

Detroit Riverview Hospital to close: “Losing this hospital will devastate this community”

By Charles Bogle
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St. John Detroit Riverview Hospital has served east side Detroit since 1987. Earlier this year, the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute announced their intent to transform the community hospital into a facility devoted exclusively to cancer patients.

On June 30, this intention will become a reality, and the area’s residents, many of whom are poor and/or elderly, will no longer have a community hospital. The hospital presently employs 1,511 workers, many of whom reside in Detroit. Only 400 of these workers will remain once the Cancer Institute opens.

Talking to the hospital employees and area residents, one gains an appreciation for the services provided by the hospital to the surrounding neighborhood and what the loss of these services will mean to both residents and employees. One also begins to grasp the devastating consequences of the domination of healthcare services by profit interests.

St. John Detroit Riverview Hospital has geared its services to the mostly poor and elderly who live in the surrounding area. Employee Terri Anderson stated that because “many of our patients are geriatrics who are unable to get to other hospitals, St. John provided transportation for them.” Kim Clark, another employee, added that because the nearest hospital is 5 to 10 miles away, those area residents who do not have cancer “will have to depend on friends or public transportation.” She quickly added, however, that “no buses run from here to the remaining hospitals.”

St. John Hospital Reverend Nora Brown also stated that the hospital provided “dental and pediatrics services as well as medications.” “Losing this hospital,” she stated, “will devastate this community. Everybody in this community could use this hospital; not everybody in this community has cancer.”

Joe Morgan, area resident and husband of a hospital

employee, added to the sense of impending devastation when he told this reporter, “A lot of patients don’t have insurance, and they depend on this hospital for care and medications.”

Losing St. John Detroit Riverview Hospital will also affect hospital employees, both present and future. An RN with 38 years of experience, who asked to remain anonymous due to the uncertain nature of her severance package, said that she had “planned on retiring in a few years,” but she knows that when she looks for another job, “no one will match my present pay.” She also added, “doctors will be displaced due to change in purpose [from community hospital to cancer treatment].”

Reverend Nora Brown told this reporter that of those employees who will be retained by the cancer treatment facility, many will move from “full-time to part-time” status, which means that while the employees may work 40 or more hours, their benefits will be determined by the part-time formula. And while severance pay will be provided for those employees who were unionized, the amount, according to employee Angela, will be determined by a formula of “one week’s pay for each year you’ve been here.”

The employees will also pay emotionally when they lose their jobs. Miss Johnson, an RN, said that when the closing was announced, “I kind of felt like I was being put out on the street from my own home.”

When asked why a hospital that had served its community so faithfully was being closed, those interviewed pointed to the privatization of healthcare and its demoralizing consequences. As Joe Morgan put it, “It’s the money.”

Miss Johnson underscored this statement when she reasoned, “St John’s wants to get out of the city in order to make more profits.” She also spoke to the

sense of demoralization among those who have spent their working lives in healthcare: “Healthcare has really changed over the years. It used to be that hospitals took care of their patients. Now, it’s all about the numbers.”

Several employees saw evidence of this “all about the numbers” attitude in the present conditions at Riverview Hospital and the outlook for the nursing profession. Miss Johnson mentioned that the hospital has become “a corporation, so therefore they don’t think about the employees.” Apparently, they don’t think about the patients either. Employee Angela pointed out that due to a lack of available beds, “We’ve had people that have actually been in the ER for five days.”

For these and other reasons, including placing “too much responsibility on the nurses,” Angela declared, “Healthcare and nursing are not good professions anymore.”

Near the end of our conversation, Miss Johnson looked back toward the hospital and said with evident dissatisfaction, “We never see the CEO or management walking the halls.” Perhaps it is this disconnection from the reality facing hospital workers and patients that is behind the viewpoint of St. John Health President and CEO Elliot Joseph, who stated in a press release, “The sale helps St. John Health to be good stewards of its resources so we can continue to serve Detroit through our vibrant health programs and services.”

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