



NEWS

Hospital closure stirs up board

County leaders scrambling for ways to fight action

Thursday, January 19, 2006

By Jonathan Lipman
Staff writer

The sudden closing of a West Side hospital has Cook County's health bureau scrambling to find a home for its walk-in clinic and bracing for an influx of patients.

The closure has county commissioners riled and suggesting plans to fight the closure and rescind tax breaks for hospital owners.

"We need to do something about this," said Joseph Moreno (D-Chicago).

Advocate Health Care announced last week it plans to shut down the 125-bed Bethany Hospital and convert it into an 85-bed "long-term acute-care facility" in March, pending approval from state regulators.

Company officials said the hospital's emergency room, obstetrics and psychiatric services were underused. The community lacks acute-care facilities, they said, which treat those recovering from severe wounds, strokes and heart attacks.

The shutdown will have a ripple effect on Cook County, the largest provider of charity health care in the county.

The county gets payment from Bethany every time the hospital refers one of its high-risk pregnancies or critically ill infants to Stroger Hospital's top-notch natal care unit, health bureau chief Daniel Winship said.

"That will disappear," Winship said. "And it is likely that we will receive directly some of those patients. We have no idea how many that will be."

County Board President John Stroger said he is also troubled by the closure, but he hopes many of Bethany's patients have insurance or Medicare and will not be a burden on county taxpayers if they start going to Stroger Hospital.

In exchange for taking the difficult obstetrics cases, Bethany also allowed the county to use space at its hospital free of charge for a walk-in clinic that saw 15,000 visits a year. As of March 1, Advocate wants the county to pay between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year for that space.

"We're not wildly enthusiastic about paying that," Winship said, adding the county was looking both for money to pay the rent and possible other homes for a clinic in the same area. He told commissioners he hoped to have a plan in time for approval of the 2006 budget, scheduled for next month.

Union-backed activist groups have accused Advocate in recent years of a failure to commit resources to poor neighborhoods despite its nonprofit status. The company has denied the charges, pointing to Bethany and other hospitals in poor areas as proof.

County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado renewed his call this week for the county to investigate whether the company still deserves tax breaks based on its nonprofit status.

"They have declared war on the taxpayers and the patients of Cook County," Maldonado said in a news release. "The only question now is what we are going to do about it."

Commissioner Forrest Claypool (D-Chicago) said Advocate has "inexplicably made these announcements when they're not even on the docket for approval ... by the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board." The state board, which regulates hospital construction, will have to sign off on the conversion. Claypool said the county should try to protect its interests by pushing for public hearings before the state board.

Jonathan Lipman may be reached at jlipman@dailysouthtown.com or (312) 782-1286.