

Five year old asylum seeker died of sepsis from strep, COVID and other infections linked to overcrowding in Chicago shelter

Kristina Betinis
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Five-year-old Jean Carlos Martinez Rivero, who was staying with his family at a migrant shelter in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, died last December 17 as a number of diseases reportedly tore through the large facility where his family had been living since late November.

A report by the Cook County Medical Examiner determined Jean Carlos died of sepsis due to “widespread bacterial infection” of Group A *Streptococcus pyogenes*. The boy also had COVID-19, adenovirus and rhinovirus/enterovirus. His cause of death was ruled “natural.”

Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, once a Chicago Teachers Union lobbyist and Cook County Commissioner whose election was heavily promoted the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has made no personal statement about the report.

The conditions in the Pilsen warehouse facility have been widely reported as inhumane. Migrants, medical service providers and volunteers have spoken out about the lack of resources made available by the city to meet basic needs. The shelter has been housing more than 2,400 people, though it was constructed to house just 1,000.

The shelter sits in the ward of DSA Alderman Byron Sigcho Lopez, who on February 18 spoke to CNN to defend the city’s shelter system while appealing for support from the federal government and state of Illinois. He said, “Right now, in Chicago, we are trying to do everything we can to address the serious needs that we can have, in terms of these humanitarian needs. We have, right now, unfortunately, as you mentioned,

these tragedies that keep... mounting because of the serious conditions that are being created.

“We have a governor in Texas that is treating this is a—as a war zone. He’s not treating these like a humanitarian crisis. We have people arriving in flip flops and without jackets often times. We have Arctic weather... When we see this—again, we are all familiar with the strep throat in Chicago. Unfortunately, when this becomes a more serious and aggressive type, and we’ve seen a lot of disease, this is—this ended up in a tragedy... we, as the city, as a community, we are an immigrant community, we’re urging the state, for instance, to win state access and document the patients to be able to access medical care.”

The shelter houses some of the more than 33,000 migrant families from Latin America, many from Venezuela, who have arrived in Chicago since Texas Governor Greg Abbott began busing large number of people into US cities from the southern US border.

Asylum seekers have described the extreme overcrowding, inadequate and spoiled food, filthy bathrooms, vermin and a lack of availability of medical care. Families have also described verbal intimidation and abuse by shelter staff, for which the city of Chicago is paying hundreds of millions to private contractor Favorite Staffing. The parent company of Favorite is Acacium Group, which has been involved in corporate scandals as a contractor for the British National Health Service. Acacium itself is ultimately owned by Onex, a global conglomerate led by Canadian billionaire Gerry Schwartz.

In the days immediately after the young boy’s death,

Mayor Brandon Johnson's office issued a statement that included the claim, "The child does not appear to have died from an infectious disease." This was after five other shelter residents, including four children under the age of nine and one 18-year-old, were also hospitalized.

Local pediatrician Dr. Rebekah Fenton had seen a number of patients from the shelter in the Pilsen neighborhood where Jean Carlos and the others are living. Speaking to the *Sun Times*, Fenton said the many illnesses the asylum seekers are getting are a result of the conditions in the city shelter: "Because of the close contact in which they're living, they're being exposed to things beyond what they should be. It sucks that a child's death is what's prompting this conversation."

A shelter resident who wished to remain unnamed said, "Everyone's sick, from adults to little kids. What you get, the next person does, too."

In emails obtained through freedom of information requests, Chicago Commissioner for Family & Support Services Brandie Knazze responded to Ald. Nicole Lee's concerns about the treatment of migrants at the shelter. Knazze was indifferent, acknowledging that the shelter "residents are coming from police stations," while "some residents are coming with illness from being in the elements." Her replies denied the cramped conditions of the shelters played any role in the boy's death.

As the WSWs reported, she suggested migrants submit grievances using QR codes, knowing that the reason such complaints are not filed is because the migrants fear retaliation and are threatened by shelter staff with the loss of what meager assistance the city provides.

In the last week, the city has reportedly closed down four shelters housing some 400 people. At least one has closed and reopened once before. This month, 12,748 asylum seekers remain in shelters.

Asylum and work permits for asylum seekers from Venezuela have not been issued quickly. *Crain's* reports The Resurrection Project, a non-profit immigration assistance organization, found that only about 3,500 of the more than 15,000 migrants in shelters are eligible for permits.

"As of mid-January, more than 950 received work

authorizations through the non-profit's help, although the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services has approved 1,800," a spokesman said. ??

After public outcry over Johnson's plan to evict about 2,000 asylum-seekers in the dead of winter, the mayor's office extended the eviction date of February 29 for those first arrivals. The initial time limit for shelter stays is just 60 days. The first evictions have been moved to March, with some city officials referring to a "reassessment" at that time.



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