

Mercy Hospital of Buffalo Catholic Health System

Buffalo, NY



“I wouldn’t be able to push for concessions without someone like Huffmaster in our corner.”

-Eddie Bratko, COO

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Mercy Hospital of Buffalo is one of the largest hospitals in Western New York, and the largest hospital in the \$1.1 billion non-profit Catholic Health integrated delivery system. With the busiest ER in the region and 475 staffed beds, the hospital is an integral part of healthcare in the area, and “it would hurt the community if we had to close down for any period of time,” according to Eddie Bratko, Chief Operating Officer at Mercy Hospital. During the last two union negotiations in 2012 and 2016, Mercy relied on Huffmaster Healthcare to prepare for possible strikes among their 95% unionized workforce – nurses, service personnel, technical positions, and clerical staff.

“When you are faced with something like that, you want someone that you know can deliver.” -Eddie Bratko, COO

The system had experienced more than a decade of positive financial performance, but had ended 2015 with only a small surplus of \$5.6 million, down 84% from 2014. Some of the largest expense increases had come in the areas of employee benefits and salaries, which had increased 11.5% and 2.6% respectively in 2015. As a non-profit, any shortfall could jeopardize Mercy Hospital’s mission of delivering high-quality, compassionate, and affordable health services to all, with special care given to those who are poor and disadvantaged.

During the 2016 negotiations, Mercy Hospital had put forward proposals that included highly competitive wages and benefits, including one of the area’s best health insurance plans. The union countered with an economic package totaling more than \$80 million in the first year alone. After weeks of negotiations, the CWA Local 1133, which represents RNs and service, technical and clerical associates at the hospital, authorized their leadership to issue a 10 Day Strike Notice if the union could not negotiate a contract the membership would ratify.

“The bargaining team needs to feel confident that they can present certain proposals and if the union responds with a strike notice, it’s not the end of the world.” -Eddie Bratko, COO

As they had four years earlier, the leadership team at Mercy Hospital relied on Huffmaster Healthcare to get them prepared for a possible strike action. It was a group decision to use Huffmaster, and the team felt they offered the best solution, with everything in one package, including handling security issues. Despite the unfortunate timing of this occurring simultaneously with a major strike in Minnesota (Allina Health), Huffmaster was able to find and train replacement staff, with the correct licensing and credentialing required, and were ready to deliver them in the event of a strike.

“They are people that when they come into the room, you have confidence they’ve been through it before.” -Eddie Bratko, COO

Huffmaster’s contingency planning services had Mercy Hospital fully prepared, including Strike Contingency Table Top presentations which involve management team discussions and workgroups around real-world scenarios that can occur during strike actions. In addition, Huffmaster Healthcare met with every single manager in the hospital (90 people), met with the Human Resources and Security teams, and even engaged the Buffalo Police Department in coordination with the hospital. Training and support is key to proper preparation, as many hospital managers may not have experienced a strike action in their professional careers.

Fortunately, the 2016 union negotiations concluded successfully without a strike. As Catholic Health System grows, the integrated network’s partnership with Huffmaster Healthcare provides it with more confidence going into future contract cycles. As the U.S. healthcare industry becomes more complex each year, with new regulatory requirements and financial challenges, Huffmaster Healthcare helps organizations like Mercy Hospital of Buffalo keep its promises to its patients and its communities.