



# The San Diego Union-Tribune

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Matt Baker, a San Diego resident, becomes upset after several commenters spoke in favor of Chair Nora Vargas' resolution that restricts San Diego County's cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in December. ANA RAMIREZ / U-T FILE

## Expletives and worse plague S.D. County public meetings

Vulgarity and threats grow more prevalent, experts say; some advise not to strike back

By Jeff McDonald  
UNION-TRIBUNE

Earlier this month, as political gadfly Audra Morgan was sharing her views on behavioral health at a meeting of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, she punctuated her position with vulgarity and an offhand threat.

"You better listen real f---ing close, because what you guys are doing is a racket," she told the board. "It's atrocious. Your time is coming. Your days are numbered."

Nobody flinched. Nobody complained. None of the elected supervisors on the receiving end of Morgan's tirade admonished her not to express herself coarsely or warned that her speech would

have consequences.

Instead, the public comments went forward — and grew more foreboding. Another frequent critic of the county later addressed the board and staff as "f---ing c---s" multiple times.

Acting Chair Terra Lawson-Remer responded by warning the speaker — a former county employee named Justin Castro, who was the subject last year of a restraining order sought by the county — to limit his comments to the agenda item at hand.

While insults and coarse language are not unusual at public meetings like the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, experts say the frequency has grown worse in recent years.

According to a University of San Diego study released last fall, 83% of public officials surveyed said that threats and harassment against office holders is a major problem. Two-thirds of respondents reported being targeted while serving in public office, and 31% of women said they face intimidation tactics every week.

"We see majorities of almost all demographic and partisanship groups agree that they frequency of threats and violence is on the rise," researchers said.

The public meeting commentary can be more than insulting.

Former Supervisor Nora Vargas abruptly quit early this year, citing security concerns, just weeks after winning re-election. Vargas, who

could not be reached for comment, had been a recurring target of much of the heated speech during meetings as the board's chair.

Morgan, who frequently addresses the board as "Allegedly Audra," told The San Diego Union-Tribune the speech used at county board meetings is a reflection of the environment that supervisors created.

"When I use vulgar language, it is due to the negligence of the BOS," said Morgan, who was once dragged from the chamber by sheriff's deputies, forced to the floor and handcuffed after then-Chair Nathan Fletcher declared her disruptive.

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## Hegseth linked to another chat on attack

Wife, brother sent details of planned strike, sources say

By Greg Jaffe, Eric Schmitt & Maggie Haberman  
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth shared detailed information about forthcoming strikes in Yemen on March 15 in a private Signal group chat that included his wife, brother and personal lawyer, according to four people with knowledge of the chat.

Some of those people said that the information Hegseth shared on the Signal chat included the flight schedules for the F/A-18 Hornets targeting the Houthis in Yemen — essentially the same attack plans that he shared on a separate Signal chat the same day that mistakenly included the editor of The Atlantic.

Hegseth's wife, Jennifer, a former Fox News producer, is not a Defense Department employee, but she has traveled with him overseas and drawn criticism for accompanying her husband to sensitive meetings with foreign leaders.

Hegseth's brother Phil and Tim Parlatore, who continues to serve as his personal lawyer, both have jobs in the Pentagon, but it is not clear why either would need

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## Proposal calls for U.S. State Dept. to be gutted

White House denies considering drastic overhaul in draft order

By Edward Wong  
THE NEW YORK TIMES

A draft of a Trump administration executive order proposes a drastic restructuring of the State Department that includes eliminating almost all of its Africa operations and shutting down embassies and consulates across the continent, according to U.S. officials and a copy of the document.

The draft also calls for cutting offices at State Department headquarters that address climate change and refugee issues, as well as democracy and human rights concerns.

It was not immediately clear who had compiled the document or what stage of internal debates over a restructuring of the State Department it reflected. It is one of several recent documents proposing changes to the department, and internal administration conversations take place daily on possible actions.

Some of the ideas have been debated among U.S. officials in recent weeks, though it is unclear to what degree they would be adopted or how active the draft is, officials said.

Elements of the draft executive order could change before

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## Israel finds chain of failures in killing of 15 medics

Ambulances with Palestinian health workers hit in Gaza

By Melanie Lidman  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — An Israeli investigation into the killings of 15 Palestinian medics last month in Gaza by Israeli forces said Sunday it found a chain of "professional failures" and a deputy commander has been fired.

The shootings outraged many in the international community, with some calling the killings a war crime. Medical workers have special protection under international humanitarian law. The International Red Cross/Red Crescent called it the deadliest attack on its personnel in eight years.

