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Dangerous Precedent Set by Closing of Hospital's Maternity Services

HARTFORD -- Because of a bill that was voted into law on the last day of the 2010 Legislative Session, hospitals throughout Connecticut may now add or eliminate most healthcare services without permission from State of Connecticut overseeing authorities or the public's knowledge, the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) reports.

Less than 30 days after the new bill went into law, one hospital, Rockville General, had already announced plans to close its childbirth services. Doctors at the hospital deliver approximately 400 babies each year. Rockville General now operates under the aegis of the Eastern Connecticut Health Network (ECHN), which was formed in 1995 by the merger of that hospital and Manchester Memorial Hospital.

Under prior law, a healthcare facility needed to obtain a Certificate of Need (CON) in order to terminate most healthcare services, including maternity care, family planning and reproductive services, pediatric services or geriatric services. The CON process ensured that a hospital was held accountable to report its intentions to the community and would, consequently, hear the public's reaction. But PCSW is concerned that with the enactment of Public Act 10-179 (Section 83-124 & 161), which went into effect Oct. 1, this check-and-balance system no longer exists.

“Rockville Hospital may be just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to eliminating healthcare services, including those unique to women,” said PCSW Executive Director Teresa C. Younger. “Because the new legislation means hospitals may now reduce or eliminate services at will, the way is cleared for them to put profitability before the healthcare needs of patients. Our concern is that changes to the law may have ramifications far wider than Rockville Hospital's service area or its maternity care; in fact, the lack of a CON requirement could have long-term implications for communities throughout Connecticut, particularly rural communities where people must travel long distances, and at a time when hospitals are continually ending their fiscal year in the red. The PCSW is concerned that with the door wide open, hospitals will be allowed to reduce or eliminate a full range of healthcare services for women, including family planning, without taking into consideration the impact on the community. So, we are asking the question: exactly who is monitoring hospitals now?”

The Office of Health Care Access (OHCA) proposed the legislation to streamline the approval process. However, with the CON requirement gone, there is no reliable mechanism to ensure that a hospital's plan to eliminate a service will be vetted or made known to anyone in the community. This means that interested members of the public no longer have recourse through public hearings, or a forum to comment on the proposal.

PCSW, which is mandated by law to monitor legislation as it affects women and their families, and has as one of its priority areas women's health and safety, is raising awareness of the potential effects of the law and is reminding the General Assembly to be aware of the unintended consequences of their efforts to streamline government.

This is not the first time PCSW has intervened in a case in which a hospital wanted to reduce or eliminate services unique to women. At least three times in the recent past, PCSW has raised public awareness and stepped in to work for a resolution when women's health services were similarly imperiled by a proposed change in hospital practices. Hospitals and dates of such action include:

2007: Hospital of Saint Raphael, New Haven
2005: Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, New London
2001: Sharon Hospital, Sharon

About the PCSW: The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women was formed in 1973 under Sec. 46a of the Connecticut General Statutes to study and improve Connecticut women's economic security, health and safety; to promote consideration of qualified women to leadership positions and to work toward the elimination of gender discrimination. As a non-partisan arm of the General Assembly, the agency monitors, critiques and recommends changes to legislation in order to inform public policy, and assesses programs and practices in all State agencies for their effect on the state's women. The PCSW serves as a liaison between government and its diverse constituents, and convenes stakeholders, including the business, non-profit and educational communities, local governments, and the media, in order to promote awareness of women's issues.