

HEALTH INSURANCE

CANCER DIAGNOSIS LED TO BANKRUPTCY



LIZ RYMAREV, POST-DISPATCH

Angie Salvador hugs one of her dogs on Wednesday, May 13, 2026, on her patio in Swansea. "They're my emotional support animals," she says. Salvador's breast cancer diagnosis, coupled with other health issues, resulted in large healthcare bills that ultimately led her to file for bankruptcy.

Swansea woman's saga shows gaps in US healthcare system

BY JACOB BARKER
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

SWANSEA — A routine mammogram a year ago — Angie Salvador's first ever — launched her on an odyssey through the American healthcare system.

More tests were ordered. A biopsy followed. Then the bad news: breast cancer.

She began a hormone treatment to halt the spread. In December of last year, she underwent a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery at Barnes-Jewish Hospital.

By then, the bills were already filling her mailbox in Swansea.

Salvador, a 42-year-old social worker in East St. Louis, had health insurance. But with an out-of-pocket maximum of more than \$8,000, the bills not covered by insurance for treatments, diagnostics and surgeries strained her \$42,000 salary.

When the new year started, her deductible and \$8,200 out-of-pocket maximum reset, just in time for more bills from procedures due to complications from her reconstructive surgery.

She was already struggling with some medical debt. In September, Washington University Physicians

sued her for \$1,916 in St. Clair County, leading to an order to garnish her wages.

On top of her battle with cancer and the resulting medical bills, another shoe dropped: Her health insurance premiums skyrocketed at the beginning of the year, rising from just more than \$100 per paycheck to \$450 per paycheck, according to pay stubs she shared with the Post-Dispatch.

Some of the increase was because she'd recently married and added her husband to her health insurance

Please see **HEALTH**, Page A4

Letters ask EPA head to regulate abortion pill

AGs, lawmakers want mifepristone classified as water contaminant

NADA HASSANEIN
Stateline

Republican attorneys general from 14 states and 19 GOP members of Congress are asking U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee Zeldin to classify and regulate the abortion medication mifepristone as a water contaminant.

In a letter to the EPA, the state officials argue that mifepristone is "a growing threat to the country's waterways."

The letter was signed by the attorneys general of Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas.

Missouri Attorney General Catherine Hanaway was the lead Republican attorney general behind the letter. Sent on Hanaway's office letterhead, the attorneys general state that "the upsurge in home-setting chemical abortions has serious implications for the Safe Drinking Water Act."

A concurrent letter, led by Republican Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey, made similar claims and was signed by 18 other GOP members of Congress.

Mifepristone is prescribed as part of a two-drug medication regimen to terminate a pregnancy. Studies have shown medication abortion to be safe and effective.

Environmental health science experts say there is no evidence that mifepristone in wastewater causes harm to the environment or to humans.

"There's no evidence that medication abortion is affecting U.S. water systems, including drinking water and aquatic wildlife," the Center for Biological Diversity, which advocates for stronger environmental protections, says on its website.

The GOP letters cite a 1996 FDA Center for Drug Evaluation and Research statement that said harmful environmental effects from mifepristone were "not anticipated," while acknowledging that the drug may enter the environment via excretion or disposal of pharmaceutical waste. But drug trace amounts in water are a common occurrence, experts say, and state environmental agencies and scientists check for harmful contaminants in water as part of protocols and research.

Please see **LETTERS**, Page A4

'Hammerhead' worm spotted locally

Invasive flatworm found in St. Louis Co.; danger is minimal, experts say

BY SAM OAKS-LEAF
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

ST. LOUIS COUNTY — On a recent walk through Cliff Cave Park alongside the Mississippi River, Sarah Bertelsen spotted what she thought was a baby snake. But its wide, flattened head, jutting out from a long slender body, gave her the feeling that this critter was out of place.

She was right, scientists say. The hammerhead flatworm originates in the tropics and is invasive in the U.S. Experts believe this particular worm, which Bertelsen snapped a photo of and reported to the St. Louis County parks department, is a Biparium kewense. The worm spotting comes amid concerns that other non-native species from warmer regions could thrive in Missouri, experts said.

The sighting prompted county parks officials last week to issue a warning about the hammerhead worm and instructions to kill it because it's a danger to the ecosystem. (It's crucial, however, not to cut the hammerhead worm into pieces or crush it because dismembered pieces can regenerate into new worms, experts warn.)

It is best not to handle the hammerhead worm with bare hands — and they should never be ingested — but despite their unsettling appearance, experts say they look much scarier than they are.

"I've known about these for 10 years, more than that even, and I have never heard of a case of any person or pet being harmed," said Matt Bertone, director and entomologist of the plant disease and insect clinic at North Carolina State University.

Hammerhead worms prey on native snails, slugs and earthworms but their danger to humans and pets is minimal, he said.

The tropical worms have been in

Missouri since at least 2018, and likely for much longer than that, so most of their ecological damage has likely already been done, Bertone said.

The hammerhead worm thrives in hot, humid environments. According to Bertone, the worm will quickly dry out without moisture, similar to an earthworm. They like damp spots under rocks or debris, he said.

The species was first brought to the U.S. in 1891, and a map maintained by the University of Georgia shows that they are prevalent across the southeastern region.

Angela Sokolowski, the invasive species coordinator for the Missouri Department of Conservation, said "there is a concern that climate shift is going to make some places way more hospitable to species, especially those that have really thrived in the southeast."

The site iNaturalist, an online database where photos of wildlife can be uploaded

Please see **WORM**, Page A4



SARAH BERTELSEN

Sarah Bertelsen was walking a paved trail at Cliff Cave Park on June 4, 2026, when she encountered what she thought was a baby snake. It turned out to be a type of hammerhead worm, an invasive, carnivorous species that primarily eats native earthworms.

Inside

OPINION	A5
OBITUARIES	A6
CLASSIFIED	A7
SPORTS	B1
EVERYDAY	B5

Activate your digital subscription

Scan to set up your digital login. STLtoday access is included in your subscription.
[STLtoday.com/activate](https://stltoday.com/activate)



Weather

Plan your week: For a 5-day weather forecast for our region as well as the national outlook, please see **PAGE B8**

Hammered out



POST-DISPATCH WEATHERBIRD®

Got a story tip?

We want to hear from you.
stltoday.com/newstips

Vol. 148, No. 166 ©2026

EE • Lee Enterprises, Incorporated
— Majority shareholder, David Hoffmann, Hoffmann Media Group