



SUPERIOR HEALTH— 'LIFE HAPPENS ON OUR LINENS'

Suburban Chicago plant emphasizes tech upgrades and treating staff like 'the gold of the operation'

By Jack Morgan

The leaders of Superior Health Linens' Batavia, IL, plant, take a simple but effective approach to boosting their market share in the hyper-competitive Chicagoland market for healthcare textiles: invest in the plant, but at the same time, take care of your people.

Textile Services recently visited Superior Health Linens' Batavia plant, which is located about 43 miles west of downtown Chicago. General Manager Fadi Rihani told us he sees the plant's ability to thrive as inextricably linked to the satisfaction level of its roughly 100 employees. Naturally, that means ensuring their safety and comfort on the job. But clear and regular communications are equally critical. "I have maintenance guys out there," Rihani says. "I have hourly workers out there. When you guys were walking around, I was saying 'Is everything OK?"

I just want to thank you so much. You guys are amazing. Thank you for the job you're doing.' I tell them that, and that's how interactive we are with the plant (staff) and they know it. That's what we try to build here."

Established in June 2009, this 60,000-square-foot (5,574-square-meter) plant is part of the Healthcare Laundry Services Group (HLSG). That company oversees nine plants in Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Kentucky, plus a headquarters office in St. Charles, IL. Like healthcare laundries nationwide, Superior Health's Batavia plant has battled to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time we visited late last year, the plant had adapted well, with minor additions to its already robust safety protocols. It also had largely recovered from deferrals of elective surgical procedures that were imposed early in the crisis last spring. The plant, which was processing 630,000 lbs. a week, pre-COVID is now at roughly 540,000 lbs.

In a post-tour interview, we got an overview of the plant's operating plans during a discussion that included Rihani, General Manager Nate Collins, HLSG Senior Vice President of Operations

Michael Dudczyk and HLSG Director of Engineering Paul Walsh. Among recent innovations that are expected to improve efficiency and cut production downtime is the implementation of an automated maintenance program from e-Maintenance. An outside contractor collected information on every piece of equipment in the plant and fed it into the software. Now, electronic sensors deliver alerts to maintenance staff to make repairs as needed to keep systems running smoothly and avoid breakdowns. All repairs are then recorded in a database to help ensure a systematic focus on upkeep. "We're rolling out e-maintenance, which is an automated program," Dudczyk says. "So each maintenance man will have a tablet. The benefit is everything gets documented for troubleshooting."

Walsh explains how this system can make a difference in plant operations from the way things were before. "So it's 4 o'clock in the morning, and I've got a mechanic that goes out to a machine and he says, 'OK I'm going to start changing this out,'" Walsh says, describing a hypothetical repair job. "You know I should probably replace that grease fitting and maybe the sprocket too, so I got that sprocket right here I'm just going to throw that one on.' Then he goes and

does something else and he goes ‘Oh I got a call. I’ve got to go fix No. 5.’ And he didn’t write down that he used that sprocket. Then two weeks later, going over to No. 5, they say, oh this sprocket’s about to go. Let’s run over to this shelf where there isn’t one anymore.” Dudczyk adds that all nine HLSC locations will share the system. It’s expected to drive significant improvements in efficiency and save labor. “With the e-maintenance, we project a significant yearly savings by decreasing our downtime and having a robust PM (preventive maintenance) system,” he says. “A lot of time’s wasted with people not being prepared.”

Another recent innovation is the automated tracking of route vehicles, using a system called Geotab fleet management. “That’s a routing software for all our transportation,” Dudczyk says, noting that the system is designed to minimize vehicle costs per mile by optimizing routes and tracking drivers for issues such as traffic violations, excessive idling, etc. The system assists with service issues as well. “It also helps on the customer side,” Dudczyk says. “They say ‘Hey I need a delivery.’” Previously, there was no way to quickly determine if the delivery was made. Now it’s in the system. “Before we didn’t know. Now we just go to Geotab. OK, our man was there at 5 a.m.”

