

Chicago Tribune



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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Migrant shelters’ staffing firm here to stay

Despite steep price tag, officials no longer seeking replacement: ‘Right now, Favorite is our solution’

By Alice Yin and Joe Mahr
Chicago Tribune

When Brandon Johnson became mayor, he condemned an expensive staffing contract for migrant shelters that his administration inherited from his predecessor.

Now with the two-year mark of the city’s asylum-seeker crisis this month, the vendor Favorite Healthcare Staffing has billed over a quarter-billion dollars for running operations at the shelters, and is likely here to stay. The out-of-state emergency

staffing firm was first tapped by Mayor Lori Lightfoot in fall 2022 to run Chicago’s nascent migrant shelter system as busloads of Venezuelans began arriving in the city from Texas. That contract has remained the city’s costliest by far of the ongoing migrant situation, with almost two-thirds of the \$433.7 million in total expenditures spent on asylum-seekers so far going toward Favorite Staffing,

per city records from July. The Johnson administration has touted rate negotiations that have driven down per-resident costs and have saved up to \$3 million a week even as an earlier spike in the shelter population this winter contributed to a whopping \$276.6 million bill from Favorite Staffing since the start of the migrant crisis. But now, city officials who have in the past signaled they were

searching for alternatives said they no longer expect to phase out Favorite Staffing from its role in the shelters. In an interview with the Tribune, Department of Family and Support Services First Deputy Commissioner Jonathan Ernst said the city has determined Favorite Staffing’s ability to get the facilities up

Turn to Staffing, Page 4



Sadness, setbacks and ‘beautiful moments’

A migrant family’s first year in Chicago after risking their lives to get to the US

Story by Nell Salzman | Photos by Armando L. Sanchez | Chicago Tribune

Above, Esperanza Mendez sits on the couch with her daughter Yuledy Mendez, 11, on July 24 in their home.

When Esperanza Mendez went into surgery in January, her two youngest children had nightmares about what could go wrong. They had spent the past few weeks in fear. Arguments between their parents filled the apartment. Empty liquor bottles covered the kitchen table. The fighting got so bad, their dad moved out.

Now, their mom was being put under anesthesia — something they didn’t even know existed — to remove a large lump on the right side of her neck. If it didn’t go as planned, they worried they would be completely alone.

“I want to go with you!” Esperanza’s 11-year-old daughter, Yuledy, said the night before the surgery, hugging her tightly.

Though doctors assured them the procedure was routine, it was hard on the Mendez children, who had just moved to the South Side of Chicago after a long trek from Venezuela. Everything was hard in those first few months: school, meals, family disputes, their unresolved immigration statuses.

In 2023, the Tribune followed the Mendez family of five — Esperanza, her adult son, Fabian, his girlfriend, and Esperanza’s two youngest children, Yuledy and Pedro — on a bus and train from El Paso, Texas, to Chicago last July. They had risked their lives to make it to the United States. A year later, they find themselves in deep isolation.

More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled their country since 2014 in the largest population displacement in Latin

Turn to Migrants, Page 2

Itasca’s Ziemek sets an American record in Paris

Becomes first US athlete to complete 3 Olympic decathlons: ‘That’s what drove me the entire time’

By Stacy St. Clair
Chicago Tribune

PARIS — After running a painful, rain-soaked 1,500 meters to finish the Olympic decathlon, Zach Ziemek sat down on the track and let the exhaustion envelop him. The Itasca native had partially torn his left LCL the previous day during the long jump, instantly dashing his hopes for a medal and making the remaining eight events increasingly difficult. The final four laps around the track — never his favorite event — were a test of determination, done almost

solely to secure his place in the U.S. record books. “I was going to finish no matter what,” said Ziemek, who finished the decathlon in 17th place. “I was going to do whatever it took, whether it was crawl or hop on one leg, whatever it was going to be.” As he watched the medalists celebrate, Ziemek, 31, called no attention to himself or the feat he had just accomplished. When he crossed the finish line, Ziemek became the first American athlete to complete three Olympic

Turn to Decathlon, Page 8



USA’s Zach Ziemek runs the 1500 meters to close the decathlon Saturday during the Paris Olympics. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

INSIDE

US, allies prepare to defend Israel

Israel is in a “multi-front war” with Iran and its proxies, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said as the United States and allies prepared to defend Israel from an expected counterstrike. **Nation & World**

Inside Hester’s Hall of Fame induction

By the time former Chicago Bears star Devin Hester took the stage Saturday to be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, he already had been through an intense cycle of emotions. **Chicago Sports**

