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St. Paul

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Ramsey County

Cold snap claims two St. Paul men

Local hospitals see rise in hypothermia, frostbite cases

By Mara H. Gottfried
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Subzero temperatures this week apparently led to hypothermia and death for two men in St. Paul, the Ramsey County medical exam-

er's office said Thursday.

A 70-year-old man died Wednesday at Regions Hospital and a 77-year-old man was found dead outside his home in St. Paul's North End on Tuesday, said Don Gorrie, chief investigator for the med-

ical examiner's office.

William Romell, 77, who used a walker, apparently slipped and couldn't get up, Gorrie said.

The 70-year-old man, whose name hasn't been released pending notification of family,

was found leaning over the trunk of his car in the Summit-University neighborhood, said St. Paul Fire Marshal Steve Zaccard. It appeared he might have been living in his car, he said.

The last deaths from excessive cold in St. Paul were in 2001, when three people died from hypothermia/exposure,

according to a Minnesota Department of Health review of death certificate data. One such death occurred in 2000 and one in 1999, the data showed.

Local hospitals report seeing more cases of hypothermia and frostbite this week.

TWO DIE, 6B >



Dan Buettner, at podium, author of "The Blue Zones," announces a partnership Thursday with leaders in Albert Lea, Minn., to make the community a place where residents live longer and healthier lives.

Albert Lea, Minn., is the test community for 'Blue Zones' author Dan Buettner, who wants to see if healthy practices can make the Minnesota city a longevity hot spot.

Building a 'Blue Zone'



Several dozen people took a walking tour along Albert Lea's Front Street West on Thursday to learn more about the city's health makeover plan, which includes strategies to get residents exercising more and eating healthier meals.

By Jeremy Olson
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The secret to a long life appears to be a combination of factors — from close families and spirituality to good wine and communities that value the elderly.

Minneapolis-based explorer Dan Buettner has found these qualities in small pockets of the world such as Italy, Sardinia and Okinawa, Japan, where unusually high percentages of residents live to be 100 or more. He calls them Blue Zones in his best-selling book of the same name.

Now comes the big question: Can these life-prolonging qualities be replicated, repack-

aged and rolled out in everyday America?

Buettner intends to find out. And he's starting in Albert Lea.

On Thursday, Buettner announced a partnership with leaders in the southern Minnesota city to try to make the community a healthier and more vital place.

The goal is to enlist 5,000 volunteers and add 10,000 potential years of productive life to Albert Lea — two years per person. It's certainly possible, Buettner said, because the human body is built for 90 years, but Minnesota's life expectancy is only 78 years.

Success could be an antidote to an aging crisis that threatens to bankrupt the nation if it continues to rely on expensive nursing

homes and assisted living for its elderly citizens.

"We warehouse our old in retirement homes, and there's an attitude, as seniors get older, that they are recipients of care," Buettner said. "In Blue Zones, where people are living the longest, there's a big attitudinal shift. The older you are, the more celebrated you are for your collected wisdom and what you have to contribute. It's such a big thing."

Minnesota government now spends more than \$1.5 billion in state money on long-term care, and that number will triple in 20 years. Over the same timeframe, the number of

ALBERT LEA, 6B >

St. Paul



Donald Dornseif threw his ex-girlfriend's dog over her balcony in September.

No jail for man in dog's tossing

Ex-boyfriend will do 300 hours of community work

By Emily Gurnon
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A St. Paul man who pleaded guilty to throwing his ex-girlfriend's dog off a third-floor balcony — as his 6-year-old daughter and other children watched — was sentenced Thursday to 300 hours of community service.

The English bulldog, named Precious, was injured so severely in the Sept. 26 incident that she had to be euthanized.

Ramsey County District Judge Rosanne Nathanson appeared to agree with the defense's argument that Donald Dornseif, 44, should be allowed to continue with his alcohol treatment program. She sentenced him to a 15-month stayed sentence and imposed the relatively hefty amount of community service instead of prison time.

