

Shutdown appears closer to ending



White flags planted to commemorate lung cancer victims fly in the wind along the National Mall on Nov. 10 on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The Senate reached a deal late Nov. 9 to fund the government, aiming to end the longest shutdown in history. TOM BRENNER/GETTY IMAGES

House expected to return in coming days

Zachary Schermele, Kathryn Palmer, Zac Anderson, Bart Jansen, Maureen Gropppe and N'dea Yancey-Bragg
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The longest-ever government shutdown is on the verge of ending, as food aid benefits are in limbo and flight cancellations and delays disrupt travelers.

The U.S. Senate on Nov. 9 took the

first big step toward voting on a bipartisan deal reached between some Democrats, Republicans and President Donald Trump’s White House that would fully reopen the government until Jan. 30.

The agreement would include full-year funding for several agencies and programs, including food aid and veterans’ benefits. Funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Women, Infants and Children

program would continue through September at higher levels. That means those programs wouldn’t be vulnerable to being cut off in another shutdown if lawmakers reach an impasse on Jan. 30.

Another component of the agreement includes a commitment to a vote in the second week of December on a bill to potentially extend expiring Affordable Care Act subsidies. The tax credits, which millions of Americans rely on for help paying premiums, have

See SHUTDOWN, Page 3A



Manatees move through the waters at Manatee Park and the Orange River off Palm Beach Boulevard in Fort Myers on Dec. 2, 2024. ANDREW WEST/FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS

Touching marine mammals is illegal

Chad Gillis
Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

West Indian manatees are the epitome of cute and cuddly, so much so that you just want to reach out and squeeze one.

From the surface, they look like giant, brownish beanie bags that you could just jump on and go for a float.

And while it probably wouldn’t harm a manatee if you were somehow able to swim to it and give it a hug, do you dare touch one of these gentle giants?

More importantly, is it even legal to touch a manatee?

When encountering any wildlife, it’s a good idea to keep your hands to yourself.

For one, most animals are a lot stronger and more capable physically than a human. Take bobcats: they’re faster, more agile and much better fighters than we are.

And, they have the tools: the teeth and claws to kill.

Common sense says that if the animal is wild, don’t touch it. Only trained professionals and veterinarians and their staff should regularly touch wildlife.

See MARINE, Page 2A

Report: Overdose deaths plunge in Florida in 2024

Ana Goñi-Lessan
USA TODAY NETWORK - Florida

After years of grim milestones, Florida’s drug crisis finally bent in the right direction in 2024, with overdose deaths dropping 14% – a downturn so dramatic longtime forensic experts say they’ve never seen anything like it.

The total number of drug-related deaths decreased to pre-pandemic levels, with big drops in the number of deaths caused by fentanyl and cocaine, according to the 2024 Drugs Identified in Deceased Persons report by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement’s Medical Examiner’s Commission.

While the Sunshine State’s decline in overdose deaths is consistent with trends nationwide, experts can’t pinpoint one specific reason for the change. Widespread availability of naloxone,

which rapidly reverses opioid overdoses; changes in the drug supply; drug-using preferences and more access to recovery options could all be playing a role in keeping more Floridians alive.

“In all my years here in Florida working death cases involving drugs, I have never seen such a decrease,” said Dr. Bruce Goldberger, a professor of toxicology at the University of Florida.

The U.S. has seen an approximately 30% decline in overdose deaths, said Ryan Marino, a medical toxicologist and an associate professor at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in Cleveland. Almost every state saw a reduction in overdoses, except for some west coast states, where fentanyl is still finding its way into the drug supply, Marino said.

See OVERDOSE, Page 2A



After years of grim milestones, Florida’s drug crisis finally bent in the right direction in 2024, with overdose deaths dropping 14% – a downturn so dramatic longtime forensic experts say they’ve never seen anything like it.

JAMAR COACH/JACKSON SUN

