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THURSDAY, MAY 8, 2025



CHRIS FOX PHOTOS Villa Park Review



Dressed up for a special night

Willowbrook High School held its 2025 prom on Saturday evening at Pinstripes in Chicago. About 540 students boarded buses at the Villa Park school to head to the prom. After dinner, dancing, bowling and bocce at Pinstripes, promgoers enjoyed boat cruises on the Chicago River. One picture (above left) taken just before students departed Willowbrook to go to the prom shows (left to right) Ismael Esparza and Junior Kenya Hernandez-Rodriguez with seniors Kasen Blain, Camryn Dooley, Payton Brose, Briana Dotson, Nina Guajardo, Halle Ahrens and Avery Solis. Another photo (left) shows (left to right) Juniors Evan Kase, All Jan'us, Evan Haworth, Jacob Byisma, Alex Dew and Ben Rattana. One more photo (above right) shows (left to right) seniors Liz Tretina and Camryn Warke.

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CHRIS FOX PHOTOS Rock Valley Publishing

Warriors sweep the Blazers

The Willowbrook baseball team swept a three-game West Suburban Gold Conference series against Addison Trail last week. The Warriors' busy schedule last week also included a loss to Downers Grove South in the third game of a conference series. Willowbrook finished the week with Saturday's 6-4 non-conference victory at York. The Warriors' overall season record stood at 14-6 after that win. Willowbrook opened its series against Addison Trail with an 11-1 five-inning win in Villa Park on April 21. The Warriors won a wild 19-13 slugfest in Addison on April 22. Willowbrook completed its sweep of the Blazers with an 11-2 home victory on April 24. The Warriors suffered an 11-5 conference loss at Downers Grove South on April 23. That contest was originally scheduled to be played during the previous week, but was rained out. The Mustangs won two of three games in the series with Willowbrook. Junior Jake Bonino went 2-for-3 and drove in two runs in the Warriors' April 21 win over the Blazers. Senior Nathan Mulholland went 1-for-1 and drove in three runs for Willowbrook. Junior Noah Edison pitched a five-inning complete game to record a win for the Warriors in the series opener against Addison Trail. Edison allowed seven hits and no walks while recording four strikeouts. Willowbrook senior Jesus Torres went 2-for-3 with two home runs and seven runs batted in during his team's 19-13 win in Addison on April 22. Torres hit a three-run homer in the first inning and bashed a grand slam in the fourth. Senior Ryan Bannon, senior Sam Marrese and junior Alek Ramey also hit home runs for the Warriors during their 19-run eruption. Downers Grove South scored eight runs in the third inning of its April 23 win over Willowbrook. Torres (top left), Bannon (No. 20 - left) and Ramey (top right) are pictured during that game. Ramey is shown while connecting for a two-run single against the Mustangs. Sophomore Michael Garner pitched a seven-inning complete game for the Warriors in their win over the Blazers on April 24. Garner struck out eight batters while allowing five hits and one walk. Willowbrook raised its conference record to 8-2 when it completed its series sweep of Addison Trail. Edison pitched five innings and earned the win in Saturday's victory at York. Bonino belted a three-run home run in the second inning to give the Warriors a 4-0 lead.



Illinois community-based foster homes face insurance 'crisis'

Ballooning costs, dwindling coverage pose threat to Illinois foster children, advocates say

By Jade Aubrey and UIS Public Affairs Reporting (PAR)

Insurance companies are reducing the scope of coverage for some community foster agencies in Illinois, leading to higher costs, diminished coverage and fewer options for agencies who say a continuance of the trend could lead to closures.

If the situation worsens, some foster agencies warn they will have to shut down, sending children in their facilities back under the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, an agency advocates say doesn't have the capacity to handle an influx of foster children.

In Illinois, DCFS contracts with community-based foster agencies in order to house and provide services for children in state care. The department reported that the state had about 20,000 foster children in 2024, with more than 4,000 of them in the care of community-based foster or group homes.

These agencies are licensed by DCFS and must have many types of insurance to operate, including liability insurance, which protects them against claims resulting in injuries or damage to property.

If a person sues DCFS and seeks damages, the highest amount they can receive in damages is capped at \$2 million—which the state recently extended to foster parents. Lawsuits against community-based agencies, however, do not have a cap. And in recent years, many agencies have faced lawsuits resulting in large payouts or settlements.