Israel at first claimed that the medics' vehicles did not have emergency signals on when troops opened fire but later backtracked. Cellphone video recovered from one medic contradicted Israel's initial account. Footage shows the ambulances

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## San Diego's popular gripe app Get It Done plans to expand

City's residents will be able to file new kinds of requests for service

By David Garrick  
UNION-TRIBUNE

San Diego's popular Get It Done tipster app recently expanded to allow complaints about vacation rentals and will soon allow complaints about city parks and hundreds of new electric vehicle charging stations.

City officials say the 9-year-old app, which gets more than 1,000 complaints a day in 65 different categories, is becoming more liked by users because they now more frequently get "after" photos when problems get fixed.

They're also considering adding more categories for complaints — such as stop signs that are frequently run, areas where speeding is common and problems with parking meters, which are set to spread to more neighborhoods under a new city plan.

The app could also help officials and residents cope with an expected wave of deep budget cuts this summer that's likely to slow city response times to many types of problems.

Officials say the app will help residents lower their expectations appropriately, because it estimates for users how long it will likely take to fix the problem they reported based on previous reports of the same problem.



City officials are considering allowing residents to report their problems with parking meters as they expand the popular complaint app Get It Done. NELVIN C. CEPEDA / U-T FILE

Despite steady innovations and upgrades, city officials still want to improve customer satisfaction with the app. During 2024, just over half of those surveyed rated the app either a 9 or a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10.

But satisfaction varies widely by complaint type. Users reporting graffiti are satisfied 91% of the time, and users requesting a new trash bin have a 75% satisfaction rate.

But users reporting a parking violation are satisfied only 23% of the time, and those reporting a streetlight problem just 28%.

Dissatisfaction with parking violation responses is particularly problematic because that's the No. 1 type of complaint

submitted to Get It Done, making up 61,443 of the 391,561 complaints made in 2024 — about a sixth.

"It's one of the highest volumes, but also historically it's been one of the lowest-scoring on customer satisfaction," said Alex Hempton, who oversees the program as interim director of the city's Performance and Analytics Department.

The second most common complaint, illegal encampments, is also a challenge. Only 40% of users express satisfaction how their reports of illegal encampments get resolved.

Hempton told the City Council

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## HEGSETH

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to know about upcoming military strikes aimed at the Houthis in Yemen.

The previously unreported existence of a second Signal chat in which Hegseth shared highly sensitive military information is the latest in a series of developments that have put his management and judgment under scrutiny.

Unlike the chat in which The Atlantic was mistakenly included, the newly revealed one was created by Hegseth. It included his wife and about a dozen other people from his personal and professional inner circle in January, before his confirmation as defense secretary, and was named "Defense | Team Huddle," the people familiar with the chat said. He used his private phone, rather than his government one, to access the Signal chat.

The continued inclusion following Hegseth's confirmation of his wife, brother and personal lawyer, none of whom had any apparent reason to be briefed on details of a military operation as it was getting underway, is sure to raise further questions about his adherence to security protocols.

The chat revealed by The Atlantic in March was created by President Donald Trump's

national security adviser, Mike Waltz, so that the most senior national security officials across the executive branch, such as the vice president, the director of national intelligence and Hegseth, could coordinate among themselves and their deputies before the U.S. attacks. Waltz took responsibility for inadvertently adding Jeffrey Goldberg, editor of The Atlantic, to the chat. He called it "Houthi PC small group" to reflect the presence of members of the administration's "principals committee," who come together to discuss the most sensitive and important national security issues.

Hegseth created the separate Signal group initially as a forum for discussing routine administrative or scheduling information, two of the people familiar with the chat said. They said Hegseth typically did not use the chat to discuss sensitive military operations and said it did not include other Cabinet-level officials.

Hegseth shared information about the Yemen strikes in the "Defense | Team Huddle" chat at roughly the same time he was putting the same details in the other Signal chat group that included senior U.S. officials and The Atlantic, the people familiar with Hegseth's chat group said. The Yemen strikes, designed to punish Houthi fighters for attacking inter-



Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth shared sensitive details in a private group chat that included his wife, brother and personal lawyer, four sources say. **ERIC LEE / NYT FILE**

national cargo ships passing through the Red Sea, were among the first big military strikes of Hegseth's tenure.

After The Atlantic disclosed that Hegseth had used Waltz's Signal group to communicate details of the strikes as they were being launched, the Trump administration said he had not shared "war plans" or any classified information, an assertion that was viewed with tremendous skepticism by national security experts.

In the case of Hegseth's Signal group, a U.S. official declined to comment on whether Hegseth shared detailed targeting information but maintained that there was no national security breach.

"The truth is that there is an informal group chat that started before confirmation

of his closest advisers," the official said. "Nothing classified was ever discussed on that chat."

