



## A ROCK LEGACY

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Early Edition

# Chicago Tribune



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SUNDAY, APRIL 9, 2017

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

### ANALYSIS

## Syria crisis tests Trump worldview



GETTY-AFP

Damage to the Shayrat air base in Syria is visible in a photo taken Friday after the overnight U.S. cruise missile attack.

### Long-term effect of missile strike depends on what he does next

By EVAN HALPER AND W.J. HENNIGAN  
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump made an about-face in his approach to the Middle East by launching a fiery salvo of cruise missiles at Syria. With it came relief to American allies — and many of the president's critics at

home — but its impact in Syria will ultimately depend on what he does next.

Attacking one airfield — at least one of the two runways were still in use Friday — hardly diminishes President Bashar Assad's military capability. And

whatever cache of poison gas or other chemical agents the Syrian government has remains intact, including one at the air base that the Pentagon didn't target for fear of spreading a toxic cloud.

The volatile situation will test the new administration's ability to respond to international atrocities or other provocations while upholding Trump's vow to

Turn to **Analysis, Page 30**

### NATION & WORLD

### U.S. vows to keep pressure on Syria after attacks

The Trump administration signaled new sanctions could come soon, and the Pentagon looked at whether Russia was involved in the chemical weapons assault that compelled President Donald Trump into action. **Page 25**

### TRIBUNE WATCHDOG POVERTY'S POISON

## Kids get poisoned, landlords get paid

CHA-approved homes plagued by lead contamination

By MICHAEL HAWTHORNE AND JENNIFER SMITH RICHARDS  
Chicago Tribune

As private landlords increasingly take over the government's role of housing low-income families, dozens of children have been poisoned by brain-damaging lead while living in homes and apartments declared safe by the Chicago Housing Authority.

Taxpayers often still paid the rent.

Federal law requires the CHA to inspect subsidized homes before tenants move in and at least once a year afterward. But since 2010, at least one child has been diagnosed with lead poisoning in 187 homes the housing authority approved for occupancy, according to a Tribune analysis of thousands of pages of inspection reports, monthly payments, court documents and property records.

The CHA paid the landlords of those hazardous homes more than \$5.6 million in federal rent subsidies after clearing them to participate in the Housing Choice Voucher program,

Turn to **CHA, Page 12**

## Millennials start to settle down and buy homes

Business

### THE BLUEPRINT Building a baseball and business empire



E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Ricketts family is changing Wrigley Field and the area in a way that one economist said could erase Wrigley's "bleacher bum" mystique.

## Sticker shock for Cubs fans

### Owners poised to mine success after netting World Series win

By KATHY BERGEN AND PATRICK M. O'CONNELL  
Chicago Tribune

Like many Cubs fans, Nick Penze has his share of cherished memories. As a child, he met Ernie Banks at a car dealership. Later he watched his father pencil in scores on their program as the North Siders walloped the Montreal Expos.

And last fall, he sat spellbound at Wrigley

Field as the Cubs staved off defeat in Game 5 of the World Series, a crucial victory on the way to their first championship since 1908.

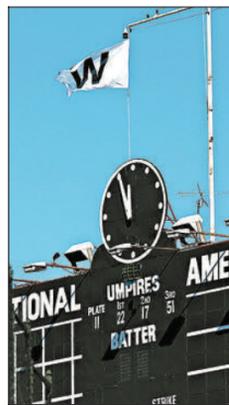
Now, like many fans who will be at Monday's home opener, Penze is finding that creating new memories at Wrigley Field is becoming more of

a gold-plated proposition. The tab for the season tickets he shares with two friends shot up by nearly 30 percent this year, bringing their average from about \$70 to \$90 per game for outfield box seats.

"It felt like a little punch in the stomach," he said.

But that's just the start. The team's family owners, led by Tom Ricketts, plan to roll out four luxury clubs starting next

Turn to **Cubs, Page 14**



NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE 2016

### CHICAGO SPORTS

### Changes bring a new Wrigley experience

The iconic ballpark is evolving quickly, writes Paul Sullivan, but it's the fans who still make it a special place.

