

White House press briefing [via FNC's *America Reports*]

02/18/26

1:28:21 p.m.

8 minutes and 53 seconds

KAROLINE LEAVITT: We're seeing promising signs every day that 2026 is going to be a record successful year for the American people, just as President Trump promised them. The January jobs report shattered expectations, highlighting how the President's pro-growth economic agenda is fueling American prosperity. The economy added 172,000 new, private sector jobs to kick off the year. That's more than two and a half times economists predictions. The labor force participation rate went up while the unemployment rate fell. The prime age labor force participation rate is now at its highest since 2001. Most importantly, 100% of all job creation under President Trump continues to be in the private sector. This is truly remarkable. That's 615,000 private sector jobs that have been added in President Trump's second term thus far. These are real working people. These are real American families who will be living out their American dream. Meanwhile, federal government employment has shrunk to its lowest level since 1966, saving taxpayers \$29 billion annually in all of the net job growth under President Trump has gone to native born Americans, ending the disgraceful pattern under Joe Biden of job gains going to non-citizens and illegal aliens. Additionally, on inflation, the new CPI report is even more proof of the progress made by President Trump. Despite all of the doom casting from the so-called experts, the President has managed to utilize powerful tariffs to secure trillions of dollars in investments into our country and rebalance our trade deals while simultaneously cooling inflation. Year over year inflation fell to 2.4% in January, beating expectations again and marking the lowest level since May. Core inflation — the best measure of inflation — dropped to its lowest level in nearly five years. Meanwhile, real, average, hourly earnings for all private sector workers rose in the month of January, which means more money is going back directly into people's pockets after only one year of President Trump back in office, real earnings for all private sector workers have outpaced inflation by nearly \$1,400, earning back roughly half of the \$2,900 they lost under Joe Biden when 40-year-high inflation was stealing Americans purchasing power. President Trump's policies are and will continue to allow Americans incomes to go further for bills, retirement, and achieving the American dream. A key part of the American dream. A key part of the American dream is buying a home, and that is finally becoming more affordable under this President. This past week, it was announced the annual mortgage cost for a new home has fallen by \$4,000 so far under President Trump, after rising by roughly \$15,000 under Joe Biden. As a result, mortgage affordability has reached a four year best following recent bold action by the President to make homeownership more attainable for American families, not large Wall Street corporate institutional investors. At the same time, national median rates — rents have fallen to a four year low and have declined for six consecutive months. The annual rental cost for a new rental unit has fallen nearly \$100 so far under President Trump, after rising more than \$3,000 under Joe Biden, and many are crediting that to the president's deportation efforts to remove illegal aliens from our communities, and therefore from housing that should be used for American citizens. At the grocery store, the price of eggs, dairy, cheese, fresh fruit, apples, oranges, potatoes, tomatoes and butter have fallen since President Trump took office, and he is continuing to fight for even lower prices at the grocery store for the American consumer. At the gas pump, fuel prices are down by almost 10% over the past year. The average national price

for a gallon of regular gas is now less than \$3, and is approaching \$2.70 in some states, in much lower than that in many states across the country as well. We've seen in several states, gas is under \$2 a gallon. And at the pharmacy, prescription drug prices are down over the past year, with even more price relief ahead for American patients thanks to President Trump's most favored nation, drug pricing deals and the Great Health Care Plan, which he is calling on Congress to pass as soon as possible. What President Trump wants Americans to understand is that this is only the start, and the best is yet to come. The historic success that we have seen since he took office is just the beginning of an enormous growth and opportunity that we are about to witness. And I know the President looks forward to hitting the road and being with the great people of Georgia tomorrow to talk about just this. So with that today, I know there's a lot of news. I will open it up to take your questions, and we're going to start, as always, with our new media seat, the great Michael Graham from Inside Sources. Thank you for being here, Michael.

MICHAEL GRAHAM: Thank you for having us. And thanks from our 200 newspaper partners around the country. So you mentioned gas. We didn't mention natural gas. And back where you live, your friends and family are paying among the highest prices —

LEAVITT: That's right

GRAHAM: — for natural gas to heat their home and for electricity generation, the number one source of power across New England. The cheap gas is in Pennsylvania. The two highest places to buy gas in the country? New York City and Boston. The problem is, the blue states will not allow the gas to travel, to produce electricity or to reach customers. When President Trump first came into office, there was some talk him and Governor Hochul in New York possibly reaching a deal. When will consumers in the Northeast feel relief from President Trump's energy policies? And what can he do about state objections to expansion of infrastructure? Then have a quick follow up.

