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Millions in COVID dollars returned

Health department voluntarily gave money back to government

By Alice Yin
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Throughout last year, Mayor Brandon Johnson vowed to protect Chicago's public health dollars from President Donald Trump.

But behind the scenes, his health commissioner voluntarily returned tens of millions of dollars in COVID-19 grants to the federal government months before expiration — funds that could have gone to disease surveillance to help prepare for an outbreak or racial equity programming to improve health outcomes across the city.

Commissioner Dr. Olusimbo Ige also terminated over two dozen Chicago Department of Public Health employees last fall despite Johnson emphatically drawing a line against layoffs and his Law Department successfully fending off threats from the White House to slash Chicago's federal funding thus far. Her actions unfolded alongside investigations of a hostile work environment and significant turnover among her employees.

The outcome was self-inflicted, said a former CDPH epidemiologist who was let go in December and has filed pending retaliation and disability discrimination complaints against Ige.

"Sometimes I've lost belief in the system," Hannah Matzke told the Tribune. "I'm so disheartened because these are people who should know better, and do know better. ... I don't know how long Dr. Ige will be the commissioner, but I am afraid that she's making decisions that impact (CDPH) long term."

In a statement on Friday, Ige defended her handling of the personnel cuts by saying she wanted to "coordinate" the department's transition off multiple COVID grants, some of which did expire last year, with one restructuring that "prioritized core functions."

"I managed a department during

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'THE THREAT IS SO REAL'

By Lisa Schencker
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The last thing Chelsea Cheveria remembers after the birth of her daughter was greeting her new baby girl.

"I said, 'Hi, oh, that's my baby,'" Cheveria, 38, recalled. She kissed the tiny newborn, and her husband told her, "You did it."

Then everything went dark. Without warning, Cheveria's heart stopped as she lay atop the operating table where minutes earlier doctors had delivered her baby Zairah through a cesarean section.

Workers rushed her husband Scott Cheveria out of the room, and doctors and nurses began performing CPR on the Logan Square mom. A medical worker urged Scott Cheveria to pray, he said.

"We were all smiles and everything was going well," said Scott Cheveria, 39,

Chelsea Cheveria's heart stopped after giving birth. Now, she's warning others about blood clots during pregnancy

Above: Chelsea Cheveria holds her newborn daughter, Zairah, on Wednesday at their home in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. After giving birth in February, Cheveria developed blood clots in her lungs that sent her into cardiac arrest and was saved by medical staff at Northwestern Medicine Prentice Women's Hospital. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

remembering that day. "And then the tables turned and everything became a nightmare."

Now, 12 weeks later, the family is home and, miraculously, healthy. They're celebrating their first Mother's Day as a family of four after what doctors describe as a rare but life-threatening pregnancy complication.

Chelsea Cheveria had developed a blood clot that traveled through her heart and to her lungs, known as a pulmonary embolism. The clot obstructed the flow of blood out of her heart, causing her blood pressure to plummet and cardiac arrest.

Though only about one in 1,000 pregnant women develop pulmonary embolisms, it's one of the most common causes of pregnancy-related death in the U.S.

Though blood clots can happen during pregnancy, for someone to go into cardiac arrest because of one "is quite rare," said Dr. Daniel Schimmel, director of the Pulmonary Embolism Response Team

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INSIDE



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Not an arms race

As win streak ends at 10, the Cubs feel no urgency to add a starting pitcher, despite social media madness. **Paul Sullivan in Sports**

Ceasefire tested

The U.S. strikes on Iranian tankers on Friday cast doubt on the ceasefire, but the U.S. says it's still in effect. **Nation & World, Page B5**

Once centers of teen culture, many malls take last breath

Formerly quintessential shopping complexes may be past their prime

By Audrey Pachuta
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Storefronts once crammed with shoppers, now covered by tarps. Flickering lights. Sweatpants-clad mall-walkers with nothing to look at and nowhere interesting to stop.

