

Abortion foes will oppose merger City's hospitals may face backlash to proposal

By David Krechevsky
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WATERBURY — The president of a Connecticut anti-abortion group said this week his organization will oppose the proposed merger of Waterbury's two hospitals if it means the combined facility or an affiliate would perform abortions.

Bill O'Brien, president of Waterbury-based Connecticut Right to Life Corp., issued a statement Wednesday evening saying his organization "will work against any merger of Waterbury Hospital with Saint Mary's Hospital if the merger would result in the opening of a new abortion clinic in Waterbury."

In a telephone interview Thursday, O'Brien said he was reacting to comments by officials involved in the proposed merger, who said that while the joint venture between the hospitals and LHP Hospital Group of Plano, Texas, will operate in accordance with the ethical and religious standards of the Catholic Church, the partnership has also committed to continuing "all health care services now available in Greater Waterbury." That would presumably include family planning measures long opposed by the church.

"Since Waterbury Hospital has essentially served as Waterbury's abortion clinic, we find it inconceivable that Saint Mary's would even consider merging with Waterbury Hospital as long as Waterbury Hospital continues to allow abortions to be done on its premises or continues to have abortionists on its staff," O'Brien said in his statement. "We also find it abhorrent that Saint Mary's Hospital's leaders may even be considering entering into any new relationships, (no) matter how removed they may be, with any abortionists or abortion clinics."

Darlene Stromstad, Waterbury Hospital's new chief executive officer, issued a statement via email on behalf of the parties involved in the joint venture in response to O'Brien's statements.

"There are many examples of successful mergers across the United States in which faith-based and non-Catholic hospitals have been able to maintain access to health care services through various arrangements," Stromstad said. "The new medical center, when completed, will respect the tradition of faith-based care consistent with Catholic teaching and abide by the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services. At the same time, there is a commitment to provide the continuation of all health care services now available in Greater Waterbury. "

Lois Uttley, director for MergerWatch.org, a New York-based nonprofit organization that seeks

to protect patients' rights when religious and secular hospitals merge, said similar mergers elsewhere have found ways to make the conflicting principles work, either by the concept of a "hospital within a hospital" or the concept of a "hospital beside a hospital."

She cited Brackenridge Hospital in Austin, Texas, which was operated by the city until it awarded a management contract to Seton Health Care, a Catholic, not-for-profit health care system.

Initially, family-planning services were performed at Brackenridge only by city-paid employees, which the local bishop approved. After objections were raised and a complaint was made to the Vatican in Rome, "the city was forced to go back to the drawing board," Uttley said.

The city then created Austin Women's Hospital, which was incorporated separately and placed on the top floor of Brackenridge. It is run not by Seton, but by the University of Texas' medical branch.

She noted, though, that it is usually not possible to include abortion services in that arrangement, "because the Catholic hierarchy does not allow it."

The "hospital beside a hospital" alternative is one set up by Kingston Hospital in Kingston, N.Y., which merged with Benedictine Hospital, a Catholic facility.

They built an ambulatory surgical center in the hospital's parking lot to perform abortions and other surgical procedures there.

The fear that the Waterbury merger will create a "new abortion clinic" is misleading, Uttley said. "This does not add an abortion provider, it simply maintains the provision of the service," she said.

O'Brien, however, said his goal is to end abortions in Waterbury, as well as to fight family planning services. He said Thursday he also believes doctors who perform abortions should not have privileges at Saint Mary's Hospital or the merged facility.

"If a newly constituted Saint Mary's Hospital is to abide by the ethical and religious directives for Catholic health care services, the hospital should abide by the spirit, as well as the letter, of those directives," he said. "To us, that means that such a hospital should have absolutely nothing to do with abortion, or doctors who perform abortions, or other practices that are opposed to Catholic ethical or moral principles."

Uttley said O'Brien's objection is premature, because the parties in the proposed merger have not yet offered a specific plan to deal with these issues. She also said the parties have shown a sensitivity to the concerns of all sides, even though two of the parties are secular.

"I really think they are bending over backwards to accommodate the Catholic religion and restrictions in this entity," she said. "Saint Mary's is only one of three partners and will only own 10 percent of this entity, so it seems to me there's been a great deal of deference given to

Catholic restrictions here.

"There needs to be an equal amount of attention paid to protecting patients' rights and access to care," Uttley added, "and I'm hopeful this will happen as the partnership goes forward."

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