Gang faction charged in 10 killings

The "Latin Kings" gang faction has been charged with three murders, including that of a 19-year-old man who was shot to death in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. According to authorities, the gang was involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activity. The charges were brought in response to a rise in gang-related violence in the city. The Latin Kings are one of the largest and most violent gangs in the United States, with a presence in many urban areas. The charges come amid a nationwide effort to curb gang violence and improve public safety. The Chicago Police Department has been working with other law enforcement agencies to disrupt the gang's activities and bring its members to justice. The charges were announced by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois and the Chicago Police Department.
Sterigenics cancer risks held back from public

Letter: Administrations knew information for months before acting

By Michael Hawthorne

Gov. Bruce Rauner's administration knew in December that toxic air pollution from the Sterigenics plant in west suburban Willowbrook likely was responsible for some of the highest cancer risks in the nation, according to a letter obtained by the Tribune.

The governor's office and the Rauner-led Illinois Environmental Protection Agency kept the politically explosive information from the public for eight months, then initially downplayed the dangers posed by a company owned in part by the incumbent Republican's former private equity firm.

Disclosure of the previously unknown warning about Sterigenics comes as angry and frightened neighbors packed a hearing Friday in the Loop called by state lawmakers who are scrambling to respond to health dangers in a swath of suburban Chicago that also is a key battleground in the Nov. 6 election.

Other records obtained by the Tribune show the Rauner administration worked behind the scenes with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency between December and August on a more intensive investigation of Sterigenics and discussed potential solutions to the company's pollution problems.

State officials ended up deferring to political appointees in President Donald Trump's administration to determine when and how the public was told about what insiders understood months earlier, the records show.

In the Dec. 22 letter, sent to a Sterigenics executive, a top official in the U.S. EPA's Chicago office outlines the results of a preliminary federal analysis linking unusually high cancer risks in the Willowbrook area to the company's emissions of ethylene oxide, a potent gas used to sterilize medical instruments, pharmaceutical drugs and food.

Copied on the letter is Julie Armitage, chief of the Illinois EPA air bureau.

"EPA has calculated a cancer risk of approximately 1,000 in a million at the nearest
residence, exceeding our typical upper limit of cancer risk acceptability," wrote Ed Nam, director of the regional U.S. EPA air and radiation division. "EPA would like to provide Sterigenics with the opportunity to review our modeling and to suggest improvements for accuracy."

Federal regulators generally target polluters when local cancer risks are greater than 100 in a million. Based on air samples collected in May in neighborhoods near Sterigenics, an arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determined the cancer risks from breathing ethylene oxide pollution could be orders of magnitude higher than initially estimated: up to 6,400 per million, or more than six cases of cancer for every 1,000 people.

The Illinois EPA responded to the report by quietly giving Sterigenics a permit to voluntarily install new pollution-control equipment, making it more difficult for authorities to pursue legal action against the company unless it can be shown the fix has failed to eliminate health risks from ethylene oxide pollution.

Sterigenics says recent testing found the new equipment has substantially reduced its emissions of the dangerous gas. "Sterigenics' Willowbrook facility operates safely today as it has throughout its history," the company declares on a webpage that attempts to sow doubt about the EPA's conclusions and suggests more people would die from hospital infections if the facility was shut down.

Federal officials say the company released uncontrolled amounts of ethylene oxide from building vents for more than 30 years. In 2016, after a decade-long review of peer-reviewed scientific studies, the EPA declared the volatile chemical poses long-term cancer risks at extremely low levels.

About 19,000 people live within a mile of the Willowbrook facility. Four schools and a day care center also are close by, including Hinsdale South High School in Darien and Gower Middle School in Burr Ridge.

No action was taken at Friday's hearing. But residents and local officials spoke emotionally about their concerns and one by one said Sterigenics should not be allowed to continue operating near densely populated communities.

"This was like an information dirty bomb that was dropped on my desk," said Willowbrook Mayor Frank Trilla, who noted the U.S. EPA informed him about the cancer risk report an hour before it was posted online in late August. "We had no way to prepare for that. They don't teach that in mayor's school."

Gabriela Tejeda-Rios, a lawyer who has lived a half block from Sterigenics for nine years, said she has read studies suggesting a link between exposure to ethylene oxide and the type of chronic headaches her two daughters, ages 9 and 11, have suffered since their early days in public schools that also are close to the facility.

"Every single symptom my family and I have experienced in the past number of years has been associated with ethylene oxide," Tejeda-Rios said, referring to websites created by federal and state officials that note children are particularly at risk. "I live in constant fear and worry and guilt. My children have been exposed to this 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and I cannot protect them from it."

Long considered a destination for young families moving out of Chicago, Willowbrook and surrounding suburbs are among just a few dozen communities nationwide where toxic air pollution is responsible for higher-than-allowed cancer risks.

Most of the risks in the other cities also are from ethylene oxide exposure, the EPA revealed when it finally released its latest National Air Toxics Assessment on Aug. 24.

Asked Thursday about the December letter, spokespersons for the federal and state agencies said they delayed informing the public because they wanted to make sure the initial U.S. EPA estimates were correct.
"Without additional analysis from USEPA, IEPA was not in a position to take action," Kim Biggs, a spokeswoman for the state agency, said in an email. "The Illinois EPA is very concerned about potential adverse health impacts that may be caused by the operations of Sterigenics and is committed to doing everything within our authority to bring all possible relief to Willowbrook and the surrounding communities."

The federal agency said the December letter was intended to give Sterigenics a chance to respond to the EPA's concerns before the public release of its analysis. "Verifying emissions is a critical step in NATA development," Jeff Kelley, director of the EPA's regional communications office, said in an email, using the acronym for the air toxics assessment.

After the Tribune first reported about the cancer risks in Willowbrook and Rauner's connections to Sterigenics, the governor said the Willowbrook facility operated well within the law.

"This is not an emergency," Rauner told reporters following an unrelated Aug. 28 event. "My understanding is that particular company has followed all the regulations and the proper procedures."

Rauner appointees later refused to provide key documents about the Willowbrook facility to Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, required the state's chief lawyer to request the records under the Freedom of Information Act and delayed providing the information until after the Tribune inquired about the dispute on Sept. 20.

Less than two weeks later, with fellow Republicans in DuPage County, both of the state's U.S. senators and Democratic gubernatorial challenger J.B. Pritzker clamoring for more aggressive action, Rauner joined a chorus of politicians demanding that Sterigenics cease operations unless the company can prove its pollution no longer increases the risk of developing cancer.

The company is still operating.

Rauner has said he no longer has a stake in Sterigenics, contrary to his most recent statement of economic interests.

Spokespeople for his campaign and government office told the Tribune that Rauner sold his interest as part of a 2015 deal but have not produced documents showing the transaction took place.