

Community organizes to save Mercy Hospital

By Monica M. Walk

Community activism is succeeding so far in preventing Chicago's oldest chartered hospital from quietly closing its doors during the ongoing pandemic.

Several December protest vigils brought health care workers and local residents together in their cars and on foot near Mercy Hospital & Medical Center's 2525 S. Michigan Ave. location, creating awareness of the South Side's healthcare plight far beyond the neighborhood.



Photo courtesy KOCO

Mercy Hospital staff brought the fight to keep the facility open to LaSalle Street to make more Chicagoans aware of the hospital's plight.

Coupled with a calling campaign, the effort prompted Illinois Governor JB Pritzker and other elected officials and lawmakers to acknowledge the hospital's importance and the need to maintain it to serve its mainly Black and Latino patients.

Advocates for keeping the hospital open are pushing for a new owner, although current Mercy Hospital owner Trinity Health continues to focus on closing the hospital and pivoting to an outpatient services model.

However, on Jan. 26, the Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board (IHFSRW) voted to deny approval for Trinity's outpatient facility plan.

"I thank the community, community groups, and the nurses, physicians, and staff at Mercy; they are the reason this place is open," said State Representative Lamont J. Robinson Jr. (D-5th), a leading advocate for keeping the hospital open. Robinson has criticized the closure's timing and asked Governor Pritzker to support a moratorium on any hospital closing in Illinois until the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis passes.

"The credit is to the community, or the hospital would close," Robinson said. "It's important we understand the community led the effort, and thank them. They asked the governor to get involved. I believe the governor heard the cries of the community and that is why he stepped in and engaged. He heard their cries in the midst of the pandemic; COVID is not over and has lasting effects. We need to continue to have quality healthcare, especially in Black and Brown communities that have had the highest numbers of COVID cases and deaths."

"Gov. Pritzker believes healthcare is a right, not a privilege," said Jordan Abudayyeh, Pritzker's press secretary. "As the governor has said throughout this pandemic, we must work to address the inequities in our healthcare system that have left Black and Brown communities especially susceptible to the worst outcomes of this virus."

The Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) and the Lugenia Burns Hope Center are considered leaders in the community organizing efforts to preserve Mercy Hospital. Both are partners in the Chicago Health Equity Coalition (CHEC), which brings together numerous

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groups to support keeping Mercy Hospital open.

Robinson was among State representatives and Chicago City Council members participating in a CHEC-sponsored Save Mercy virtual town hall via Zoom on Jan. 19. Robinson hopes Mercy Hospital will remain open under new ownership.

Possible buyer

"A buyer is engaged with—it is a hospital in our community working with the governor's office and mine," Robinson said. "A consulting group is going through the books and the physical plant of the hospital to see the investment needed to keep open and be successful. Trinity is still on the same road to closure. It's important to push hard and fast to keep the hospital open but do these things to be sure it's successful."

According to Carol Schneider, president of Mercy Hospital & Medical Center, "The decision to discontinue services at Mercy Hospital was not an easy one. But patients on the South Side have unmet needs within the current system. The transformation from an inpatient model to one with greater access to outpatient services will better address the disparate outcomes in health from which our community suffers today."



Photo courtesy Lugenia Burns Hope

The community continues to organize to keep Mercy Hospital open, as its closure would create a healthcare desert on the Southeast Side.

A Mercy/Trinity spokesperson participated in a public hearing in mid-January about opening the new Mercy Care Center. The IHFSRW turned down the care center idea on Jan. 26. Mercy may decide to go before the same board separately to revisit its Certificate of Need application to close the hospital.

On Dec. 15, 2020, the review board had denied unanimously the application to close.

The governor has communicated to Trinity "the State's position that the company urgently rethink the decision to close Mercy Hospital," Abudayyeh said. "The State stands ready and willing to work with them to avoid closure."

At the IHFSRW meeting the week of Jan. 18, "the administration publicly voiced our objections to the planned closure," she added. "The governor also made clear that based on the State's analysis of Trinity's most recent cost reports, the State's \$150 million rate increase is offsetting a significant share of Mercy's reported losses—giving more reason and flexibility to delay this closure and work with Illinois lawmakers to pass a hospital transformation bill."