In 2018, the father of a 2-year-old boy who died after Lutheran Social Services of Illinois placed him back in the care of his mother sued the foster agency, seeking \$45 million in damages.

LSSI placed Lavandis Hudson back in his mother's care in late 2010. Around six months later, he was rushed to the hospital with severe injuries, where he ultimately died.

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that a medical examiner ruled Hudson's death "a homicide caused by multiple blunt-force injuries resulting from child abuse." Hudson's mother was charged with first-degree murder in 2012 but has not yet faced trial.

A jury awarded \$45 million in damages, although the payout was ultimately about half that due to a deal struck by both parties late in the trial according to the *Tribune*.

Other similar lawsuits against foster agencies have resulted in large payouts across the country, even instances where agencies have denied wrongdoing at claimed negative outcomes were beyond their control. In turn, insurance companies that provide liability coverage for the agencies are taking monetary hit after hit—by raising premium prices or reducing their offerings in response.

The insurers say the risk is too high to continue to insure foster agencies. After a case in California was settled December for \$15 million Nonprofits Insurance Alliance of California, the state's liability insurance provider the state, announced it would not renew any agency plan and pulled out of California entirely.

Now, that organization sounding alarm bells as it begins to scale back coverage other states, including Illinois.

Andrea Durbin, CEO of the Illinois Collaboration for Youth, said in an interview that the crisis is a "very complicated issue."

"I think people who have been harmed should have opportunities to recover from that harm," she said. "The complexity of it is, how you make sure that people get the kind of restitution they're entitled to without also completely undermining the community-based infrastructure that serves kids and families today?"

Reduction of coverage

In an interview with *Catol News Illinois*, Pamela Ivis, the founder, president and CEO of Nonprofits Insurance Alliance, or NIA, said the organization had never previously done a mass nonrenewal like the one in California. She said insurance companies are struggling to distinguish low-risk foster agencies from high-risk ones, since agencies who are doing a "good job" and those who are doing "bad job" are getting sued the same.

In Illinois, NIA scaled back

See CHSIS, Page 1



CHRIS FOX PHOTOS Rock Valley Publishing

High-scoring week for Rams

Glenbard East's girls soccer team won three straight matches in a five-day span to raise its overall season record to 5-7-2. The Rams routed Ridgewood 10-0 in an Upstate Eight Conference match at Ridgewood on April 29. Glenbard East's week continued with a 6-0 non-conference victory at Glenbard North on May 1. The Rams' winning streak continued with Saturday's 3-1 conference win over Elmwood Park in Lombard. Glenbard East sophomore Sam Anderson (above left - No. 3) scored four of her team's goals in last week's win over Ridgewood. Senior Brissa Sarabia netted three goals, while sophomore Jessica Gilleran (above right - No. 10) supplied two goals. Junior Nora Opila provided one goal and three assists. Sophomore Teagan Murphy contributed two assists. Sarabia, Murphy, Opila, Gilleran, senior Cleo Glienzinski (right - No. 4) and Junior Lily Tripp scored one goal each during the Rams' triumph at Glenbard North. Glienzinski and Opila scored goals in the first half of Saturday's home match against Elmwood Park. Glenbard East led the visiting Tigers 2-1 at halftime. Opila scored the only goal of the second half with about 10 seconds left in the match. The Rams raised their conference record to 2-0-1 with Saturday's win. Glenbard East's schedule this week includes conference matches against Riverside Brookfield, West Chicago and Fenton. Anderson, Gilleran and Glienzinski are pictured during Saturday's victory over Elmwood Park.



CHRIS FOX PHOTO Rock Valley Publishing

Winning Warriors

The Willowbrook softball team earned a pair of West Suburban Gold Conference wins last week to improve to 12-7 overall and 4-0 in conference play. The Warriors traveled to Hinsdale South and defeated the Hornets 13-3 in a six-inning conference game on April 30. Two days later, Willowbrook routed Proviso East 19-0 in a four-inning contest in Villa Park. Senior Sonia Ruchala went 3-for-3 and drove in five runs for the Warriors in last week's win at Hinsdale South. Ruchala scored four runs for Willowbrook, which piled up seven runs during the top of the fifth inning. Junior Marli Smrz went 3-for-4 and scored three runs in the Warriors' win over the Hornets. Senior Isabel Bates went 2-for-3 with two RBIs. Sophomore Aleena McNamara went 2-for-4 and drove in one run. Sophomore Liz Pettinger went 1-for-3 with two RBIs. Ruchala went 3-for-3 with a home run and drove in three runs in Friday's dominant victory over Proviso East. Marli Smrz went 3-for-3 with one RBI. Juniors Allie Coppersmith, Adrianna Weaser and Delaney Smrz supplied two hits each. Bates is pictured while firing a pitch during Friday's game. She didn't give up any hits in two innings in the circle. Bates recorded four strikeouts and walked one batter. Willowbrook junior Kyleigh Mlazga pitched the final two innings of Friday's game against the Pirates. Mlazga did not allow any hits or walks. She struck out four batters.

