

Ensuring Continuity of Emergency Care – A Meeting With Seth Warren

During a recent meeting at St. James Hospital, President Seth Warren assured State Representative Al Riley, D-Olympia Fields, local mayors and village officials that south suburban residents will continue to receive high quality emergency care despite the hospital relinquishing its status as a Level 1 trauma center.

Rep. Riley organized the meeting to get a full understanding of St. James' decision and to ensure that the public health needs of residents are addressed. "I explained to Representative Riley and the other mayors and village managers the unfortunate reasons we are ceasing to provide trauma coverage," Warren said. "I also explained the difference between emergency care and trauma care and that St. James will continue to have a full service, comprehensive emergency department in both of our facilities."

According to Warren, the term "trauma" specifies certain types of injuries, such as blunt force trauma or penetrating trauma, which includes bullet wounds. Out of 71,000 visits to St. James emergency rooms in the last year, only about 1,000 were trauma cases, Warren said. This amounts to 1 1/2 percent of emergency room visits. There are about 85 transfers a year from other institutions, including Gary Methodist, he said.

Warren said there were operational as well as fiscal reasons for the hospital's decision. St. James does not have all of the specialty physicians required for state designation as a Level 1 trauma center. This is because specialty physicians who are in high demand relocate to more financially lucrative geographic locations, or to Indiana, where the reimbursement rate and payment cycles by the state are better.

"This is a problem affecting the entire country," said Riley, "especially when the payer mix includes a greater number of uninsured patients. There are also the issues of high medical malpractice rates in Illinois and a high level of litigation in Cook County". Warren said that St. James loses about one million a year maintaining the center.

After meeting with Warren, Riley said he feels comfortable that "normal emergency room care is not affected by this change—that is something people need to understand. St. James will maintain full service emergency room care in both of their institutions." "I also want residents to know that these changes have been communicated to Emergency Medical Services personnel throughout the region; there will be continuity of emergency care". Warren said, "Some trauma victims will still come to our department and be stabilized before they are moved to another hospital." That hospital, in all likelihood, would be Christ Hospital and Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

Park Forest Manager Tom Mick said he came away from the meeting with a better understanding of why the hospital opted out of its trauma status. "We understood there was not one particular issue why St. James ceased its trauma status. We learned how their decision was made—it had to do with staffing and liability. It was good to hear that residents will continue to get the same exact high quality service from both St. James facilities that they've gotten all along. That was real positive."