LEAVITT: Sure, absolutely. Well, the President has promised all Americans across the country, and in particular in the Northeast, where we do face much higher costs of electricity and of energy. Unfortunately, because of the Democrat policies in the area, from the federal government's perspective, the President and the National Energy Dominance Council, Secretaries Wright and Burgum are doing all we can when it comes to federal permitting. The drill, baby, drill agenda is obviously underway. The President has made a huge push for more fossil fuels in this country. You look at what he did last week with respect to coal. Coal truly keeps the lights on in this country. We learned that in the recent winter storms, however, there's only so much that can be done at the federal level. That's why the President has called on blue state governors to participate in this energy dominance agenda, including governors in New England in the northeast, by contacting Governor Hochul directly to get this Constitution pipeline underway. This is not only going to bring down the cost of energy in the northeast, it's also going to support job growth and to support job growth and energy affordability and more opportunity for workers in the Northeast. And I just have a quick statistic here on energy that I found fascinating. And it's obviously true because I'm saying it up here. Red states with Republican legislatures currently enjoy lower average retail electricity prices than blue states with Democrat legislatures. And that's exactly why the President is calling on all blue state governors across

New England and the northeast to get on board. Let's bring prices down for all Americans, whether they live in a red or a blue state.

GRAHAM: So, right down the street from your alma mater, St. Anselm College, there's talk about building an ICE facility that's causing a lot of political [drama] in New Hampshire. And for the Republican governor, Kelly Ayotte. Seem to be some miscommunications, arguing on both sides. Even Republican supporters of Trump who live in the towns say, we're not sure we want this. What's your message to the folks in New Hampshire about this proposed ICE facility?"

LEAVITT: The message is that illegal immigration, while the border is secure, is still a problem across our entire homeland. And the previous administration allowed nearly 20 million illegal aliens from countries all over the world into our country. And the President and Secretary Noem have done a phenomenal job at deporting nearly three million illegals, have left the country, either through deportation or self-deportation, under over the past year. But obviously, there are a lot more illegal alien criminals left in our homeland. That includes in New England, there are many within our communities in New Hampshire and Maine, definitely in Massachusetts and in the Boston suburbs that need to be arrested, detained and deported back to their home countries. And so the president and Secretary Noem and I know ICE are engaged with local governors across the whole country, including in New Hampshire, to open more detention facilities. This is an unfortunate consequence of the previous administration's border invasion that the President has thankfully put a stop to. But of course, we still need to grapple with the illegal alien criminals who are here, and that requires more detention space. Thank you, Michael.

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1:39:03 p.m.
2 minutes and 26 seconds

ED O'KEEFE: About Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The administration decided to appeal the judge's ruling that in essence was trying to put the slavery of the slaves back, arguing that the federal government "believed it had the power to assemble and disassemble historical truths when it has domain over historical facts." The judge said it does not. The administration said you were planning to put up an updated, interpretive materials and provide a fuller account of the history of slavery in Independence Hall. What more was the administration or is the administration planning to add?

LEAVITT: I'm not familiar with this specific instance to be honest with you but I will check in with the appropriate people who are overseeing this and we'll get you a more firm answer.

O'KEEFE: One other question.

LEAVITT: Sure.

O'KEEFE: Yesterday in his statement about Jesse Jackson the President said "despite the fact that I am falsely and consistently called a racist by the scoundrels and lunatics on the radical left,

Democrats all, it was always my pleasure to help Jesse along the way.” Where or when does the President believe he has been falsely called racist?

LEAVITT: You’re kidding, right?

O’KEEFE: No.

LEAVITT: I will pull you a plethora of examples. I’m going to get my team in that room to start going through the internet of radical Democrats throughout the years, Ed, who have accused this president falsely of being a racist on ensure there’s many people in this room and on network television across the country who have accused him of the same. In fact, I know that because I’ve seen it with my own eyes. The President very much looks forward to having an event later this afternoon at 3:00 p.m. to celebrate Black History Month and talk about how his policies are advancing opportunity and prosperity for all Americans through record tax cuts, through the Trump Accounts that all Americans can access, regardless of race. These are a great thing for the next generation of Americans. The President has also awarded hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding to strengthen educational outcomes historically black colleges and universities across the country. Again, the President is protecting the hard-earned benefits of the 2.4 million black veterans who honorably served in our nations armed forces by reducing the backlog of veterans waiting for their VA benefits and their home loans through the Department of Veterans Affairs. There’s a lot this President has done for all Americans regardless of race and he has absolutely been falsely called and smeared as a racist and I am happy to provide you those receipts —

O’KEEFE: Is he going to [inaudible]

LEAVITT: — and we gladly will right after this briefing.

(....)

1:42:04 p.m.

2 minutes and 40 seconds

JENNIFER JACOBS: And on the sewage spill, the sewage pipe that broke on the Potomac, can you give us an update on the federal government’s response? And officials have told CBS that some of that aging infrastructure is a concern that this particular pipe wasn’t of the most urgent concern. Do you know if the government is looking into which other pipes could be at risk of collapsing?