Warriors beat Broncos

The Willowbrook and Montini Catholic girls soccer teams squared off in last week's match in Villa Park. The Warriors defeated the visiting Broncos 2-0 in the April 30 contest. Willowbrook secured its second win of the season with its victory over Montini and moved its overall 2025 season record to 2-11-1. The Broncos' record dropped to 5-7 following their loss to the Warriors. Senior Emily Barth (right - No. 6) gave Willowbrook a 1-0 lead over Montini when she headed the ball into the net off of a corner kick by senior Liz Tretina with about 31 minutes remaining in the first half. Senior Halle Ahrens (middle - No. 22) extended the Warriors' lead to 2-0 when she scored on a penalty kick with about 24 minutes left in the second half. One more photo from the match shows (left to right) Montini senior Annalee DeFeo and Willowbrook freshman Ailna Blain (far right - No. 14).



CHRIS FOX PHOTOS Rock Valley Publishing

Willowbrook on track to meet expectations

By BOB NARANG

Shaw Local News Network correspondent

Expectations were very high for the Willowbrook baseball team this season.

Thus far, after 20 games this spring, the Warriors are right on track to reach most of their goals.

Willowbrook (14-6, 8-2) is in third place in the West Suburban Conference Gold Division, right within striking distance of Downers Grove South (8-9, 5-1) and Leyden (9-7, 6-1).



Vinny Ippolito

"I feel pretty good about our team," Willowbrook coach Vic Wisner said. "We're starting to figure out who we are. We have good pitching and swing it really well. We have to continue to tighten up defensively, which we've been working on. We've gotten several good outings from our pitchers. We have to pick it and throw it, then we're in good shape."

The Warriors have a unique slate of games this week, facing Proviso East three times sandwiched between a game at St. Ignatius' picturesque stadium in Chicago and ending with a road game against Downers Grove North on Friday.

"It's a busy week, but we have to continue to grind out wins and play as hard as we can and get better defensively and start to play clean games," Wisner said.



Photo provided by Willowbrook Athletics

Willowbrook senior catcher Vinny Ippolito said the Warriors have all the ingredients to make some noise in the playoffs.

"Our pitching has been really good and our bats are starting to come alive as it has gotten warmer."

Willowbrook returned nine starters from last season's 24-win team, including the entire pitching staff.

Senior catcher Vinny Ippolito said the Warriors have all the ingredients to

make some noise in the playoffs.

"I think what makes our team unique is how deep and skilled our roster is," Ippolito said. "One through nine, all of our guys can hit and make a contribution. Every game our offense has delivered quality at-bats and that level of consistency has translated throughout the season. Also, one of our strengths is how we handle adversity. After losing a game, we come right back and play our best ball the following game, fixing our mistakes from the previous game."

"I believe we can be a dangerous team come playoff season. When this group gets hot, we're tough to beat."

Ippolito said he prepared for the season by becoming "faster, strong and more athletic" to handle the long grind and avoid injuries.

"My training program significantly helped me develop my speed, strength and explosiveness," he said. "I spent a lot of time practicing hitting and working on my swing and building up a rhythm that I could rely on for my pregame routine."

Junior outfielder Jake Bonino is playing with consistency for the Warriors, helping the team earn quality wins and avoid losing streaks.

"This team has a lot of talent and that helps keep us in every game," Bonino said. "We're a tough group of kids who all grew up together, so the bond is strong and that helps with our team chemistry."

Bonino is batting a robust .440 at the top of the lineup.

"I think the potential is super high for

this team," he said. "We have to go out there one game at a time and work as hard as we can to get where we need to be by the end of the season."

Lemont on right track

A two-time state champion, Lemont is aiming to play its last game on the final day of the season — again.

After earning the Class 3A second-place state trophy last season, Lemont returned from a spring break trip to Florida looking to build off playing high-level competition.

Thus far, Lemont (14-3-1) is on the right track.

