

Massachusetts 1199SEIU Members at State-Run Facility Fight to Keep Affordable Healthcare

BRIDGEWATER – Mary Hammond is worried. She's worried that if her employer gets its way, her health insurance costs will double and she'll be forced out of her own job. She cares for herself and her chronically ill husband and her employer's plan to raise the cost of her health coverage could force her to quit her job and join a state-subsidized insurance plan.

Mary and her co-workers at Bridgewater State Hospital are in a battle with their employer, MHM Services, Inc., a profitable, Virginia-based healthcare services company that employs mental health workers at BSH. At the hospital – which is run by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections and provides mental health services to the criminally insane – the 130 union members are bargaining with MHM for a new contract.

MHM, which contracted with the hospital to provide health services, recently threw a curveball during negotiations: doubling the cost of health care for 1199SEIU members.

“I have not been able to sleep because I am so worried about how we would survive. We live paycheck-to-paycheck and could never afford the cost of our prescriptions if this is allowed to happen,” said Mary, who has worked at BSH for more than three years and only makes \$13.13 an hour.

According to union members, under the MHM proposal, a change in health insurance plans could double the cost of health coverage and significantly increase deductibles. There is no deductible in the current health insurance plan for union members.

Mary is part of the 130 nursing assistants, mental health workers, phlebotomists, licensed practical nurses and registered nurses at BSH who, if MHM has its way, would have to pay a high cost for health insurance. Mary, and several other members of the bargaining unit, is worried that if MHM wins this battle, they'll be forced to leave their jobs and apply for state-subsidized health insurance. The state of Massachusetts offers health insurance to residents who are not provided coverage through an employer.

Mary and her co-workers see the hypocrisy in the dilemma they're facing: a highly profitable, out-of-state healthcare company holding a lucrative contract with a Massachusetts hospital is asking its own employees to pay an excessive amount for health insurance. The proposal is especially outrageous given the fact that union members provide exceptional healthcare services to incarcerated individuals who are often ill and are quite dangerous.

MHM, which has admitted that its company is earning substantial revenue and has no need to cut costs, has refused to budge on the issue and has put workers in a difficult situation.

“They said, ‘It's not that we can't afford to give you more, we just choose not to’,” said Naia Barros, a delegate at the facility.

Naia, who has worked at the facility for 16 years as a mental health worker, said she was outraged by MHM's behavior.

“We work with patients and inmates that are seriously ill. We're dealing with patients, we're touching patients, we're at risk. We have given this company a lot. They would not be given a state contract if it wasn't for our great work. This behavior is just disrespectful,” she said, noting the irony of not providing affordable healthcare to healthcare workers.

On Wednesday, August 21, Mary, Naia and more than 30 other union members participated in a lively protest at the Middleboro Rotary, just down the road from the BSH campus. Union members proudly made their voices heard while holding signs that said, “MHM = Outrageous Healthcare Policy” and “Fairness at Bridgewater State Hospital.”

While the 1199SEIU bargaining unit and the MHM negotiating team now have a federal mediator at negotiations, union members are making their voices heard and are fighting the good fight for affordable health insurance.

Stay tuned for more information on the fight for affordable care at BSH.