



Our View | Health Care

Aurora stands up for city, but access still a problem

Aurora does the right thing and maintains critical services at Sinai hospital. Now, let's bolster federally subsidized clinics.

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Aurora Sinai Medical Center, a bastion of medical care for Milwaukee's central city, will keep its emergency department and other services open at its downtown location.

In the face of millions of dollars of losses, Aurora and its chief executive, Nick Turkal, stood firm [and did the right thing for the city](#).

But chronic problems remain in Milwaukee's health care system. Access to primary care needs to be improved - and patients need to be encouraged to seek care at clinics, not at expensive emergency departments. The latter may be as difficult as the former, given the long history in Milwaukee of using emergency departments for urgent or routine care.

One goal emerging from the Sinai decision should be an agreement to bolster Federally Qualified Health Centers in Milwaukee - Milwaukee Health Services, Progressive Community Health Centers and the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center. If these clinics can find a way to grow, the city's primary health care system could be made more sustainable.

Aurora's evaluation of Sinai over the past few months raised deep concern among those who care for the poor in the central city that the health care group would close its Sinai emergency room, where thousands of impoverished people seek care each year. [Wheaton Franciscan](#), which operates the only other ER in the central city at Wheaton Franciscan-St. Joseph, was understandably worried that it couldn't carry the entire load alone.

But Aurora was able to increase efficiency at Sinai to cut its losses to what are likely to be a more manageable \$10 million annually, Turkal said. Sinai lost an estimated \$17 million last year.

Mayor Tom Barrett, while clearly pleased with Aurora's decision, is frustrated that the city's health care system remains so fragile - especially after new hospitals have gone up at great expense in the suburbs in recent years. "I need these hospital systems to work with me and our Health Department to ensure that our residents have ER care and primary care and ultimately the same care that other citizens get," Barrett said.

Turkal counters that the systems are working together to improve access and on other issues through the [Milwaukee Health Care Partnership](#). And he said that Aurora is hoping to form partnerships with

community organizations to expand access to primary care to reduce the number of patients using Sinai's emergency room.

Aurora made a difficult decision to keep Sinai's ER and other services open despite financial pressure to do otherwise. Give the company credit for that. Now, Aurora and the city's other health care systems should put more money and effort into bolstering federally subsidized clinics, which could ensure better and more sustainable access to quality care.

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