

Black Maternal Health Week Pushes For Maternal Equity

In 2021, maternal mortality increased significantly in the US, with Black women dying at a rate 3-4 times higher than non-Hispanic white women 1. This issue is alarming, as the maternal death rate among Black women in the US was already one of the highest among industrialized nations and has nearly doubled between 2018 and 2021 2. Helping to increase awareness of this issue, The Bump, a leading multi-platform brand for pregnancy and parenting, announced the expansion of the Reclaiming Your Power podcast series within its Black Maternal Health Hub. The series features discussions and inspiring stories from notable Black women such as Olympian Sanya Richards-Ross and bestselling author and founder of Mama Glow Foundation, Latham Thomas. The series highlights how Black women can harness the power of their physical health, wellness team and community to improve the



outcomes for Black mothers in the US.

"The maternal mortality health crisis is a pressing issue that disproportionately affects far too many Black women in the United States. At The Bump, it is our imperative to

raise awareness and educate parents about this issue," said Jen Lee, Head of Marketing at The Bump. "The Black Maternal Health Hub aims to inform, support and empower Black women to advocate for their health and community. Our goal

is to reduce maternal morbidity rates while encouraging Black families to focus on the joy and celebration of expanding their families. We are committed to providing authentic and inclusive content to ensure that all parents, especially Black parents, feel emboldened to receive the care and support they need to thrive during and after birth."

In partnership with the National Medical Association, The Bump launched its Black Maternal Health Hub in 2021 to provide resources, advice and insights for expecting Black parents. The hub features educational and first-person content aimed at helping raise awareness of the maternal mortality crisis and empowering Black audiences.

The Bump podcast series Reclaiming Your Power expanded last week with the launch of new episodes, such as "The

(See **MATERNAL HEALTH**, P. 2)



Shooting At Alabama Birthday Party Kills 4 People, Wounds 28

DADEVILLE, Ala. (AP) — Alabama law enforcement officers Sunday were imploring people to come forward with information about a shooting that killed four people and injured 28 others during a teenager's birthday party.

Among those killed was a high school senior who planned to play college football and was celebrating his sister's 16th birthday. The shooting erupted Saturday night at a dance studio in downtown Dadeville.

During two news conferences Sunday, Sgt. Jeremy Burkett of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency did not take questions. He did not say if a suspect was in custody or if investigators knew about any motivation. He did not provide the names of those killed.

"We've got to have information from the community," Burkett said during a Sunday evening news conference.

Philstavius "Phil" Dowdell, a Dadeville High School senior who had committed to Jacksonville State University, was celebrating at his sister Alexis' party before he was shot to death, his grandmother Annette Allen told the Montgomery Advertiser.

"He was a very, very humble child. Never messed with anybody. Always had a smile on his face," Allen told the newspaper, calling it "a million-dollar smile."

Dowdell's mother was among those hurt in the shooting.

"Everybody's grieving," Allen said.

Burkett said the shooting occurred about 10:30 p.m. Saturday. "There were four lives tragically lost in this incident," he said.

The shootings rocked the city of 3,200 residents, which is about 57 miles northeast of Montgomery, Alabama.

Keenan Cooper, the DJ at the party, told WBMA-TV that the party was stopped briefly when attendees heard someone had a gun. He said people with guns were asked to leave, but no one left. Cooper said when the shooting began an hour later, some people took shelter under a table where he was standing, and others ran out.

Pastor Jason Whetstone, who leads the Christian Faith Fellowship, said the granddaughter of one of his church members was shot in the foot and underwent surgery Sunday.

"All of our hearts are hurting right now. We're just trying to pull together to find strength and comfort," Whetstone said before an interfaith vigil in the parking lot of First Baptist Church.

"We are a loving community," he said. "We're pulling together in every aspect to comfort each and every one of these children, the teachers, all of the community."

Dadeville's compact downtown is centered around a courthouse square with one- and two-story brick buildings. The town's busiest commercial district is a few blocks north of the square, off a bustling four-lane highway that runs between Birmingham and Auburn. Dadeville is close to Lake Martin, a popular recreational area.

Investigators on Sunday continued filing in and out of the Mahogany Masterpiece dance studio, denoted by a banner hanging on the outside of a one-story brick building just off the square. Less than a block away, the American and Alabama flags were lowered to half staff outside the Tallapoosa County Courthouse.