A man takes off one shoe, then another, and reclines in a lifeless wing of Ford City Mall. He props his bare feet up on a nearby chair. "What?" he said. "Who's gonna stop me here?"

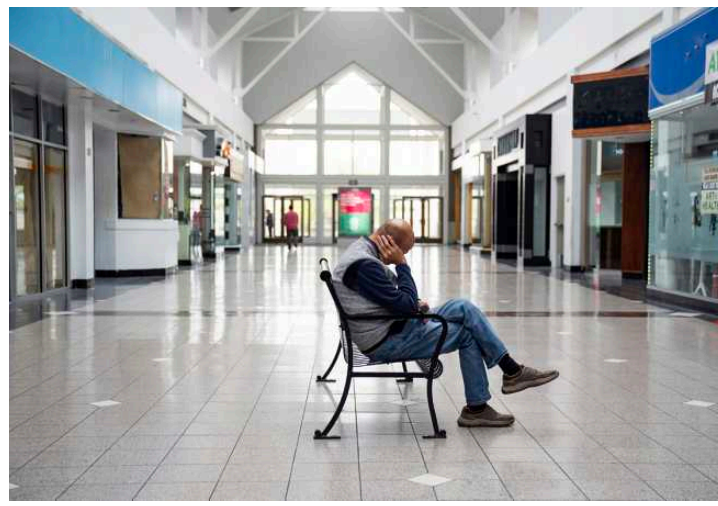
Such is the last breath of another dying mall.

A few decades ago, massive buildings, like Ford City on Chicago's Southwest Side, were rife with crowds of loitering teenagers who spent hours mingling in arcades and food courts. Much like their youthful, emotional heartbeats, malls in the '80s and '90s bustled, becoming as quintessential to American culture as hot dogs and apple pie.

Today's teens have no shortage of movies and TV shows romanticizing what malls were like in their parents' youth. Look no further than the opening sequence in "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" or Regina George summoning her fellow Plastics with the line "Get in loser, we're going shopping" in "Mean Girls."

Across Chicagoland, malls memorialize "the good old days."

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A mall walker rests at a sparsely populated Lincolnwood Town Center on April 30. The Village Board and property owners recently agreed to a phased demolition of the mall as part of a redevelopment plan.

E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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178th year No. 130
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Overlooked Belgian bursts with fine cuisine



Rick Steves

Whenever I think of Belgium, I recall digging into a dish of mussels while seated on a sunny square in Brussels, in the shadow of a lacy medieval spire. My waiter bragged, “In Belgium, we eat as much as the Germans and as fine as the French.”

Wedged between Germany, France and the Netherlands, Belgium often gets lost in the mix. But this overlooked country rewards visitors with some of Europe’s finest cuisine, including its best beer, creamiest chocolates, and tastiest french fries.

You’ll find a good mix of both Germanic and French influences here. The Flemish (Dutch-speaking natives of Flanders — now northern Belgium) were ruled by the dukes of Burgundy, and absorbed some of the fancy French cuisine of their overlords. And yet, once Belgian, always Belgian: This country has perfected the art of cooking with its own unique beers, imbuing the cuisine with a hoppy sweetness.

Mussels are one of Belgium’s signature dishes. The classic preparation is à la marinière, cooked in white wine, onions, celery, parsley and butter (though some cooks use light Belgian beer for the stock). For a high-calorie version, moules à la crème is thickened with heavy cream. You’ll also find them served plain, with white wine, or in a tomato sauce (provençale). From about mid-July through April, you’ll get the big Dutch mussels (most are from the coastal Zeeland area to the north). Locals take a break from mussels in May and June, when only the puny Danish kind are available.

