and with newborn infants in shelters. One lawmaker said of the situation that it's time to "find a moral compass for this state,"

At the activation of the cold weather protocol, 5,486 people were recorded by name as homeless in Connecticut, including more than 500 children. Of those, more than 800 people were living outside, according to Sarah Fox, chief operating officer of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

Turn to Homeless, Page 3

SoNE puts freedom in the hands of doctors

New option for those who spurn restraints of corporate medicine

By Kenneth R. Gosselin Hartford Courant

A physician-owned health network is launching a new medical group with an innovative membership twist: primary-care doctors who aren't interested in being independent practitioners but also don't want the constraints of being part of a big hospital.

Windsor-based Southern
New England Healthcare,
known as SoNE Health, said
the new medical group will
allow primary-care doctors to
spend more time with patients
enjoying some of the same
autonomy as independent
physicians without the headaches of negotiating contracts
with insurers, dealing with
government regulations and
time-consuming billing.

The medical group also is open to physician assistants and nurse practitioners.

The medical group seeks to open up another avenue for primary care, often the first point of medical care contact for most consumers. In recent years, primary care has undergone a rapid consolidation as an increasing number of independent doctors and other medical professionals have become affiliated with big health systems.

health systems.

"So when they join SoNE's medical group, unlike being tied to a health system or other organization that demands high productivity — the treadmill and churning out patients and all that — SoNE Medical really allows them much autonomy within how they do their medicine," James Uberti, SoNE Health's medical director and president of the new medical group, said.

Uberti, a physician with a master degree in public health, said doctors and others joining

Turn to Doctors, Page 2

More Christianity in classrooms? Trump's win may embolden some on the right

By Moriah Balingit Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Conservative lawmakers across the U.S. are pushing to introduce more Christianity to public school classrooms, testing the separation of church and state by inserting Bible references into lessons and requiring teachers to post the Ten Commandments.

The efforts come as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office pledging to champion the First Amendment right to pray and read the Bible in school, practices that are already allowed as long as they are not government sponsored.

While the federal government is explicitly barred from directing states on what to teach, Trump can

indirectly influence what is taught in public schools and his election

may embolden state-level activists. Trump and his fellow Republicans support school choice, hoping to expand the practice of using taxpayer-funded vouchers to help parents send their children to reli-

gious schools.

But there is a parallel push to incorporate more Christianity into

the mainstream public schools that serve the overwhelming majority of students, including those of other faiths. And with the help of judicial appointees from Trump's first presidential term, courts have begun to bless the notion of more religion in the public sphere, including in schools.

"The effect of even Trump being the president-elect, let alone the president again, is Christian nationalists are emboldened like never before," said Rachel Laser, the president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Large numbers of Americans believe the founders intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation. A smaller group, part of a movement widely

Turn to Religion, Page 3

In Mystic, a restaurant hits a Milestone

Milestone restaurant marks one year with "something for everyone," like innovative burgers, elevated pork chops and a popular pizza with a Golden Girl namesake. **Connecticut, Page 1**

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Bond reduced for man accused of cyberstalking judges

By Edmund H. Mahony Hartford Courant

Bond has been reduced for blogger Paul Boyne, who has been in custody for 18 months while awaiting trial on charges of cyberstalking state judges with malicious internet postings.

It was unclear whether Boyne, 64, could post the bond, which Superior Court Judge Peter Brown set at \$5,250 in cash deposited with the court, or a \$75,000

Boyne, who argues that his blog was dedicated to exposing corruption in the state family court system, is accused of 18 felony stalking and cyberstalking charges for years of often racist and antisemitic blog posts that several judges said caused them to fear for their safety.

Boyne, an electrical engineer, has argued, unsuccessfully, that his blog enjoys first amendment protection and the stalking changes should be dismissed. He has turned down a plea agreement that would allow him to pursue a first amendment appeal of the conviction.

The case was set to be tried last fall and Boyne has been partly responsible for delays since then. In September, Brown ordered a competency evaluation at the request of Boyne's public defenders. Boyne would not cooperate, even refusing to

leave his prison cell. After a delay, Brown questioned Boyne personally and found him to be competent. Boyne then fired his public defenders for questioning his mental competence.

Several weeks more passed before the public defenders could be replaced.

Boyne formerly lived in Glastonbury and is said by associates to be consumed by what he believes was unfair treatment in his divorce and custody case. He has lived for nearly two decades in Virginia with his elderly parents, from whose home he allegedly published the blog. He has not admitted authorship of the blog, but investigators have made a persuasive case it is his using internet service and other

Assembly

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were impacted or destroyed by flooding in August had any flood insurance. What say you?" Lamont asked in the historic Hall of the House in Hartford. "Judiciary committee, how can we better protect our civil liberties, including reproductive rights, in the face of threats from Washington?... Education committee, let's build on the blue ribbon child care commission. Let's make a down payment on affordable, accessible early child care for all of our families.

While Lamont offered various questions, Republicans charged that he did not provide enough answers.