DOG TOSSED, 5B >

Obituary > Elizabeth Pegues-Smart, 77



Elizabeth Pegues-Smart found her calling at a vocational training center.

Racism no barrier for board president

She never earned a degree but rose in field of education

By Tad Vezner
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Elizabeth Pegues-Smart was told, again and again, not to bother.

As the oldest daughter of a single black woman in Iowa, Pegues-Smart raised three siblings and graduated from high school in what time was left.

She wanted to take college prep courses. Counselors steered her toward typing instead.

When the family moved to Minneapolis, "She tried getting jobs. They'd say, 'Oh, they're not hiring Negroes,' but she'd try anyway. We used to say Liz and I had more jobs than we had paydays. She'd do everything, and tried everything," said her brother, Frank Castleman.

Pegues-Smart later scored high on a college-entrance exam, but an admissions officer said she was just "doing well for a colored girl," and suggested she stick with clerking.

In the end, Pegues-Smart — who never graduated from college but taught seminars at

BOARD PRESIDENT, 2B >

Minnesota

Hospitals reported more errors last year, state says

Increase expected due to new standards

By Jeremy Olson
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A man had the wrong kidney removed at Methodist Hospital. A 12-hour-old baby was badly burned in his bassinets at Mercy Hospital. A

35-year-old's face caught fire during a simple procedure at Regions Hospital.

All three generated headlines last year when they came out through lawsuits, police records and public statements. Now, all three are

statistics in Minnesota's fifth annual report of preventable hospital errors, which seeks through public disclosure to prevent similar missteps from happening again.

Released today by the state Department of Health, the report linked so-called adverse events at hospitals to 18 deaths and 98 serious injuries in a

Bassinets fire: Warmer ignited, burned baby at Mercy, report says. **Page 6B**

12-month period ended Oct. 6, 2008. While embarrassing and frustrating, hospital leaders said, the report has become a key source of motivation and education.

"This is the only way we can learn from each other and prevent these things," said Dr. Penny Wheeler, chief clinical officer of Allina Hospitals & Clinics.

Minnesota hospitals reported 312 events in the latest report, though more than half

HOSPITAL ERRORS, 6B >

Minnesota

DNR slapped for lax policies, spending

17 issues are being fixed, agency says

By Dennis Lien
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The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources exercised poor controls over some of its policies and spending during a three-year period ending last spring, the legislative auditor said Thursday.

The report, for example, noted the agency hadn't fully repaid money to its game and fish fund that had been spent on a controversial game warden conference in St. Paul in 2007.

In all, the auditor cited 17 findings dealing with inadequate or inconsistent ways of handling revenue and payroll transactions, of documenting special expenses or of monitoring cell phone use by employees.

In a letter to the legislative auditor, the department said it has resolved some of those problems, has partially corrected others and will make other fixes by mid-year. Commissioner Mark Holsten said personnel and policy changes

within the DNR between July 2005 and May 2008 led to some of the problems.

"We have restructured to increase accountability, guarantee appropriate sources and uses of funds, enhance compensating controls and establish tracking systems that allow for ongoing review and improvement of all department policies and procedures," Holsten wrote in the letter.

The report said the agency hasn't determined how much general fund money should be transferred to the game and fish fund to reimburse it for spending on the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association's annual conference.

Two DNR officials lost their jobs after auditors found \$289,000 of agency money had been misspent on the conference. Most of it came from the game and fish fund, which hunters and anglers support through license fees.

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Minnesota > Department of Human Services

Woman admits to \$1M Medicaid fraud

Used state job to get checks issued

By Andy Rathbun
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A Hudson woman pleaded guilty in federal court Thursday to one count of health care fraud and admitted that she defrauded Medicaid for more than \$1 million.

Kim Joann Austen, 47, a former employee of the Minnesota Department of Human Services, admitted in a plea agreement that she used her position with the department to fraudulently cause the state to issue 23 checks to a man who was not a Medicaid provider, according to the U.S. attorney's office.

The checks — which totaled more than \$1.1 million — were then cashed for personal use. The scheme was carried out from August 2003 through September 2008, according to a statement.