LEAVITT: Well, the next step in this process is for any of the three local jurisdictions involved, whether that’s the Commonwealth of Virginia, the state of Maryland and Governor Moore, or the District of Columbia to step forward and ask the federal government for help and ask for the Stafford Act to be implemented here, so that the federal government can take control of this local infrastructure that has been abandoned and neglected by Governor Moore in Maryland for far too long. In fact, it’s no secret that Maryland’s water and infrastructure have been in dire need of

repair. Their infrastructure has received a nearly failing grade in the 2025 report card from the American Society of Civil Engineers. This is the same grade they've received five years earlier. There's been no improvement under the leadership of Governor Moore. He has clearly shown he's incapable of fixing this problem which is why President Trump and the federal government are standing by to step in and for all the environmentalists in the room and across the District of Columbia, let's all hope and pray that this governor does the right thing and asks President Trump to get involved because it will be an ecological and environmental disaster if the federal government does not step in to help. But of course, we need state and local jurisdictions to make that formal request. That's part of the legal process to move forward. [TO DOOCY] Peter.

PETER DOOCY: So, you that said any of the three Democrats just need to ask. A few minutes ago, Maryland Governor Wes Moore asked.

LEAVITT: Wow.

DOOCY: He said, "if the President wants me to ask nicely, the response is this. Please, Mr. President, do your job."

LEAVITT: To which I say I'll ask the President and we will provide you with next steps. But, in all seriousness, the federal government has been preparing plans, the White House has been in contact with FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers, Environment Protection Agency. We've been standing by. This is a problem we want to fix not just for the federal government but for everyone who lives in the District of Columbia, including all of you. So, you're welcome.

DOOCY: To your point about that, there are a lot of events coming up for America 250. The president wants people from all over to come to the nation's capital. Is he worried that by this summer the Potomac River will still smell like poop?

LEAVITT: He is worried about that, which is why the federal government wants to fix it and we hope that the local authorities will cooperate with us in doing so.

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1:47:47 p.m.

1 minute and 52 seconds

FRANCO ORDOÑEZ: President Trump has talked about a forthcoming executive order on voter ID. Is there more details you can provide? Can you talk about steps you're taking to overcome court challenges that you've kind of faced in this area before on voting?

LEAVITT: Well, as the President said in that Truth Social post, he is discussing and exploring legal options for potential executive order with perspective voter ID. But this is something he is made very clear he wants Congress to get done. The SAVE America Act as a common sense piece of legislation that has now passed the House of Representatives to ensure that voter ID is a requirement for the United States of America. It's a common sense policy that nearly 90 percent

of the country agrees with. You need an ID to go and purchase alcohol. You need an ID to go to the library and check out a book. And so, the President thinks you should have an ID to vote in our nation's elections and I know the vast majority of Americans agree with him on that of you wants Congress to move quickly to get it done.

ORDOÑEZ: [INAUDIBLE]

LEAVITT: Sure.

ORDOÑEZ: On Cuba, it's increasingly being described as a humanitarian crisis. Can — what is a successful outcome for the U.S., that the U.S. wants to see in Cuba. Is there anything less than regime change that would be considered success?

LEAVITT: I think, as Secretary Rubio has articulate and the President himself, we want to see it flourishing and prosperous democracies all over the world, especially in our own hemisphere. I'm not dictating any action the United States may take to get there, but I — of course, that's in the United States' best interest to have Cuba be a truly free and prosperous democracy. Unfortunately right now, that is not the case. They are a regime that is falling. Their country is collaption [sic] — collapsing and that's why we believe it's in their best interests to make very dramatic changes very soon and we'll see what they decide to do.

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1:58:15 p.m.
51 seconds

BENI RAE HARMONY: So, Governor JB Pritzker just recently signed the bill — the law went into effect in January that is supposedly going to allocate about \$2.5 billion to illegals to go to college on financial aid in the state of Illinois. What is the White House's reaction to this? Illinois is already, by 2027, they're supposed to have a \$3 billion deficit. What's your reaction to that?

LEAVITT: Yeah, we'll have to take a look at that. I would say the President certainly thinks that Governor Pritzker is not doing a very good job of managing his state as evidenced by not only the waste, fraud, and abuse but also the crime in the city of Chicago that, unfortunately, Governor Pritzker has refused to pick up the phone call — phone and called the White House and ask for help on, which is something his residents want him to do, but he refuses to do for political reasons. As for the specific money, we'll take a look and get you an answer.

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2:01:20 p.m.
1 minute and 6 seconds

PEDRO ROJAS: Governor Moore in Maryland said he was ending the law enforcement

cooperation with ICE and, by doing that, a lot of local sheriffs are not happy about that. In fact, they met today in Annapolis to come up with legal action. What is the message of the White House to those sheriffs and to the residents of Maryland?

LEAVITT: Well, first of all, it's another despicable action by Governor Moore. Why would you prevent your state and local law enforcement with cooperating with federal law enforcement? If you just ask them — to your point, if you ask sheriffs across the country if they want to have that level of cooperation and coordination with the federal government, of course they do. It makes their jobs easier, it keeps them out of hostile and dangerous environments. It allows them to detain criminals who have committed heinous crimes in our country with — with the most safe circumstances possible. So, the President, of course, continues to stand on the side of law enforcement and this is another just horrible and frankly political action taken by Governor Wes Moore, and unfortunately, the people of his state are going to reap the consequences of it.