"I think the speech didn't say a lot," said House Republican leader Vincent Candelora of North Branford. "I think he is clearly sending a message that he wants the legislature to do the job, and that concerns me.'

Senate Republican leader Stephen Harding of Brookfield agreed, saying Lamont should have provided more

"There was very minimal substance to it," Harding said. "You can give us challenges, but give us some ideas with it. He basically just referenced the problem, and said, You guys figure it out.' That's not an idea. That just says there's a problem. We're already aware what the problems are. Give us some ideas of what your vision is to fix the problems of the state."

But Senate President Pro Tempore Martin Looney, a New Haven Democrat, rejected Republican complaints by saying that the State of the State Address sets the tone and the annual budget address in February would provide a deep level of financial detail on scores of departments and agencies.

"I thought it was a very good opening day speech," Looney said. "The major themes he hit were excellent. This was a general. thematic speech to start the



House Republican leader Vincent Candelora says he's concerned that Gov. Ned Lamont did not mention fiscal guardrails during the State of the State Address. AARON FLAUM/HARTFORD COURANT

session, not a nuts-and-bolts budget speech."

Early childhood education: Looney noted that Lamont has made early childhood education a high priority in an attempt to help the youngest students who have already fallen behind by the time they reach kindergar-

"Those 4-year-olds today that are not prepared for kindergarten next year are the ones who, a dozen years from now, would be part of that cohort of those 16- to 24-year-olds who are disengaged, not in school, not working, not employable in some ways," Looney told The Courant in an interview. "So we need to make sure we have a massive level of engagement with young children so they are not $-1\overline{2}$ years from now — the next cohort of disengaged kids."

Guardrails: One of the key issues that Lamont did not mention in his speech is the so-called fiscal guardrails that have limited spending and poured an additional \$8.5 billion into the state pension funds that had been largely neglected for 70 years by previous governors and legislators.

In the coming months, liberal Democrats are expected to clash with Lamont and Republicans over the guardrails.

Lawmakers will be debating the "volatility cap,"

which blocks the legislature from spending any money above a certain threshold that is collected under the "estimates and finals" portion of the state income tax. The money includes capital gains that are largely paid by millionaires and billionaires in Fairfield County, a total that has exploded in recent years with large gains on Wall Street

The guardrails have become an all-encompassing issue at the Capitol that comes up on a constant

"I know there's a game out there: Drink every time you hear the word guardrails," said House Majority Leader Jason Rojas, an East Hartford Democrat.

Among Republicans, both Candelora and Harding said it was a missed opportunity for Lamont to reiterate his support for the guardrails in front of a large audience.

"I think it was an opportunity to send a clear message to the legislature and the residents of Connecticut that we are going to live within our means," Candelora said. "It's opening day. Maybe he wants to keep it light."

But Lamont's press office said he has not changed his position on the guardrails and does not have to mention the topic in every speech. Lamont has consistently reiterated his view recently, noting that the legislature re-approved the guardrails last year by extending them for another five years with an option for an additional five years.

Despite any thought to the contrary, Looney said Democrats are not interested in blowing up the guardrails completely.

"We recognize the merit of what the guardrails have done for us in the last seven years," Looney said in an interview. "Building up a healthy rainy day fund of over \$4 billion. Increasing the percentage of funding for both our state employee pensions and our teachers' pensions. Those are substantial achievements. What we're saying is we may be facing a huge fiscal crisis brought on by declining federal funding in so many areas because 2025 is not 2017. We need to look at the realities as they exist today. There may need to be some discussion on the guardrails and also whether or not federal cuts will constitute enough of an emergency that we have to look at the rainy day fund. We don't know any of that yet.'

Potential changes in the guardrails, he said, are not drastic.

"I refer to it as a minor modification," Looney said. "We would still have a volatility cap. We would still have a spending cap. We would still have a revenue cap where we commit not to spend 100% of the revenue that we anticipate coming in. The Republicans are trying to say the sky is falling if we even mention the word modification. But that's part of their game, and it's not real."

Electricity: Another vexing problem facing the legislature is the high price of electricity, which has been a problem for decades.

Among the disputes is whether the chief regulatory agency, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, known as PURA, should have three commissioners or five. Lamont has steadfastly maintained that only three regulators are needed, but the current state law says

there shall be five members. Sen. Norm Needleman, an Essex Democrat who co-chairs the energy committee, agrees strongly with Lamont, even if some

"The more people you have on a board, the more difficult it is to get consensus," Needleman told The

other Democrats do not.

But Sen. Ryan Fazio, a 34-year-old Greenwich Republican with detailed knowledge of energy issues, agreed with Republicans and some Democrats that the authority under the law should have five fulltime

commissioners. "The law, which we are all obligated to follow, prescribes five members to PURA," Fazio said after Lamont's speech. "I believe in following the law, and if people think it's better with a different number, then they should change the law. Otherwise, they should fill the spots with five energetic and intelligent regulators who will protect consumers and enforce the law as it is. It's not what I want or not. It's what the law says."

