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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM



Digital monitor programs to change

Officials poised to make alterations, but few details available

By Madeline Buckley
Chicago Tribune

Earlier this month, at around 4:30 a.m., Chicago police officers noticed a car with a broken headlight and initiated a stop. The officers spotted a black bag on the floorboard, felt an L-shaped object, according to prosecutors, and found a loaded pistol with a defaced serial number.

The 34-year-old man charged with a gun felony then became one of the newest of the roughly 1,500 people currently on the Cook County sheriff's office's electronic monitoring program.

Another approximately 1,900 people are on separate electronic monitoring programs operated under the court system, including one geared toward domestic violence offenses.

Experts and county stakeholders have long criticized the parallel electronic monitoring programs as wasteful, with Cook County as one of the only jurisdictions in the country that splits resources in this way.

"It's a historical artifact, just that the two programs were created at different times essentially," said Sarah Staudt, an attorney who consults with the Illinois Network for Pretrial Justice. "It's fundamentally inefficient."

Now, the county is making moves to merge the programs under the auspices of the chief judge's office, rather than the sheriff's office — a move that Sheriff Tom Dart has long pushed for and Chief Judge Tim Evans has resisted.

The proposed changes follow years of debate about electronic monitoring, with

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'We are not alone'

Local 'Blue Christmas' services offer solace for those who grieve, struggle during the holidays

By Angie Leventis Lourgos | Chicago Tribune

Elena and Kevin Shuff had 17 days with their son Michael Kevin before the newborn's death on Dec. 26, 2022.

The Advent season is a period of complicated emotions for the north suburban couple.

They recall the elation of becoming parents after the birth of their only child, who came into the world precariously early on Dec. 9, weighing just 2 pounds.

"It was the most joyous time in our lives," Kevin Shuff said. "It was hope, peace, joy and love."

Yet they simultaneously mourn the end of his short life, which fell the day after Christmas.

Zoe Sundstrom sings a hymn at a Blue Christmas service to offer solace for worshippers during the holiday season at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview on Dec. 18. Blue Christmas events are often held on or around the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, for many a time of reflection.

TESS CROWLEY/
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"Knowing he is in heaven is a comfort; knowing we have a saint looking down on us," he added. "But knowing that doesn't make up for all the memories we couldn't create together."

The mother and father were among the roughly five dozen worshippers who attended the first "Blue Christmas" service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview on Wednesday, which was designed to offer a message of healing for those who are grieving, lonely or sorrowful during the holidays.

Blue Christmas services — also called the Longest Night services — are often held on or around the winter solstice, which fell on Saturday this year in the Northern Hemisphere. The date marks the longest night and shortest day of the year, symbolizing a dark time of life as well as the assurance that the days will

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US: 2 Navy pilots shot down by 'friendly fire'

Both alive after incident over Red Sea

By Jon Gambrell
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Two U.S. Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the U.S. military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Both pilots were recovered alive after ejecting from their stricken aircraft, with one suffering minor injuries. But the shutdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become, with ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite

U.S. and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

The U.S. military had conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels at the time of the friendly fire incident, though the U.S. military's Central Command did not elaborate on what the pilots' mission was and did not respond to questions from The Associated Press.

The F/A-18 shot down had just flown off the deck of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, Central Command said. On Dec. 15, Central Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea.

"The guided-missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of

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West Side middle schooler Camarria Williams, left, and her twin, Camerria, are shown at James R. Jordan Boys & Girls Club on Dec. 20. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

North Lawndale middle schooler helps make scientific discovery

Girl, 11, finds molecule with cancer-fighting properties in goose poop

By Sylvan Lebrun
Chicago Tribune

In Garfield Park, Camarria Williams has often enjoyed walks with her mom. There, the 11-year-old girl also discovered a new cancer-fighting molecule in an unexpected source: goose poop.

Williams and her twin sister, Camerria, who attend William H. Brown STEM Magnet School, spent the fall of 2022 participating in a science program at a West Side Boys & Girls Club where they worked with researchers to identify potential antibiotics that occur in nature.

The twins from North Lawndale were part of the third cohort of middle school students who participated in the Chicago Antibiotic Discovery Lab, a partnership between the Boys & Girls

Club and a University of Illinois Chicago lab run by pharmaceutical sciences professor Brian Murphy.

During a field trip to Garfield Park to collect samples rich in bacteria, Williams knew exactly where to look. She thought back to memories of feeding the park's geese with her mother, she said.

"The reason I got the poop was because the geese eat everything," Williams said.

Turn to Discovery, Page 2



INSIDE

Bears lose to Lions, 34-17

The Lions capitalized on Bears mistakes Sunday in Chicago, surging ahead early to a 20-0 lead and forcing the Bears to play catch-up. Bears quarterback Caleb Williams, left, threw for 334 yards — the third-highest output of his rookie season — and two touchdowns.

Chicago Sports



CHICAGOLAND

Customers say goodbye as closing retailer Party City

'It's going to be missed in the neighborhood'

By Ikram Mohamed
Chicago Tribune

Amid the holiday rush for last-minute gifts Sunday, Stephanie Tariga stopped by the Party City on Western Avenue in North Center to pick up decorations for a Christmas Party she and her husband are planning to host for friends.

Looking through a collection of Christmas decorations, the Avondale resident said she was drawn in by the news of the company's closure as well as the large sale that accompanied it.

"We heard that there's probably gonna be a sale since they're closing, so that's why we came here," Tariga said.

Indeed, after nearly 40 years, the nation's largest party supply store chain will be closing its doors in the new year. The company told employees in a Friday meet-

ing that the company would be "winding down" operations beginning immediately, according to CNN. Corporate employees worked their final day Friday while more than 700 stores nationwide are set to close by Feb. 28.

It was the second time the party supply chain has filed for bankruptcy in less than two years. The company previously filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January 2023, allowing for the elimination of nearly \$1 billion in debt. However, the company's troubles persisted.

"The decision was made following exhaustive efforts by the company to find a path forward that would allow continued operations in an immensely challenging environment driven by inflationary pressures on costs and consumer spending, among other factors," Party City said in a statement.

Tariga, an alum of Lane Tech High School right across the street from the store, said she regularly visited the location when



Amy Wojak exits a Party City store in the North Center neighborhood on Dec. 22, 2024. Eileen T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

she was a student there. The store is one of Chicago's five locations, according to the company's website, with dozens of other stores across the suburbs and state.

But news of its demise did not come as a surprise

to Tariga, who attributed the store's decline to competition such as Amazon.

"I (visited more) when I was in high school... but not much now that I'm older," Tariga said. "I also go to Amazon more because it is

more convenient, just ordering on your phone."

Dalia Marouf was at the North Center store picking up last-minute items for her daughter's second birthday. She said Party City is her family's place for balloons

and party supplies. With stores closing, it's currently "up in the air" where they'll be purchasing their party items now.

"It's sad to see all these big corporations closing down," Marouf said.

Cradling Christmas supplies, Amy Wojak said she decided to stop by the store when she learned about the upcoming closure and the "50% off the entire store" signs stationed outside. Having visited Party City about five times a year, Wojak said she's not sure where else she'll be able to get her party essentials.

"Where am I gonna go to get balloons?" the North Center resident said. "I guess I'm not doing balloons anymore."

While she will likely turn to Amazon for her party needs, Wojak said the store's closure will be hard.

"It's going to be missed in the neighborhood," Wojak said.

The Associated Press contributed.

Christmas

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soon lengthen, giving way to brighter moments in the future.

"It is a hope-based message, even in the midst of struggles," said Paula Kowalkowski, a certified spiritual director who coordinated the service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Houses of worship across the Chicago area have been hosting similar events to offer solace during the holiday season, which can be particularly challenging for folks enduring pain, hardship or loss.

Second Unitarian Church of Chicago in the East Lakeview neighborhood held its annual Blue Christmas service on Wednesday to "engage with music, reflect together, light candles and be gentle with one another's spirits," according to an event announcement.

In the south suburbs, Faith United Methodist Church of Orland Park had a service scheduled for Sunday afternoon to "remember those whose loss we feel during Christmas," according to the church website. Organizers intended to livestream the service for those who couldn't attend in person.

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Naperville offered a Blue Christmas service Saturday afternoon to provide "a comforting space to navigate sorrow during the holidays."

"We recognized the tension of a season filled with joy and anticipation for Jesus' birth while carrying the weight of life's challenges — loss, divorce, addiction, estranged relationships and more," the service invitation read. "Join us for an evening of prayer, Christmas music, and reflection, as we acknowledge our pain and entrust it to Jesus."

First and only Christmas

Born premature, Michael Kevin Shuff lived his entire life in the hospital. His parents typically had to visit him individually, scrubbing up before entering the room one by one.

The exception was Christmas Day, when the mother and father were allowed in at the same time and they spent the holiday together as a family.

"It was a beautiful time in our life," recalled Kevin Shuff, adding that he and his wife had been trying to have a child for years.

"Then the next day, we got the call," Elena Shuff said, as tears welled up in her eyes.

The infant had to be urgently transported to another hospital and died en route in the ambulance.

Michael Kevin Shuff was buried at St. Mary Catholic Cemetery in Lake Forest. The tombstone on his grave reads: "My last breath. My



A person places a note into a basket during a Blue Christmas service to offer solace for worshippers at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview on Dec. 18. Those who were moved to do so could write about their heartache and suffering, or the name of a loved one on the notes. TESS CROWLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



A person wipes tears away during the Blue Christmas service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview.



People attend the Blue Christmas service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

final heartbeat. My first ride on angel's wings."

Amid their sorrow, the mother and father try to remember their son's life whenever they can.

They celebrate his birthday. On Dec. 25, they will think back to his first and only Christmas two years

prior.

The Blue Christmas service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help provided another opportunity to remember their baby.

"He was precious. Angelic," said Kevin Shuff, as he sat beside his wife in a wooden pew, surrounded

by the Christmas trees and holiday wreaths that decorated the church.

The hymns and scripture readings of the service were tailored to themes of grief and sorrow, as well as comfort and solace.

"Some people come because they are mourning

the death of a loved one," Kowalkowski said during the service. "Some have suffered from illness, addiction or estrangement. Some are lonely, struggling or in conflict with another."

She listed a litany of reasons for attending: Some worshippers are in pain from divorce or broken relationships. Some are lonely. Some are hurting from the violence and despair that plagues the nation and world.

"Tonight we gather in the midst of suffering to remember that God is near. ... We are not alone," she reassured everyone.

The Gospel reading from Matthew relayed a message of comfort amid trials from Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls."

'Spring will come'

Worshippers at Our Lady of Perpetual Help were each given a slip of blue paper when they arrived.

Those who were moved to do so could write about their heartache and suffering, or the name of a loved one.

"Something you want to communicate to our God," Kowalkowski explained during the service.

They could place those folded sheets of paper in baskets in front of the altar; Kowalkowski assured everyone that she would not read them.

"God knows what's in your heart," she added.

Through tears, Elena Shuff wrote a prayer for her son and left the message in one of the baskets.

"It does bring a little closure," she said.

"We rely on our faith," her husband added. "The (service) is a vessel that

"Some people come because they are mourning the death of a loved one. Some have suffered from illness, addiction or estrangement. Some are lonely, struggling or in conflict with another."

— Paula Kowalkowski, a certified spiritual director who coordinated the Blue Christmas service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help

transports our messages to heaven."

Kowalkowski, 64, has a master's degree in spirituality from the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago and serves as the music director at another local parish; she began coordinating a Blue Christmas service a few years ago at her church, at the request of the pastor.

Some of her work is in bereavement ministry. She also experienced great loss after her husband died in March 2014.

The first Christmas afterward was very difficult for her and her daughter, Kowalkowski recalled. But she was able to put up a tree and send Christmas cards, which included her husband's name in the signature.

Years later, Kowalkowski found love again. But then her partner was diagnosed with lymphoma. After a prolonged illness, he died in November 2023.

"I did not put up a tree that year," she said in a recent interview with the Tribune. "And since, I have not sent cards."

It can be particularly hard to grieve when the world is saying "merry Christmas" and "happy holidays," she noted.

"And you feel terrible inside," Kowalkowski said. "Like your heart is breaking."

Yet there is always light, she added. Sometimes that light comes in the form of a kind word from a friend or a text message from a loved one. Sometimes it's summoning the strength to wake up and get dressed, even when it feels impossible to do so.

"We realize that this winter is not stronger than us. For you will walk with us, you will support us and you will guide us on this new and unfamiliar ground," she said during the service. "For the sun will slowly melt the ice and the winds will shift, and spring will come. Death will yield to life as it always does. We just must give it time."

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