

Emanuel: Hospitals must focus on homeless too



Mayor Rahm Emanuel (Hilary Higgins / Chicago Tribune)

By **Tribune staff report**

Mayor Rahm Emanuel vowed yesterday to engage the City's hospitals in efforts to combat growing homelessness in Chicago.

Addressing a group of 800 advocates here for the national Corporation for Supportive Housing Summit, Emanuel said the case for hospital involvement is a "no-brainer." He noted hospitals are paying a high price when homeless men and women are forced to find care in emergency rooms.

"The hospitals are trying to address this problem on their own in the most inefficient way you can think of and they know it because it's costing them plenty in their emergency rooms. That's where homeless people are getting their health care and it's not working for anybody. We need to get people housing and access to cost-effective preventive care, and hospitals must play a role," Emanuel said.

Emanuel hailed the \$250,000-a-year pledge by the University of Illinois at Chicago Hospital to address homelessness. He said Health Commissioner Dr. Julie Morita was meeting with 21 other health care providers to challenge them to “help us pay upfront to end the problem or deal with its more expensive consequences on the back end.”

Yesterday’s prodding by Emanuel was further evidence of an ongoing escalation in his administration’s efforts to tackle an issue over which he is often criticized by residents and members of City Council for doing too little.

Andy Thayer, of the Uptown Tent City Organizers, has accused Emanuel of prioritizing City resources on “cleaning up the lakefront for yuppie tourists” rather than dealing with the needs of the homeless.

“A new Riverwalk is nice, and separate lakefront paths for bikers and runners is great. It's all very pretty, and in a world with unlimited funds these would be nice things to have," Thayer said. "But we don't live in that world, and Chicago has a huge homelessness problem that the mayor isn't addressing.”

In response to Thayer and other critics, Emanuel announced in April the launch of a pilot program overseen by a task force aimed at housing residents experiencing chronic homelessness.

The task force, with the support of the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), has been directed to identify solutions through the pilot program—designed to leverage permanent housing options for residents who have experienced recurring and extended homelessness.

“We as a City cannot thrive until each and every one of our residents can thrive, which is why we are committed to addressing homelessness in a holistic, comprehensive and compassionate manner,” Emanuel said when he announced the task force. “This pilot will enlist stakeholders from all over the city to ensure that we are all doing our part in ensuring that our neighbors have a place to call home, and that those who are struggling can get the support they need to get back on their feet.”