The mussels come with another Belgian specialty on



Belgians take their beers as seriously as the French take their wines, with hundreds of types and about 1,500 brands. **ADDIE MANNAN**

the side, frieten — what we call “french fries” and the Dutch call “Flemish fries.” In Belgium, fries are an art form. Just like every village in England has its “chippy” (for fish-and-chips), and every German burg has its wurst stand (for sausages), every Belgian town has a favored frietkot (fry shack, also called a frituur). The fries are extra-delicious because they’re deep-fried twice — once to cook them and once to brown them. The best fries are cooked to a crisp in flavorful ox fat.

Traditionally, Belgian fries are generously topped with sauces like mayo (the most traditional), tartar sauce, curry ketchup, or currysaus (without the ketchup). Ketchup is sometimes available for the Yankee tourists, but I

encourage you to skip it and go on a sauce adventure. When I see a sauce that sounds scary — like “samurai sauce” — I go for it.

If you need something to wash down those mussels and fries, Belgium has you covered. It’s right up there with Germany, England, and the Czech Republic as one of the world’s great beer countries. Belgians take their beers as seriously as the French take their wines. And when it comes to variety, Belgium is number one, with hundreds of beer types and about 1,500 brands.

In general, Belgian beer is yeastier and higher in alcohol content than beers in other countries. Connoisseurs and novices alike can be confused by the many choices, and casual drinkers probably won’t like every

kind offered, since some don’t even taste like beer. Locals in pubs are happy to educate you on the options. You can also pay your respects to Belgian beer by taking a brewery tour; De Halve Maan Brewery in Bruges is one of the most accessible and enjoyable.

When you’re ready for a sweet treat, indulge in Belgium’s exquisite chocolates. The two basic types are pralines (what we generally think of as “chocolates” — a hard chocolate shell with a filling) and truffles (a softer, crumblier shell with filling).

Belgians truly have a passion for chocolate. The people of Bruges, in particular, are connoisseurs; tempting chocolate-filled display windows are all over town. Katelijnestraat is “Choc-

olate Row,” with a half-dozen shops within a few steps. While locals rarely buy chocolate here (prices are marked up for tourists), it’s a convenient place to shop. Among the many good options, I like Dumon, which makes some of Bruges’ smoothest, creamiest chocolates — and their staff happily describe them with an evangelical fervor.

Save room for another sweet Belgian specialty — waffles. You’ll see little windows, shops and trucks selling them either plain (for Belgians and purists) or topped with fruit, jam, chocolate sauce, ice cream, or whipped cream (for tourists). Belgians recognize two general types of waffles. The common take-out version is the dense, sugar-crust and very sweet Liège-style

waffle, usually served warm. Brussels-style waffles are lighter and fluffier, dusted with powdered sugar, and sometimes topped with marmalade. Though Americans think of “Belgian” waffles as a breakfast food, Belgians generally have them as a late-afternoon snack.

Hungry? Belgium is ready for you. Like sampling a flavorful praline in a chocolate shop, that first enticing taste just leaves you wanting more. Go ahead, it’s OK... buy a whole box of Belgium.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Korea trip with family stands out for artist

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

With her gayageum — a 12-string zither — avant-garde musician-composer-vocalist DoYeon Kim blends traditional Korean music with free jazz.

“When I was in fifth grade, I went to a traditional Korean music performance with my father (and was immediately drawn to its sound,” said Kim, 34. “I loved that I could directly pluck, pull and press the strings to shape the sound myself. I could feel the vibration and the subtle changes in tone through my hands, which made the instrument feel incredibly expressive to me.”

Kim recently released her debut album, “Well-spring.”

This interview with Kim has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: When you came to the U.S. in 2014 to study at the New England Conservatory of Music and then went to grad school at the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, did you think back then that you’d end up staying here?

