

Johnson administration in Chicago knew of dire conditions in migrant shelter weeks before five-year-old died

Alexander Fangmann
22 January 2024

Emails released by the city reveal that Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and other officials were thoroughly informed of the unsanitary and unsafe conditions at a migrant shelter seven weeks before five-year-old Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero died of an illness on December 17. The boy's death and the continued warehousing of asylum-seekers by Johnson is an indictment of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its pseudo-left allies, who continue to back the mayor and his administration as it carries out the anti-immigrant policies of the Democratic Party.

The emails, obtained following Freedom of Information Act requests initiated by WTTW and a non-profit organization known as the FOIA Bakery, show that Johnson and city officials were alerted to conditions at the shelter by 11th Ward Alderman Nicole Lee on October 28.

Lee noted a number of issues that had been brought to the attention of her staff by volunteers who have been working to aid the migrants, as much of the city's response has relied on networks of volunteers.

Lee's email highlighted:

- Insufficient bathrooms
- Exposed pipes with raw sewage
- Insect infestation (cockroaches)
- Possible outbreak of illness with many people being sick
- Insufficient provision of meals and water
- Poor and disrespectful treatment by staff of migrants housed in the shelter

Images provided to WTTW depict cots for migrants directly over a sewer drain cover. One of Lee's aldermanic aides, Zoe Chan, who had written to Lee two days prior, provided more detail on some of these issues.

Chan was the campaign manager for alderman Byron

Sigcho-Lopez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. The shelter is actually located in the ward represented by Sigcho-Lopez. Chan noted that long lines to use bathrooms were likely the source of local resident complaints about migrants relieving themselves in alleys out of desperation. The lack of toilets was evidently exacerbated when "someone left the door to the bathroom open so a snake entered." Chan's emails also noted that many of the migrants seemed to want to return to the police stations on whose floors they were previously sleeping, but they were being threatened by staff if they shelter there. The Johnson administration recently made removing migrants from police stations a top priority, moving them in some cases to even less hospitable conditions.

Brandie Knazze, Johnson's commissioner for the Department of Family and Support Services, responded defensively to Lee's email the following day. Nevertheless, even her defensive formulations constitute an indictment of the conditions the Democratic Party in Chicago has forced asylum seekers to live in. In response to the claim about insufficient bathrooms, Knazze said the facility, which now houses 2,500 but which at the time of the email was housing 1,300, had 33 toilets inside the facility and 20 outside (in frigid Chicago weather). In response to the complaints about the smell of raw sewage, she revealed the property manager simply covered the sewer drain while staff moved cots away from the immediate vicinity.

Discussing the possible disease outbreak, Knazze oozed indifference, merely acknowledging that "residents are coming from police stations," while "some residents are coming with illness from being in the elements," and thus denying the cramped conditions played any role. Knazze also claimed a health provider is on site every Monday,

which has been shown to be completely inadequate, resulting in illnesses requiring hospitalization and at least one death.

To these issues and others, she suggested the migrants submit grievances and complaints using QR codes, knowing full well that the reason these complaints are not filed is because the migrants fear retaliation and the possibility of losing the meager assistance the city provides.

Conditions at the shelter did not meaningfully improve in the nearly two months that followed Lee's email to Johnson, at which point the five-year-old Martinez died and several others were hospitalized with an undisclosed illness. Indeed, the brutal conditions facing migrants are being allowed to occur with the deliberate aim of discouraging asylum seekers from coming to or staying in Chicago.

Since taking office the city administration has worked to offload the migrant crisis, as it cuts across the attempts of Mayor Johnson, a former staff member and lobbyist for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), and his allies in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), CTU and United Working Families (UWF), to posture as a left alternative. Just days after the boy's death, Johnson was asked in an interview on WTTW whether the conditions at the shelter were safe. Refusing to answer directly, Johnson reacted dismissively, saying, "Everything I've done is to ensure the safety of all of the migrants arriving here. The concerns people expressed; these aren't new concerns. Remember, there were 4,000 people living in police districts. There were ambulatory runs there."

In fact, Johnson did everything he could to cover up conditions at the shelters, from allowing the contractor running the facilities, Favorite Healthcare Staffing, to ban journalists as well as photos or videos revealing the conditions. The Johnson administration also tried to prevent the release of the above-mentioned emails, initially responding to WTTW's request with an almost completely redacted version, and only relenting after WTTW threatened a legal challenge. WTTW also received much of the content from FOIA Bakery.

Underscoring the sensitivity of this issue to the Democratic Party as a whole, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker defended Johnson, saying, "I did see the report, I haven't heard their response to it. I think we all understand and the mayor and his administration understand that we are in very difficult circumstances, trying to keep people safe in shelters as we're moving on to more permanent housing and jobs."

In reality, there is little prospect of either housing or jobs for many of the migrants, as the Johnson administration has announced plans to severely curtail shelter access and other city aid. Only in response to life-threatening cold weather did Johnson announce a postponement of a new 60-day shelter limit to February 1, at which point 650 migrants will be forced out of shelters, with more evictions in the following weeks.

For many of the migrants, the ending of shelter support, as filthy and dangerous as it is, will mean being thrown out on the streets, as work permits normally take two to four months to be approved for those who are even eligible. A program that was supposed to help in submitting 11,000 applications has seen only 1,655 migrants register, with only a few hundred approved.

The Johnson administration has additionally ceased any plans to open new shelters and will be slashing spending on migrants in the coming year. Alderman Andre Vazquez, chairman of the city council's Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights, said Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Johnson's deputy chief of staff, told him the city plans to "rightsize" the shelter system.

Vazquez, a former member of the DSA and a current member of the city council's progressive caucus, said, "The city feels that there is limited capacity they can take on. It's unprecedented. They don't know if they can handle the scale of how it's continuing, and they've got to make very tough decisions given the financial restraints on how to continue. What they're determining is exactly what it sounds like. If there's a limited amount of funds, they can't continue with the current shelter system and staffing levels."

All indications are that fascistic Texas Governor Greg Abbott will continue to ramp up buses and flights of migrants to Chicago and other "sanctuary cities" in an attempt to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and promote the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Roughly 35,000 have been sent just to Chicago so far as part of Abbott's Operation Lone Star.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact