

Another Brooklyn Hospital Announces Closing of Maternity Ward

MATERNITY CRISIS

Over the past five years, three maternity wards have closed in Brooklyn. In 2004, Interfaith Medical Center was forced to close its maternity ward. St. Mary's Hospital closed down entirely in 2005. Last December, mounting financial problems led Victory Memorial Hospital in Bay Ridge to close its labor and delivery ward. Long Island College Hospital announced plans to close its maternity ward in August.

Labor and delivery services are typically the biggest money loser at hospitals due to low reimbursement rates and high costs of malpractice insurance. Stanley Breeznoff, the president of LICH's parent company, Continuum Health Partners, said the closing of the maternity ward would help LICH avoid bankruptcy. According to Continuum, maternity and prenatal care services lose \$11 million dollars per year. LICH is in \$170 million dollars of debt. The plan to close LICH needs final approval from the State Department of Health.

LICH delivered nearly 3,000 babies in 2007 and will deliver approximately 2,200 this year. Hundreds of women who were planning to deliver at LICH must now find alternative hospitals to deliver their babies. Methodist, Lutheran and Brooklyn Hospitals are expected to pick up these obstetric patients. Three hundred and fifty employees could lose their jobs at LICH. The announcement comes amidst conflict at the hospital. In June, medical staff announced their intention to file complaint with the State Department of Health and the Attorney General's office to sever its partnership with Continuum Health Partners alleging that Continuum diverted resources away from LICH to benefit its other hospitals in Manhattan.

The closing of several maternity wards in Brooklyn is emerging as a serious threat to maternal and child health. City Councilman Bill de Blasio, who represents the district where LICH is located, has written a letter to Health Commissioner Daines to ask the Department of Health to analyze the impact of LICH's proposed closing, noting that "maternity wards closings are becoming a borough wide problem" (Ruiz, NY Daily News, August 8, 2008). Brooklyn has the highest number of births of the five boroughs of New York City and consequently there is a high need for maternity care services, especially among underserved communities in East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Bushwick. Doctors and advocates recognize that obstetric services are often a point of entry into the hospital. Eliminating these critical services will have an impact on the other departments, including neonatology, pediatrics, and family medicine. As hospitals continue to close their doors, increasing numbers of women and families will be left without accessible health services.

