

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 9, 2023

Ms. Karen Senger
Illinois Department of Public Health
525 West Jefferson Street
Springfield, IL 62761

Mr. Michael Constantino
Illinois Health Facilities & Services Review Board
525 West Jefferson St., Second Floor
Springfield, IL 62761

Dear Ms. Senger and Mr. Constantino,

I write regarding the January 25, 2023 notice of St. Margaret's Health's temporary suspension of operations at the health system's Peru facility, effective January 28, 2023. This discontinuation of critical health care services would have devastating effects on the community I represent in the United States Congress, and is already being felt by local residents. I urge your agencies to take every possible action to preserve access to care for my constituents who depend on St. Margaret's Health-Peru for care.

Since St. Margaret's Health's abrupt announcement, I have heard from constituents throughout our community expressing alarm about the closure of the hospital. The long-term health and stability of our rural communities depends on access to high-quality, sustainable health care services. In fact, in December 2020, when St. Margaret's Hospital in Spring Valley announced the finalization of a consolidation of health care operations with Illinois Valley Community Hospital in Peru that allowed SMP Health System to govern what became known as St. Margaret's Health-Peru, the President and CEO of St. Margaret's Health, Tim Muntz, stated that the consolidation would "enhance the services" provided to patients, "while also strengthening the financial health of the organization."¹

Just over two years later, however, patients are stranded and desperate for answers that St. Margaret's Health has not provided. One Peru resident wrote to me asking where women in the Illinois Valley area are supposed to go for obstetric care. Another person flagged the potential for longer response times for medical emergencies. On top of the health risks, as many as 200 people could suddenly find themselves unemployed after a lifetime of work caring for their neighbors at St. Margaret's Health-Peru. These are questions that demand answers, and it is imperative that your agencies work with our community to address these urgent concerns.

The concerns raised by our community members are backed by robust evidence: the loss of accessible obstetric services and increased distance to travel to care has been associated with "increased risk of non-indicated induced Cesarean section (which can lead to more

¹ St. Margaret's Health: *St. Margaret's and IVCH Finalize Affiliation!*. January 4, 2021.

complications), postpartum hemorrhage, prolonged hospital stay, and/or postpartum depression.”² Research also shows that rural hospital closures can result in higher unemployment and lower per-capita incomes.³

The toll that the temporary suspension of operations at St. Margaret’s Health-Peru will take on Peru and surrounding communities in the coming months is significant. Even if the facility eventually reopens as a rural emergency hospital (REH), people will still face barriers to accessing critical categories of care – such as obstetric services – that are reportedly expected to be permanently discontinued.

As your agencies review St. Margaret’s Health’s January 25 notice to temporarily suspend operations at their Peru facility and their intention to file for an REH designation, I urge you to take into consideration the concerns raised by community members about these changes and the data that demonstrate the potential health and economic risks associated with the proposal. I respectfully request an update on this review no later than March 24, 2023.

We must work together to protect access to care for people in Peru and the surrounding areas. Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your work to ensure that every Illinois community has access to high-quality health care.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lauren Underwood". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services: *Maternal and Obstetric Care Challenges in Rural America: Policy Brief and Recommendations to the Secretary*. May 2020.

³ George M Holmes, Rebecca T Slifkin, Randy K Randolph, and Stephanie Poley: *The Effect of Rural Hospital Closures on Community Economic Health*. April 2006.