

DATE
7/13/21

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For Immediate Release

Schenectady Tells Ellis: Don't Take Away Our Services

Event to highlight demands for transparency amid inequity and loss of critical services

Schenectady, NY, July 13, 2021 – The Schenectady Coalition for Healthcare Access (SCHA) is holding a rally on Sunday, July 25 at 12:30 pm to call for an end to cuts in healthcare services and highlight the lack of transparency in the impending merger agreement between Ellis Medicine and St. Peter's Health Partners (SPHP), a Trinity Health affiliate. *SOS: Save Our Services* will kick off with a march beginning at Schenectady City Hall and end with the rally at Veteran's Park.

A wide range of speakers will address the group at Veteran's Park, each bringing her/his/their unique perspective concerning issues of the merger. Anyone unable to participate in the march portion of the event is encouraged to join the rally.

"Among the most troubling components of this merger is the accelerated timeline," says Michelle Ostrelich, Schenectady County Legislator and chair of the health and human services committee. "When we held our first public forum in March, we were told that official plans would not materialize for at least one year — enabling time for the community's concerns to be studied and addressed. Now we are hearing that agreements are being finalized. And yet, not one of the concerns raised at the forum have been addressed — formally or informally. None of this speaks to the transparency we were initially assured. Backroom deals are not transparency."

At its core, SCHA's priorities tackle issues of inequity and loss. "A healthcare system that provides a limited range of services and/or selectively determines eligibility for services — based on discriminatory practices rather than sound medical advice — is not an equitable public health care provider," says Arthur Butler, Schenectady County Human Rights Commission Executive Director. "How can we tell our family, friends and neighbors that some of them don't matter? Are any of our lives truly more valuable than others?"

Women who already face inequity of care in our current healthcare system will now be further disadvantaged by cuts in services. And medical decisions will move from thoughtful and compassionate discussions between a woman and her doctor to forced adherence to policy-based exclusions of care.

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“What kind of message is Ellis sending women right now? ‘We don’t care,’” says Nikita Hardy, MPA, Schenectady County Human Rights Commissioner and certified doula. “By moving forward with the merger plans — with no modifications in writing — Ellis is telling women they don’t care about their reproductive health, their mental health or their overall well-being. But there are many of us in the community who *do* care. And we’ll keep fighting for women and families.”

While SCHA recognizes that independent community hospitals — both in the Capital Region and on a national level — face significant challenges with long term-viability, the secrecy surrounding the details of the current Ellis Medicine merger are of grave concern. “There are clear risks and benefits to this or any merger,” continues Ostrelich. “What’s so disconcerting here is that no one has shared information with our community about partnership options. We were simply told that Ellis would merge with SPHP/Trinity. We hear sound bites about the benefits of this merger. But we never see anyone trying to mitigate the very real risks that will accompany it — risks to the health and well-being of the people that live and work in Schenectady County. They are owed more than that. They deserve better.”

Butler agrees with that assessment. “Whether current Ellis/Trinity discussions are in the form of a management or partnership agreement, that makes little difference in the long run. Any agreement or merger language has to protect all of us, the members of this community. Otherwise, we have wholeheartedly lost a seat at the table.”

End-of-life care decisions are also in jeopardy as a result of the merger. “Patients nearing the end of life, seeking compassionate care — such as voluntarily stopping eating and drinking, palliative sedation, withdrawal of care — may no longer have access to these options,” says Kim Callinan, President and CEO of Compassion & Choices. Instead of patients and loved ones making their own choices regarding care, she says, decisions will be made by the hospital’s bioethics committee — which could ultimately lead to prolonged and unnecessary suffering. “It will be impossible to undo the harm caused by denial of services: the memories of a loved one’s suffering and pain are forever etched in family members’ minds. A person’s ability to select care, particularly end-of-life care, is incredibly personal and should not be dictated to them.”

Across the country, legislation is being proposed targeting the LGBTQ community. Health care access for this population is already under siege — and merging with a large, national health care system will undoubtedly add to the trauma and discrimination the LGBTQ community is currently facing.

“Receiving medical care is one of the most vulnerable and intimate things a person can do,” says Justice Dazzle, President and founding member of Schenectady Safe Space. “Having to worry about your partner being allowed at your side, your identity and/or sexuality being questioned, being forced to defend and educate in exchange for basic human respect, being denied affirming and necessary care — these concerns should not be part of the equation. The Ellis/Trinity merger will make informed, respectful and affirming care a variable for all LGBTQIA+ people in the area. That is simply not acceptable.”

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The merger has also gained the attention of the NYCLU. “No New Yorker should be turned away from their local hospital because of policy-based exclusions that defy science, yet Ellis Medicine and Trinity Health will soon cut essential services and put patients seeking care at risk,” says Melanie Trimble, Regional Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union’s Capital Region Office. “The NYCLU is proud to stand with patients, caregivers, doctors, nurses and clergy to save Schenectady’s health services and ensure that community residents’ access to life saving, evidence-based healthcare will not be in jeopardy.”

Ellis has long been supported by the residents and leaders of Schenectady County — through its tax-exempt non-profit status, a loyal donor base and countless service hours from dedicated volunteers. In return, the community seeks continuity of care.

“A community hospital, even one that partners with a larger health care system, has a primary responsibility: to care for every individual who walks through its doors,” says Reverend Sara Baron of First Schenectady United Methodist Church. “Will women be able to continue receiving the full range of reproductive care they currently receive at Bellevue? Will the LGBTQIA+ community be welcomed and affirmed in the Trinity system? Will end-of-life decisions be made *for* us, instead of *by* us? These questions have been asked, over and over again — but they’ve fallen on deaf ears. Today we are calling for the Ellis administration to hear us. To protect us. To consider the real-life effects this merger will have on the individuals and families that live in and around Schenectady County.”

For more information about the Schenectady Coalition for Healthcare Access please visit www.schdy.org or call Michelle Ostrelich at 518-391-9900.

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Schenectady Coalition for Healthcare Access seeks to maintain access to comprehensive reproductive care, infertility care, LGBTQ+-inclusive care, gender affirming care and end-of-life care within our community, and we oppose any discrimination or elimination of services or change to our ability to learn about, choose and be provided with medical treatment in hospitals and clinics. Our purpose is not only to protect patient rights, but also -- as a matter of healthcare justice -- ensure that such care is locally accessible, equitably distributed and non-coercive whether it is currently available or may become available in the future.