Dadeville Mayor Frank Goodman said he was in bed asleep when a council member called him just before 11 p.m. Saturday. He said he went to Lake Martin Community Hospital in Dadeville, where some of the people who had been shot were taken.

"It was chaotic," Goodman said. "There were people running around. They were crying and screaming. There were police cars everywhere, there were ambulances everywhere. People were trying to find out about their loved ones. That was a scene, where we never had anything like this happen in our city before."

Black Chiefs Meet On Benefit Of Diversity

Over his 32-year police career in Dallas, Terrance Hopkins has seen tremendous changes in the profession. For rookie Black officers in a predominantly white and conservative field, he said, the prevailing feeling used to be that you were lucky to be allowed on the force.

Now, it is not unusual to see veteran Black officers in top leadership roles. But the issues that plague the profession's reputation in Black communities — excessive uses of lethal force, racial profiling and routine brutality from officers — have not become relics of the past under diverse leadership. That reality has been laid bare by the beating death of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee, and the in-custody restraint death of Irvo Otieno that involved Virginia sheriff's deputies.

Part of the problem is that too many Black police leaders "walk on eggshells" about addressing bad policing and racism in the force, said Hopkins, the outspoken president of the Black Police Association of Dallas who serves as a tactical special events planner for the city's department.

"You're still in a conservative, white male-dominated profession and these guys still have to buy into you. If they don't buy into you, they're calling for your job," he said.

Very few, if any, Black police chiefs believe their mere presence subverts systemic racism in the profession. But as the



Interim Atlanta Police Chief Rodney Bryant speaks to the Associated Press, June 18, 2020, in Atlanta. Bryant retired as Atlanta's police chief in June 2022.

number of Black law enforcement professionals leading major police departments increases, so do the opportunities to show that diversity on the force can foster better relationships, make policing fairer, and save more Black lives, current and former police leaders told The Associated Press.

"Sometimes it does seem like

an unfair burden that, just because (a chief) comes in who is African American, decades of mistrust are just going to melt away," said Brenda Goss Andrews, president of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives and a former deputy chief of the Detroit Police Department.

"You're not going to be able to

solve that quickly and, in some cases, if at all," she said. "But the key thing is that you have to take the time to talk to the community and see what's going on."

This weekend, Black police chiefs, commissioners, sheriffs and commanders from across the country will gather in De-

(See **BLACK CHIEFS**, P. 2)

Historic Black Church Gets Land Returned From NHL Franchise

By Stacy M. Brown

NNPA

In Pittsburgh's Hill District, the historic Black Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church will return to its former location.

More than 60 years ago, the church was forced to relinquish its sanctuary to an urban renewal project that destroyed the core of an African American neighborhood.

The church was compensated for a fraction of its value, according to the church.

Now, the church has reached an agreement with the Pittsburgh Penguins, the NHL team that owns the development rights to the site adjacent to its current facility.

According to a report by The Grio, the Penguins have consented to allowing the church to use a 1.5-acre plot of land that the church plans to use for housing and other revenue-generating development.

Kevin Acklin, president of business operations for the Penguins, stated that the organization is "recognizing our role here as a steward" of the property and its history.

Prior to 1967, the Penguins played in a former community arena, and now they play in a newer arena nearby.

According to historians, the Hill District was a center of Black culture in the 20th century, renowned for its jazz clubs and other cultural landmarks depicted in many of acclaimed playwright August Wilson's works.

In addition, Bethel AME played an important role in that community.

It was founded in 1808 and is regarded as Pittsburgh's oldest Black church. From its inception, it was involved in infant education and civil rights.

It opened a large brick church with rounded arches and a prominent tower in 1906 in the Lower Hill District, which was home to 3,000 members at its zenith.

In the 1950s, the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority declared a large portion of Lower Hill to be derelict.

It oversaw the demolition of approximately 1,300 structures on 95 acres, displacing more than 8,000 individuals, more than 400 businesses, and numerous places of worship.

Bethel congregants stated that the predominantly white Catholic church was not, however, demolished.

Bethel's leaders battled the church's demolition unsuccessfully, ultimately receiving \$240,000 for a \$745,000 property.

The pastor of Bethel, Rev. Dale Snyder, told The Grio, "This is a model for how we can heal the broken realities of America."

The church intends to construct housing, a daycare center, and other potential commercial developments on the property.

