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Financial crises hit Heartland Alliance

Turmoil threatens to upend safety net programs across city

By Brian J. Rogal
Chicago Tribune

One of the city's leading social service organizations, beset by a pair of financial crises that last year engulfed its housing and health care divisions, could be on the verge of splitting up.

The turmoil at the Heartland Alliance, a sprawling nonprofit encompassing five divisions providing a vast array of social services, threatens to upend important safety net programs at a time when Chicago is experiencing an influx of migrants, many of whom need help with health care and housing.

Heartland Alliance's housing division, which grappled with inflation and declining rent collections during the pandemic, ceased operations last spring and needs buyers for the roughly 1,000 affordable units it operated in Chicago and Wisconsin.

Heartland's health division, struggling to cover escalating health costs and expenses associated with a surge of migrants in its shelters, indefinitely furloughed more than 150 employees between September and November and cut back programming. It's now considering spinning off into an independent organization, according to a written statement from Mary Kay Gilbert, interim executive director of Heartland Alliance Health, and Chief External Affairs Officer Ed Stellon. Health care centers in Englewood, Uptown and the Near West Side remain open.

"(Heartland Alliance Health) is considering a variety of options and no final decisions have been made at this time," Gilbert and Stellon wrote.

"Heartland Alliance as an entity will cease to exist," said Michael Brieschke, a Heartland Alliance case manager and unit chair of the

Turn to Heartland, Page 2

Breaking a bottleneck

Belt Junction is a notorious snag in the rail system. Fixing it could boost capacity, but benefits to South Side residents might be mixed.

By John Lippert and Sarah Freishtat
Chicago Tribune

As Percy Fields waits at Belt Junction, three freight trains stand nearby with their engines running and headlights shining in the chilly, predawn darkness.

Fields is president of the Belt Railway of Chicago, which is operating one of the trains. His job is to keep it moving.

But on this morning, like most others, the freight carriers must wait until a solitary Metra commuter train rolls through and opens up the track. Then they can blast their horns, clank and start to move.

Even then, they crawl at 5 mph through Belt Junction, a half-mile jumble of crumbling, century-old tracks along 75th Street between Western Avenue and Halsted Street on the South Side.

Above: A Metra train passes through a bottleneck on the Belt Junction on Chicago's South Side on Jan. 5.
E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE

It's Chicago's most notorious rail bottleneck because, more than a hundred years ago, somebody decided five sets of tracks should merge into two and cross each other's path.

It's such a torment that Fields and other freight railroaders, plus Metra, Amtrak and government officials from across Chicago, have been working for more than 20 years to rip up Belt Junction and start over.

They want to spend $2.5 billion for new tracks, viaducts and flyovers to double the Belt Junction corridor's annual capacity to 4 million rail cars.

Belt Junction is a critical building block in their plan to boost by nearly 80% their rail capacity in the Chicago region as a whole by 2052.

The project presents Chicago with painful dilemmas.

As has been true for hundreds of years, Chicago's location at the bottom of the Great Lakes still brings intense pressure to move more freight.

Turn to Junction, Page 6

Death cuts off dreams of man recently freed

Lee Harris, left, stands next to his son Jermaine Harris, right, during a news conference at the former site of the Cabrini Green housing projects in Chicago on Sept. 28. Harris filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the Chicago Police Department. TRENT SPRAGUE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Murder conviction vacated after decades spent behind bars

By Christy Gutowski
Chicago Tribune

Lee Harris died just as he was embarking on the final chapter of a life interrupted.

Harris spent 33 years in prison, convicted of murder. During his decades of incarceration, he obtained a college associate degree, volunteered in prison ministries and directed gospel choirs, all while trying to prove his innocence.

Eight months before his death last Thanksgiving at age 68, the Chicago man finally won back his freedom.

When he started serving time he was a young married father from Cabrini-Green who had helped organize youth athletic programs and anti-violence events and volunteered for prominent figures such as Mayor Jane Byrne and Jesse White, then a state representative.

Harris also was a self-admitted hustler and petty thief on parole for burglary. When police arrested him in the 1989 murder of a promising young graduate student, they cited his shifting stories. He would later say he'd been foolish — naively repeating what police told him to say with an eye on collecting a $25,000 reward.

"I ain't no angel," he told the Tribune that year. "But I don't

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