

Aldermen slam hospital closing

February 22, 2006

BY FRAN SPIELMAN City Hall Reporter

Chicago aldermen accused Advocate Health Care of turning its back on an impoverished West Side community -- and lying about it until the last possible moment -- with its plan to transform 85-year-old Bethany Hospital into a long-term, acute care facility.

Health Committee Chairman Ed Smith (28th) lashed out at Advocate CEO Jim Skogsbergh at a raucous City Council hearing packed with West Side residents who depend on the hospital.

Smith charged that Advocate deliberately deceived the City Council seven months ago when company officials appeared before aldermen to assure them that Bethany's operations would remain untouched.

Advocate officials even went so far as to arrange a field trip to Barrington to prove there was no hospital service available in the wealthy northwest suburb that was not also offered at Bethany for residents of East and West Garfield, Lawndale and Austin.

"All of that was a lie," said Smith, whose ward includes the hospital at 3435 W. Van Buren.

Adding insult to injury, Smith said Advocate then waited until 48 hours before the official announcement to inform him of the plan to convert Bethany to a facility that treats long-term patients.

'You've done a very bad thing'

The plan would close the emergency room and obstetrics ward, forcing residents to go elsewhere, such as Stroger Hospital.

Mental health and substance abuse programs would also be eliminated.

"You've done a very bad thing and I don't know what will allow you to repair that with me. . . . That's total disrespect. . . . Had this not been my ward -- had this been a ward that was way north someplace -- you never would have done that. You would have gone to that alderman and you would have spoken to him about this. . . . It shows how much you care about the people in the neighborhood," Smith said.

Skogsbergh emphatically denied Advocate lied in its earlier appearance before the City Council.

"At the time that you had the hearings, sir, we had not contemplated the long-term, acute care hospital. The people that spoke to you on behalf of Advocate a year ago spoke to you truthfully," Skogsbergh said.

But the Advocate CEO made no effort to defend keeping aldermen in the dark.

"I have apologized to you privately, and I've done so in public. We are absolutely convicted of having poor communication. We regret that. We are interested in repairing that relationship and we will do whatever we can to do so," he said.