

Advocate Health facing bias complaint

By Hal Dardick
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Two Chicago community groups Friday filed a federal civil rights complaint against the state's largest hospital network, describing its capital project spending as "medical apartheid."

The South Austin Coalition Community Council joined the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now/Illinois to file the complaint with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The groups alleged Advocate Health Care Network Inc. violated civil rights statutes by spending far more on capital improvements at four hospitals serving mostly whites than it did at five hospitals treating mostly minority patients.

The complaint asked the government to investigate Advocate, "take appropriate enforcement action" and order Advocate to correct its alleged discriminatory practices. It contended the alleged spending disparities violate the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which bars discrimination by corporations that receive federal funding.

Advocate spokesman Mike Maggio noted the complaint is based on a study by the Hospital Accountability Project, an arm of the Service Employees International Union that has been trying for two years to organize Advocate's 25,000 employees.

The study's numbers don't tell the whole story, he said. Maggio provided figures that indicate Advocate spends more per patient at its three current Chicago hospitals that serve large minority populations than it does at its five suburban facilities. Advocate's figures, unlike the union's, factor in technology investments and financial losses.

From 1995 to 2003, Advocate spent \$232 million on capital improvements at "majority hospitals," compared with \$26 million at "minority hospitals," according to the complaint.

In 2004, Advocate proposed spending \$276 million, including \$222 million to build a hospital in Tinley Park that has not won state approval, compared with \$20.5 million at minority hospitals, the complaint stated.

But Maggio said Advocate from 1997 to 2004 spent a "weighted average" of \$70,000 per occupied bed at its three remaining city hospitals, compared with \$38,000 a bed at its five suburban facilities.

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