The man's identity was not disclosed in the plea agree-

ment, said David Anderson, spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Minneapolis.

"We are grateful to the U.S. attorney's office for bringing this case to a successful conclusion. DHS has revised its policies and procedures to reduce the possibility employees are able to commit fraud," said Commissioner Carl Ludeman.

Austen was a supervisor in the financial operations division.

Medicaid is a federal health care benefit program, which is administered in Minnesota by the DHS.

Austen faces a maximum of 10 years in prison for the health care fraud charge. She could not be reached for comment Thursday. A sentencing date has not been set, prosecutors said.

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Twin Cities

MPR noise issue delays Central Corridor work

Leaders discuss keeping studios quiet

By Dave Orrick
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Construction on the planned Central Corridor light-rail line linking St. Paul and Minneapolis will be delayed several months, in part because of concerns raised by Minnesota Public Radio.

Construction was scheduled to start in spring 2010, and it's now pushed back until late summer 2010, project director Mark Fuhrmann said Thursday. The projected opening of some time in 2014 remains unchanged.

Officials with the Federal Transit Administration, which will pay for half the \$915 million project, recently told local officials that MPR's concerns over noise from the

trains disrupting their studios in downtown St. Paul needed to be addressed further before moving forward.

On Wednesday, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman convened a meeting between MPR President Bill Kling and Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell to avoid a potential impasse. The station wants assurances that noise- and vibration-dampening measures will work.

Fuhrmann said the meeting went well. Officials with MPR couldn't be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.

Part of the delay is a result of the Federal Transit Administration asking local officials for more information about how they plan to pay for the project.

Mercy Hospital bassinet fire blamed on defective warmer

Defects in a warming device were the most likely cause of a bassinet fire that severely burned a newborn at Mercy Hospital last January, according to results released Thursday.

Tiny particles appear to have broken loose from a heating element in the warmer, which showed signs of overheating, according to the report. Those particles ignited the Jan. 22

fire, which was fueled by the supplemental oxygen that Maverick Werth, just 12 hours old, had been receiving under a plastic hood.

The infant suffered severe burns to his face, shoulders and hands. He was rushed to the burn center at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis.

"We are satisfied that we now know what caused this

terrible accident," said Dr. Penny Wheeler, chief clinical officer for Allina Hospitals & Clinics, which operates Mercy Hospital in Coon Rapids.

Allina hired Pennsylvania-based ECRI Institute to investigate the fire. ECRI is expected to issue a broader list of findings regarding the safety of this particular brand of warmer, a Hill-Rom 1250, and others like it. Allina has stopped using that

type of warmer and others with similar design and construction.

Chris Messerly, the Werth family's attorney, withheld reaction until his independent expert reviewed the report.

Maverick has scarring on his shoulders, face, right wrist and scalp. His wrist doesn't bend properly and must be covered by a protective glove.

— Jeremy Olson

CONTINUED FROM 1B

> Hospital errors

were due to new, stricter reporting standards for bedsores and falls. Using the old standards, the hospitals reported 141 errors last year, up from 125 in 2007.

Wrong surgeries (16) and fatal falls (10) were more common in the 2008 report, which also listed the first case in five years of a woman dying from a low-risk childbirth.

While health officials expressed concern over the increase, they also commended hospitals for becoming more open, accountable and committed to patient safety over the past five years.

"Of course, we would love to see the numbers going down," said Dr. Same Magnan, state health commissioner. "But the numbers alone don't reflect what's actually being learned from these events and what's actually happening."

Attention to hospital mistakes has increased since 2005, when Minnesota became the first state to identify hospitals with any of 27 specific errors — often called "never events" because they can be prevented through sound medical and organizational practices.

The state's insurers in 2007 stopped paying hospitals for any surgeries or care associated with such events. Medicare adopted the same stance last fall.

Hospitals have started to publicly discuss these errors rather than hide them. Methodist Hospital leaders issued a public apology in

Higher standards, higher errors

Stricter reporting standards for falls and pressure sores increased the number of hospital errors reported last year.

