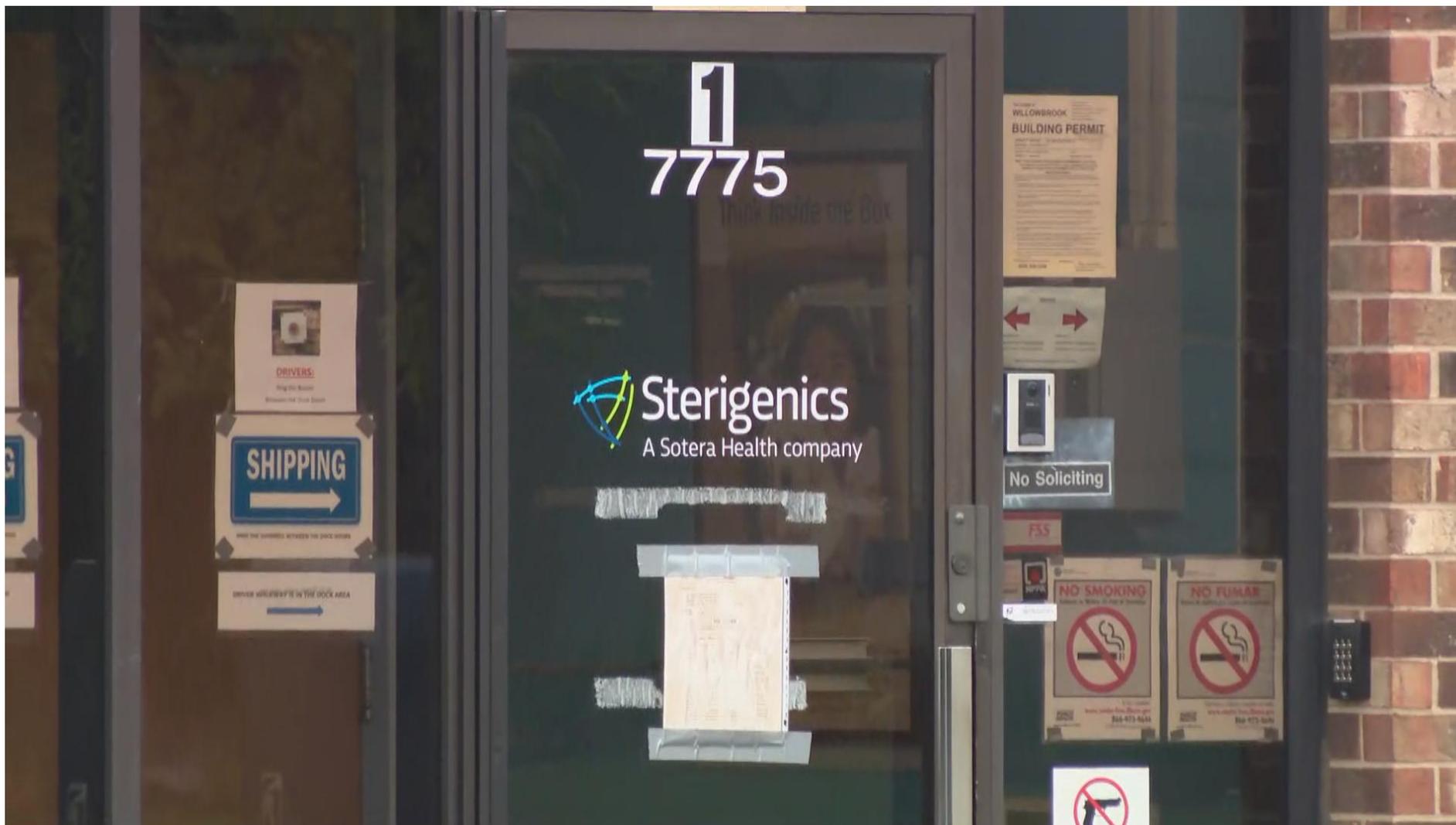


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Controversial Chemical Company Sterigenics Ceasing Illinois Operations

Amanda Vinicky (/stories-by-author/Amanda Vinicky) | September 30, 2019 4:04 pm



A company under fire for using a carcinogenic gas to sterilize medical equipment announced Monday it is permanently closing its sole Illinois facility on account of an “unstable legislative and regulatory landscape.”

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Sterigenics (<https://www.epa.gov/il/sterigenics-willowbrook-facility-background-information>) had operated quietly in suburban Willowbrook for more than 30 years, since 1984.

News broke last August (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-dupage-cancer-pollution-rauner-20180827-story.html>) that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determined a gas posed a greater health hazard than previously thought (https://cfpub.epa.gov/ncea/iris2/chemicalLanding.cfm?substance_nmbr=1025), and that Sterigenics' emissions of the gas – ethylene oxide, or EtO – meant that “an elevated cancer risk exists” for residents who live near the facility.

