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Community testifies on keeping Bethany a hospital *Detox center and birthing clinic cited as major needs*

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Photos by Terry Dean
Jackie Mason (podium) testified Friday that Bethany "saved my life and my daughter's life."

Community residents and activists pleaded their case to maintain Bethany Hospital as a full-service hospital at a special hearing Friday of the Illinois Facilities Planning Board on the West Side.

In nearly three hours of public testimony, more than 40 people spoke during the planning board's public hearing at Marshall High School, many opposed to Advocate Health Care's plan to shut down primary care services and turn Bethany, 3435 W. Van Buren, into a long-term care facility.

The testimony taken Friday will be submitted at the planning board's non-public meeting on April 25 in Springfield.

The planning board will decide on Advocate's current proposal to close additional services, including its birthing clinic and detox center.



A show of support: Advocates and community residents packed Marshall High School's public hearing Friday, arguing that Advocate invested in other hospitals over Bethany.

Former West Side resident Jackie Mason testified that Bethany's detox center helped her kick her drug habit. Mason, 46, said she's been clean and sober since first entering the clinic in 1988.

Though she now lives on the South Side, Mason said she still comes to Bethany.

"It helped me, and it saved my life," she said. "And it saved my daughter's life because she was four years old when that happened."

West Side resident Beverly Morris testified that her brother, who's clean now, was treated for addiction at Bethany's detox center last year, after disappearing for weeks on an alcohol binge.

"I'm afraid to think of what might have happened if Bethany weren't there," Morris testified. "Now I'm afraid of the possibility of what could happen if we face the same situation again."

Advocate Health Care, based in Oak Brook and the largest non-profit health care system in Illinois, announced in January that it would convert Bethany into a long-term care facility. The decision has outraged residents who are patients of the West Side hospital, as well as community activists.

"This is the last place that needs services withdrawn," said Rev. Marshall Hatch of New Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church, testifying that Bethany was the only hospital serving the East and West Garfield and Lawndale communities, which suffer high rates of infant mortality, drug abuse and crime-related injuries.

"There are no community residents saying we don't need a hospital in our community," Hatch said.

Advocate officials also testified Friday to a mostly angry crowd that included West Side clergy and community advocacy groups ACORN and the South Austin Coalition.

Bethany Hospital President Lena Dobbs-Johnson said Advocate officials were there to hear from the community.

"The community has a voice, and what we're hearing here tonight is the community speaking," she said.

In her testimony, Johnson said Bethany's ER is open as a standby unit, and still treats and stabilizes trauma victims before transferring them to another facility, primarily John Stroger Hospital.

Opponents argued that Stroger Hospital is already over-capacitated with patients.

Once the conversion of Bethany is complete—which will take several months, said Johnson—Bethany will have a staff of about 200 employees, down from more than 400.

Advocate Health Care spokesperson Tony Mitchell testified that Bethany was serving less than 75 patients a day, delivering two babies per day and treating two patients per hour in its emergency room before the conversion.

Mitchell said Advocate Health Care did a "Community Needs Assessment" study in 2004 of its hospitals and surrounding hospitals within its system.

The study, he said, revealed that area hospitals were providing similar services to Advocate, and that there was a "surplus" of available bed-space because of the high number of hospitals in surrounding communities.

The study was not made public.

"This is less about money than having too few patients to serve at the hospital," said Mitchell. "This would explain why many hospitals, including Bethany, are underutilized. We don't blame the community for these drops in Bethany's volume. But when a community is fortunate enough to have many hospitals to choose from, a small community hospital like Bethany is often not the first choice."

But Ald. Ed Smith (28th Ward) blasted Advocate for shuttering services to the West Side's predominantly poor and black communities.

Smith testified that Advocate officials assured aldermen at a City Council hearing last fall that Bethany would remain a full-service hospital.

"Now they want to give us a cock-and-bull story," said Smith. "Through the years, we have supported that hospital, and that hospital needs to support the people."

Bethany's conversion might also affect other surrounding health care providers.

Dr. Toshi Ushida, of the Westside Health Center of Cook County, located across the street from Bethany, testified that Bethany owned her facility, which includes a clinic for newborns.

Johnson on Wednesday said the building was not one of Advocate's properties, but is owned by Alter Care, a provider not affiliated with Advocate.

Johnson also called much of Friday's opposition a "corporate campaign" organized by the unions opposed to the Bethany conversion.

"I would say 90 percent of people in the room don't live in Lawndale or the West Side. They live on the South Side and are brought together by the unions," said Johnson.

South Austin Coalition Executive Director Bob Vondrasak, an Austin resident, called the accusation an attempt to distract people from the real issue of Advocate's true plans for Bethany.

"It's a pattern of disinvestment in the black community," said Vondrasak. "This is kind of the standard, to start attacking the people as outside agitators. The real issue is why did they not put adequate investment into that hospital? It's seems like they've been planning to get rid of it for years."