"We have some guys that have stepped up for us in some big spots," Lemont coach Brian Storako said. "Our pitching has been consistent throughout so that keeps us in a lot of ballgames."

Sophomore Zane Schneider, who can play first base, second base and third base, is filling a lot of spots for Lemont. Junior outfielder Grady Garofalo is providing stability with his consistent play. Schneider is batting .364 with one home run, 13 RBIs and nine walks. Garofalo is hitting .308 with four doubles, a triple, 14 RBIs and 10 walks.

"Zane has come up with some big hits for us to drive in some runs," Storako said. "He has also stepped up and filled in many different roles on the field. Zane is starting to come into his own this season. He has varsity experience on the basketball court, so he has the right mentality. No moment seems too big for him at the moment."

NFL DRAFT

Former Nazareth standout CJ West taken by San Francisco in fourth round

By STEVE SOUCIE

ssoucie@shawmedia.com

Former Nazareth standout defensive lineman CJ West was taken in the fourth round of the NFL Draft by the San Francisco 49ers on Saturday.

West, a 2020 Nazareth graduate, finished a productive college career at Indiana last fall. He had 40 tackles, eight for loss, along with two sacks in his one year with the Hoosiers and proved to be a difficult player to try to block from his interior line position.

West established himself at the college



CJ West

level before arriving at Indiana with a solid four-year stint at Kent State where he racked up 110 tackles, including 19 tackles for loss and 11 quarterback sacks.

The 6-foot-2, 317-pounder should have an excellent opportunity to make his way with San Francisco as the 49ers don't have a lot of established experience at the defensive tackle position. West

already is listed as a second-team defensive tackle on the San Francisco depth chart behind fifth-year veteran Kevin Givens.

On the draft broadcast, an ESPN draft analyst described West as having "strong active hands and being agile and quick. He plays hard and is going to be disruptive. He can get after the quarterback."

West becomes the third Nazareth alum drafted in the past decade along with Julian Love (fourth round, New York Giants, 2019) and JJ McCarthy (first round, Minnesota Vikings, 2024). West and McCarthy were teammates on Naza-

reth's Class 7A state championship team in 2018.

Nazareth coach Tim Racki commented on the value West brought to the Nazareth program and wasn't surprised a pro team came calling Saturday.

"CJ was a dominant force on our defensive line for three years. His ability to make big plays in crucial moments was a cornerstone of our success on defense," Racki said in a news release. "CJ was a selfless player who demonstrated leadership through helping his teammates during practice and games on a daily basis."

After-school programs continue push for state aid

\$50 million appropriated for current year was never released, advocates argue

By Peter Hancock
CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

Advocates for after-school programs that provide tutoring, recreation and other services made their case again April 29 for a \$50 million state appropriation to restore programs in some schools where funding has run out and to expand them into more schools.

"There are decades of research that supports that after-school programs improve school day performance, grades and attendance, helps reduce violence, and also supports working class families," Rep. Aaron Ortiz, D-Chicago, told a House budget committee.

Ortiz is the lead sponsor of House Bill 3082, which calls for \$50 million to be distributed by the Illinois State Board of Education through a competitive grant program to entities that seek to provide tutoring and other enrichment services in high-poverty schools, where 40 percent or more of the students come from low-income households.

That's the same amount of money advocates asked for, and lawmakers provided, in the current fiscal year's budget. But 10 months into the fiscal year, those advocates say that money still has not been distributed.

"What we've been hearing is that the governor's office has been waiting for legislative intent," Susan Stanton, executive director of the advocacy group ACT Now, told the committee. "We've kind of heard things back and forth from both the governor's office and ISBE and legislators. And we've yet to get a clear answer on why the money wasn't released."

The after-school programs have traditionally received federal funding through the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, which distributes money for programs in high-poverty areas throughout the country.

Stanton, whose organization represents more than 2,000 after-school programs, said that Illinois typically re-

ceives about \$56 million a year through that program.

In the following months, she told the committee, a large number of after-school programs ended up losing their funding and going out of business.

In an email statement, however, ISBE said it rectified the miscalculation by allocating federal pandemic funds to after-school programs in that year.

The reason organizations were not renewed in that cycle, the spokesperson said, is because they'd reach the maximum of one renewal that was allowed under the federal program.

"The large-scale rolling-off of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants has led to 27,000 students losing programs and 2,000 staff members losing their jobs," Stanton said. "Funding appropriated by this committee and the General Assembly would provide a lifeline to these students and bring back stability to the communities that need it most in Illinois."