Looking ahead, a major capital expenditure planned for plant is the installation of an overhead rail system. Dudczyk says this investment reflects plans to upgrade the facility that was acquired several years ago. “That’s in the future,” he says. “That’s one that’s in our five-year plan.” In any event, Walsh says the plant is already highly efficient. “As far as a plant that doesn’t have (a rail system), this one works well,” he says. He credits a well-designed production “flow.” “It is in the big circle. It does work its way around and it spirals around until it comes out.”

We got a look at how this plant operates during our walk-through of the facility.

IN THE PLANT

For a laundry with minimal automated material handling, we were impressed by the coordination that allows the Batavia plant to process more than half a million lbs. a week in a two-shift operation, despite the pandemic. And they do so with a pronounced emphasis—especially since the pandemic struck—on protecting staff (see related story, pg. 30) and ensuring high levels of infection control. The plant is certified to the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council standard and staff are in the process of certifying to TRSA’s Hygienically Clean Healthcare standard, Dudczyk says. The process

begins with trucks offloading carts of soiled linens at the soil-side loading dock. Carts are weighed, recorded and lined up in the sorting area. We watched as employees tore open blue plastic bags and placed soiled items on a belt that moves up to the sorting deck. There, employees sort items such as sheets, gowns and pillowcases, tossing them into carts for movement to the tunnel. All employees wear masks, hairnets and gowns. A cart dumper automatically drops the sorted goods onto a belt that moves the textiles up to the mouth of one of two tunnels that are built into the wall. Both tunnels are Lavatec machines. One has 16, 150 lb. (68 kg.) modules. The other has 12,

BELOW: Leadership Team: (l/r) Mike Dudczyk, sr. VP; Kristine Hollis, office support; Chris Magget, ops. spvsr.; Nate Collins, GM; Yvette Marin, HR generalist; Joe Volt, chief engineer; Fadi Rihani, GM; Paul Walsh, dir. of eng.; David Shamshoon, ops. spvsr. An exterior view of the plant located in a suburban industrial park. On the opening page: a plant employee places flatwork into a sheet feeder.





ABOVE: (Clockwise, from top) a cart washer; heat-reclamation equipment; an employee inspects stacks of textiles on the back end of an ironing line. One of two tunnel washers in the plant. Sorted goods move up the conveyor at right and drop into the tunnel for processing.

120 lb. (54 kg.) modules. Rihani says the 16-mod tunnel completes 28-30 transfers per hour. The 12-mod tunnel makes 24 transfers per hour. After processing with wash chemistry provided through a chemical-injection system from Gurtler Industries Inc., the clean, wet goods emerge from the press on the clean side of the wall. They're now ready for the next stage of processing. The plant also has pony washers for small lots and stain-re-wash items. These include a 450 lb. (204 kg.) washer/extractor from G.A. Braun Inc. and three 80 lb. (36 kg.) machines from Pellerin Milnor Corp. Goods processed in these pass-through washers are placed in small dryers from Huebsch and Coffman on the clean side of the plant. Lint collection is provided by Clean Cycle Systems.

Superior Health Linens provides primarily rental textiles to its healthcare clients. About 7.5% of the goods are customer-owned items that the company processes on an as-needed basis. These include baby linen, lab coats, patient straps and similar items. While the goods processed here are primarily hospital bed and bath linens, about 10% of the plant's throughput is scrubs. Requests from hospitals for isolation gowns spiked when the pandemic first struck in March 2020. Superior provided hundreds of "iso gowns" to customers on a direct-sale basis. The company also has provided rental programs for these personal protective equipment (PPE) garments. Demand has stabilized since the early weeks of the pandemic, Rihani says. "It was a boom when it first hit with COVID. It exploded. Direct sales for us was massive that month (March). It's fallen off. For our plant at least."

To enter the clean side, we pass through a buffer area between the clean and soil areas. Rubbing on a shot of hand sanitizer, we enter the clean side of the plant. Here, we watch as "cakes" of clean, wet goods emerge from the tunnel press. These textiles move via conveyor to one of a large bank of 250 lb. Lavatec dryers. After drying, the goods drop into carts for movement to the finishing department.

Safety—Universal Precautions Expanded During the Pandemic

Before COVID-19 struck a year ago, the Healthcare Laundry Services Group (HLSG) already had a rigorous safety program in place at its Batavia, IL, plant based on universal precautions for dealing with soiled healthcare linens. But since the pandemic took hold, they've expanded on that baseline with additional protective measures, training and policy shifts designed to ensure social distancing.

"From a safety standpoint, even before COVID we've always followed the guidelines, precautionary measures," says General Manager Nate Collins. "We always had the gowns. We always had the gloves. We always had the masks provided to the employees. As COVID hit, we continued that process, but you continually educated them on the reasons why." Collins said each employee completed training modules to make sure they were fully aware of Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines on issues such as the importance of regular hand washing, continuous use of personal protective equipment (PPE) on the plant floor and the need for social distancing. The Batavia staff get regular updates from the group's corporate safety office on developments related to the pandemic. "We have a safety director in place who also sent out safety tips on what things to talk about each week," Collins says. It didn't really affect us in that we had to change much because we always looked at every piece of (soiled) linen as infectious. So we've always had the proper PPE."

One area that did undergo changes was the way the plant's roughly 100 employees take their lunch and work breaks. Managers had to stagger the timing so that groups were kept small enough to ensure six feet of social distancing by staff at all times. That required adjustments, but staff have adapted well to the changes, says Collins. "We did break up our lunch breaks," he says, "So we didn't have so many people on lunch at a time. Or their regular breaks. So that way we could space them out to conform to the social distance. In our lunchroom, we even have spaces and signs on the chairs where these are the only places you can sit in the lunchroom. That way, it keeps that six feet of distance going. So those are the things that we had to really change."

The Batavia plant has seen the impact of its policy changes as the pandemic has continued during the first quarter of 2021. A small number of COVID-19 cases have turned up among staff, but none were linked to plant operations and production wasn't affected.

For the small number of COVID-19 cases that have occurred, the Batavia plant managers have followed CDC guidelines on investigating the source of the infection. "The other thing that was changed was the protocol when someone thought they had COVID," Collins says. "There was a special process. The safety director had to get involved and the general manager. Then we added (contact) tracing, so if you did test positive, who did you contact?"

This area includes five ironer lines. Among these are two Century Steam ironers from Chicago Dryer Co. These are equipped with Chicago Edge Max feeders and Skyline folders. Other equipment includes a Lavatec Master Fold ironer, a Setra 800 three-roll ironer from Goudkuil, a Dutch manufacturer; and a Super Sylon eight-roll ironer from American Laundry Machinery Co. "I love Hypros," Collins says. "They're workhorses." Walsh also praised these vintage, rebuilt machines as a "caddy" among ironers because of the quality of their finish and their affordability.

The folding equipment includes three Foltex towel folders, two Air Chicago machines for large and extra-large items and a Chicago Blanket Blaster for feeding and folding.

In the plant's boiler room, Walsh pointed out recent upgrades, including a new Culligan system for water softening. This equipment can treat 120,000 gallons a day with no manual loading of salt. Other equipment includes a Hurst 350 HP boiler, with a second Hurst boiler slated for installation in the near term. Thermal Engineering of Arizona provides a heat reclamation system for the plant.

The plant runs 32 routes to area hospitals and clinics. Equipment includes four semi-trucks, including two 53-foot (16-meter) and two 48-foot (14-meter) vehicles. The plant operates seven 30-foot (nine-meter) box trucks and two clinic 20-foot (six-meter) trucks. The plant services 10 hospitals and more than 200 clinics. With plans for future investments, including the aforementioned overhead rail system. Staff here are upbeat about the future, despite the ongoing challenges of COVID-19.

EMPLOYEES: ENHANCING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

Equipment and software upgrades aimed at improving efficiency are a must for any company that wants to stay competitive in today's healthcare laundry market. But Superior's leadership team are equally

convinced that maximizing employee job satisfaction is critical to their success.

That's why, in addition to equipment investments, Superior has implemented quality-of-life improvements for its staff, including the installation of sky lights in the ceiling to provide more natural light and cooling vents at each workstation to keep staff comfortable in warm weather. "We consider them our gold," Rihani says of employees, noting that each new employee gets a welcome kit that includes a water bottle, a T-shirt, a cooling towel, hand sanitizer and other items designed to enhance their comfort. "We try to take care of them as much as we can," he says. "If we don't have them, we don't have anything. It doesn't matter who's running the front office. It doesn't make the plant run."

