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Westiders protest Bethany Hospital's change of mission

Advocate to convert to long-term care facility

By **TERRY DEAN**

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The decision by Advocate Health Care to close portions of Bethany Hospital on the West Side and turn it into a long-term care facility will hurt the community members who use Bethany for their primary care, alleged protestors Monday during a rally outside the hospital.

Advocate announced last week that it will close Bethany's emergency room, birthing center and other services at the West Side hospital by March. Bethany serves an estimated 67,000 patients annually. The 125-bed hospital will become a facility specializing in acute care patients recuperating for up to 25 days. Advocate also plans to shut down Bethany's detox, intensive care and psychiatry programs, reducing its number of beds to 85.

Advocate officials said the hospital lost roughly \$17 million last year and was projected to lose approximately \$20 million this year.

Advocate's plans, however, have rankled community activists and residents, who held a protest Monday outside Bethany, 3435 W. Van Buren.

"Where are these people going to go?" asked Rev. Gregory Livingston, pastor of Mandell United Methodist Church and CEO of the Westside Ministers Coalition.

At the same time Advocate Health Care is trimming services at Bethany, which serves mainly poor and low-income blacks, the suburban-based health care system will spend \$239 million for hospital expansion in Park Ridge, protestors noted. Officials at advocate say they invest in all of their hospitals. Residents on the West Side, however, don't see it.

"Put a rich folks hospital in a poor community," said Livingston. "Put a white folks hospital in a black community. If you're going to spend \$239 million on Park Ridge, then spend some money here where it's needed. That's all we're asking. Why can't you do it here?"

Oak Brook-based Advocate is the city's largest not-for-profit health care system. Bethany is one of eight hospitals in its system. With more than 24,000 employees, Advocate is one of the city's 10 largest employers.

The South Austin Coalition representatives were among the protestors Monday. Bethany serves patients in Austin, North Lawndale and South Lawndale, and East and West Garfield. The decision to trim Bethany's services has drawn criticism from advocates across the city and from unions.

Cook County Commissioner Forrest Claypool, who attended Monday's protest, said he would call for a public hearing on Bethany with the Cook County Board before changes take effect in March. Accusing Advocate of "showing a degree of arrogance," he questioned the health care system's motives for shunning services on the West Side.

"The law says that hospitals operating as non-profit companies must provide "charitable care." Advocate said they would do that, but as soon as they got approval for the Park Ridge Hospital, they turn around and shut Bethany without any sort of regulatory approval whatsoever," Claypool said. "If they want to be a for-profit company, then they should give back the millions and millions and millions of dollars they've taken from property taxpayers in the county."

The Service Employees International Union said it would wage a campaign against Advocate, claiming that it doesn't provide charitable care and serves affluent suburbs over urban communities.

West Side residents and community members protesting Advocate's plan said the move will put more patients at risk. They and others also fear that Bethany's closing will result in overcrowding at other surrounding hospitals such as John Stroger Hospital—former Cook County Hospital—near Harrison and Damen, and Mt. Sinai Hospital near Ogden and California.

Bethany is located in East Garfield Park, just south of Garfield Park. Advocate critics are concerned that families may be put at risk in having to travel to hospitals in other neighborhoods.

"I don't want to see a kid die from asthma because they were afraid to cross turf lines," said Livingston. "We know Stroger Hospital is overcrowded. My thing is, if [Advocate] says they don't have any room, then buy up some of these liquor stores. You get over a billion dollars in profit; buy up some of these liquor stores and put some health centers there. Put some 'legal' pharmacies on these corners."

Austin resident and SACCC member Mattie Holmes said she knows people who use Bethany and said she's fighting for them.

"We need this place and it's not fair that they can come in and do this," she said. "They get all of this money but they spend it elsewhere. We don't get nothing back, and we want something back for our neighborhood. This is for us."

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