The Rev. Prudence Harris, associate pastor and lifelong Bethel member, stated that she was five years old when she and her parents witnessed the deconstruction of the previous sanctuary.

The agreement was reached after years of public requests and protests by the church.

It is a microcosm of a larger conflict over the legacy of the 1950s project, in which Black community leaders have long sought redress from Pittsburgh's political, business, and athletic elites.

The Penguins hope that the



Business & Finance

New Push On US-Run Free Electronic Tax-Filing System For All

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's that time of year when throngs of taxpayers are buckling down to file their income tax returns before Tuesday's filing deadline. Many often pay to use software from private companies such as Intuit and H&R Block.

Almost one-quarter of Americans wait until the last minute to file their taxes.

There could be a new, free option in future years. The IRS has been tasked with looking into how to create a government-operated electronic free-file tax return system for all. But that doesn't sit well with the big tax-prep companies.

The idea has been batted around and hotly debated for a long time. Congress now has directed the IRS to report in on how such a system might work.

The order came as part of the \$80 billion infusion of money for the tax agency over the next 10 years under the Democrats' flagship climate and health care measure, known as the Inflation Reduction Act, that President Joe Biden signed last summer. It gave the IRS nine months and \$15 million to report in on how it might implement such a program and how much it would cost.

Next month, the IRS will release the first in a series of reports looking into how it might be done.

The possibility of an electronic free-file system operated by Washington is being celebrated by some taxpayer advocates who for years have said that would reflect good governance and well serve taxpayers. Critics voice

skepticism about the IRS taking on the dual roles of both tax collector and tax preparer, arguing that the new service could create a power imbalance between taxpayers and the government.

Robert Marvin, an IRS spokesperson, said in an email that a key goal of the study is to "look for ways to make filing taxes as easy as possible."

"It's important that Americans have choices that work best for them when preparing their taxes, whether it's by using a tax professional, tax software or free options," he said.

But big tax preparation companies have millions of dollars to lose if the program comes to fruition. Last year, more than 60 million taxpayers were serviced between Intuit, the parent company of TurboTax, and H&R Block.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent trying to influence policymakers on the issue, and lobbying data shows that the big tax companies in particular have spent heavily.

An analysis shows that Intuit, H&R Block, and other private companies and advocacy groups for large tax preparation businesses, as well as proponents in favor of electronic free file, have reported spending \$39.3 million since 2006 to lobby on "free-file" and other matters. Federal law doesn't require domestic lobbyists to itemize expenses by specific issue, so the sums are not limited to free-file.

Intuit has spent \$25.6 million since 2006 on lobbying, H&R Block about \$9.6 million and the



conservative Americans for Tax Reform roughly \$3 million.

Derrick Plummer, a spokesman for Intuit, said taxpayers can already file their taxes for free and there are online free-file programs available to some people. Individuals of all income levels can submit their returns for free via the mail.

A "direct-to-IRS e-file system is a solution in search of a problem, and that solution will unnecessarily cost taxpayers billions of dollars," he said. "We will continue unapologetically advocating for American taxpayers

and against a direct-to-IRS e-file system because it's a bad idea."

Starting in 2006, an agreement between the IRS and some commercial tax preparation companies, known as the Free File Alliance, prevented the IRS from creating its own free tax return filing system. In exchange, tax preparation companies agreed to provide free services to taxpayers making \$73,000 or less.

The provision that barred the IRS from exploring a free-file system expired in 2019, but the Free File Alliance agreement to provide free services for low-

income taxpayers remains in effect.

Ariel Jurow-Kleiman, a tax law professor at Loyola Law School, and the New America think tank have been selected by the IRS to conduct the congressionally mandated study for the agency. Jurow-Kleiman said their mandate is "evaluating the feasibility, approach, schedule, cost, organizational design, and IRS capacity to deliver a possible direct e-file system."

But she has faced pushback from Republicans who say she does not fit the law's requirement

that an independent third party assess what it would take to deliver a direct file program.

Rep. Jason Smith, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, sent a letter to the IRS in March questioning Jurow-Kleiman's ability to be an independent reviewer, saying her work indicates "a clear preference for an expansive government-run system."

Smith, R-Mo., said the selection of Jurow-Kleiman and New America shows that "the Administration has already predetermined that a government-directed e-file system should exist regardless of what might be found in a truly nonpartisan, independent, third-party review."

