



## Pastors, residents march on Bethany Hospital

### **Leaders hold mass emergency prayer to keep Advocate Bethany Hospital open**

Monday, March 13, 2006

Seeking to dramatize the plight of West Side residents threatened by the loss of Advocate Bethany Hospital services, a coalition of religious leaders led a mass prayer session Sunday outside the doors of the facility's recently shuttered emergency room.

Hundreds of community residents attended the event, billed as an "Emergency Prayer," to underscore the dire predicament facing the West Side if Advocate Health Care proceeds with plans to eliminate Bethany's OB/GYN, mental health and substance abuse units - on top of its recent closure of major emergency room care.

The demonstration came as the controversial Bethany plan faces a spate of new scrutiny this week. On Monday, Cook County Commissioner Roberto Maldonado will conduct a public hearing on Advocate's cuts at Bethany. On Tuesday, members of the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board -- the agency with authority over the Bethany cuts -- will disclose its review of Advocate's spending practices in the inner-city.

In November, the IHFPB required Advocate to demonstrate that it would maintain its funding commitment to the West Side as a condition for approving the company's \$239 million expansion of Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. But as the Board meets Tuesday in Chicago (9 a.m., 350 N. Orleans) to consider Advocate's response, the company has already asked regulators to approve a major reduction in services at Bethany. Such inconsistencies are part of Advocate's continuing pattern of misrepresentations regarding Bethany, according to a letter that an alliance of West Side clergy sent last week to the church officials who sit on Advocate's board.

"Last year, we challenged executives of Advocate to explain why they were not seeking investments at Bethany on the same scale as they were making in suburban hospitals," wrote the pastors, known as Clergy Committed to Save Bethany, Save Our Community. "We were repeatedly told that Advocate remains committed to Bethany and to our community. We were told that Advocate would keep the doors of Bethany open to the community, despite financial losses."

As a non-profit, religiously affiliated hospital network, Advocate collects more than \$70 million annually in tax exemptions. In exchange, it is required to provide community benefits such as low-cost or free healthcare to the indigent and uninsured -- two populations that are highly prevalent in the West Side neighborhoods Bethany serves. Hospitalization rates on the West Side are twice the city average for mental illness and three times higher for substance abuse. In some area neighborhoods, the mortality rate from assault averaged 192 percent higher than the city-wide average.

Against this backdrop, critics claim that the Bethany cuts buck Advocate's public obligations to serve distressed communities.