

# PARK RIDGE HERALD-ADVOCATE

October 13, 2005

## Hospital seeks to expand rooms

Union organizes protest against Advocate's investment here

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Members of several inner city organizations and the Service Employees International Union last week protested plans by Advocate Lutheran General Hospital to add a \$239 million, 192-room addition onto its Park Ridge campus.

During a public hearing held at Park Ridge City Hall on Oct. 6, organization members accused Advocate Health Care of failing to invest money in the hospitals it operates within Chicago, while making multi-million dollar improvements at its suburban facilities.

The opponents, predominately African American and Hispanic, asked the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board - which must vote to approve the Lutheran General addition - to require Advocate to provide a plan for how it will improve its Chicago hospitals as well.

Advocate operates eight hospitals, three of them within the city of Chicago.

"I think that what the suburbs have is great, but we need it too. We need it more," said Jennifer Jimenez of the Albany Park Neighborhood Council. She stated that many of her friends and family members "struggle with health care needs," and Advocate "needs to pay attention to us."

"We have tried many ways to get resources we need and we still haven't gotten any help," said the Rev. Terry LeNoir of the Target Area Development Corporation, based on Chicago's South Side. "We want the best for Park Ridge and its residents, and we want the best for our community and its residents also."

"Is it too much to ask that Logan Square should have the same access to health care as Park Ridge?" asked Gabriella Lara of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association. She said many residents in her neighborhood "are weighed down with medical debt we may never be able to pay off."

Vasyl Markus of the Service Employees International Union's Hospital Accountability Project accused Advocate of focusing improvements on hospitals with "affluent" patients, rather than those that serve a large number of minorities.

"A couple of accountability projects conducted recently show that Advocate Health Care Network makes far fewer capital expenditures requiring Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board approval at its hospitals serving predominately minority patients than at its hospitals serving more affluent, white patients," Markus said.

The SEIU claims Advocate committed only \$2.9 million for capital improvements at one Chicago hospital in the last three years while committing \$705 million for improvements to several suburban hospitals.

Tony Mitchell, spokesperson for Advocate Health Care, called the SEIU's numbers "skewed," saying they only include projects that required approval by the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board and did not take into account investments made to improve technology and staffing at Chicago hospitals.

"We have made it clear that our level of investment in our city hospitals is strong," Mitchell said.

"The investment numbers they are focused on are a narrow picture of the full scope of our investments," he added.

Mitchell stressed that Advocate's Chicago hospitals - Bethany, Illinois Masonic and Trinity - "have outstanding care givers and employees who are very focused on giving very strong care in the communities we serve."

Advocate filed a lawsuit last year against the SEIU for defamation, claiming the SEIU published a number of false and defamatory statements about the health care system, including how it charges patients.

The Rev. Jerry Wagenknecht, senior vice president of mission and spiritual for Advocate Health Care, said Advocate does "invest significantly in the ongoing operations of all of our sites of care." He stated that Advocate has invested millions of dollars in both Chicago and suburban hospitals between 1997 and 2004.

Wagenknecht pointed out that improvements have continued despite financial losses at Chicago hospitals. Last year, Bethany, Illinois Masonic and Trinity lost nearly \$2 million per month, he said.

"These hospitals serve disproportionately large numbers of Medicaid and uninsured patients whose costs of care are not fully covered or covered at all," Wagenknecht said.

Financial stability of other hospitals, like Advocate Lutheran General, aid inner city hospitals, he added.

State Rep. Rosemary Mulligan, R-65th, told opponents that patients who pay for care at Lutheran General Hospital help to cover costs at other Advocate facilities where patients are unable to afford care.

"Charitable care is not free. It has to be covered by someone," she said.

"Voting not to expand a hospital that can pay its bills and help pay the bills of the hospitals in its system is a misguided way of doing business," Mulligan added.

Although opposition to the Advocate Lutheran General project was expressed at the public hearing, there were words of support for it as well. Among the supporters who made statements were Park Ridge Mayor Howard Frimark, Des Plaines Mayor Tony Arredia, Maine East High School Principal David Barker, state Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-57th, and Dr. Bruce Campbell, president of Advocate Lutheran General Hospital.

The Advocate Lutheran General building addition request is expected to be discussed by the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board in early November.