Jurow-Kleiman said the GOP pushback to her selection was based on an unpublished draft of an article about tax compliance costs and that none of her writings have "addressed the questions that we are assessing in the feasibility study."

Molly Martin, director of strategy at New America, referred requests for comment to the IRS, saying the organization "is still working on its report."

David Williams, at the right-leaning, nonprofit Taxpayers Protection Alliance, says the "government preparing taxes is problematic."

"The taxpayer is looking for the biggest refund possible, but for the IRS that's not their job to look for the biggest refund for filers," he said. "We're concerned about that conflict of interest, but also really the ability of the IRS to do this."

States Confront Medical Debt That's Bankrupting Millions

DENVER (AP) — Cindy Powers was driven into bankruptcy by 19 life-saving abdominal operations. Medical debt started stacking up for Lindsey Vance after she crashed her skateboard and had to get nine stitches in her chin. And for Misty Castaneda, open heart surgery for a disease she'd had since birth saddled her with \$200,000 in bills.

These are three of an estimated 100 million Americans who have amassed nearly \$200 billion in collective medical debt — almost the size of Greece's economy — according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Now lawmakers in at least a dozen states and the U.S. Congress have pushed legislation to curtail the financial burden that's pushed many into untenable situations: forgoing needed care for fear of added debt, taking a second mortgage to pay for cancer treatment or slashing grocery budgets to keep up with pay-



ments.

Some of the bills would create medical debt relief programs or protect personal property from collections, while others would lower interest rates, keep medical debt from tanking credit scores or require greater transparency in the costs of care.

In Colorado, House lawmakers

approved a measure Wednesday that would lower the maximum interest rate for medical debt to 3%, require greater transparency in costs of treatment and prohibit debt collection during an appeals process.

If it became law, Colorado would join Arizona in having one of the lowest medical debt inter-

est rates in the country. North Carolina lawmakers have also started mulling a 5% interest ceiling.

But there are opponents. Colorado Republican state Sen. Janice Rich said she worried that the proposal could "constrain hospitals' debt collecting ability and hurt their cash flow."

For patients, medical debt has become a leading cause of personal bankruptcy, with an estimated \$88 billion of that debt in collections nationwide, according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Roughly 530,000 people reported falling into bankruptcy annually due partly to medical bills and time away from work, according to a 2019 study from the American Journal of Public Health.

Powers' family ended up owing \$250,000 for the 19 life-saving abdominal surgeries. They declared bankruptcy in 2009, then the bank foreclosed on their home.

"Only recently have we begun to pick up the pieces," said James Powers, Cindy's husband, during his February testimony in favor of Colorado's bill.

In Pennsylvania and Arizona, lawmakers are considering medical debt relief programs that would use state funds to help eradicate debt for residents. A New Jersey proposal would use federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to achieve the same end.

Bills in Florida and Massachusetts would protect some personal property — such as a car that is needed for work — from medical debt collections and force providers to be more transparent about costs. Florida's legislation received unanimous approval in House and Senate committees on its way to votes in both chambers.

In Colorado, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Massachusetts and the U.S. Congress lawmakers are contemplating bills that would bar medical debt from being included on consumer reports, thereby protecting debtors' credit scores.

Castaneda, who was born with a congenital heart defect, found herself \$200,000 in debt when she was 23 and had to have surgery. The debt tanked her credit score and, she said, forced her to rely on her emotionally abusive husband's credit.

For over a decade Castaneda wanted out of the relationship, but everything they owned was in her husband's name, making it nearly impossible to break away. She finally divorced her husband in 2017.

"I'm trying to play catch-up for the last 20 years," said Castaneda, 45, a hairstylist from Grand Junction on Colorado's Western Slope.

Medical debt isn't a strong indicator of people's credit-worthiness, said Isabel Cruz, policy director at the Colorado Consumer

Health Initiative.

While buying a car beyond your means or overspending on vacation can partly be chalked up to poor decision making, medical debt often comes from short, acute-care treatments that are unexpected — leaving patients with hefty bills that exceed their budgets.

For both Colorado bills — to limit interest rates and remove medical debt from consumer reports — a spokesperson for Democratic Gov. Jared Polis said the governor will "review these policies with a lens towards saving people money on health care."

While neither bill garnered stiff political opposition, a spokesperson for the Colorado Hospital Association said the organization is working with sponsors to amend the interest rate bill "to align the legislation with the multitude of existing protections."

