

Buy-out in works

Mercy OKs pact to run medical center

By Teri Bonas
Staff writer

The Sisters of Mercy Health Care Corp. have signed an agreement to operate Westland Medical Center, settling the stage for an outright buy-out from the Southwest Detroit Hospital Corp.

The agreement was reached Tuesday morning and is expected to take effect immediately, said Mercy spokeswoman Rose Dill.

Southwest officials declined comment.

In a renewable 30-day contract, Mercy begins to operate the former county-operated medical center in Westland while negotiators draft a purchase option. There are eight years remaining in a 10-year lease Southwest has with Wayne County.

At least for the next month, Mercy will continue to honor employee contracts with the center's 650 workers. "We can't say what's going to happen after that," said Dill.

DILL SAID an assessment team of specialists from Mount Carmel Hos-

pital in Detroit, one of five Mercy-operated hospitals in southeast Michigan, will be sent to Westland Medical to begin examining its operation and financial status. For years as a county-operated facility, the center, then called Wayne County General Hospital, recorded annual deficits of \$15-\$18 million. In 1985, Southwest reports its corporate losses at the Westland center and its Detroit hospital at \$2.5 million.

Particularly troublesome has been a low occupancy rate at the 310-bed facility of about 30 percent. In recent years, its 85-member physician staff had slipped in numbers from a one-time average of 125 doctors.

It also carried a high percentage of partial-pay patients, though it tried to bring up its number of full-pay patients. Recent records show Westland Medical carried 30 percent Medicaid patients, 25 percent Medicare patients, 12 percent indigent patients under the Resident County Hospital Program, 15 percent Blue Cross-Blue Shield patients and 5 percent private-pay patients.

The decision by Southwest to turn over its operating lease at Westland is one that it has pursued strongly because of an inability to continue to absorb financial losses.

Mercy Corp. was one of three interested bidders. Others had included an out-of-state firm, Gateway Medical Systems of Atlanta, and Michigan Osteopathic Medical Services, which recently purchased 21 clinics in the Detroit area.

Industry observers say Southwest officers were quick to hone in on the Sisters of Mercy Health Care Corp., the largest not-for-profit health care organization in the country, and one of the top five largest health care providers overall in the United States.

Besides having a healthy bank-book, Mercy's reputation in the field was considered a needed asset by Southwest officers and could provide "immediate credibility" for the struggling facility. Also, Mercy's commitment to caring for the poor, considered a central "mission" by its officials, was also viewed positively

considering Westland's status as a provider of health care to county indigents.

Tuesday morning's decision followed a Friday meeting at Mercy's Farmington Hills corporate office where its corporate board of directors directed officers to "move quickly toward an agreement," said Mount Carmel's chief operating officer, Scott Jenson.

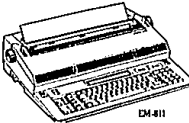
Broadening its services and diversifying has strengthened the corporation internally and made it a more influential health care operator nationwide, said Symond Gottlieb, executive director of the Greater Detroit Area Health Council.

Though some industry insiders view it as "too mission-oriented."

"The reality is when you're being squeezed for costs you can't stay in business if you give away too much care for free. The sisters are trying to do both... By and large, they're out to do a quality job," Gottlieb said.

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