The ISBE spokesperson said organizations whose grants concluded at the end of FY24 did have the opportunity to apply for new grants. ISBE released a \$10 million 21st Century Community Learning Center grant competition in June 2024, and a spokesperson said districts could also apply for a separate after-school program grants for non-school districts that received an \$8 million appropriation.

Stanton said even with full federal funding, there is more need for after-school programs in Illinois than those funds would cover, and the additional state funds would make after-school programming more accessible

throughout the state.

Stanton said during an interview after the April 29 committee hearing that she remains hopeful the \$50 million included in the current budget will eventually be distributed. In the meantime, she said, her organization is pushing for funding in next year's budget.

The governor's office has said previously that the money was included in this year's appropriations bill without any clear instructions about how to distribute it and that the administration has been consulting with legislative leaders about what their specific intent was for the money. "We understand the urgency surrounding after-school programming and remain

committed to ensuring that these resources are allocated in a way that best serves students and families across Illinois," Pritzker's press secretary Alex Gough said in an email statement. "Per the last budget agreement, we are awaiting direction from the General Assembly as to where this funding will be distributed."

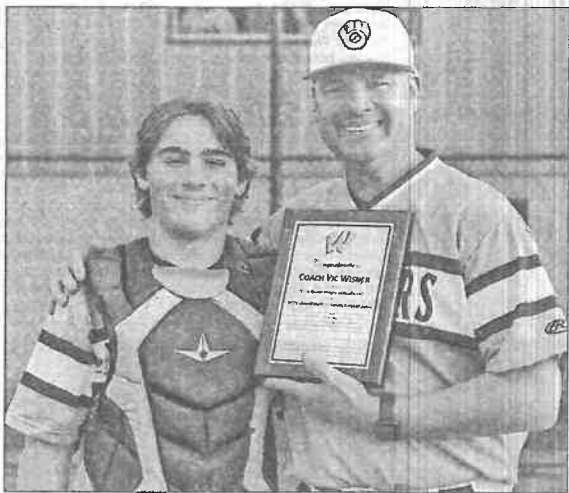
The April 29 hearing was a "subject matter" discussion only, meaning the committee took no formal action on the bill. A final decision about whether the state will again allocate money for after-school programs will be made when lawmakers pass the final omnibus appropriations bill at the end of May.



JANE CHARNELLO PHOTOS Rock Valley Publishing

Taking the oath of office

Outgoing Lombard Village Clerk Liz Brezinski on Thursday, May 1, swore in former District Two Trustee Anthony Puccio as the new village president, along with new Village Clerk Ranya Elkhatib and new District Four Trustee Patrick Egan. Also sworn in were incumbent Trustees Brian LaVaque (District One), Bernie Dudek (District Three) and Bob Bachner (District Six). LaVaque said he was "very humbled to be serving the community for another term." Dudek said that since he was first elected four years ago, "It's been an amazing ride." Egan said, "It's an honor to stand here as your village trustee." Bachner said, "I'm just very happy to have another four years." Elkhatib said, "I am honored and grateful to be here." Puccio welcomed the returning and new board members, adding, "I'm ready to get going." Pictured are (back row, left to right) District Five Trustee Dan Militello, LaVaque, Bachner, Egan, (front row, left to right) Dudek, Puccio and Elkhatib.



JOE PEARSON PHOTO Rock Valley Publishing

A milestone victory

Vic Wisner earned his 300th win as Willowbrook's head baseball coach last week. Wisner reached the milestone when the Warriors beat Proviso East 9-0 in a West Suburban Gold Conference game in Villa Park on April 28. Wisner, a 1985 Willowbrook graduate, has been the school's head baseball coach since the 2011 season. He is pictured (right) with his son, senior catcher Troy Wisner (left), after last week's notable victory. The Warriors went on to sweep their three-game conference series against Proviso East. Willowbrook earned a 12-2 win over the Pirates at Proviso East on April 29. The Warriors completed the three-game sweep with a Friday's 13-0 five-inning win in Villa Park. Willowbrook also picked up a non-conference victory last week, defeating Saint Ignatius 8-7 in Chicago on April 30. The Warriors improved to 18-6 overall and 11-2 in conference play with Friday's victory over Proviso East. Willowbrook's schedule this week includes a three-game conference series against Morton, along with this Saturday's non-conference home contest against Lyons Township.