Sterigenics is no longer obscure: At least 43 people who allege that they or their relatives got sick because of Sterigenics are suing the company, thousands more are part of an active Stop Sterigenics page on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/StopSterigenics/>) and it has been the target of legislation aimed to shut it down.

“The announcement today that Sterigenics has decided not to reopen its Willowbrook facility, while a victory for the people fighting Sterigenics' unsafe ethylene oxide emissions, is also a sad reminder that it should never have been allowed to operate there in the first place. For years, Sterigenics spewed its cancer-causing chemical into an

neighborhood filled with schoolchildren, teachers, moms and dads who had no idea they were ever in danger,” Shawn Collins, an attorney representing one of the plaintiffs, said in a statement. “Dozens of lawsuits filed against the company claim that Sterigenics’ chemical emissions gave them cancer or, even worse, caused the death of a family member. I hope news of the company’s closing is of some solace to them, and that no community will ever again be treated as callously as they were.”

Even before Monday’s announcement, Sterigenics had stopped operating in Willowbrook – quietly, or otherwise: the state in February suspended operations.

But Sterigenics was on a path to legally resuming its sterilization work: A judge in early September approved a consent order agreed to by Sterigenics, the state and DuPage County State’s Attorney Robert Berlin that would allow it to reopen once it installed equipment to capture EtO emissions. The court-enforced order required Sterigenics to reduce its annual emissions from the 2,840 to 7,340 pounds per year it was averaging from 2006 to 2018 to 85 pounds per year.

The state EPA in mid-September issued Sterigenics a permit to begin construction on the facilities.

Instead, the company issued a press release Monday saying that it “plans to exit its ethylene oxide (EO) sterilization operations in Willowbrook.”

“Unfortunately, inaccurate and unfounded claims regarding Sterigenics and the unstable legislative regulatory landscape in Illinois have created an environment in which it is not prudent to maintain these critical sterilization operations,” the statement says.

According to the statement, Sterigenics was also unable to renew the lease on one of its two buildings in Willowbrook.

Whether Illinois should implement tougher regulations of ethylene oxide, or prohibit the chemical’s use altogether (House Bill 3885 ([http://ilga.gov/legislation/fulltext.asp?](http://ilga.gov/legislation/fulltext.asp?DocName=&SessionId=108&GA=101&DocTypeId=HB&DocNum=3885&GAID=15&LegID=121947&SpecSess=&Session=)

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would allow municipalities to ban the product) is up for debate in the upcoming veto session, which begins Oct. 28.

“Sterigenics got the message that we were never going to let them reopen their doors and poison our communities again,” House Republican Leader Durkin, who lives in nearby Western Springs and is a sponsor of the measure, said in a statement.

Durkin’s spokeswoman said he will still work to advance the legislation even though Sterigenics is leaving.

“The Willowbrook areas is strong and vibrant. We are truly a community and are relieved to read that this company has decided to stop emitting toxins where we work, children play and where we call home,” reads a Twitter post from the Stop Sterigenics grassroots organization. “Other areas in the State still need better protections from ethylene oxide emissions, however. The legislature should follow through with these protections for all Illinois communities during this fall veto session.”

Several other companies use and emit EtO (<https://www.epa.gov/il/ethylene-oxide-emissions-lake-county-illinois>) in the area, including Medline Industries in Waukegan and Vantage Specialties in Gurnee.

Already, those facilities will have to abide by a new law (Senate Bill 1852 (<http://ilga.gov/legislation/billstatus.asp?DocNum=1852&GAID=15&GA=101&DocTypeID=SB&LegID=119501&SessionID=108>)) that toughens standards for ethylene oxide use. The law also prevents new facilities that use EtO from opening within either 10 or 15 miles of schools and parks.

Sterigenics describes itself as “the global leader in comprehensive sterilization solutions serving customers across the medical device, pharmaceutical, commercial, and food industries” that is “focused on eliminating threats to the health of humanity.”

While it’s ceasing its operations in Illinois, Sterigenics International LLC has eight other EtO sterilization facilities in other states, and according to the company there are 100 EtO sterilization facilities in the U.S.

“Hospitals and patients around the United States and the world depend on Sterigenics for vital, sterilized medical products and we cannot provide them with the certainty they require while operating in a state that will suspend operations of a business despite the company’s compliance with applicable rules and regulations,” the company said in Monday’s statement. “Sterigenics will continue to lead the way in industry safety by voluntarily implementing new controls at our other sterilization facilities.”

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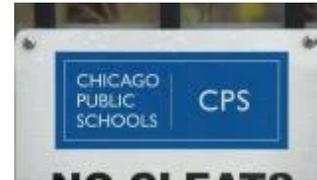
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