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Editorial: Two weeks and too many bodies on the streets. Please reinstate ShotSpotter, Mayor Brandon Johnson.



Mourners hold candles as they comfort each other during a vigil for Sierra Evans in an alley near the 9500 block of South Avenue N in Chicago on Oct. 2, 2024.. Evans, 19, was found fatally shot in the alley on the morning of Sept. 28. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)



By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD** | Chicago Tribune

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The anger is building as the tragedies are unfolding.

It's been just two weeks since Mayor Brandon Johnson decided in the face of overwhelming opposition within the City Council to end the city's contract with the company that owns and operates the ShotSpotter gunshot-detection technology. In that brief period, we've seen cases of gunshot victims in areas previously served by ShotSpotter discovered by first responders only when they were dead.

In those situations, no one called 911 to say they had heard shots fired.

Two weeks. And there already have been six instances of what the invaluable crime reporting service, CWBChicago, is [now calling "Brandon's Bodies."](#) That's a harsh but justifiable tagline. Johnson took this action, fulfilling a campaign promise he'd made, even as far more data than was available during the election surfaced showing how ShotSpotter saves lives.

It does so by alerting first responders to gunshots immediately and — crucially — giving them accurate information on where those shots were fired. In so many documented cases that this effect now is impossible to refute, the technology saves precious time that can make the difference between life and death for victims who've initially survived gunshots but otherwise won't survive without immediate care.

On the East Side, mourners last week held a vigil for 19-year-old Sierra Evans, who was shot to death in a dark alley, apparently shortly after midnight on Saturday, Sept. 28, and whose body wasn't discovered until someone called authorities *nine hours later*. ShotSpotter sensors detected the shots at 12:06 a.m., but the information wasn't transmitted to police because Johnson had cut off the service, according to 17th Ward Ald. David Moore, who has led the City Council's effort to overrule the mayor and preserve the technology.

Making these incidents all the more terrible is that the ShotSpotter sensors still are up in the wards in which they've been operating for seven years. They're still detecting gunshots. But now the information isn't being relayed to Chicago police because there's no contract.

Chicago Tribune reporter Karina Atkins attended the vigil, and the [agony of Evans' family and friends was palpable](#) in her reporting. There was anger as well. Tenth Ward Ald. Peter Chico, another ShotSpotter supporter, said of his slain constituent, "Her lying here in the alley for eight, nine hours is unacceptable. It's inhumane. If ShotSpotter wasn't released, it would have alerted the police to get here much more quickly."

Amen to that.

Writing on Facebook of Sierra Evans' death, the Rev. Michael Pflieger, pastor of St. Sabina Church on the South Side who's long toiled on the front lines of Chicago's gun-violence epidemic, remarked, "How many more will there be?"

How many more indeed?

Two aldermen, Moore and Monique Scott, who represents the 24th Ward, including violence-ravaged North Lawndale, called on Johnson to reverse his stand and reinstate ShotSpotter "immediately."

A 14-year-old boy was gunned down last Tuesday night and died on a street in her ward, Scott wrote on Instagram; his body wasn't discovered until an hour after he was shot. "An ambulance could have been dispatched within minutes, but instead a young man bled out on the street," she wrote.

How did she know the response took an hour? Because the ShotSpotter sensors in her ward still are there and detecting the shots. She reached out to SoundThinking, the company that owns the technology, and they confirmed for her when the shots rang out.

As a side note, it's interesting that SoundThinking hasn't yet begun dismantling the sensors or stopped collecting data from them despite the expiration of its contract. It's clear to us the company is keeping

the system intact for now and is responding to its aldermanic supporters when they ask for information after a tragedy in hopes of putting pressure on the mayor to change his mind. Some may wonder at SoundThinking's motivations, but in this case what's in the interest of the company's bottom line is aligned with the needs of Chicago and its residents, particularly those in neighborhoods most susceptible to gun violence.

Even as Johnson went through on Sept. 22 with his promise to cut ties with ShotSpotter, his administration said it [would begin a formal process](#) to "gather recommendations on reliable and efficient forms of first responder technology to ensure immediate attention from first responders in emergency situations."

A mayor who was serious about the issue long ago would have started the process of finding a ShotSpotter replacement instead of waiting until the day he pulled the plug. Finding an equally effective replacement, if one even exists, likely will take months, if not longer. In the meantime, there already is a technology that "ensures immediate attention from first responders in emergency situations." It's called ShotSpotter.

These two weeks alone have proved Johnson's move to pull the ShotSpotter plug was both mulish and foolish. The mayor's explanations for the unpopular decision have bordered on incoherent. But the real motivation appears to be that he promised during the 2023 mayoral campaign to get rid of ShotSpotter, and he felt bound to honor his promise.

As Ald. Scott rightly said during the last City Council debate before ShotSpotter went away, "[You can't put a life over a campaign promise.](#)" There was ample room for Johnson to pivot, given the [compelling information we have now on ShotSpotter's benefits](#) that wasn't available during the campaign.

We don't know for sure if Sierra Evans' life could have been saved had help arrived in a timely fashion. Nor if any other of "Brandon's bodies" would have still been living Chicagoans if ShotSpotter were still transmitting.

But Evans' body lay unattended for nine hours in an alley in the neighborhood she called home. That is enraging and the responsibility of Chicago's mayor.

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