



March 25, 2015

Wellstar Health System
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Emory Healthcare
Patient Relations Department
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To Whom It May Concern:

We are writing today to express our deep concern about the potential Emory Healthcare and WellStar Health System merger. Georgia Watch is the state's leading consumer advocacy organization. Our mission is to empower and protect Georgia consumers on matters that impact their wallets and quality of life through education, advocacy and policy development. Our Health Access Program (HAP) seeks to ensure access to safe, quality and affordable healthcare for all Georgians, especially those who most need a champion, such as senior citizens, low-income individuals, the uninsured, and the underinsured.

In a joint announcement, Emory and WellStar promised to engage in discussions that, "will serve as an opportunity to educate constituents, have dialogue, and answer questions in preparation for committing to a multistep design process for the new health system that would take about a year to complete." Considering Georgia Watch's long history of healthcare consumer advocacy and unique understanding of the critical roles hospitals play in the Atlanta community, we are concerned that we have not been invited to participate in any of these conversations.

In a February *NeighborNewspapers.com* article, Emory's president, James Wagner is quoted saying, "This really is a time to be listening to our stakeholders, talking to them, refining our thoughts and planning." Despite his statement, the process for submitting public comments has not been widely published. We want to know what stakeholders are being engaged, and why consumer advocacy organizations are being left out of the conversation.

We are concerned about the lack of transparency and meaningful consumer involvement in this process. Considering the significant consequences that this merger could possibly have on the Atlanta community, this is not a good way to begin a relationship with the community Emory and WellStar intends to serve.

According to independent reports and a number of studies from across the country, provider consolidation is leading to higher prices for consumers with little to no improvement in the quality of care individuals receive. A 2012 issue brief from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that "increases in hospital market concentration lead to increases in the price of hospital care," and that "when hospitals merge in already concentrated markets, the price increase can be dramatic, often



exceeding 20 percent." There is no evidence that higher costs associated with provider consolidation result in higher quality care for patients. In fact, the same Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study showed that hospital competition often results in higher quality care for consumers.

We hope that, even after this 45-day comment period, Emory and WellStar will make every effort to engage in a thoughtful and transparent discourse with their patients about the likely result of the merger in terms of cost and services. We also hope that Emory and WellStar will engage Atlanta healthcare consumers and consumer advocacy organizations in the merger process, seeking their valuable opinions and input, as prices, providers and access points will likely shift.

We look forward to hearing from you to discuss ways that consumers can play a meaningful role in your merger process.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Beth Stephens". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Beth Stephens
Health Access Program Director