

## **250 rally to hold on to Bethany**

### **Other area hospitals too busy, critics say**

By Ray Quintanilla  
Tribune staff reporter

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More than 250 angry residents packed a Lawndale Church on Monday night to oppose the closing of Advocate Bethany Hospital, a medical center serving Chicago's West Side for 85 years.

The building is set to be converted into a long-term care facility this spring.

"My family needs the hospital, because it's close by," said Candice Johnson, 49, who lives within walking distance of Bethany and whose two asthmatic adolescent grandchildren use breathing machines.

"I don't want to imagine what could happen in the 40 minutes it takes to get my babies to Stroger," she said of Stroger Hospital.

Organizers said the meeting, held at Christian Valley Baptist Church, 1237 S. Homan Ave., was put together to pressure the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board, the state agency overseeing Illinois hospitals, to block Advocate Health Care's plans.

Officials say the hospital admitted 6,000 people in 2005, many from sections of three major Chicago neighborhoods: North Lawndale, Austin and West Garfield Park. Bethany Hospital, 3435 W. Van Buren St., is one of three medical centers serving the area.

Opponents call the plans "wrongheaded" because the other nearby medical facilities, Mt. Sinai Hospital and Stroger, both handle large numbers of patients already.

State Rep. Marlow Colvin (D-Chicago) worked the crowd into a frenzy when he declared Chicago's health-care system broken, especially for its poorer residents.

"Hospitals in America are becoming bottom-line oriented," he said to raucous applause. "We have to fight to keep Bethany open, and this is just the beginning."

Bethany Hospital officials, meanwhile, describe the change as a "promising transformation." Hospital officials say that starting March 1, Bethany's mission will be helping patients whose medical needs require average stays of 25 days or longer.

Bethany is run by Oak Brook-based Advocate Health Care, the largest health-care provider in Illinois. The firm is a faith-based, non-profit system and related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Church of Christ.

Advocate's 200-plus health care sites in metropolitan Chicago include eight acute-care hospitals, two

children's hospitals, a home health-care company and four of Chicago's largest medical groups.

Hospital officials said protesters are out of touch with the West Side's medical needs.

"Patients with serious illnesses or injuries requiring extensive, individualized care will now have a hospital in the community dedicated to serving their needs," Bethany Hospital President Lena Dobbs-Johnson said.

Advocate spokesman Tony Mitchell said the decision was reached only after careful study and consultations with hospitals such as Stroger, Mt. Sinai and others. Mitchell said the West Side has a surplus of hospital beds.

Officials with the Illinois Department of Public Health said any transformation at Bethany cannot begin until after the state's health facilities planning board meets to discuss the changes. The board isn't scheduled to meet until mid-March.

"Bethany needs to put this in a certificate of need and present that to the Health Facilities Planning Board. Until they do that, they are being premature," said Melaney Arnold, spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Cook County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado described Bethany's actions as "irresponsible." He said Stroger's emergency room is swamped.

"To say the West Side of Chicago has access to plenty of health care services is just plain wrong," he said.

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