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Daley halts closure of mental health clinics

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BY **FRAN SPIELMAN** City Hall Reporter

Mayor Daley said Tuesday he's putting his \$1.2 million plan to close four of Chicago's 12 mental health centers "on hold" until he gets to the bottom of a flawed billing system that triggered the cuts.

One day after a noisy City Hall demonstration that included a brief sit-in at the mayor's office, Daley gave at least some measure of hope to mental health advocates who want the clinics to remain open indefinitely.

"We are looking into that. We take this seriously. We're putting it on hold to find out some of the issues there," Daley said.

Tuesday was supposed to be closing day for four South Side clinics: Back of the Yards; Beverly/Morgan Park; Great Grant/Mid-South and Woodlawn.

Daley refused to say how long the reprieve would last or where the money would come from to continue operating the facilities.

"We don't know. We'll get to the bottom of it," he said. "We're asking the state. They cut over \$1.2 million. That's a lot of money."

Henry Bayer, executive director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31, applauded the mayor for taking a fresh look at clinic closings that, Bayer argued, would put "vulnerable individuals at risk."

"The city lost state funding for the mental health centers due to billing problems that can and should be fixed, and the Illinois Department of Human Services has indicated that funding can be restored if the city corrects its billing process," said Bayer, whose union represents clinic staff.

"We're glad to know that city officials now indicate a willingness to tackle the problem. . . . We urge the mayor to make a strong, clear commitment to keeping all city mental health centers open."

Earlier this year, Daley blamed the state for the clinic closings, telling reporters, "We didn't cut. It was the State of Illinois that didn't fund us. That is state money."

State officials countered by blaming the city for failing to bill the state for mental health services. In July 2008, the state stopped issuing mental health grants and started reimbursing cities for services rendered.

Dr. Terry Mason, the city's health commissioner, has acknowledged that a new computer system caused billing delays.

In ongoing negotiations with City Hall, mental health advocates are demanding that Daley find the money to keep the clinics open until the billing problems can be straightened out.

“People with mental health [problems] are just as important, if not more important, than dogs and cats and statues and fountains and Olympics. These people need help. This is a very serious situation,” said Darryl Gumm, chairman of the Community Mental Health Board.

Without clinics close to their homes, some mental health patients simply won’t “get out of bed,” said Fred Friedman, who suffers from depression.

“We live a precarious life. And one of our lifelines is the City of Chicago clinics. For them to close these lifelines means that some of us simply won’t survive,” Friedman said.

“Some of us will end up in jail. Cook County Jail is the largest mental health clinic in the state. Some of us will end up in hospitals. All of those are vastly more expensive to the public than providing proper care in the community. It is up to the city to provide care for those who can't care for themselves,” Friedman said.