



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



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**MAYOR JOHNSON, CITY OFFICIALS HONOR 1995 HEAT WAVE VICTIMS, FORGOTTEN
WWII HERO EMILIO AGUIRRE WITH FULL MILITARY FUNERAL HONORS**

The City and its partners highlighted efforts to build resistance to extreme heat and climate change in neighborhoods that are most at risk, while honoring the lives of those we lost.

CHICAGO — On the week of the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave, Mayor Brandon Johnson and City of Chicago officials are lifting up two events honoring the more than 700 Chicagoans who lost their lives during the tragic heat wave. Today, Mayor Johnson joined the Department of Environment (DOE), Department of Public Health (CDPH), the Chicago Park District, the Northwestern Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, and other community partners at an event highlighting the progress the City, community, and academia are making as part of the Defusing Disasters project to build heat resilience and protect Chicagoans from extreme heat. On Thursday, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) will posthumously honor Emilio Aguirre, a World War II U.S. Army veteran and former prisoner of war who passed away from heat-related illness during the '95 Heat Wave, with full military honors and a proper headstone.

"Today, we gather to remember and honor the more than 700 Chicagoans whose lives were lost during this tragic event," said **Mayor Brandon Johnson**. "The '95 heatwave made it abundantly clear that environmental crises are never just about weather; they are about equity, access, and justice. That is why my administration is investing in climate action and resilience that focuses on the people and neighborhoods who are most at risk."

The 1995 Heat Wave Commemoration and Defusing Disasters Project Showcase was held at the Columbus Park Refectory, located in the Austin neighborhood. This location was chosen due to Austin's experience during the 1995 heat wave and its proximity to several of the communities that were most severely impacted.



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“Creating a substantive response to extreme heat requires community voices,” said **Angela Tovar, Chicago’s Chief Sustainability Officer and DOE Commissioner**. “The collective research, preliminary findings, and perspectives from community and academia push us toward solutions. They serve as the foundation as we build a future where we in Chicago are equipped not just to manage or survive disasters, but to thrive in the face of climate, economic, and public health challenges.”

One important way the Johnson administration is taking action is through the expansion of the tree canopy. On the City’s South and West Sides, many neighborhoods lack tree cover, with some neighborhoods having less than 5% canopy. These neighborhoods experience more severe flooding and more extreme heat, which can cause heat-related illnesses. Through the [Our Roots Chicago](#) program, the City has taken a community-driven, data-informed approach to make neighborhoods healthier and more resilient by planting more than 64,000 trees in the areas that need them most.

Heat-related illness is currently the leading cause of weather-related mortality in the U.S. One major component of the work of the Defusing Disasters collaboration is the development of a Heat Vulnerability Index (HVI), a spatial data tool designed to identify neighborhoods most at risk to extreme heat. Development of the HVI is in line with the commitments laid out in the Chicago Climate Action Plan.

“The HVI is both a data tool and a powerful means to inform meaningful change,” said **Jennifer Chan, MD, MPH, Northwestern University faculty and member of the Defusing Disasters project**. “With the insights from the HVI, we can shape the policies we need to keep people safe from extreme heat.”

Defusing Disasters community partners informed 30 policy recommendations to address extreme heat and vulnerabilities at a neighborhood level. The Defusing Disasters working group recently distributed a [public survey](#) asking people their top seven priorities out of the 30 heat policy recommendations. The survey will remain open through the end of the summer as the group continues to gather citywide input.

The top policy selections will be further evaluated and discussed in coordination with the City, helping identify the most feasible and impactful policies to recommend for citywide implementation.

Interested residents can complete the survey [here](#). Find photos of the event [here](#).



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On Thursday, the City of Chicago, through the leadership of Mayor Brandon Johnson and the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, will posthumously honor Emilio Aguirre, a World War II U.S. Army veteran and former prisoner of war, with full military honors and a proper headstone. Thursday marks exactly 30 years since his passing during the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave.

"Emilio Aguirre's story is a powerful reminder that courage, sacrifice, and patriotism know no borders," said **Mayor Brandon Johnson**. "As a city, we are proud to ensure Mr. Aguirre is remembered not only for his military service but also for giving so much to this country. This tribute reflects Chicago's ongoing commitment to honor those who served—especially those who've been overlooked for too long."

Born in 1914 in Cuajimalpa de Morelos, Mexico, Mr. Aguirre enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943 and served honorably in the 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division—one of the first divisions to enter the European Theater. Despite not yet being a U.S. citizen, Mr. Aguirre fought in the Naples-Foggia and Rome-Arno campaigns before being captured in Italy in 1944. He endured more than 400 days as a prisoner of war in Germany's Stalag II-B camp until liberation at the end of the war.

For his service and bravery, he received the Bronze Star Medal, the POW Medal, the Combat Infantryman Badge, and several campaign and service medals. After returning home, Mr. Aguirre became a naturalized citizen and worked for the Chicago and North Western Railway.

Tragically, Mr. Aguirre died alone on July 17, 1995, during the deadliest heat wave in Chicago history. With no family to claim his body, he was buried in the unclaimed section of Homewood Memorial Gardens, in a grave with no marker and no formal recognition of his service.

Today, the City of Chicago is ensuring that Emilio Aguirre's service and sacrifice are formally recognized and honored.

Local historian and U.S. Army veteran Charles Henderson dedicated years to uncovering Emilio Aguirre's story and fighting to ensure he received the recognition he deserved. Working closely with Director Kevin Barszcz of the MOVA, the two partnered to bring together the resources and support needed to make this long-overdue tribute a reality.



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“While Mr. Aguirre may not have had relatives by his side when he passed, he is not alone because our veteran community is his family,” said **Kevin Barszcz, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Veterans Affairs**. “Our office was proud to lead the efforts in bringing together the partners who helped make this tribute possible. This ceremony is more than just a recognition of the past, it’s a promise that no hero will ever be forgotten.”

Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the City of Chicago, Cook County, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the team successfully located Mr. Aguirre’s military discharge paperwork, secured a government-issued headstone, and coordinated the planning and installation for a full military burial. His personal belongings, including his wristwatch, naturalization certificate, and military photograph, had been in storage since 1995 and will now be preserved and honored as part of the tribute. A full military honors ceremony is scheduled for July 17th.

Funeral Honors Ceremony for Emilio Aguirre:

Date: Thursday, July 17, 2025

Time: 11:00 a.m.

Location: Homewood Memorial Gardens

600 Ridge Rd, Homewood, IL 60430

Section GGSAM/CH, Row 1, Grave 63

The public is invited to join the City of Chicago, the Mayor’s Office of Veterans Affairs, and members of the veteran community in honoring the life and legacy of Emilio Aguirre—a long-overlooked American hero who will now be remembered with the dignity he deserves.

For more information on the burial, please contact:

Kevin Barszcz, Director, Mayor’s Office of Veterans Affairs

Veterans.Affairs@CityofChicago.org

312-771-8634

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