

Marchers Protest Closing of Summit Center Pain Clinic

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Leading a chanting throng of supporters Sunday, Cheri Honkala pushed her son's stroller down Webster Street and talked about free health care and economic human rights for everyone.

She's talked so much over the last few days that her voice has grown hoarse, but still she has miles to go before the crusade ends next month.

As part of the New Freedom Bus Tour, Honkala and a contingent of more than 60 homeless and low-income marchers are circling the country to push for better treatment of America's poor.

The tour started Nov. 10 in Philadelphia and will wind up at the United Nations Dec. 10. The group brought its message to Oakland Sunday, lobbying for improved human rights and also crusading against the closure of a local pain clinic.

"Actually it's been a depressing tour," said Honkala, spokeswoman for the bus tour. "We're collecting all these stories of people who can't afford the care they deserve."

Providing food and medical care is not something families should have to think about, she said. It's something that should be free to everyone as part of basic human rights, she said.

The group's large bus pulled up to Mosswood Park at Broadway in Oakland Sunday before marchers joined up with local supporters to bring their message to Summit Medical Center.

The hospital drew the ire of more than 60 marchers, who showed up with bullhorns and signs to protest the decision to close a pain clinic earlier this year.

Ethel Long-Scott, executive director of Oakland-based Women's Economic Agenda Project who joined the marchers Sunday, said the closure forced people suffering with chronic pain to travel far and wide for treatment.

She said the hospital put its bottom line over the treatment of its patients and should re-open the clinic.

Carolyn Kemp, a hospital spokes-woman, said the hospital kept its clinic open long enough to ensure that patients were able to find treatment elsewhere. Patients were referred to local doctors for treatment, and the clinic is still treating one patient who has a severe case of chronic pain and has been unable to receive care elsewhere.

"Every hospital has to make difficult choices in order to be there in the long term as a nonprofit," Kemp said.

Beyond the clinic, marchers on the New Freedom Bus Tour and its local supporters are pressing for a massive change not only in health care but also in the fight against hunger.

"We have a silent epidemic of poverty in this country," Long-Scott said.

She is hoping the tour will bring local, community-based organizations - all fighting against hunger or for better health care or for living wages - together to work more closely for the same goals.

"I really believe that the future of our country is at stake," she said.

The tour will stop off in San Jose next before heading south for Los Angeles. When the tour stops at the United Nations next month to lobby for free universal health care, the group will also present the stories it found on the way - the stories about people without access to care or enough food.

Long-Scott said a vigil will be planned to take place at the same time in Oakland.