**A fan's view:** The end of on-field bullpens, and of a Wrigley "family."  
**Sky high:** The story behind the most meaningful raising of the "W" flag in Cubs history.

Tom Skilling's forecast High 78 Low 62

Chicago Weather Center: Complete forecast in Nation & World, Page 39

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## TRIBUNE WATCHDOG POVERTY'S POISON



TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Tolanda McMullen helps her son Makheil with schoolwork last year in a Chicago Housing Authority–approved home where Makheil suffered from lead exposure. They have since moved.

# Kids poisoned as landlords got paid

CHA, from Page 1

the Tribune analysis found. Nearly \$1 million of that amount was delivered to landlords while they faced housing code violations or lawsuits filed by another city agency, the Chicago Department of Public Health, over deteriorating lead-based paint in their rentals.

Young kids remain at risk in part because CHA inspectors only check visually for cracked and peeling paint, rather than confirming hazards with dust swabs or hand-held scanners. The CHA also doesn't consider lead paint a "life-threatening" hazard that landlords must fix immediately in order to collect taxpayer subsidies through the voucher program, commonly known as Section 8.

CHA officials have said for more than a year that they are working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on a new "proactive approach" to home inspections. But when the CHA renewed its guidelines for the voucher program in February, it made no changes to its inspection procedures. Maryland, Rhode Island and Rochester, N.Y., already require rigorous lead testing before families move into subsidized rentals.

"By failing to do anything about the lead, they are making crippled children who are going to grow up to be crippled adults," said Tolanda McMullen, whose son Makheil was poisoned while living in a home approved by CHA inspectors. "They don't even have a chance because it was taken from them when they were babies."

The CHA said that in some cases it has suspended or docked payments to landlords who failed to fix lead hazards quickly. "The safety of our residents and HCV participants is our priority," the housing authority said in a statement, using the acronym for the official name of the voucher program.

Asked why they continued paying landlords after health inspectors intervened, housing officials said children in some cases identified by the Tribune weren't poisoned enough to merit intervention under the CHA's regulations at the time. In other cases, the CHA said officials did not know a child was living in the home or that renters had failed to report a child had been poisoned there.

Molly Sullivan, a CHA spokeswoman, said housing officials sometimes clear landlords who provide a report from a state-certified inspector documenting that lead hazards were removed, even if the health department considers the case



ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

McMullen gently pulls Makheil, then 6, into the lab room for a blood test at La Rabida Children's Hospital in Chicago last summer. He dislikes going into the room, she said.



ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

McMullen holds Makheil as a medical technician prepares to draw blood last August. At one point the boy had lead levels nearly 14 times higher than federal health guidelines.

unresolved.

Parents of poisoned children can request to move, Sullivan said, though lawyers familiar with the system said renters often are either too afraid of eviction to complain or their moving papers are rejected because they didn't cite specific language from the federal housing code.

Makheil McMullen's ordeal highlights how Chicago continues to fail some of its most vulnerable residents.

### Mixed messages

Before his fourth birthday, Makheil was severely poisoned in three privately rented homes on the South Side, according to inspection reports and medical records provided by his mother. The amount of lead in his blood peaked at 69 parts per billion — nearly 14 times higher than federal health guidelines — and he underwent several rounds of painful injections to strip the toxic metal from his body.

Exposure to lead early in life can permanently damage parts of the brain that enable people to pay atten-

tion, regulate emotions and control impulses. A week before Makheil turned 3, doctors at the University of Chicago concluded he had the language skills of a 9-month-old and the cognitive ability of an 18-month-old.

"My baby had been healthy," McMullen said. "One day it seemed like the light in his eyes had just gone out."

Taking the toddler's health into consideration, the CHA allowed Makheil's mother to jump ahead of others on the Section 8 waiting list and gave her a voucher to cover most of her rent.

In April 2015, McMullen and her son moved to a three-bedroom house in the 8800 block of South Winchester Avenue after CHA inspectors certified their new landlord had fixed several problems, including faulty heating, leaky ceilings, cracked windows, exposed wiring, a broken toilet and mold. The CHA also determined the home met its standards for deteriorating paint, a hazard in homes built before lead-based paint was outlawed in 1978.

