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Advocates take Health plan to Advocate CEO

Nearly 100 community leaders who sought more community benefits at their local hospitals as well as workers' right to unionize and nondiscrimination in capital investments by Advocate Health Care took their Protocol for Agreement to its Oak Brook headquarters July 28.

"We have made numerous requests of Mr. [James] Skogsbergh [Advocate CEO] to address these concerns," said one of the community leaders, the Rev. C.J. Wright, a member of the West Side Health Crisis Coalition (WSHCC). "Since he will not respond to our repeated requests, we decided it would be appropriate to personally deliver our concerns to him."

Advocate spokesman Tony Mitchell promised a response by August 5, but also told StreetWise that the demands stemmed from an unsuccessful bid by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to obtain names and addresses of Advocate workers as part of a labor organizing drive.

Kathy Anderson, an executive board member of Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations (MAC) South said the protocol was the work of 25 community organizations that represented 500,000 people. The community leaders picked Advocate "because they are the largest hospital system in the state and can influence other hospital sys-

tems and the state of Illinois to provide adequate health care in our communities."

The protocol seeks a "defined, required and enforced" standard of care and notes that "preventive care is as important as treatment, mental health is as important as physical health."

Its four principles seek community benefits; patients' rights to health care; workers rights to a free and fair union process; and non-discrimination in capital investments.

Sponsored by the United Church of Christ and Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the hospital system should provide charity for the uninsured, underinsured and those with HIV/AIDs, notes the protocol. As a faith-sponsored institution, its charity should be commensurate with its subsidies from taxpayers, the protocol said.

Another facet of the protocol seeks to recognize the workers' right to unionize free from coercion or intimidation. Finally, it says investments in health care facilities "should be made so as to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in health care."

The West Side Health Crisis Coalition had earlier this year protested Advocate's \$29 million request for Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital in Barrington from the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board on the grounds that Advocate Bethany Hospital in their neighborhood had not received any significant investment.

What they termed a

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Advocates bring plan to Advocate

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suburban/urban disparity in funding led the WSHCC to file a complaint of "racial redlining" with the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"I saw two hospitals that not only were separate in the same system, but they were 'unequal,' the Rev. Marshall Hatch said as a representative of West Side churches at the March 15 Chicago City Council meeting. "The fundamental question is, does Advocate Healthcare value white lives more than it values Black lives? To the extent that they do, it's morally indefensible."

The SEIU Hospital Accountability Project said that Advocate Good Shepherd in Barrington received \$72 million from the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board while Bethany on the West Side had no significant investments. The report also said Advocate invested \$232 million in hospitals that serve a white clientele but only \$26 million at hospitals with Black/minority patients. And it provided the lowest level of charity care, considering its size and price structure.

Union leaders have said that Advocate's four "profit centers" are Good Shepherd Barrington, Good Samaritan in Downers Grove, Lutheran General in Park Ridge and Christ Hospital in Oak Lawn. Hospitals with a minority clientele include Trinity, Illinois Masonic and Bethany in Chicago as well as South Suburban in Hazel Crest.

Susan Hall, a nurse's assistant at Advocate South Suburban Hospital, said during an October 17 Rolling Thunder rally sponsored by Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations and other Black/Hispanic groups, that 68 percent of employees surveyed said they usually or always worked without enough staff. Hall said she was among those seeking to form a union and that her manager had told her "we make examples of people who go around talking to other people. There will be a sacrificial lamb."

Advocate spokesman Mitchell said the hospital system agreed with the workers' right to a free union process and that it already has four or five unions, including the Teamsters. The hospital system would support a secret ballot election if the union were able to get enough employees to say they were interested in having an election. "But we are not simply going to turn over the names and addresses of our workers and not respect their privacy on that process."

Since the time Advocate refused to turn over names and addresses, "the SEIU has charged that we are racial redlining, not providing enough charity care, subjected us to a barrage of criticism that was not their view of us when they want-

ed to partner with us," Mitchell said.

He continued, "since that time, suddenly there has been a series of reports and they have gotten various groups to join their effort to protest against our work, criticize our level of care, a whole range of activities that ultimately in our view were focused around their efforts to organize our workers."

Regarding the protocol, Advocate provided \$250 million in community benefits last year, Mitchell said. The amount included unreimbursed Medicaid and Medicaid bills, research and education, all according to state standards initially sought by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, he said.

"Advocate has one of the most generous health care policies in the country," he added, with free or discounted health care to individuals or families who earn up to four times the federal poverty level, about \$80,000 a year. It also provides counseling to patients about other programs, such as the state-sponsored Kidcare, for which they could be eligible.

He also denied charges of "racial redlining." Advocate had asked the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board for \$20 million for an intensive care unit at Advocate South Suburban in Hazel Crest, which the SEIU opposed, he said, "as they have opposed all our requests."

Meanwhile, on the West Side, "Bethany is one of the few hospital systems in the country that has an electronic intensive care unit and we have invested in mammography that is computer-aided, an

upgraded obstetrics suite, a renovated emergency department."

Advocate has maintained that keeping Bethany open despite its financial losses shows its commitment to serving the West Side.

The SEIU, in turn, has responded that "losses are not capital investments." It has cited a study by the University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Urban Economic Development that said more infrastructure investments would bring in different payers.

"We disagree that the fact that we are sustaining losses but remain committed to keeping the doors open to the community should be dismissed or irrelevant," Mitchell said.

"If you walk through the West Side or the South Side and look at organizations that lose \$8 million or \$10 million a year, you would find those organizations close their doors, bolt their doors, leave and don't give you a forwarding address," he said. "It's absurd to suggest the fact that we are sustaining significant losses but still providing quality and compassionate care is something to be dismissed."

The SEIU's James Muhammad said that the union was not only interested in the workers, "we're interested in the communities where the workers live."