Behind the scenes, Republicans and Democrats have been working to gauge the political support for increasing to five seats, up from three. They have also been working to gain a spot on PURA for former state Rep. Holly Cheeseman, a veteran lawmaker from Niantic who lost her bid for re-election in November and is available to take a fulltime job on the authority. A package deal that could have placed Cheeseman on the board was not completed before the legislative session began Wednesday.

Another key point is that ratepayers were outraged during the summer over a large spike in their electric bills at a time when many residents learned for the first time about the "public benefits" charges on their bill that they had often overlooked.

Republicans want the charges taken off electric bills and instead switched into the expenses of the \$27 billion annual state budget. where ratepayers would no

longer see the charges on their monthly bills.

The public benefits charge is being paid over 10 months to cover a deal with the Millstone nuclear power plant and also unpaid bills for customers who avoided shutoffs for four years due to the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath. Millstone represents 77% of the current public benefits charge, and the other 23% pays for various bipartisan programs that include recovering charges from the four-year moratorium in which the utilities were blocked from shutting off various customers.

In addition, state utility regulators approved a plan for Eversource and United Illuminating to be repaid about \$3 per month per residential customer – depending on their level of usage — in the public benefits charges for their costs in the electric vehicle charger program. That became effective on September 1 and will last until April 30.

Shifting the costs to the state budget, Fazio said, should be an early move by the legislature.

"It would make the most progress for consumers because those costs basically equate to a tax in the electric bill for discretionary budget programs," Fazio said. "It would permanently reduce electric bills by hundreds of dollars per year for the average resident in the state, based on my calculations."

The idea will not go away because it will be mentioned by lawmakers over the next five months in bills and amendments at both the committee level and on the floor of the House and

It was highly important, Fazio said, that Lamont immediately addressed energy costs in the opening minutes of his State of the State Address.

"Mentioning electricity as the first issue," Fazio said, "reflects the fact that it is an issue at the top of voters' minds."

Christopher Keating can be reached at ckeating@ courant.com

Doctors

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the group become employees, their compensation determined not only by productivity goals but practicing high quality medicine that translates into better patient health and forms a more satisfying relationship for both doctors and their patients.

SoNE Health and the new medical group is grounded in what is known as valuebased care. Value-based care ties payment amounts for patient services to the results that are delivered by such measures as quality, equity and cost of care, according to the American Medical Association, a professional association and lobbying group for physicians and medical students.

The approach can

promote better coordination among different health care professions, avoid unnecessary services, promote wellness and prevention and expanded access for "historically marginalized or clinically complex populations," the AMA said.

One broader goal of the value-based model also is to help rein in the soaring cost of health care.

Pushback on big health **systems:** The medical group is forming at a time when independent physician practices — particularly primary care – are being snapped up by large hospitals, both in Connecticut and nationally.

A recent report from the Physicians Advocacy Institute and Avalere Health shows hospitals, health systems and corporate entities now employ 77.6% of the nation's doctors, up from 44% in 2018, and own 58.5% of medical practices.

The report found 19,100 more "physicians became employees of hospitals or corporate entities between 2022 and 2023."

In addition, for the first time, corporate entities such as health insurance companies, private equity firms and pharmacy chains own a greater share of practices, at 30.1% than do hospitals and health systems, at 28.4%.

In Connecticut, hospital health systems range from large organizations such as Yale New Haven Health and Hartford HealthCare to systems owned by one hospital, such as UConn Health. Other medical systems such as ProHealth Physicians, owned by Optum, is part of insurance giant United-Healthcare.

Hospital health systems say that they provide improved, streamlined and coordinated care because primary care providers and specialists can work together and have easier access to patients' medical

But studies report that acquisitions are driving up the cost of health care and doctors lose the freedom to manage their own scheduling.
"We continue to encour-

age primary and preventative care, which keeps you healthier and keeps you out of the hospital," Lamont said.

Doctor-patient relationship: SoNE Health was previously allied with Trinity Health of New England, the parent of St. Francis Hospital and three others in Connecticut. SoNe, whose market stretches from Waterbury to Springfield, Mass., went independent a year ago.

But with the launch of the new medical group, SoNE is looking to expand geographically across Connecticut.

Prior to the launch of the medical group, SoNe Health focused on its consortium of more than 500 independent physicians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners plus and the services needed to go along with those practices, including insurance contracts and billing. In addition to services, those who join the new medical group would work with the independent specialty doctors in the original network.

Potential candidates for the new medical group are newly-minted physicians; those who may have years of experience as independents but no longer want to deal with the administrative duties and the accompanying costs; and medical

professionals who no longer want to be a part of a larger health system, Uberti said.

Lisa Trumble, SoNE Health's president and chief executive, said SoNE puts the doctor-patient relationship first.

"Patients don't want their employer, the government, the Supreme Court, insurers they don't want anyone else making those decisions for them," Trumble said.

"They want to make those decisions together with a trusted clinician. Our goal is to expand our footprint by developing a medical group whose focus will be solely based on this principle."

For more information, physicians and advanced practice providers can contact info@ sonemedgroup.com.

Reporting by the Connecticut Mirror is included.

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