But Makheil's lead levels

soon spiked again. Less than five months after the CHA had vouched for the safety of the property, the city health department sent one of its inspectors to take a look. He found lead hazards in every bedroom and the dining room, living room and back porch, indicating Makheil was ingesting contaminated dust and absorbing more of the toxic metal into his bloodstream.

CHA inspectors came back and documented cracked and peeling paint during seven visits between December 2015 and February 2016. The heat still didn't work properly. Mold had spread to a bedroom, the living room and the bathroom. When McMullen withheld her small share of the rent in protest, the landlord, Integrus Realty Group, posted a notice on the front door threatening to evict them, she said. Integrus did not respond to requests for comment.

CHA officials sent a form letter to McMullen in March 2016 declaring they were kicking the property out of the voucher program. But the housing authority reversed its decision three days later, sending another

letter telling McMullen the home was safe. The next day, the CHA informed McMullen in writing that it was giving Integrus up to 60 days to eliminate the lead hazards found by the health department six months earlier.

Amid the contradictory messages, the CHA reduced its payments to Integrus by \$2,420, an amount equivalent to less than 2½ months of what the landlord was charging for rent. But by the time McMullen and her son moved out last April, the housing authority still had paid Integrus \$9,701, including \$4,648 during the seven months the health department was involved in the case.

"There is no justification for standing by as child after child suffers brain damage under the CHA's watch," said Emily Benfer, director of the Health Justice Project at the Loyola University School of Law, which represented McMullen in a fight with the housing authority that dragged on for months.

### Policies lacking

Like the Winchester home, the vast majority of subsidized rentals are in poor, predominantly African-American neighborhoods on the West and South sides where children suffer lead poisoning at rates significantly higher than the city average. In some census tracts within those neighborhoods, the rate of lead poisoning is increasing again after years of improvement.

Robert Sampson, a Harvard University sociologist who has studied the Englewood neighborhood for more than two decades, calls lead paint a "pathway through which racial inequality literally gets into the body."

Yet federal and local housing policies lag woefully behind scientific research that shows there is no safe level of exposure to the toxic metal.

The Tribune first revealed in 2015 that Section 8 landlords nationwide weren't required to address lead hazards unless children were poisoned at levels four times higher than guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CHA officials said they continued paying landlords of some lead-contaminated rentals because their policies mirrored HUD regulations, which had not been updated since the 1980s.

Shortly before the Obama administration left office in January, HUD updated its rules to match the CDC's more stringent standard for intervention after kids are diagnosed with lead poisoning.

To help prevent kids

from being poisoned in the first place, HUD officials have said lawmakers need to approve an overhaul of national inspection standards for subsidized housing. Despite bipartisan support, leaders of the Republican-controlled Congress have not advanced legislative changes proposed last year by Democratic Sens. Dick Durbin of Illinois, Ben Cardin of Maryland and Jack Reed of Rhode Island, and Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine.

Ben Carson, President Donald Trump's housing secretary, noted during his Senate confirmation hearing in January that each case of lead poisoning burdens society with "tremendous costs." But Trump's proposed budget would drastically reduce federal spending on housing programs, including initiatives to eliminate lead hazards in low-income neighborhoods.

"If you are a businessperson and want to look only at your return on investment, spending in modest ways now to prevent lead poisoning avoids those tremendous costs later," said Ruth Ann Norton, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Green and Healthy Homes Initiative. "By repairing these crumbling homes, we can help children, improve real estate and change the economy and health of struggling communities."

### Persistent problem

The toxic legacy of lead paint has haunted the Chicago Housing Authority for decades. During the mid-1990s, housing officials acknowledged they had known for years about high levels of lead in hundreds of CHA-owned properties but had failed to tell families living there. The mother of a child poisoned around that same time while living in the ABLA Homes on the West Side later won a \$16.5 million jury verdict against the CHA after the agency conceded it had failed to fix lead paint hazards in their apartment.

When former Mayor Richard M. Daley began a campaign to bulldoze the CHA's notorious high-rise housing developments, he promoted Chicago's rapid expansion of the Section 8 program as a model for the rest of the nation that would make cities more diverse while giving low-income families an opportunity to live in safer neighborhoods with better schools. Giving low-income Chicagoans a choice of subsidized housing would "rebuild their souls," he said at the time.