The fact that this sentiment is shared across the nine-plant HLSG system, including the Batavia facility, was confirmed last October when the group was recognized as a "Great Place to Work" by an eponymously named program that surveys companies on employee satisfaction and honors the highest-scoring companies. In its companywide survey, 69% of HLSG staff described their company as a great place to work. Eighty percent said HLSG makes the employee experience a high priority.

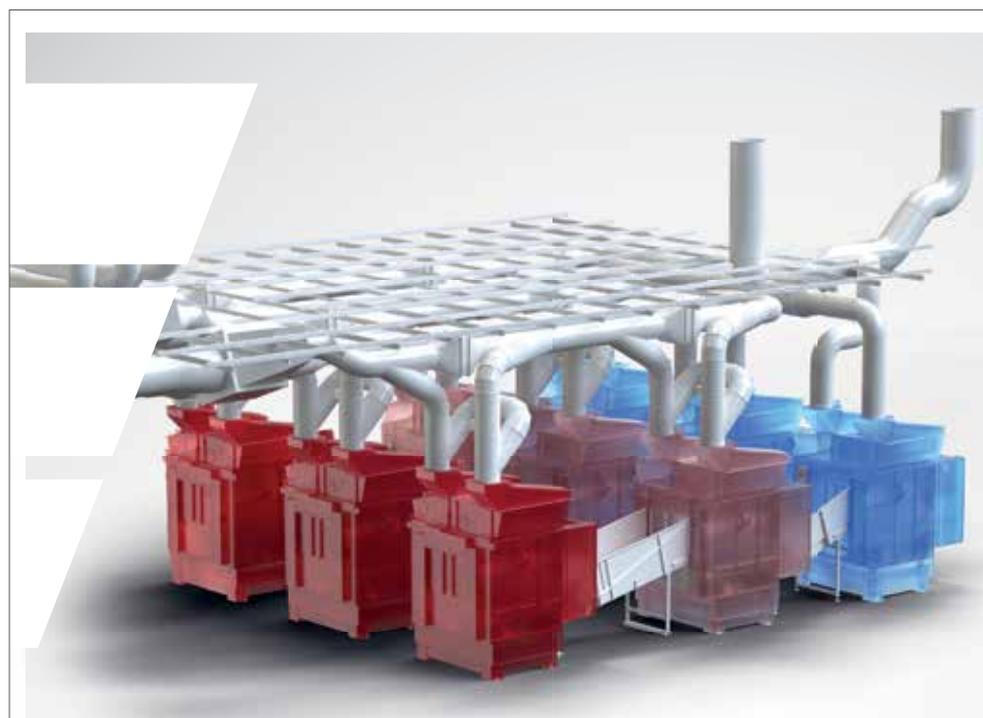
That emphasis on employee satisfaction facilitates recruitment/retention, particularly in today's tight job market. Dudczyk says the plant has had a 20%-25% turnover rate on average during the pandemic. Early on, staff at the Batavia plant had to make difficult decisions as their poundage dropped and income declined. Rihani said balancing the bottom line with staff needs helped Superior get through this period as employee hours were cut, amid shrinking demand. "I knew I had to make sure my P&L is right, though I try to balance it out," he says, adding that his goal for staff is "Making sure they're OK and happy. They're the gold of the operation."

As for linen quality, he talks to employees about their impact on end users. "I

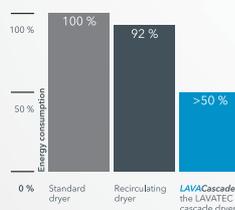
stress that to them because it rings a bell," Rihani says. "You know when you see a stained pillowcase, I say, 'Someone's head is going to be on this pillowcase.'" That someone could be a friend or neighbor, mother, father, sister, etc. Apparently, this approach is working because the Great Place to Work survey reported that 85% of HLSG employee respondents said they feel their work makes a difference to clients. "They all live in the Chicagoland

area," Rihani says. "So if you're going to one of the hospitals that we're servicing, why would you want one of your family there? Always remember: With laundry, life happens on our linen." **TS**

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