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Chicago Tribune

$4.00 | MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2026 | CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Faulty DNA report unravels Indiana rape case

Both sides want accountability after an attorney found a state police lab had made a 'critical error'

By Rebecca Johnson
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

When Charltanae Ridgell was called into a northwest Indiana prosecutor's office over the summer, she expected a benign update on the impending trial of the man accused of raping her.

Instead, she was told that the office planned to drop the case.

"It was like that scab got completely ripped off, and it was brand new and exposed again," the 29-year-old South Hammond resident recently told the Tribune.

What she learned was that the Indiana State Police Laboratory had incorrectly reported the DNA recovered from her sexual assault kit. It erroneously said it belonged to Michael Narcisi, the Crown Point resident she had accused of rape.

Ridgell believes he got away with a crime and desperately wanted the chance to testify in court. She recently spent her time organizing a march and petition to press the point.

But Maryam Afshar-Stewart, Narcisi's attorney, sees it differently. When the two counts of rape against her client were dropped, it was the end of a nightmare for him. This "critical error" cost him his reputation and nearly his freedom, she said.

What they do agree on, however, is that the lab should be held accountable for upending their lives. Experts said although DNA is an incredible technology, it isn't immune to human error. The consequences, when it happens, can be massive.

"This case should concern every member of the public," Afshar-Stewart said. "No one should lose their freedom because of an avoidable mistake. Scientific evidence carries enormous weight in our courts, and with that comes an equally enormous responsibility to ensure it is accurate."

In response, the Indiana State Police forensic science division said it's conducting a "quality review"

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Charltanae Ridgell of Hammond, Indiana, is organizing protests and speaking out after a case against a man she accuses of rape was dismissed after a DNA test error. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Maddison Mueller, a biological science technician with the USGS Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center, hauls a netful of silver carp to tubs along the Illinois River in Ottawa on Wednesday. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Catch and release

Illinois River tagging effort to count invasive carp, help protect Lake Michigan

By Adriana Pérez
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The fish, caught in a net with dozens of others like it, had just been brought to the boat ramp and placed in one of several large, water-filled tubs, where it patiently waited its turn.

Soon enough, it was whisked up and away in a catch net, weighed in at 10.14 pounds, the same as a 12-pack of soda, measured at 25.7 inches, or about the length of a standard rolling pin. Then it was laid on its back on a surgery tray, where it was tagged twice.

Despite some wriggling resistance, it was released back into the water within 1 minute and swam away like nothing happened.



Amanda Milde, a biologist with the Environmental Sciences Center, tags a silver carp Wednesday.

After repeating a similar process several hundred times over two days last week as part of a multi-agency effort, scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey will be keeping a close eye on about 1,000 silver carp caught and tagged near the confluence of the Illinois and Fox rivers to track the movements of the invasive fish in these waterways — and, ultimately, inform strategies to remove them and prevent their spread into the Great Lakes.

"We only want to tag fish that are actually going to survive because we want to estimate our numbers correctly. So we only take fish out of there that are looking good, and then release them, make sure that they're swimming off fine," said Janice Albers, a fish biologist at the USGS Upper Midwest Environmental Sciences Center. "Our goal is to be as quick as possible, and you know, the least amount of handling. Handling stresses them out."

The gold-colored jaw tag is inserted first through a small incision in the mouth — "think of it as like a lip ring," Albers said — and then a thin, green loop tag is similarly attached to the fish's back. Both have a phone number etched on them so any angler who catches the fish can report it to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which the USGS is collaborating

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THIMBY, not NIMBY? Some question the difference

Opponents of a planned North Side substation try to keep things 'positive' with housing push

By Lila Hempel-Edgers
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The North Siders marching down Diversey Parkway on a recent morning are well aware their electrical grid is nearing its breaking point. They aren't denying a new substation is needed to funnel power to their houses and businesses. They only insist it belongs somewhere else.

Mary Driscoll knows how that sounds. But there's a world of difference, she says, between fighting an unwanted utility and the exclusionary politics that keep neighborhoods wealthy and segregated.

"The community has come together around this in a positive way," said Driscoll, 81. "Not in a 'Not In My Backyard' kind of way."

Driscoll, a Lakeview resident for more than half a century, is among thousands of locals caught up in a bitter fight over ComEd's plans to build an electrical substation at 1111 W. Diversey Parkway. The utility maintains that the site is the best available option for equipment necessary to protect the area from blackouts and brownouts, while opponents argue the land should be used for housing instead.

But the monthslong dispute has devolved into a battle of competing narratives, with residents accusing ComEd of dishonesty and the utility insisting their critics misunderstand the project. For Driscoll, who belongs to the Diversey Community Coalition, or DCC, the stakes extend far beyond electrical infrastructure.

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Pope set for fraught stop on his tour

Argentina's president at odds with church views of Leo, Francis

By Isabel Debre and Nicole Winfield
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina — Pope Leo XIV delivered a diplomatic but subtly strong critique of Argentine President Javier Milei's austerity measures and libertarian agenda as he arrived Sunday in Argentina, insisting that politicians must put people, not the economy, first.

Leo used his first public speech in Argentina to lay out a vision of governance, democracy and society sharply at odds with Milei's, exposing differences over spending cuts, social justice and artificial intelligence that the government had sought to play down ahead of the visit. "The economy must serve the person, not the person the economy," Leo told officials, diplomats and civic leaders upon his arrival in Buenos Aires from Uruguay.

Leo's visit to Argentina is the most politically delicate of his three-nation South American tour, and a place where Leo will also confront the complicated legacy of Argentine Pope Francis, who never returned home during his 12-year pontificate.

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Pope Leo XIV arrives to preside over Sunday Mass in Florida, Uruguay. **SANTIAGO MAZZAROVICH/AP**

INSIDE

Illinois hemp group sues to stop ban

The chemical in cannabis that gets users high was set to be banned in the state on Thursday. But a hemp industry group has filed suit to halt enforcement of the new law. **Chicagoland, A3**

Data centers woven into politics

A tougher regulatory environment for data center developers is expected to follow Democrats' midterm wins, even if President Donald Trump stalls any federal crackdown. **Nation & World, B2**

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