How the new standards changed reporting:

Only fatal falls were reported until 2009. Now fatal and disabling falls are reported.

2005 report	■ 8
2006 report	■ 13
2007 report	■ 12
2008 report	■ 14
2009 report	■ 10 95*

*Using new reporting standards

Source: Minnesota Department of Health

March after removing the wrong kidney from a patient and leaving a cancerous one behind. Allina leaders likewise apologized last January after the bassinet fire at Mercy badly burned a newborn.

"It took us a while," said Allina's Wheeler, "but that transparency is a really positive development in health care."

HIGHER ERROR NUMBERS EXPECTED

Three severe burn injuries were reported this year, compared with one in all four prior reports combined.

One involved Karine Hernandez, 35, whose lips and face were burned in a surgery fire at Regions. Caregivers acted quickly when the fire was discovered. The surgeon leaned against Hernandez's head to douse the flames while others threw a bucket of water over them.

Hernandez, of Inver Grove Heights, sued the hospital,

Total adverse events:

2005 report	■ 99
2006 report	■ 106
2007 report	■ 154
2008 report	■ 125
2009 report	■ 141 312*

*Using new reporting standards

Pressure ulcers that can't be classified must now be reported along with severe stage 3 or 4 ulcers.

2005 report	■ 24
2006 report	■ 31
2007 report	■ 48
2008 report	■ 43
2009 report	■ 36 122*

*When including unstagable pressure ulcers

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alleging Regions didn't take proper steps to prevent a fire in the oxygen-rich environment of surgery.

Adverse events in surgery increased from 60 in 2007 to 77 last year, including 37 cases of foreign objects left in patients.

A cooperative effort by 70 hospitals has reduced one of the most common occurrences, however: sponges left in women after childbirth. The cases dropped from nine in the first six months of the reporting period to zero in the last six months.

Most hospitals now require so-called timeouts before the start of any surgery to verify the patient, the procedure and the exact body part involved. However, hospital officials acknowledged that timeouts aren't used consistently. A new solution at Regions is to place a sterile towel over surgical equipment until the timeout has taken place.

The removal of the wrong

CONTINUED FROM 1B

> Two die

People who work with the homeless are trying to ensure they have a warm place to go.

At the Harbor Light Center in Minneapolis, workers have been going out in a van at night and giving people "the option to come back with us," said Envoy Bill Miller, the homeless shelter's executive director.

"We tell them: 'You can't stay out here. You're going to die,'" Miller said Thursday.

In St. Paul, the Dorothy Day Center generally closes twice a day for 90 minutes to two hours, to convert from day to evening operations and back again, said Rebecca Lentz, Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis spokeswoman. When the temperature or wind chill is zero degrees or below, the shelter stays open and works around

people, she said.

On Wednesday night, there were 240 people staying at Dorothy Day; the average was 196 in January 2008, Lentz said.

Thursday's low temperature in St. Paul was minus 18 degrees and the low wind chill was minus 40 degrees, according to the National Weather Service. The low on Wednesday was minus 15 degrees in St. Paul.

The 70-year-old man who died at Regions on Wednesday was found outside his car at Grotto Street and St. Anthony Avenue about 11:15 a.m., Zaccard said. He was "in profound hypothermia, had decreased consciousness and was mumbling to paramedics," he said.

It was unknown how long the man had been outside, but he was rushed to Regions, Zaccard said. The man, who was apparently from Arizona, died at 1:05 p.m., Gorrie said.

The cause of death, pending further tests, appears to be hypothermia, Gorrie said.

In the last few days, Regions Hospital has treated five to 10 people a day for hypothermia, frostbite, slips and falls, and car accidents.

Romell was found dead outside his home at 76 W. Rose St. at about 9:20 a.m. Tuesday, Zaccard said.

Officials gave conflicting information about how Romell was discovered.

Zaccard said a neighbor who usually shovels Romell's sidewalks found him on the steps outside his home, next to his walker.

The information from the medical examiner's office indicated Romell had been out with friends the night before and he dropped them off, Gorrie said. When the friends couldn't reach him overnight,

they went to check on him and found him lying outside his home's front door, Gorrie said.

Romell died of hypothermia, he said.

In the last few days, during the current cold spell, Regions Hospital has treated five to 10 people a day for hypothermia, frostbite, slips and falls, and car accidents.

Hennepin County Medical Center treated 19 people between Monday and midafternoon Thursday — 13 for frostbite, two for "frost nip" and four for mild hypothermia.

Judy Misencik, spokeswoman for Regina Medical Center in Hastings, said two patients have been treated for hypothermia during this cold spell.

She said neither was working outdoors: "They are just people who were out in the cold that shouldn't have been."

Nick Ferraro contributed to this report.

CONTINUED FROM 1B

> Albert Lea

seniors in Minnesota will overtake the number of school-age children. Finding ways to make seniors healthier, more independent and more active in the community will soon be a necessity.

Buettner's coalition, which includes AARP, the University of Minnesota and United-Health Foundation, isn't alone in seeking a broad environmental solution. A leadership committee of Minnesota's long-term-care providers discussed similar plans earlier this week to create so-called Communities for a Lifetime.

Of course, the successes in the Blue Zones were created over centuries. In Sardinia, the close proximity of family is a major factor in the happiness and longevity of its residents. In the United States, the distance separating relatives will make that challenging to replicate.

Buettner said the goal isn't to force all of the healthy habits of the Blue Zones on Albert Lea but to give residents an "a la carte menu" of habits they

could adopt.

One goal is to find volunteer families willing to "deconvenience" their homes by getting rid of automatic garage doors and snowplows. Another is to increase everyday activity by encouraging walking and biking for daily errands — not just for exercise — and by holding meetings during which people stand instead of sit. Another is to decrease food portion sizes and encourage consumption of healthy nuts and even wine.

Leaders in Albert Lea believe their community of 18,000 is suited to the challenge. The city has a wide network of parks, trails and clean lakes. It also has active community leaders who recently mobilized numerous volunteers for charity drives and a home-building project.

On the practical side, Buettner's team needed a smaller city in which they could measure the results of their efforts. The goal is to take the successes in Albert Lea to other cities around the country.

"Whether you're in New York or California," Buettner said, "I think you can look at Albert Lea and the experiences here and say, 'These are

people who look like me, feel like me and confront a lot of the same issues.'"

The social aspects of the Blue Zones communities appear as important as diet and exercise. In Loma Linda, Calif., the spirituality of Seventh Day Adventists appears directly linked to longevity. In Okinawa, residents form tight circles of friends at birth that continue throughout their lives.

Buettner sees vestiges of that social spirit in Albert Lea at places such as the ice arena, where seniors sometimes skate together during lunch.

There are plenty of go-getters in town, too, like Nancy Hockenberry, the 77-year-old involved in civic organizations, a yoga class, an exercise group and, most of all, the theater.

"I think I've played every old lady there is," she said.

Wayne and Arlene Miland, both 75, walked their usual two miles inside the Skyline Mall on Thursday, despite the freezing weather. In the summer, they bike nine miles each day, and Arlene brings lunch to her son at his farm or in the fields.

"You sit down in the chair," Wayne said, "and it can become rather permanent."

Many community leaders in Albert Lea already have tried adopting some healthy Blue Zones habits. Community-education director Chris Chalmers said he has been eating more nuts and using the smaller dinner plates for meals. In the spring, he may have his family walk the mile to church rather than drive.

"Change is hard," he said. "But with this type of program, we can change as much as we want."

Another cornerstone of the Blue Zones is that families and communities revere elderly residents. Some civic leaders believed they'd lose this opportunity after young nursing aides were charged last year with abusing residents of a local nursing home.

Now, the project gives the community an opportunity to move forward from the shameful allegations, said Victoria Simonsen, city manager.

"Obviously, Albert Lea had some issues with that this year. If nothing else, what we need to work on is instilling that notion of elder respect."

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