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Protesters seek answers on Advocate charity care

By Henry Stuttley Daily Herald Staff Writer

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At least 25 protesters gathered at Advocate Health Care offices in Oak Brook Thursday, demanding to know why the faith-based organization's charity program did not pay for their skyrocketing medical expenses.

Singing "We Shall Overcome," employees and former patients of Advocate gathered in the lobby of its corporate headquarters to seek answers about its Charity Care Program.

"They're dancing around it, and they need to do something about it," said Cindy McKinney, a respiratory therapist at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

Advocate Health Care serves patients at Christ Medical and other Chicago-area hospitals, including Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove.

Tony Mitchell, vice president of community and government relations for Advocate, said Charity Care pays the medical bills for those who are uninsured or can't afford to pay.

Mitchell said the program pays between 60 percent and 100 percent of each patient's expenses and that it has covered more than \$200 million in medical expenses annually for Chicago-area patients.

"There is a whole range of things that we're doing to try to fulfill our mission to provide quality health care in the various communities we serve," he said.

But Karen Backus, program director of the Service Employees International Union, said it's time for the health care organization to live up to that mission.

The union, which represents more than 1.8 million health care workers and 120,000 retirees nationwide, has received hundreds of complaints from Advocate employees, Backus said.

Bill collectors through Advocate, she said, have sought payment for the unpaid health care bills of employees, some of whom have even been sued by bill collectors.

"They have this obligation to give back to the community," Backus said.

A former patient, Isa Rafati, said he was told he had to pay an \$86,000 medical bill after being treated at one of Advocate's hospitals for three gunshot wounds.

Rafati said he was never told about the Charity Care program but was immediately released after telling a hospital counselor he did not have any money for his medical bills.

"Sometimes I wish I was dead," said Rafati, who was an unemployed student at the time of the shooting. "There is nothing I can do."

But Mitchell said health care administrators will examine the facts of each case.

"We're going to try to get to the bottom of this and get a realistic assessment of what we've got," he said.

Advocate's health and healing ministry is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the United Church of Christ.