

ER Wait Times Surge

By Villager staff

(AUSTIN, TX) - For East Austin residents, a trip to the emergency room increasingly means hours of waiting — sometimes entire nights — before seeing a doctor. As hospitals across the region expand their facilities westward, community advocates and health care workers say the city's east side is being left behind, deepening inequities that have long defined Austin's health landscape.

At St. David's and Dell Seton, patients from East Austin report average ER wait times exceeding five hours, according to recent state health data and patient accounts. Meanwhile, new hospital wings and urgent care centers are opening in West Austin and suburban areas like

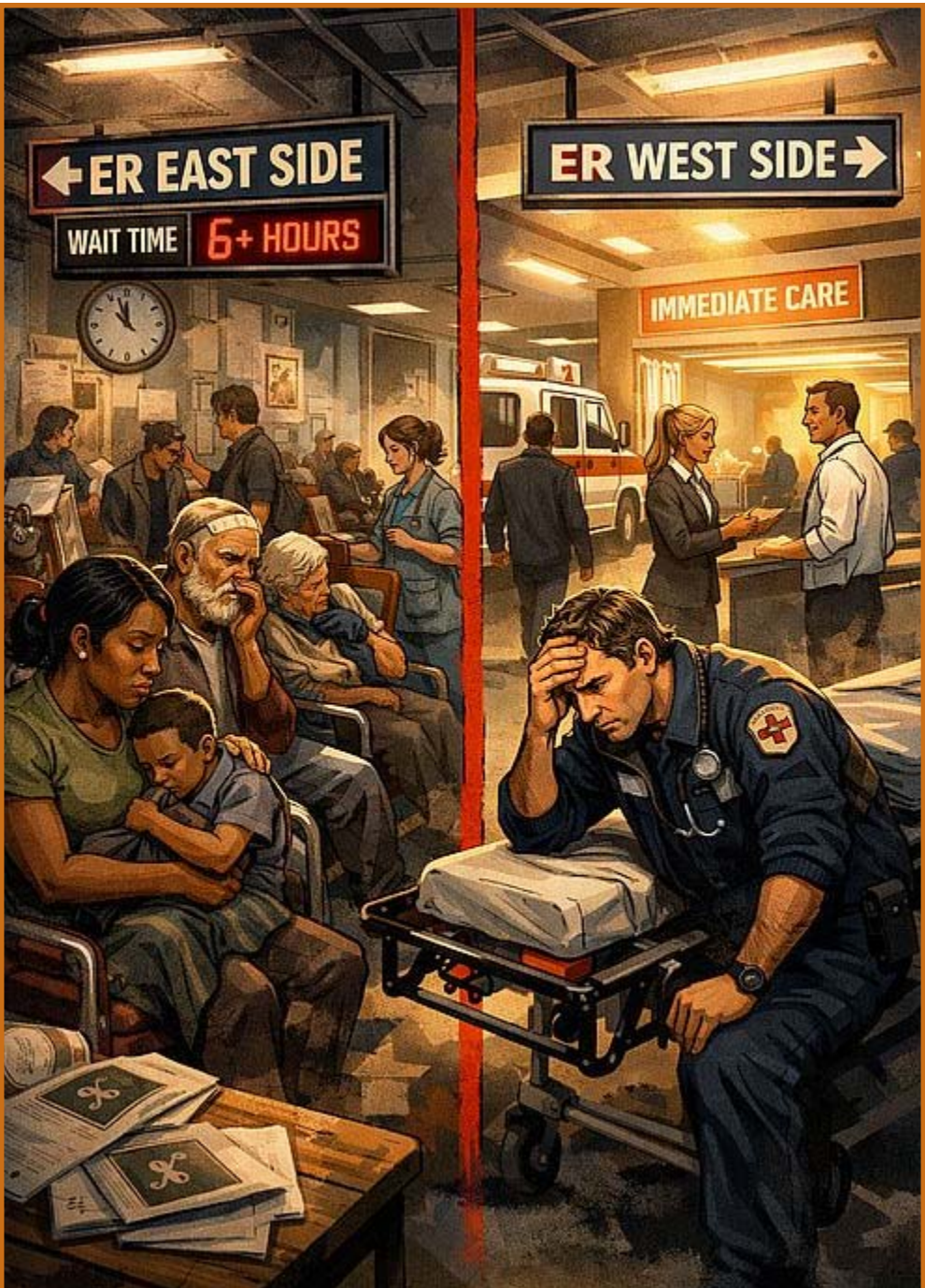
Bee Cave and Lakeway, where median incomes are far higher and insurance coverage rates stronger. The imbalance, critics argue, is not accidental — it reflects a pattern of investment that prioritizes profitability and private insurance over proximity and need.

Hospital administrators acknowledge the strain but attribute it to staffing shortages and rising patient volumes citywide. Yet nurses and paramedics working in East Austin say the problem is structural: emergency departments serving lower income neighborhoods are under resourced, while expansion projects follow the money westward. "We're seeing ambulances rerouted because there simply aren't enough beds open," said one ER nurse who requested

anonymity. "It's not just inconvenient — it's dangerous."

Community leaders are calling for transparency in hospital planning and equitable distribution of resources. They note that East Austin's population has grown rapidly, with many residents displaced from central neighborhoods but still reliant on nearby public hospitals. Advocates are urging the city and county to require health impact assessments before approving new hospital expansions, ensuring that underserved areas receive proportional investment.

For families waiting through the night in crowded ERs, it's a matter of survival — and a test of whether Austin's health system will serve all its residents, not just those living west of I 35.