A: Yes, I did. I always had the intention of living abroad long term. When I was in middle school, I spent a winter in Victoria, Canada, for a language program. It was my first time living outside of Korea and it had a huge impact on me. I’ve always had a big personality. Growing up in Korea, I was often labeled as a drama queen, which sometimes made me feel self-conscious. But in Canada, people accepted me as I was. I began to see that my personality could actually be a strength. That experience really helped me build a stronger sense



Musician DoYeon Kim has never been to Iceland, but would like to visit to see the Northern Lights. **HYUN PARK**

of self. At the same time, I was surprised by how little people knew about Korea. That made me start thinking, “What if I could share Korean music, especially the gayageum, with a wider audience?” From my second year of middle school, I began to seriously dream about becoming a gayageum player and living abroad. So even though I officially moved to the U.S. for graduate school, in many ways, I had already been preparing for this life since I was very young.

Q: What do you remember about your first professional gig?

A: I believe my first recital was in 2011, during my sophomore year of college. It was my first experience performing in a professional setting, and I prepared for it very intensely. At the time, I was practicing almost obsessively to the point where I would sometimes end up in the emergency room or receiving IV treatments on weekends. I also suffered a serious injury to my left wrist during that period, which made things even more difficult... I think I was pushing myself beyond my limits because I was so determined to prove something to myself through that performance.

Q: What are your five favorite cities?

A: Seoul, Mykonos, Barce-

lona, Venice and Hong Kong.

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: I would love to visit Iceland to see the Northern Lights.

Q: What is your best vacation memory?

A: In 2024, my family and I took a three-week trip to Europe to celebrate my mother’s 60th birthday. It was my parents’ first time visiting Europe and it meant a lot to me to be there with them as they experienced everything for the first time. I still remember small moments very vividly — walking through different cities together, sharing meals at local restaurants, and seeing my parents react with so much excitement and curiosity to places they had only seen in pictures before.

Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?

A: Anmyeondo (South Korea), without a doubt. I remember it as a place where I could experience seafood in its freshest form, especially the seasonal shrimp that I still think about even now. There was something unforgettable about eating simple, freshly prepared food right by the sea.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Airbnb freezes account after address in Ukraine confirmed

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I don’t understand why Airbnb deleted my account. I’ve been a responsible guest with excellent reviews. Airbnb says that I violated its community standards, but I know that I didn’t.

The only explanation I can think of is my location. I live in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, which is near the front line of the ongoing war but remains under Ukrainian control. Airbnb won’t do business in Russia.

Some international services wrongly mark our entire region as “disputed,” which feels discriminatory and unfair.

Airbnb asked me to confirm my address, and right after I did, it froze my account permanently.

I appealed and sent all the information that they requested, including proof of residence. Still, they refused to restore my account and said that I can’t create a new one.

Even worse, I never received my refund of \$1,000 for the cancellations.

Can you help me get my money back and, if possible, my account reinstated?

— *Daria Popova, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine*

A: Airbnb owes you both an explanation and a refund. The company is allowed to close an account if it believes that a guest has violated its terms, but it should provide a valid reason and process your refund in a timely manner. None of this happened here.

You followed the right steps — appealing the decision, providing documentation, and contacting customer support. Unfortunately, it looks like you got stuck in a loop of automated replies from Airbnb. This left you without answers or access to your funds.

This isn’t the first case where Airbnb got its geography wrong. I mediated a case at the beginning of

the Russian-Ukrainian war, where the platform banned a guest because she used to live in Russia and still had a Russian phone number. When the normal resolution process doesn’t work, you can always appeal to an Airbnb executive. I list all of them on my consumer advocacy site, elliott.org.

I reached out to Airbnb on your behalf. A representative said that the company would review your case. Shortly after, Airbnb asked you for your address information again. You provided it, but then received the same canned response that your account was permanently blocked. At this point, you still didn’t have a refund.

So, I went back to Airbnb

and asked for a second review, which finally broke the logjam. Airbnb refunded the full amount of your canceled reservations and reactivated your account. The takeaway: When a company ignores you, persistence matters. A paper trail, a clear record of promises that were made (like refund deadlines), and an advocate (if needed) can make the difference between losing \$1,000 and getting it returned to you.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.