



Civil Liberties

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Hospital Merger Threatens Access to Abortion Services

The ACLU is working with its pro-choice allies to preserve women's access to the full range of legal reproductive health care services when Catholic and non-Catholic hospitals merge. In the latest instance, Swedish Medical Center, the state's largest hospital, announced in March it is merging with Providence Health System-Washington, a Catholic institution. As part of the agreement, Swedish initially agreed to maintain Providence's restrictive policy on abortion services and stop providing any abortions that are not done for the purpose of protecting the woman's health.

In the rapidly changing health care market, an increasing number of mergers involve religiously controlled hospitals. Church officials push Catholic health care facilities to abide by the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*. The latter bars them from providing abortions, elective sterilizations, contraceptive services and supplies, comprehensive AIDS prevention and condom distribution, and "morning-after" pills for rape victims.

Under the merger, Swedish Medical

Center will own and operate Providence Seattle Medical Center, the Jefferson Medical Tower, and the Providence Medical Group, which includes nine primary care clinics. The Swedish-Providence deal is different from most similar mergers: Even though the new entity will no longer be a Catholic facility, a non-religious facility has agreed to adopt a Catholic facility's policy against providing non-therapeutic abortions.

"The prospect that women's reproductive health care options could be curtailed by this partnership is alarming. Lower-income women could be hit especially hard by this policy, as they may not be able to go beyond their normal clinics to obtain abortion services," said ACLU Legislative and Field Coordinator Christie Walker.

There are several steps ahead before the merger is approved. While the Department of Health reviews the details of the plan, the ACLU-WA and its pro-choice allies continue to discuss with Swedish how it can protect the full range of reproductive health services for women after the merger. ■