

Five-year-old boy dies during outbreak at overcrowded Chicago migrant shelter

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A five-year-old boy who was staying at a Chicago migrant shelter in the Pilsen neighborhood died on Sunday as a number of diseases reportedly rip through the large facility. The conditions in the warehouse facility, now housing more than 2,400 people, were just days prior reported as inhumane. Five others from the same shelter were hospitalized on Monday, including four children under the age of nine and one 18-year-old.

Such conditions, and related illnesses and deaths, are the foreseeable outcomes of the Democratic Party's anti-immigrant policies. The shelter, a warehouse in an industrial area on the southwest side of the city, was originally planned to house 1,000 migrants but now holds 2,414.

The boy, Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero, an asylum-seeker from Venezuela, was staying with his parents at the shelter. According to a report in the *Chicago Tribune*, the child had been sick for the past two to three days with a fever. When his lips turned purple and his father went to the shelter to request an ambulance, shelter staff told the family it was "probably because of the cold."

Borderless magazine, citing a Venezuelan migrant living at the shelter, said the boy had a fever of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and was convulsing in the bathroom. A police source told the *Chicago Sun-Times* the child was bleeding from his mouth and nose and had been suffering from diarrhea for days. Although the boy was officially pronounced dead at Comer Children's Hospital, migrants told the magazine they believe he died at the shelter.

Borderless published a report on December 14 detailing the overcrowded and inhumane conditions, which it said, "fails to meet the basic standards for emergency shelter laid out by the U.N. Refugee Agency."

Hundreds have arrived in the past week as the administration of Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, formerly on the legislative staff at the Chicago Teachers Union, announced its success in clearing the migrants out of police stations designating as "emergency staging areas," where hundreds had been sleeping on floors and subjected to verbal and physical abuse.

Media reports on the conditions in the Pilsen shelter highlight

the inadequate heating at the facility, which is poorly insulated. Favorite Healthcare Staffing, the contractor which operates the facility, has received \$94 million from the city but allocates each family only a single non-thermal blanket. Migrants also report mold, water leaking onto their cots, as well as dust and fiber particles which fall from the ceiling, which some believe caused eye infections in their children.

Following the boy's death, one migrant told *Borderless*, "There is a plague here. There are a lot of sick families ... And there are no doctors here." Migrants report outbreaks of several illnesses, including chickenpox, influenza and other infections as the US more broadly is seeing a surge of COVID-19 infections.

One migrant, a 28-year-old mother with two children, told ABC News, "There is a chicken pox outbreak. There is a flu outbreak. Children have scabies. There are bed bugs. Anything you can imagine is in that shelter." Another migrant told *Borderless*, "There's a lot of illnesses here, and they're trying to hide it."

Indeed, Favorite Healthcare Staffing has worked hard to prevent the public from finding out about the conditions at their Chicago shelters, with staff aggressively confronting reporters who come near facilities and threatening to call the police. Most shelter facilities have posters on the doors which say, "No media allowed unaccompanied" in English and "Media not allowed (reporters)" in Spanish [No se permiten medios de comunicación (reporteros)].

These warnings are equally directed at any migrants considering speaking to reporters about their plight. Migrants are not allowed to take photos or record videos of conditions in the shelters with the threat of being kicked out onto the street. A migrant named Maria told *Borderless*, "They're constantly threatening you. You have to be so careful because they write a report for everything. If you slip, they report you and kick you out. It's a bit frustrating." A young woman added, "They treat us terribly—like dogs."

The Johnson administration reacted defensively to news of the boy's death, placing the blame on the fascistic Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who has been sending busloads of migrants to Chicago and other cities from the southern border for more than 16 months.

Johnson said, “The conditions in which people are arriving in Chicago are quite disturbing. They’re showing up sick. Do you hear me? They’re showing up sick. The issue is not just how we respond in the city of Chicago, it’s the fact that we have a governor—a governor, an elected official in the state of Texas—that is placing families on buses without shoes; cold, wet, tired, hungry, afraid, traumatized.”

Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and chair of the city council’s Housing and Real Estate Committee, staged a walkthrough of the shelter following the boy’s death. He similarly disavowed any responsibility for the conditions in the shelter, saying, “We cannot put all of this on the shoulder of Chicagoans. These tragedies can be prevented if we get the resources that we need.”

Most of the 26,000 migrants who have arrived in Chicago since last August were sent by Abbott with the intention of creating a political crisis in cities run by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party, for its part, has reacted by embracing anti-immigrant policies from the highest levels on down, with the Biden administration currently pushing to sacrifice the right to asylum and militarize the border in return for an agreement with Republicans on war funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Johnson also claimed that “at every single site throughout the City of Chicago, we provide onsite medical care.” However, migrants at the Pilsen warehouse reported that a “pop-up clinic” would come by every eight days for a few hours and did not provide any medication or treatment for anything serious. Instead they were told to seek care at outside medical facilities. In some cases, migrants report being discouraged from calling for ambulances, explaining that the shelter staff said it would be “financially ruinous for them.”

The death of Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero follows the Johnson administration’s attempt to open up a massive migrant tent camp on industrially contaminated land in the Brighton Park neighborhood, about 10 blocks south of the Cook County jail. Security contractor GardaWorld had already begun the construction of a tent camp for asylum-seekers over objections from immigrant rights and environmental activists, which noted the site was previously the location of a zinc smelter, a rail yard and an underground diesel storage tank.

When Johnson acknowledged concerns about the site’s contamination, he did so only to dismiss them, saying, “As we’ve been doing at all of our sites, we’ve assessed and we have looked for any contaminants, and all of the remediation that’s necessary to eliminate the contaminants, that’s very much a part of our overall agenda.”

Following the release of an 800-page city report on the site detailing soil contaminated with arsenic, mercury, lead and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker announced that the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) would not approve the site, which it said did

“not adequately reduce risks of human exposure to known and potential environmental conditions.” According to media reports, the city is still paying the owner of the lot \$91,400 per month for the lease.

The Johnson administration continues to make conditions as unpleasant and untenable as possible in a bid to discourage asylum-seekers from staying in Chicago altogether.

On November 15, Johnson announced that migrants would be limited to 60 days in city-run shelters, saying the city would be “implementing a tiered 60-day shelter stay limit, combined with robust case management and workforce access to move new arrivals through our system to self-sufficiency and economic stability.”

Brandie Knazze, the Department of Family and Support Services commissioner, said migrants would be issued notices in three waves, with the vast majority of current shelter residents receiving their 60-day notice by February 1.

Moves to cut off shelter access and attempt to turn migrants away are also being made by other Democratic mayors around the country. New York mayor Eric Adams proposed a similar 60-day limit. Denver, Colorado, has announced adult migrants would receive only 14 days of shelter, and families with children get a mere 37 days.

The contracting of private companies by the city for hundreds of millions shows there is clearly no want of resources, and that the terrible treatment of asylum seekers is a political decision.

The right to asylum and the democratic rights of migrants are under attack from every quarter of the official political spectrum, including pseudo-left groups such as the DSA, which has embraced the right-wing positions of the rest of the Democratic Party. Earlier this year Jeanette Taylor, 2023 DSA conference keynote speaker and Chicago city council member, flatly demanded: “Stop putting them in our community.” The rights of immigrant workers will only be guaranteed and defended on the basis of the unity of the working class in the struggle for socialism, to expropriate the ill-gotten billions of the capitalist class, and ending the outmoded political division of the world into rival nation-states.



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