



The San Diego Union-Tribune

\$2.77 PLUS TAX

SUNDAY



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T PHOTOS

Brittany McKinney, 38, shows how she lights a fire for warmth with a piece of foil and hand sanitizer. Her tent was set up last week at 13th and E streets in downtown San Diego.

PANTRIES STRUGGLE AS MORE NEED FOOD AID IN S.D.

Nonprofits feel biggest squeeze in years as high prices hit donors, visitors

BY ROXANA POPESCU

At one free food pantry in Vista, visits by hungry San Diegans swelled by 900 more households in October, November and December.

At a free produce distribution point in Sorrento Valley, tomatoes and berries have been flying off the tables, as more than 800 households stock up there every month. Back in 2022, the weekly traffic was less than 100.

The escalating need comes at a tough time for food organizations: At three key food charity nonprofits, donations have fallen year over year, with sharper declines coming in winter months, when demand is greater. At a fourth nonprofit, donations are flat.

Tight budgets and high demand are the perennial dueling pressures faced by these nonprofits. But the gap between what they need to serve San Diego's hungriest residents and the funds and food at their disposal to meet those needs is far greater than in previous years.

"With this increase in numbers served, the San Diego Food Bank is definitely experiencing its greatest need/demand for assistance since SEE FOOD • A10

AS NIGHTS GET COLDER, RISKS OF SLEEPING OUTSIDE INCREASE

More than a dozen homeless people have died in recent years

BY BLAKE NELSON

Sometime between sunset Tuesday and Wednesday's sunrise, the temperature became unbearable.

Brittany McKinney was in a tent downtown. Curling up near a friend wasn't enough, nor was the body heat from her dog, a young husky mix.

The 38-year-old placed a square of tin foil on a paper plate and set both on the tent floor. Then she lifted a bottle of Purell, squeezed hand sanitizer onto the foil and flicked a lighter over the pile.

Within moments, the sanitizer ignited.

"I felt a blanket of warmth over



Nighttime lows in the 40s, with some forecast in the 30s this week, are dangerous for people without shelter.

me," she recalled in an interview. "Thank God."

Dropping temperatures are creating new risks countywide for the thousands of people who sleep outside and putting more pressure on an already strained shelter system. Even though San Diego is warmer than many cities, the area recently hit lows in the 40s and forecasts are warning of nights in the 30s. Plus, wind chill and rain are especially dangerous for those with precarious health.

Over the past 10-plus years, low temperatures have been cited in more death investigations than the heat.

At least 16 homeless people have died throughout the region amid exposure to the cold, according to data from the San Diego SEE RISKS • A8

■ A8 • Fewer churches able to offer shelter on winter nights.

171 BOEING JETS GROUNDED BY REGULATORS AFTER MIDAIR EMERGENCY

THE WASHINGTON POST

The Federal Aviation Administration ordered the grounding of 171 Boeing airplanes for inspection on Saturday, after part of a jet's wall blew out during a flight Friday and caused a dramatic emergency landing.

All Boeing 737-9 Max planes with the same part — a mid-cabin door plug, or an exit that's paneled off rather than used as a door — operating in the U.S. must be inspected, the FAA ordered.

Alaska and United Airlines, which use the jets, had begun inspections, the carriers said. The incident caused dozens of flight cancellations Saturday, with the checks expected to take several days to complete.

On the Friday Alaska Airlines flight, a door plug blew out partway down the plane, leaving a gaping hole beside a row of seats, according to the FAA, experts and images captured by passengers. Some on board described pieces of debris SEE BOEING • A11

FIRM HIRED FOR COUNTY SCHOOLS RETIREMENT PROGRAM

Move intended to improve services also raises some concerns

BY JEFF MCDONALD

Thousands of Southern California educators are supplementing their retirements through a special program of the San Diego County Office of Education, creating an investment fund that has swelled to nearly \$800 million over the past 20 years.

The initiative, operated under

a joint-powers authority called the Fringe Benefits Consortium, has drawn members from 120 or more K-12 districts, charter schools and community colleges across San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties.

The collaboration invites 90,000 or more teachers, principals and other school employees to grow their retirement income by investing in mutual funds, annuities and other financial products through the in-house adviser.

But the looming retirement of the program's manager prompted

consortium officials to rethink the way the effort is being managed.

Instead of replacing the longtime manager, an employee of the county schools office, the executive board in charge of the Fringe Benefits Consortium voted to hire a for-profit investment consultancy to run the program.

The decision was made in August absent any public bidding process or staff report to the executive board or the public.

Under the policy shift, contractor PlanMember Services is poised to earn millions of dollars by marketing and managing the

accounts of 14,000-plus participants who rely on the San Diego County Office of Education for retirement planning.

PlanMember Services also will have plenty of room to grow; some 75,000 more people are eligible for the program.

In addition to millions of dollars in fees, the new vendor is expected to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from the consortium for various management services.

San Diego County Office of Education officials said outsourcing SEE PROGRAM • A11

GAS MONITOR DATA SHOWS UNHEALTHY AIR QUALITY NEAR TIJUANA RIVER WATERSHED

BY TAMMY MURGA

It's only the first of six monitoring stations that will be placed along the border region near where sewage flows through the Tijuana River watershed, but in the three months since it was installed, it has confirmed what South Bay residents long suspected: The air they are breathing is unhealthy.

What, they wonder, will the other five monitoring stations show? And how will the data collected be used to remedy the decadeslong, unchecked discharge of contaminated water from the U.S.-Mexico region?

Since late September, six monitors came online at a station the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District built on the property of San Diego Fire Station 29 in San Ysidro. The air-quality monitors are measuring, on an hourly basis, the quantities of the potentially toxic gas hydrogen sulfide, which SEE DATA • A7



ANA RAMIREZ U-T

This is one of six gas monitors installed by the San Diego Air Pollution Control District in San Ysidro.

The witty and compassionate winner of the 2023 Pulitzer Prize

English

By Sanaz Toossi
Directed by Arya Shahi Jan. 27 - Feb. 18

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