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State rep seeks probe of Advocate hospital strategy

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An influential state representative plans to hold hearings in the next few weeks to investigate allegations that Advocate Health Care spends significantly fewer dollars on capital improvements at hospitals in minority communities than it does at hospitals in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Rep. Mary E. Flowers, chair of the House Health Care Access and Availability committee, is responding to criticisms in a recent report by the Service Employees International Union, which has been trying to organize workers at Advocate. Advocate, the largest nonprofit health care delivery system in the Chicago area, has denied any wrongdoings alleged in the report, and said the report is part of a union campaign to organize Advocate workers.

The report, prepared by the union's Hospital Accountability Project, looked at Advocate's Good Shepherd Hospital in Barrington, Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove, Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge and Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn. The patients served by those hospitals are affluent, and 81 percent white according to the union, which found that Advocate spent a total of \$232 million on significant capital improvements at the hospitals between 1995 and 2003.

During that same period, Advocate spent only \$26 million on hospitals serving predominantly minority communities, including Advocate's Bethany Hospital, Trinity Hospital, Illinois Masonic Medical Center, all in Chicago; and South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest, the report found.

"I was really outraged when I read the report," said Flowers, a Chicago Democrat. "There is no justification for this type of disparity. At Bethany, there was not one penny invested in the infrastructure."

She said she has met with West Side clergy, community activists in Chicago and Advocate Chief Executive James Skogsbergh, and she plans to visit Advocate's facilities this month.

Advocate has labeled the allegations in the report "false, groundless and an unjust characterization of its faith-based health care ministry." It says between 1997 and 2004 it invested more at city hospitals than at suburban hospitals. It says it invested on average \$843 per patient at Bethany, Illinois Masonic and Trinity hospitals, compared with \$506 per patient at Christ, Good Samaritan, Good Shepherd, Lutheran General and South Suburban.

Advocate representatives contend the report is part of a union campaign to malign Advocate for refusing to sign a neutrality agreement, which would have allowed workers at Advocate to use a check card system instead of a secret ballot process to decide if they want union representation.

The union report led to a federal civil rights complaint being filed last month by community groups including the South Austin Coalition Community Council, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now/Illinois and Chicago area residents.

The complaint alleges Advocate's investment policies have resulted in a "dual, racially discriminatory health care system that delivers the least resources to minority populations with the greatest health care needs."

It asks the government to investigate and require Advocate to eliminate racial disparities.

Abbott pitches in

Abbott Labs has committed \$4 million in funding and health care product donations to the victims of the natural disasters in Southeast Asia and the eastern coast of Africa.

Working through international humanitarian agencies, AmeriCares and Project HOPE, Abbott is sending needed prescription drugs and nutritional aid. Among the donated Abbott products are Biaxin, Omnicef, Pedialyte, PediaSure and Rehydralyte. The Abbott product donation is expected to help approximately 60,000 people and is valued at \$2 million.

Additionally, Abbott is donating \$2 million in funding through relief agencies working on the ground in the affected regions.

And, employees in Abbott's Egyptian affiliate have pledged one hour of their salary to assist in relief efforts.

Rush 1, Teamsters 0

Rush University Medical Center won a round in its battle to replace its current employee health care benefits program.

Teamsters Local 743, which represents 1,000 workers at Rush, last month asked a U.S. District court for an injunction to block Rush from dropping its existing HMO benefit plan and replacing its PPO plan with one the union contends will make health care unaffordable for its members.

The court ruled that since the matter will go before an arbitrator there will be no irreparable harm done to workers even if the arbitrator ultimately rules in the union's favor, said Teamsters spokesman Brian Rainville. That's because workers would be reimbursed for any increased cost from the new plan if the arbitrator sides with the union, the court said.

Rush, which implemented the new health care benefit plan Jan. 1, has maintained the changes in medical insurance plans were made for all employees, and were done in accordance with the collective bargaining agreement with the union. It also has maintained the new plan offers greater choice of providers and, for most employees, a decreased paycheck contribution for premiums.