Turn to **CHA, Next Page**

CHA, from Previous Page

Daley's administration also pledged to help Section 8 landlords rid their properties of lead. But it failed to follow up with funding.

While most voucher recipients can only afford to live in neighborhoods where it is common to find aging homes in various states of disrepair, the CHA said it would be too burdensome to routinely check whether Section 8 landlords are involved in lawsuits filed by the health department or other city agencies.

The Tribune documented weaknesses in Chicago's voucher program with records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, matching the CHA's list of properties with lead-inspection data from the health department and tallying monthly payments to the landlords.

One of the properties that stood out is an East Chatham three-flat where city health inspectors found widespread lead hazards in 2009 after a child was poisoned in one of the apartments. A year later, the CHA approved the first and third floor to be rented at taxpayer expense through the voucher program.

The owner, Jule R. Williams Jr. of Chicago, collected \$105,450 in rent subsidies from 2010 to 2015 while the health department urged him to make repairs and fought him in administrative hearings, records show. The payments continued even after Williams' mortgage lender moved in 2012 to foreclose on the building, located on the 8300 block of South Ingleside Avenue.

Efforts to reach Williams for comment were not successful. The CHA said it had no record of young children living in either of the subsidized apartments.

After the health department inspected the building again in 2015 and confirmed lead hazards remained in all three apartments, the CHA suspended its payments to

Williams and the families with rent vouchers moved out. A city lawsuit against the bank that now owns the building is pending in Cook County Circuit Court.

In the East Garfield Park neighborhood, CHA inspectors cleared one of the city's biggest beneficiaries of rent subsidies to lease the second floor of a two-flat on the 400 block of North Lawndale Avenue during 2010 and 2011. The CHA declared the apartment safe again in 2012 after a trust affiliated with Andrzej Bobrowski sold the building and the new owner, Joyce Jones, continued renting to a voucher recipient.

The health department found lead hazards in both apartments after a child living on the second floor was diagnosed with lead poisoning in May 2012, according to court records. City lawyers summoned Jones to administrative hearings a year later, and when that didn't work they sued her in circuit court. In November, a judge prohibited her from renting both apartments.

The CHA confirmed that a child younger than 6 lived in the subsidized apartment between 2010 and 2012. Neither Bobrowski nor Jones was cited for any violations of the CHA's housing standards in the building during the period.

Bobrowski, who collected nearly \$7.8 million in CHA rent subsidies between 2010 and 2016, said in a brief interview that it would be impossible for a child to be poisoned in the Lawndale home because he thoroughly renovated it. "There was no lead in the unit," he said. "It is possible the kid could have gotten lead poisoning somewhere else." The Tribune was unable to reach Jones for comment.

### Moving forward

After leaving the Winchester Avenue rental last April, McMullen had trouble finding a new place to live that was affordable and

lead-free. She and her son stayed in a North Side homeless shelter for several months while the CHA processed paperwork transferring them to the suburban Cook County voucher program.

Eventually McMullen found a home she liked in Country Club Hills, and Benfer and her Loyola colleagues persuaded the Housing Authority of Cook County to conduct a thorough risk assessment before they moved in. A spokeswoman for the agency acknowledged that lead hazards still need to be eliminated on the back porch and garage — a concern now that it's getting warmer and Makheil wants to play outside.

Makheil is due for another checkup this month, and his mom is praying his lead levels have continued to drop. Tests last fall showed just under 20 parts per billion of lead in his blood, still far higher than federal health guidelines but considerably lower than when the family was still living in the city.

McMullen coaxes him to drink more milk and eat green, leafy vegetables, which provide extra calcium to help purge lead from his body. At his new school, an aide helps him repeat class exercises and keep him on task when his attention drifts, giving him the time and patience he needs to keep from falling further behind other kids his age.

"I have to believe it's going to get better, but I'm afraid it's too late for Makheil," McMullen said. "What about those other kids out there, though? When are we going to step up so we don't lose another generation of kids to this horrible poison?"

Former Chicago Tribune staff member Geoff Hing contributed.

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