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Poor patients deserve better than Bethany

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The last time I was at Bethany Hospital was about eight years ago. At the time, my primary physician was on staff at the West Side hospital. He sent me to the emergency room in the middle of the night because he was concerned about my excruciating headache.

But our concerns about my throbbing head took a back seat to mothers holding coughing babies, frail elders, accident victims and a guy with stab wounds. After waiting hours in vain, my condition improved enough for me to leave. I remember thinking I'd never set foot in Bethany again.

Apparently, a lot of other people must have felt the same way.

According to Lena Dobbs-Johnson, president of Advocate Bethany Hospital, only half of the hospital's 150 beds are filled, the ER averages about two patients per hour, and a modernized obstetrics center that can accommodate 15 new moms generally holds one.

Since Advocate is only a couple of miles from the John H. Stroger Hospital, it's possible that potential patients have been lured by that state-of-the-art facility. But community activists engaged in a showdown with Bethany over its plans to close the hospital on March 1 and reopen it as a long-term acute care facility see something more sinister than customer dissatisfaction.

"It's disinvestment," says the Rev. Steve Greer, pastor of Christian Valley Baptist Church, who along with several other community leaders on the West Side talked to me on Wednesday during a conference call.

"The whole idea is to create the underutilization by how they ran the hospital," he said.

"If they reduced the quality of services, very few people would actually use it," said Patricia Watkins, another community activist. "At one point in time, about six years ago, they were going to pull out and disinvest in the hospital and we fought that, too. We didn't just get out here."

In clashing with Advocate, one of the 10 largest health providers in the city, the activists have brought up a thorny issue. Hospitals are like other service providers. For instance, when people aren't riding a bus route, CTA will cut the bus from its schedule. Running an empty hospital is like running an empty bus.

About-face angers alderman

Ald. Ed Smith (28th) who is head of the City Council Health Committee, agrees with this point, but accuses Advocate of trying to "sneak out of Dodge."

"There's validity on both sides. But seven months ago, [Advocate officials] testified that: 'Bethany Hospital is important to us. We aren't going to walk away. The level of care is going to be continuous,'" Smith said.

"At the same time they knew they were going to cut their services. Like most hospitals they were losing money because people don't have health insurance. When they told us they would not walk away, I came back and reported that to the people. We believed they were being truthful."

In January, Advocate announced it would turn Bethany into a long-term care facility.

"They put us out on front street," Smith said. "They didn't tell me anything until 48 hours before they were closing departments and 24 hours before they laid off 200 people. That is not the way to operate."

But back to those empty buses.

When CTA announced it was closing an L stop and some bus routes in his ward, Smith organized residents and they took public transportation to raise awareness of what was at stake. Ultimately, CTA had to rethink its decision, and actually ended up refurbishing the Garfield Park L station.

Unfortunately, Bethany has been taken for granted for so long, it may be too late to woo back its patients.

Might shift focus to others

Several years ago, activists argued that Bethany provided such poor service, the hospital didn't have basics like blankets. Today, many of these same activists are arguing that the hospital is such a vital link in the health care delivery system, its closure would be an unbearable hardship.

"This is a betrayal of the community and charity care," said the Rev. Ira Acree, pastor of Greater St. John Bible Church.

I understand why activists would fight to keep Bethany the way it was. Still, their energy would be better used to shore up the nearby Mount Sinai or Stroger hospitals, and to ensure that other hospitals in the area are doing their part to take up the slack.

In a fairer society, we would all get the same level of health care. But we don't live in that kind of a world. The underinsured and uninsured aren't getting the same level of health care as someone with, say, Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO.

So while the 85-year-old Bethany may have started out as a ministry, today it's a business.

The Advocate Health Care system made \$140 million in profits last year and lost about \$42.5 million at four of its hospitals, three of them located in Chicago. I would argue that the profitability of Advocate's suburban hospitals network allowed hospitals like Bethany to stay open as long as it has.

But, frankly, poor people deserve better than Bethany is able -- or willing -- to give.