East Austin patients face hours-long delays as hospitals expand westward, raising equity concerns and calls for oversight.

AISD Students To Hike “The Gap Mile”

By Villager staff

(AUSTIN, TX) - Austin's summer heat has already pushed triple digit temperatures, but for many East Austin families, the real crisis is only beginning. As Austin ISD implements more than \$200 million in budget cuts for the 2026–27 school year, students in several East Austin neighborhoods are losing their bus routes entirely — leaving some children to walk **two miles or more** along hazardous roads in extreme heat.

The district's decision stems from a transportation budget that has become increasingly unsustainable. AISD receives **only \$1 in state funding for every \$7.22 it spends per mile**; a **gap** district leaders say has forced them to eliminate routes deemed "costliest and least efficient." Among the routes cut outright are those serving **Campbell Elementary School** and **Eastside Early College High School**, both located in East Austin — neighborhoods where families have historically relied on districtwide transportation due to limited access to cars and safe walking paths.

For many families, the cuts are not merely inconvenient; they are dangerous. AISD's own transportation staff identified **147 walking routes** near schools that are considered unsafe, citing missing sidewalks, uncontrolled traffic arteries, highway crossings, and industrial corridors. Several of these hazardous areas are in East Austin, including segments near **Pleasant Hill Elementary**, **Travis High School**, and schools along the **Highway 183 corridor**, where students must navigate frontage roads without sidewalks.

Despite these documented hazards, AISD is returning to the state's **two mile standard**, meaning students must live at least two miles from their



AISD bus cuts force East Austin students to walk dangerous miles in extreme heat, exposing deep inequities in access and safety.

zoned school — or within a formally designated hazardous zone — to qualify for bus service. For years, several East Austin campuses had exceptions allowing students living far closer to receive transportation. Those exceptions are now gone. Elementary schools such as **Blackshear/Oak Springs**, **Norman Sims**, **Pecan Springs**, and **Zavala**, along

with middle schools like **Martin** and **Sadler Means**, will no longer receive neighborhood bus service for students living within two miles.

Families say the consequences are immediate. Parents working early shifts cannot walk their children to new "hub stops" — centralized pickup points at libraries, post offices, or CapMetro stations — which replace neighborhood stops for all middle and high school students. In East Austin, where public transit access is uneven and many households lack reliable vehicles, the hub model effectively shifts the burden onto students themselves. Some will now walk 30 to 45 minutes in heat that regularly exceeds 100 degrees.

AISD acknowledges the stress these changes create. "We recognize the stress and anxiety this causes," the district wrote to families, noting that the cuts were not made lightly. But the district's broader financial crisis — a \$205 million reduction affecting more than 500 positions and multiple core services — has left little room for alternatives.

Still, community advocates argue that the cuts disproportionately harm East Austin students, who already face higher rates of heat related illness, fewer safe walking routes, and longer commutes due to historic displacement. They point out that AISD's hazardous route evaluations often lag behind real world conditions, leaving families to navigate dangerous roads that have not yet been formally designated as "hazardous" under state criteria.

Students walking miles in extreme heat face a daily test of endurance and safety — one that begins before the first bell rings. As August approaches, East Austin families are bracing for a school year where simply getting to class may be the most dangerous part of the day.

Barbie National Collectors Convention: Carlyle Nuera Celebrates Culture, Heritage, and Inspiration Through Design



By: Melissa Fontenette-Mitchell

(AUSTIN, Texas) — During the 2026 National Barbie Doll Collectors Convention at the Hilton Austin, I had the opportunity to interview **Carlyle Nuera**, lead designer for Mattel, about the inspiration behind Barbie's cultural and historical dolls.

Nuera shared that authenticity is the foundation of every design. When creating a Barbie inspired by a real person, he begins by researching their life, contributions, and impact to ensure each doll tells an authentic story.



Carlyle Nuera

Photo credit: Melissa Fontenette-Mitchell

One of his most meaningful projects was the Barbie honoring **Maya Angelou**. After speaking with Angelou's son, Nuera incorporated thoughtful details that reflected her presence and selected warm peach and orange tones to celebrate her spirit.

He also designed the Barbie honoring **Opal Lee**, creating a doll that pays tribute to her enduring legacy and contributions to American history.

Nuera believes Barbie has the power to celebrate cultures and inspire future generations through representation. Dolls honoring influential Black and Brown leaders, professionals, artists, and changemakers allow

children and collectors to see themselves reflected in stories of courage, achievement, and possibility. By highlighting diverse cultures and lived experiences, Barbie continues to promote inclusion while encouraging young people to dream without limits.

As a Filipino American designer, Nuera has also celebrated his own heritage through Barbie, incorporating meaningful cultural symbols such as jasmine flowers and traditional Filipino tattoo designs into his creations.

The National Barbie Doll Collectors Convention continued through Saturday, July 11, at the Hilton Austin. While convention events were ticketed, the public had the opportunity to shop the 2026 Barbie Truck and visit the Sales Room on Saturday.

Also debuting during the convention, the **United States Postal Service** released its new Barbie Forever commemorative stamps on July 11. The stamps celebrate Barbie's evolution as a symbol of possibility and achievement for generations.

Introduced by Mattel in 1959 as "The Original Teenage Fashion Model," Barbie has become a global cultural icon, representing more than 250 careers over the past six decades. The new stamp collection features Barbie in a variety of professions, including registered nurse, surgeon, astronaut, firefighter, paleontologist, sign language teacher, robotics engineer, judge, soccer player, and musical artist.

Follow Melissa Fontenette-Mitchell on Instagram: @north_starphotography.