QUALITY HEALTH CARE FOR ALL:
OPCTJ’S Work with the Oak Park/Austin Health Alliance

Background

In 2004 Oak Park’s largest hospital, West Suburban, was acquired by Resurrection Health Care (RHC), a large Catholic hospital chain. West Suburban was a primary source of quality health care in the Oak Park and Austin communities as well as a major employer. At the time of the acquisition, residents in both communities expressed concern about the potential impact of the acquisition on the quality and availability of health care. In response to these concerns, the Illinois Health Facilities Board approved the acquisition only after an agreement between RHC and the Illinois Attorney General’s office. The agreement required RHC to:

1. Continue the level of charity care at or above the level provided by West Suburban prior to the acquisition (RWC and West Suburban are both organized as not-for-profit hospitals and therefore receive significant tax breaks because of their charitable mission);
2. Provide an alternative to patients seeking reproductive health services that the RHC chain refuses to provide because of its adherence to Catholic doctrine (e.g., birth control, pregnancy termination, etc);
3. Continue to seek input from community residents with respect to the range and quality of health services provided.

RHC’s Impact on West Suburban Hospital

Despite the agreement signed with the Attorney General’s office, data compiled from the first half year of post-acquisition operation revealed that the level of charity health care was reduced below that provided prior to the acquisition. Further, RHC implemented staff cutbacks that undermined the quality of health care provided. These included increase in the patient/nurse ratio in units throughout the hospital (including labor & delivery, and medical/surgical floors), a cutback in support staff (for example, the lactation consultant who helps new mothers with breastfeeding). During the past year, Resurrection West Suburban has been cited on multiple occasions by the Illinois Department of Public Health for problems including proper procedures for medicating patients for pain, preventing bed sores, and documenting patients leaving the ER without receiving care. Since acquisition of West Sub, RHC has made no efforts to include Oak Park and Austin residents in their health care planning.

Staff at West Suburban responded to these changes by an increased interest in organizing for collective bargaining with RHC, working primarily with AFSCME Council 31. RHC countered by hiring Sefarth Shaw and the Haymarket Group to counter employee organize and community accountability efforts.
Community Response: Oak Park/Austin Health Alliance (OPAHA)

The decline in charity care, the attack on employees’ rights to organize, and the overall resistance to community input into health care planning generated community opposition to RHC policies and methods. In mid-2005, OPCTJ joined with the South Austin Community Coalition (SACC) and AFSCME Council 31 to form the Oak Park/Austin Health Alliance (OPAHA) as a community vehicle for countering RHC’s move towards a corporate approach to medical care.

OPAHA’s Program

OPAHA has organized several community meetings to discuss Resurrection West Suburban (RWS) and the crisis in health care. These community meetings created a four point proposal, OPAHA’s Community Benefits Agreement:

1. Insure access to health care for residents in need
2. Provide health care services that benefit the community
3. Recognize employees right to organize
4. Create a community outreach/input program

OPAHA is now working on several fronts to implement the Community Benefits Agreement.

1. We are asking senior management at RWS to agree to meet with us and discuss these points.
2. We are going door-to-door to expand community support for the Community Benefits Agreement.
3. We are talking with representatives of the Illinois AG’s office, urging a review of the extent to which RWC has honored the undertaking executed prior to acquiring West Suburban.
4. We are seeking the endorsement and support of other Oak Park and Austin groups for the Community Benefits Agreement.
5. We are beginning to work with other groups in other communities that are also affected by RHC acquisitions to build a larger opposition to RHC’s corporatization of health care.

Join us in this fight quality health care for all;

Call: Bill Barclay 708-386-1371 or John Bradley 708-386-2373