

# INFLUENTIAL FIRST LADY MOURNED

Tough-minded former Chicagoan dies of heart failure at 94. **NATION & WORLD, PAGE 8**



DENNIS COOK/AP/1986

# Post-Tribune

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## State voucher program growing

Enrollment up amid Choice funding boost

By **CAROLE CARLSON**  
Post-Tribune

Indiana's appetite for its extensive school voucher program isn't waning.

A leap in state funding for Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program led to a surge in enrollment increases statewide and in Northwest Indiana private schools last year.

Spending for the voucher program, which began in 2011, increased from \$16 million in 2014 to \$40 million last year. Correspondingly, statewide enrollment jumped from 19,809 in 2014 to 29,148 in 2015 after state lawmakers removed the enrollment cap.

Voucher supporters applaud the program's expansion, while opponents maintain state funding for private schools affords little public accountability and safeguards. They contend public money is better spent on other alternatives, such as public charters.

Under the Choice Scholarship program, the state awards tuition money, or a voucher, to parents



CAROLE CARLSON/POST-TRIBUNE

Third-grader Destinee Jackson, at Ambassador Christian Academy, brushes up on her math skills.

who meet income requirements. Parents can use the voucher at the private school of their choice.

In Northwest Indiana, those private schools are primarily religious-based. They range from Avicenna Academy, an Islamic school in Merrillville where students study the Quran, to Catholic schools in the Diocese of Gary where students attend Mass.

One of the voucher program's biggest supporters, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, released a statewide poll in late January showing 70 percent of Northwest Indiana residents surveyed by Braun Research Inc. favored the voucher program.

Support grew to 80 percent from low-income survey participants statewide. Others surveyed cited harm to public schools because of the diverting of funding to private schools.

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## Renewed call to fund museum idea

By **CARRIE NAPOLEON**  
Post-Tribune

Former Gary Mayor Richard Hatcher has been planning a civil rights hall of fame and museum in Gary for decades, but it's a subject that hasn't come up lately.

When he appeared at a Lake County Council study session Thursday, it was to renew a request for the county's financial help that he received more than 15 years ago.

At that time, Hatcher said the council committed \$750,000 to the project. The amount was intended to be a matching amount to the city of Gary's contribution. The project, and the funding, never materialized.

It's been on the drawing board since 1980, when it received not-for-profit status, and even has 10 acres of land ready at 2301 Garfield St.

Hatcher, who said the hall of fame is expected to draw 500,000 visitors each year, said he got the idea for the museum after the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and he has not given up hope or stopped working to get the museum built.

"We see it as an economically beneficial project," Hatcher said.

But to get any kind of funding at the county level, the rules have changed from 15 years ago.

Council President Ted Bilski, D-Hobart, said state statute calls for officials to see a business plan, know who board members and any employees are and review financial records.

"We have no choice but to move forward in this fashion," Bilski said.

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Hatcher

"I'm going to hold these people accountable."

— Carlos Villarreal, of Hobart

# VETERANS FACE HEALTH CARE MINEFIELD



JERRY DAVICH/POST-TRIBUNE

Disabled former U.S. Marine Carlos Villarreal, 31, of Hobart, is frustrated with red-tape hassles and repeated delays involving the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Choice program.

## Disabled former Marine fights VA



JERRY DAVICH

Carlos Villarreal did his best to curb his frustration while talking on the phone with the representative from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Sir, I've already had this same conversation with five million other VA reps," Villarreal said as politely as possible. "Yes, sir, I've already had this talk for my consultation, and I'm still waiting and waiting for my appointment."

Villarreal, 31, of Hobart, is a former U.S. Marine sergeant who was seriously wounded in combat while serving in Iraq in 2005. Mortar fire caused severe hearing loss, lingering wounds to his mouth and, later, post-traumatic stress disorder.

The single father of twin 9-year-old boys is the most intense military veteran I've ever met. He shoots off bullet-

point thoughts with rapid-fire sentences. He thinks fast, talks faster and angrily curses with polite apology. He's highly intelligent and impressively articulate but he can be as tactful as a hand grenade.

"I've been conditioned by the Marines for controlled chaos and unpredictable crises," he said from his living room sofa. "That's all I know."

Villarreal is the kind of guy you want not only in your foxhole during combat, but also in your proximity if any danger arises. Trouble is, it's the rest of the time that he struggles to assimilate back into society.

"What's PTSD?" he once asked a doctor. "Is it a STD (sexually transmitted disease)?"

Villarreal was entirely serious, as usual. For years afterward, he was in denial and avoidance, he now admits.

"I'm an extreme case, but so many other vets my age have similar issues," he said.

For unknown reasons, his extreme case is entangled in red-tape delays for needed medical treatment with the VA, through the Veterans Choice

### Veterans' voices

Listen to Villarreal, Pappas and Orlich in their own words on my latest Casual Fridays radio show. Find that show at [lakeshorepublicmedia.org/local-programs/casual-fridays](http://lakeshorepublicmedia.org/local-programs/casual-fridays).

program. Since last summer, he's been waiting to get a MRI test to diagnose nerve damage in his mouth, stemming from that mortar attack a decade ago.

"I have a 100 percent disability, and I had to fight to even get these," he said, pulling out his hearing aids.

Villarreal served eight years in the Marines — four in active duty, four in the reserves — after enlisting as a teenager. The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks triggered his decision.

"I felt a calling," said Villarreal, who earned an honorable discharge from the Marines in 2010. "And I'd do it all over again in a (expletive) heartbeat."

In Iraq, he at least knew the

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### INSIDE



SUE ELLEN ROSS/POST-TRIBUNE

**HUMANE SOCIETY CALUMET** Area employees Sofia Perez, Nicole Arwood and Laura Wozniak check out baskets in the silent auction area at the Humane Society Calumet Area's anniversary gala. **Page 3**

### BOYS BASKETBALL

#### Bulldogs break Vikings' hearts

Crown Point outlasts Valpo in 2 OTs to win sectional. **Sports, Page 1**