

Outgoing Chicago mayor declares state of emergency over influx of migrants

Alexander Fangmann, Fabian Salgado
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On Tuesday, in what is likely her final major act as mayor of Chicago, Democrat Lori Lightfoot declared a state of emergency in response to the arrival of thousands of migrants which has overwhelmed the capacity of local shelters and social services, leaving many of the newly arrived migrants, including families with young children, to sleep on the floors of police stations, shuttered high schools and park district field houses. Reports indicate the conditions deny families access to adequate sanitation and shower facilities.

According to Lightfoot, more than 8,100 migrants, mostly asylum-seekers from Central and South America, have arrived in the city since August 31, when Texas governor Greg Abbott and other Republican governors first began sending busloads of migrants to Chicago and other Democratic-controlled “sanctuary cities.”

The executive order grants the Mayor’s office sweeping purchasing powers modeled on those granted during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing the city to move around emergency funds and orders city departments to “undertake whatever efforts are feasible pursuant to their powers and duties and to direct their employees accordingly to manage this declared emergency.”

Notably, Lightfoot’s executive order also states, “I reserve the authority to request the Governor of the State of Illinois to mobilize the National Guard to provide staffing and logistical support to address this emergency in the city of Chicago.” Deployment of the National Guard in Chicago to occupy working class neighborhoods has long been a goal of the far right, including former president Donald Trump.

While Lightfoot’s executive order will do next to nothing to address the crisis, it sets the stage for incoming Democratic mayor Brandon Johnson to act

under its authority while distancing himself from any responsibility for its creation. Johnson himself was in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday to meet with top Biden administration officials and Democratic politicians in order to drum up federal funding and support.

Earlier in the day, the Chicago City Council voted to allocate a paltry \$51 million of Chicago’s 2021 budget surplus to cover existing spending on the migrant crisis, which is estimated to be less than half of the \$112 million needed to fund these efforts through the month of June.

The Lightfoot administration has appealed for aid from the state and federal government.

The city and state asked for nearly \$200 million in total from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to accommodate and aid immigrants who had arrived in 2022, but have received only \$14.1 million. The state of Illinois has agreed to send a total of \$30 million, while the administration of billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker claims the state has spent \$260 million so far on shelter and care for asylum seekers out of its own budget.

City officials estimate that the number of average daily arrivals has surged more than tenfold since mid-April. According to Brandie Knazze, the commissioner of Family and Support Services, 100 to 150 people are arriving daily by airplane, along with another three to five busloads of people daily. Even more are expected to begin arriving with the expiration of Title 42 on May 11, even with the Biden administration’s deepening assault on the right to asylum and the deployment of 1,500 soldiers to the southern border.

The surge in migrants arriving in Chicago has exposed the inadequacy of the city’s housing and shelter infrastructure, which is now “bursting at the

seams.” According to Knazze, the city is operating seven shelters and three “respite” centers housing more than 3,200 migrants. Around 300 migrants are stuck waiting in police station lobbies around the city, while others are being placed in park district field houses without adequate bedding or other supplies.

Officials have been on the search for new temporary shelters. However, a number of the facilities being considered would require substantial repairs or upgrades to serve even as temporary housing. Meanwhile, hundreds of newly arrived immigrants have had to resort to sleeping on the floor of police stations or on the floor of O'Hare International Airport for those who arrive by plane.

Many of the locations city officials are considering for shelters are existing park district locations and shuttered public schools, leading to pushback from local residents, and even the expression of anti-immigrant sentiments. At a meeting last week in the South Shore neighborhood, residents booed city officials who proposed using the closed South Shore High School to house residents, with some residents saying “Send them back” and others holding signs saying “Build the wall.”

This followed a similar meeting earlier in the year in the South Side Woodlawn neighborhood, after plans were unveiled to house migrants in the shuttered Wadsworth Elementary School, which closed in 2013 as part of the largest school closure in US history.

These retrograde conceptions flow naturally from the Democratic Party’s racist approach to politics. Alderman Michelle Harris, whose ward includes South Shore, said prior to the meeting in that neighborhood, “While we recognize this is a humanitarian crisis [that] may constitute an emergency for the city of Chicago, it does not constitute an emergency for the South Shore community nor the residents of the 8th Ward.”

This was echoed by Alderman David Moore, who voted against the \$51 million emergency appropriation. Moore, a member of the city council’s progressive caucus, said, “I’m never going to sell my constituents out when their needs are not met first in some form or fashion, and if that’s not happening I have an issue with that. Until I see some movement on that, I cannot support and take the oxygen mask off of my community to add it somewhere else.”

Johnson, who is set to be inaugurated on Monday, has

released no specific details on his plans to address the situation, leading to the possibility that the crisis will continue to escalate and potentially lead to a request for the National Guard.



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