

October 30, 2020

Debra Savage
Chairwoman
Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board
525 W. Jefferson St., Second Floor
Springfield, IL 62761

RE: 20-039 Mercy Hospital Closure Public Hearing

Dear Chairwoman Savage,

I am writing on behalf of AIDS Foundation Chicago, in response to the news of Mercy Hospital and Medical Center (Mercy Hospital) closing in 2021. As you know, Mercy Hospital serves residents of the South Side of Chicago – a community that has long faced inequitable access to healthcare options while also being disproportionately impacted by many healthcare struggles, most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge you to work together, with local and state agencies, and with Trinity Health to reverse this decision and prevent additional hardship for the communities that Mercy Hospital serves.

AIDS Foundation Chicago (AFC) mobilizes communities to create equity and justice for people living with and vulnerable to HIV or chronic conditions. AFC envisions a future where people living with HIV or chronic conditions will thrive, and there will be no new HIV cases. For 35 years, AFC has worked to ensure that people living with or vulnerable to HIV in Chicago and across Illinois are able to access the care and services they need.

In the City of Chicago – and across the nation – Black communities often experience significantly worse health outcomes than their white neighbors. This trend has existed for decades and today, it is exemplified in statistics for both the HIV epidemic¹ and the COVID-19 pandemic.² These disparities are both the result of, and are exacerbated by, the systemic anti-Black racism that exists throughout our society – including in the healthcare arena. For communities to become and stay healthy, each resident must be able to receive accessible, equitable, and comprehensive healthcare. Allowing Mercy Hospital to close will cause irreparable harm for the historically Black neighborhoods that have relied on this institution for more than a century and a half and exacerbate the current healthcare desert that exists on the South Side of Chicago.

Mercy Hospital is one of Illinois' forty safety net hospitals and provides services to no to low income and uninsured patients seeking lifesaving care. As a safety net hospital, Mercy Hospital also works with a large number of patients covered by Medicaid and Medicare. Without this care, the neighborhoods that rely on Mercy Hospital for care will be left searching for care

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV by Race/Ethnicity," <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/index.html>.

² NPR, "What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State By State?," <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>; The New York Times, "The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus," <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latino-african-americans-cdc-data.html>.

outside of their communities and away from their trusted providers and programs that have been serving them for decades. This will cost lives.

In addition to our general objection to the closing of Mercy Hospital, we must highlight three important areas of care that Mercy Hospital provides for the predominately Black communities that access care at this institution: care for people living with HIV (PLWH), substance use support, and maternal and birthing care. First, for PLWH, connection to care is imperative to maintain health and quality of life. Mercy Hospital's Michael Reese HIV Care Program provides care to approximately 400 patients and provides clinical services, including: comprehensive primary and specialty medical care; prevention and risk reduction; case management; and, medical adherence counseling. Losing Mercy Hospital will not only make access to care more difficult for PLWH on the South Side of Chicago, it will undoubtedly make Getting to Zero in Illinois by 2030 more difficult to achieve.

In addition to care for PLWH, Mercy Hospital provides substance use and addiction services to Black communities that have been unjustly targeted by racist drug laws for years. In August, the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) released a report showing that Black Chicagoans made up 60 percent of deaths related to opioid use this year – a 66 percent increase in the rate of fatal overdoses for Black Chicagoans compared to last year.³ Losing these services will create additional hardship for Black Chicagoans seeking care in the face of stigma and over-criminalization. We implore you to do everything in your power to prevent the closure of Mercy Hospital, especially given this growing need for substance use services for Black Chicagoans.

Finally, we must note that closing Mercy Hospital will result in the loss of women's health care services, including obstetrics, in a predominately Black community. Just last year, CDPH released a data report on maternal morbidity and mortality as part of the Healthy Chicago project.⁴ Black women have the highest rates of severe maternal morbidity and the highest pregnancy-associated mortality ratio in Chicago. This report concludes that “stark racial and socioeconomic disparities in maternal morbidity and mortality exist in Chicago” especially “among Chicago's non-Hispanic Black mothers and those living in communities with higher economic hardship.” Losing pregnancy and delivery care at Mercy Hospital will create an additional barrier for Black parents on the South Side and will lead to worsening maternal morbidity and mortality outcomes for an already vulnerable community.

As organizations and individuals living in and around Chicago who support health equity, access to competent and comprehensive care, and who believe that healthcare is a human right, we know that closing Mercy Hospital will cause unnecessary and devastating harm to Black communities seeking services. We are especially opposed to the closing of Mercy Hospital because it will further alienate Chicagoans that already struggle to access care within their communities. If permitted to go forward, shutting down Mercy Hospital will endanger some of

³ Chicago Department of Public Health, “Chicago Opioid Update: Mid Year,” https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/tobacco_alcohol_and_drug_abuse/Mid-Year%20Opioid%20Report%202020%20final.pdf.

⁴ Chicago Department of Public Health, “Maternal Morbidity & Mortality In Chicago,” https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdph/statistics_and_reports/CDPH-002_MaternalMortality_Databook_r4c_DIGITAL.pdf.

our most marginalized neighbors at a time when we are fighting a global health pandemic due to COVID-19, and the subsequent economic downturn that has resulted.

As stated above, we believe that healthcare is a human right. For communities that continue to face significant health disparities, losing a safety net hospital like Mercy Hospital will not only exacerbate these disparities, it also intensifies the continued impact of systemic racism. We urge you to work together and with other partners to prevent this closure, and hope for continued support in the fight for equitable healthcare for every Chicagoan and Illinoisan. We are in the midst of a global health pandemic, an economic downturn, and an ongoing fight for racial equity – it is imperative that we do not lose Mercy Hospital in this moment.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Aisha N. Davis, Esq. at adavis@aidschicago.org.

Sincerely,

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