Sean Parnell, chief Pentagon spokesman, did not respond to requests for comment. The "Defense | Team Huddle" Signal chat until recently included about a dozen of Hegseth's top aides, including Joe Kasper, Hegseth's chief of staff, and Parnell.

The chat also included two senior advisers to Hegseth — Dan Caldwell and Darin Selnick — who were accused of leaking unauthorized information last week and were fired. Caldwell and Selnick were among three former top Pentagon officials who proclaimed their innocence in a public statement Saturday in response to the

leak inquiry that led to their dismissals.

On Sunday, another former Defense Department official, John Ulliyot, who left the department last week, said in an opinion essay for Politico that the Pentagon "is in disarray under Hegseth's leadership" and suggested that Trump should remove him.

When Goldberg released details of what Hegseth put into the Signal chat created by Waltz regarding the upcoming strikes in Yemen, Trump defended him and said he had done nothing wrong.

In a statement, Anna Kelly, a White House spokesperson, did the same after the latest revelation. "No matter how many times the legacy media tries to resurrect the same nonstory, they can't change the fact that no classified information was shared," Kelly said.

While the Signal chat created by Waltz for senior officials was criticized for sharing details of a military operation on an encrypted but unclassified app, the participants — other than Goldberg of The Atlantic, who appears to have been added accidentally — were senior government officials with reason to track the progress of the attack. But some of the participants in the group chat created by Hegseth were not officials with any apparent need to be given real-time

information on details of the operation.

Jennifer Hegseth has drawn attention for the access her husband has given her. Pete Hegseth brought her into two meetings with foreign military counterparts in February and early March where sensitive information was discussed, a development first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

Parlatore, who has been Pete Hegseth's personal lawyer for the last eight years, was commissioned as a Navy commander in the Judge Advocate General's Corps about a week before the Yemen strikes were initiated.

In an interview before rejoining the military, Parlatore told The New York Times that he would work with Hegseth's office to improve training for the military's uniformed lawyers.

Hegseth's brother Phil works inside the Pentagon as a liaison to the Department of Homeland Security and as a senior adviser to the defense secretary.

The Pentagon's acting inspector general, Steven Stebbins, announced this month that he would review the Yemen strike disclosures on the Signal chat that included top aides. It's not clear whether his review has uncovered the Signal chat that included Hegseth's wife and other advisers.



Parking violations are the No. 1 type of complaint submitted to Get It Done, making up 61,443 of the 391,561 complaints made in 2024. **NELVIN C. CEPEDA / U-T FILE**

## APP

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cil's Rules Committee last week that his department began sending more "after" photos in late 2024 and that they have seen better user satisfaction numbers since.

Also, in response to a 2022 city audit, the department revamped when it marks a complaint "closed," because many users objected to complaints being closed when the problem hadn't actually been solved.

Now, users typically get estimated completion dates for reported problems and interim progress reports.

But Councilmember Kent Lee said he still frequently gets complaints from constituents that cases are closed prematurely or without explanation.

Councilmember Vivian Moreno expressed frustration that Get It Done is so internet-based, when many San Diegans lack access and rely on telephones to ask city officials questions or report complaints.

In 2024, 11% of incoming reports were received by phone calls, 32% through the Get It Done website

and 57% through the smartphone app. The app has the advantage of using GPS to determine the location of a problem without the user having to describe it.

Moreno noted that city officials say Get It Done saves money because it would be much more expensive to hire enough customer service operators to handle by phone all the complaints submitted through the website and app.

"Missed in that analysis is the cost of leaving behind lower-income communities and senior citizens without access to an iPhone or laptop," she said.

The city recently expanded the app to begin allowing complaints about violations of the city's short-term residential occupancy law, which places a long list of restrictions on vacation rentals and the people who rent them.

Another newly added category is violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires the city to make curbs friendly for people who use wheelchairs and other accommodations.

Coming this year will be the opportunity to report problems about individual city parks or recreation

facilities.

Lee praised that change, noting he gets lots of complaints related to parks. "Having a way to funnel those will be helpful," he said.

Also coming soon will be a category for the 400 electric vehicle charging stations slated to be installed in parking lots at beaches, libraries and other city facilities over the next five years.

Reports of malfunctioning chargers will be sent directly to the contractor that will install and oversee the stations. Initial rollout of the first 10 stations is scheduled for the end of the year.

Hempton said his staff is trying to go beyond surveys to determine how to make the app more useful. They recently did hourlong, one-on-one interviews with 27 users — three from each of the city's nine council districts — to gather information on what actual users truly want.

Council President Joe LaCava said the city officials who oversee Get It Done should be praised for always seeking ways to improve it.