The association did not provide further details.

To Vance, protecting her credit score early could have had a major impact. Vance's medical debt began at age 19 from the skateboard crash, and then was compounded when she broke her arm soon after. Now 39, she has never been able to qualify for a credit card or car loan. Her in-laws cosigned for her Colorado apartment.

"My credit identity was medical debt," she said, "and that set the tone for my life."

US Will Not Prosecute Suspect In US Tourist Death In Mexico

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — U.S. officials in North Carolina will not federally prosecute the person suspected of killing a Charlotte-area woman vacationing in Mexico last year, the U.S. Department of Justice announced Wednesday.

Federal prosecutors say they have presented the findings of their investigation to the family of Shanquella Robinson, who was seen being beaten in a viral video last fall at a resort development in San Jose del Cabo. As the video circulated on social media, it raised suspicions that Robinson may have been killed by her travel companions.

Attorneys with the U.S. Department of Justice said in a news release Wednesday that the available evidence and autopsy results do not support a federal prosecution. Investigators could

not prove "beyond a reasonable doubt" that a federal crime was committed, the release said.

An autopsy was conducted in North Carolina by the Mecklenburg County medical examiner's office.

Local prosecutors in the state of Baja California Sur filed charges late last year against another U.S. woman — whom they would not name — suspected of killing Robinson on Oct. 29. They issued an arrest warrant for the suspect, who had already left Mexico with other travel companions after Robinson was found dead in a rented villa. Mexican federal prosecutors are trying to get her extradited to face charges in Mexico.

Sue-Ann Robinson, the family's attorney, said at a news conference Wednesday in Charlotte that the U.S. autopsy results,

which have not been released publicly, revealed inconsistencies with a previous autopsy conducted in Mexico, which had labeled the cause of death a severe spinal cord or neck injury.

She criticized federal officials for the speed at which they conducted their investigation, saying people on social media should not have had to "create the movement behind the case."

"United States citizens cannot go to Mexico, commit a crime that we all saw on video and then come back to America and say, 'We're on base. We're safe. We're not going to be charged with a crime,'" she said. "That cannot be the message that U.S. authorities want to send."

Federal officials say they will review and examine any new information that becomes available.

Police Continue To Probe Fatal Shooting By N.C. State Agent

APEX, N.C. (AP) — Police in North Carolina are continuing to investigate the fatal shooting of a teenager in Apex by an agent from the State Bureau of Investigation, the city's police said in a statement Wednesday.

The shooting occurred early Tuesday afternoon in the parking lot of a sporting goods store, Academy Sports, following a shoplifting incident that involved the teen and an unidentified female, police said.

They "ran out of the store and were encountered by an SBI agent in the parking lot," police said. "That encounter resulted in a shooting in which the male subject was shot by the SBI agent. A firearm was recovered at scene next to the male subject on the ground."

Dayve Sanchez, 18, died at a hospital after the shooting, police said. The SBI agent has been identified as Denzel Ward, 29.

The female was not shot but remained in the care of medical

professionals, police said. She has not been identified or formally charged with any crimes.

A friend of Sanchez's family, Joyce Bloodsworth, told ABC11 that his family wants more information about his death.

"Dayve is loved. He's a kid. He was only 18 years old," Bloodsworth said. "He had his whole life to live, and we just want answers because we love and care about him very, very much and he should not be gone."

5th Annual Moguls In The Making HBCU Student Pitch Competition

Digital financial services company Ally Financial and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCFF), the largest organization exclusively representing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominately Black Institutions (PBIs), have opened registration for the fifth annual Moguls in the Making entrepreneur pitch competition, Sept. 7 - 10 in Charlotte, NC.

Sixty students will vie for the opportunity to learn vital business skills, while competing for over \$185,000 in scholarships, paid internships, laptops and other prizes.

Registration is open until April 24. Students can learn more at www.ally.com/moguls.

Moguls in the Making was developed in 2019 to provide HBCU students with career-launching business experience, financial education, and networking access to executives and industry leaders, while also giving Ally a new path for reaching diverse talent. Since its launch four years ago, Ally has hired 41 of the participants



as interns and 14 as full-time employees, working on teams across the company, from IT, finance and marketing to product design and development.

Moguls in the Making is a

part of Ally's commitment to promote economic mobility by preparing talented diverse students to become future entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities.