**Cook County Health & Hospitals System Is**

**Viable Even as It Faces Challenges**

In many ways, the Cook County Health & Hospitals System (“HHS”) is in the best position it has been in in years. In other ways, it is facing some of its greatest challenges. But both Wayne Lerner, a member of the HHS Board of Directors, and Laurence Msall, President of the Civic Federation, agree that the HHS plays a vital role in providing healthcare to the people of Cook County, and it must continue to exist.

These are some if the key take-aways from the “Lunch & Learn with the League” annual program sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Cook County on August 11. League member Susan Kern led Dr. Lerner and Mr. Msall in conversation focusing on the topic of how sustainable is the HHS.

**Affordable Health Care Act a Lifesaver for HHS**

Those attending learned that the Affordable Care Act (“ACA,” commonly referred to as “Obamacare”) has been a lifesaver for HHS. In 2009, $481 million of the HHS budget had to be covered by Cook County taxes. In 2016, the amount of County taxes budgeted for the HHS is only $121 million. That is only 7% of HHS’s total budget of $1,640 million. As a result of the ACA, 68% of the patients that the HHS now treats are covered by some kind of insurance, whether it be private or Medicaid or other government programs. This is a complete turnaround from the past when the vast majority of patients were uninsured.

But the ACA also gave a jumpstart to the new wave of healthcare being embraced by the HHS: health management through continuous care. The concept is that health costs will be lower by having preventive and wellness care. The HHS provides such care through its County Care managed health care program. The HHS receives a fixed payment per month for each person covered by insurance who is enrolled in County Care. For this year, that is expected to amount to over $900 million. As Dr. Lerner explained, that sets the cap, and the HHS hopes to spend less than that amount in providing care to those patients. That allows the remainder to help cover other costs of the HHS providing care to those who are uninsured, as well as those in the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and the Cook County Jail.

**HHS Must Now Compete to Retain the Insured**

However, people who are now insured also have many options other than County Care or the other services of the HHS. And many choose to go elsewhere. While the goal was to have 180,000 people under County Care, it is actually about 163,000. Dr. Lerner explained the staff of the HHS is undergoing a huge cultural shift: they are not used to having competition. One of the challenges to the HHS Board is to help align the incentives among the administration, the staff and unions (90% of the staff are unionized), and the people of Cook County. Mr. Msall said that this gets complicated by the fact that while the HHS administration negotiates work rules for the union contracts, the County administration negotiates salary and benefits. This bifurcation is of concern to the Civic Federation.

**HHS Must Remain Viable**

Both Dr. Lerner and Mr. Msall agreed that the HHS must continue to be viable. While all hospitals are required to provide life-saving services, regardless of the ability to pay, other entities can and do limit the amount of other care they provide. What entity will replace Stroger Hospital’s trauma center or burn unit? What entity would provide health care to inmates, other than HHS? Where will the uninsured turn for their care?

The HHS Board has just adopted a new 3-year strategic plan. Both speakers praised it, while Dr. Lerner expressed concern that the plan called for achieving too many objectives by next year, rather than being more focused. Mr. Msall was critical of the fact that there was no accompanying 3-year financial plan. Of particular concern is that the County is not budgeting for new medical equipment.

**Praise for Independent Board**

But one aspect that the Civic Federation clearly supports is continuation of the Independent HHS Board which was created by the Cook County Board in 2008. Board members receive no compensation, other than being reimbursed for expenses. A nominating committee composed of 14 people from a variety of civic, medical, and labor organizations specified in the County ordinance provide three names per Board vacancy to the Cook County President. The President then submits one of these names to the Cook County Board for approval. Mr. Msall praised the quality of the HHS Board, as well as President Preckwinkle for allowing it to be truly independent.

**Last Thought and Challenge**

Mr. Msall had the final word: we will know that the HHS has truly reached its goal of providing excellent care and being recognized for that when the medical plan for Cook County employees covers services by the HHS!