"We're doing great today, but we can do better tomorrow," he said. "We're never satisfied."



Chair Nora Vargas listens to Justin Castro speak out against the Board of Supervisors' proposal to limit public commenters' time to speak last year. **ANA RAMIREZ / U-T FILE**

## LANGUAGE

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"When our freedom of speech is being attacked, the people stand up and fight back," she said. "I believe foul language is part of free speech."

Castro, who addresses the board as "The Gambler," is a former registrar's employee who has repeatedly claimed that the county refuses to correct fraudulent election practices. Last year, after he threatened co-workers, county officials sought and received a restraining order against him.

He also declined to explain why he addresses elected officials in sexist slurs.

Public comments at the San Diego County Board of Supervisors — and other agencies — have grown more adversarial since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public health officials imposed mask mandates and other preventive measures, and when many local governments moved to virtual public comment.

Lawson-Remer and Supervisors Joel Anderson, Jim Desmond and Monica Montgomery Steppe did not respond to questions about balancing free speech and public decorum.

But spokesperson Tammy Glenn said in a statement that San Diego County appreciates public input and adopted new rules late last year aimed at promoting both participation and order at public meetings.

Among the changes implemented in January, speakers "shall not use" threatening, profane, slanderous or abusive language, she said.

"The public has every right to air grievances, criticize the county and raise issues of concern," Glenn said. "However, the purpose of the board meetings is to conduct county business, which should be able to proceed without disruptions or threats."

The updated protocols — approved after a prior attempt to rein in public speech failed — also allow the board chair to stop the meeting and confront an abusive speaker.

"The chairperson may, at the chairperson's option, state to the person who has

used such language that such language is unwanted, unwelcome, inappropriate and interferes with the ability of those present to listen and understand," Glenn said. The Board of Supervisors may be hamstrung by legal precedent.

Core tenets of American democracy include freedom of speech and the right to disagree publicly with the government. In a precedent-setting case, the Supreme Court in 1971 upheld the right of a man to wear a jacket with the words "F--- the Draft."

"The court recognized that profanity can be a powerful way to express deep conviction," said Aaron Terr of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression in Philadelphia. "That's especially true when people feel ignored or mistreated by their government."

Elected officials can prohibit conduct that disrupts meetings, or intervene if a speaker makes threats, speaks off topic or refuses to step away when their allotted time expires, Terr said.

"But all too often, public officials conflate disruption with speech they dislike," he said. "Public comment may at times be uncomfortable. But the government doesn't get to choose which words or criticisms are acceptable."

Steven Dinkin, president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, said he is seeing more examples of public speech turning hateful.

"I've been thinking a lot about the current lack of civility across society, and it is definitely a sign of the times," said Dinkin, whose organization provides trainings and strategies to employers aimed at improving communications, productivity and human relations.

"We are getting calls from all over the country where organizations, companies, agencies are looking at trying to identify tools and strategies to de-escalate these situations," he said.

Dinkin offered some suggestions to help San Diego County lower the temperature at board meetings, including posting a code of civil discourse inside the chambers.

He also said people on the receiving end of crude or heated criticism should not

dismiss or exacerbate the complaints and be mindful of how their response might affect the behavior.

"They anticipate that you're going to immediately push back," Dinkin said. "What's very effective is that you step aside, and by not pushing back, it puts the other individual off balance."

By that measure, Lawson-Remer and other supervisors did well to avert confrontations with their antagonists.

Rachel Locke directs the Violence, Inequality and Power Lab at the University of San Diego's Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice and co-authored last year's study of threats and harassment against California elected officials.

Locke said officials must remain within the rules that govern interaction with the public and are leery of infringing on people's First Amendment rights.

"That said, as far as I know, there is nothing stopping a (county supervisor) from stating unequivocally that certain language will not be tolerated," she said. "For some, doing so may come with political consequences."

Locke said elected officials are not the only ones who can promote positive public discourse.

"There's nothing to stop a constituent from speaking up to refute the crude remarks of another constituent, doing so in a safe and respectful way," she said. "Making clear that such language is not acceptable as a community norm is important."

One speaker at a Board of Supervisors meeting two weeks ago took it upon herself to do just that.

Before activist Ilka Westin addressed the board about an item exploring the possibility of fighting private equity in the U.S. fire trucks market, she pleaded for more decorum in public speech.

"There is no reason to call any of you names or refer to any person individually," Westin said, addressing the board but referring to other speakers. "When we come up here, it's an honor, and we get to speak."

"I'm really sad that we have heard people call in and use foul language," she said.

The Board of Supervisors will again convene at 9 a.m. Tuesday.



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