"Trinity Health plans to appeal the decision and close Mercy Hospital with or without the board's approval," KOCO said in a statement. "We must continue to encourage Gov. Pritzker and Illinois elected officials to intervene to save Mercy Hospital and the lives of Black and Brown community members served by the hospital."

"Call Gov. Pritzker at (312) 814-2121 and urge him to use his leadership to keep Mercy Hospital open and save lives in the midst of this pandemic and beyond, declare a moratorium on hospital closures, and facilitate a sale between Trinity Health and a buyer committed to keeping Mercy open," the KOCO statement continued. "This is not transformation! This is a disinvestment and an elimination of vital health services!"

"The administration has also directed Trinity Health to review all viable offers to purchase the hospital so it can continue to serve the community by operating as a hospital," Abudayyeh said.

"I commend the Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board for decisively voting against allowing Mercy Hospital & Medical Center to proceed with its plans to close," said Congressman Bobby Rush (D-1st). "While it is rare for the review board to deny a hospital's request to close, to do otherwise—particularly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—would have been disastrous. We must now work on a solution that ensures long-term access to health care for patients and the financial stability of hospitals on the South Side."

Gazette Chicago previously reported Mercy's planned closing was due in part to the Illinois

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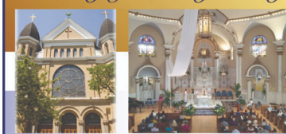
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Legislature's electing not to fund the South Side Coalition's South Side Transformation Plan as part of the Hospital Transformation Program. Robinson noted this earlier plan for Mercy to merge with three other hospitals lacked sufficient detail to ensure people in the Bronzeville neighborhood where Mercy is located would continue to have a full-service hospital and said the State had invited Trinity to return with a detailed plan. Trinity did not return with a specific commitment and instead canceled the merger and announced the hospital's closing.

BOH opposition

The City of Chicago Board of Health (BOH) issued a statement in August 2020 voicing "concern about the proposed closure of Mercy Hospital in causing a health care desert impacting persons on the South and Southwest Side of Chicago." The BOH statement called on the governor, mayor, and Illinois Health Facilities Board to halt closure until a long-term action plan for community health was determined and in place. Meeting minutes from the Oct. 21, 2020, BOH meeting note the City of Chicago has no direct role in the Mercy situation, "as the State of Illinois is the lead governmental body with oversight of Mercy Hospital."

Officials consider Mercy a safety net hospital, which provides healthcare services to people regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. Mercy has one of Chicago's busiest emergency rooms, and deleting emergency room services via hospital closure would mean serious health repercussions for area residents.

"Safety nets are under attack," Robinson said. "They need Federal assistance, Federal partners," adding he anticipated ongoing work in this area. "The State is moving in the right direction, with this political shift, to provide healthcare not only on the South Side of Chicago but across the entire State."

"The fight is not over," said KOCO in its statement.

In October, the Pritzker administration released more than \$140 million in federal dollars for safety net hospitals, long-term care facilities, and Federally Qualifies Health Centers.

Also in 2000, the Pritzker administration renewed the Hospital Assessment Program, bringing an additional \$250 million in Federal dollars to the state, with \$4.4 million to Mercy.

Trinity purchased Mercy Hospital, with 402 licensed beds, in 2012. Founded in 1852, the hospital traces its roots to a rooming house near Rush Street and the Chicago River, converted to healthcare by the Sisters of Mercy. It is Chicago's oldest hospital and its first chartered teaching hospital.

Several early moves included a then-country location that allowed the hospital to survive the Chicago Fire of 1871 and provide a haven for burn victims. A building plan in the 1950s called for relocation to the suburbs with the Stritch School of Medicine, but Mercy chose to stay close to city residents in need of care. The City of Chicago supported building the current location on South Michigan Avenue in 1968, making Mercy an accessible South Side neighborhood hospital.

Mercy has affiliations with some of the major academic programs and centers in Chicago.

For the Lugenia Burns Hope organization, log on to www.facebook.com/LBHopeCenter. For KOCO, log on to www.facebook.com/KOCOConnect.

Mercy Hospital & Medical Center can be reached at (312) 567-2000 or www.mercy-chicago.org. For the governor's office, call (312) 814-2121. To contact Robinson, call (773) 924-4614. For Congressman Rush's office, call (773) 779-2400.

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