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Opinion: Time to prioritize St. Anthony's new health care campus on the Southwest Side

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St. Anthony Hospital at 2875 W. 19th St.

At a young age, I witnessed the impact of inequality in health care. My father, a tough Italian immigrant built like a block of cement, arrived home from his job at a bolts and screws factory with his hand wrapped in bandages. A heavy box had fallen on his left hand.

My parents began talking quietly in Italian. Instead of resetting broken bones or scheduling him for surgery, the hospital sliced off three of his fingers and sent him home. He didn't have insurance.

Somehow, he still managed to take care of us and even cut hair as a side job using his thumb and index finger. But I was angry that he had been so disregarded.

Today I oversee a small community hospital, St. Anthony Hospital, on Chicago's Southwest Side. We serve the communities of Little Village, North Lawndale, Brighton Park, Garfield Park, Back of the Yards, McKinley Park and others. We offer quality, compassionate care for our patients, regardless of ability to pay.

For more than a decade, we have been working on a plan to build a new campus at Kedzie Avenue and 31st Street that would include a state-of-the-art hospital, affordable housing, green space, child care and job training opportunities. Despite years of effort, fundraising and local commitments, our project keeps getting overlooked while others at the city and state levels manage to garner support from elected officials.

To the next mayor of Chicago: Please prioritize our project, Focal Point Community Campus.

When I came to Chicago as a health care consultant more than a decade ago, I never expected to be a hospital CEO or the loudest voice on a major land redevelopment project. But I see the need every day. I see how some Chicago hospital systems brush aside people in my community. I see other health facilities turn away those who need it most.

I see elected officials who manage, even in tight budget years, to allocate funding toward theaters, arts programs, pickleball courts, dog parks, money for a solar-powered elementary school and at least \$224 million for an ongoing Capitol renovation that included mahogany doors wrapped in copper.

If money can be found for these projects — and I'm glad organizations across the state receive help — why not ours? All we're asking for is the same level of commitment.

Sadly, what I've learned is that many elected officials say how much they care about equity in health care. But they are more responsive to pet projects, favors and politics.

Our project is City Council-approved. We acquired the land for \$5 million, in addition to \$3 million the city required us to place in escrow — even as a nonprofit working with limited funds. We hired designers and are working on fundraising. What we don't have is a committed and ambitious crew of elected officials willing to make this a priority and back bonds for construction, like they have for so many other projects.

The people of the West and Southwest sides deserve a great state-of-the-art hospital with elevators that work and heating and cooling systems that keep them comfortable and private rooms and a cafeteria for families to gather. St. Anthony is a beautiful building, but it opened in 1898. It is inefficient and outdated for today's medical needs.

During COVID, we served the most dire, desperate cases. We worked overtime for more than a year at nearly 70% over capacity. And we administered more vaccine to the hardest hit communities than any other hospital in Chicago.

For more than 10 years, I have fervently and passionately fought for this new campus to give our community an amenity it deserves. The project is real and it will be built, thanks to supporters outside Chicago and Illinois who see this model as a game-changer.

Yet for most of those 10 years, I've been told it couldn't be done. That it was a crazy idea. That I should move on. But if motivated people didn't pursue big, challenging ideas, we wouldn't have McDonald's franchises. We wouldn't have the internet. We wouldn't have Amazon.

At St. Anthony, we help people who want opportunities for themselves and their families, just like residents in Lincoln Park and the North Shore. They want the same chances at life. They deserve attention and quality care. Just like my father.

Guy Medaglia is president and CEO of St. Anthony Hospital on Chicago's Southwest Side.



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