



Associated Hospital Services—

Big Easy Build Up

We look at a co-op laundry's latest upgrades as New Orleans continues its post-Katrina recovery



(clockwise/lower left) Associated Hospital Services was devastated by flooding when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. The healthcare co-op reopened five years ago this month. CEO Jennifer Elsensohn reflects on the ongoing rebuilding efforts.



By Jack Morgan

Jennifer Elsensohn, CEO of Associated Hospital Services, laughs intermittently as we discuss rebuilding efforts at the 48,000-square-foot healthcare co-op laundry she oversees in New Orleans.

Of course, Elsensohn doesn't think what she's experienced since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005 is by any means funny. Rather, her sardonic sense of humor helps her cope with a situation—make that *situations*—that would have driven less resourceful/determined textile service managers out of the business long ago.

Revitalized by reinvestments

The plant Elsensohn now directs reopened five years ago this month, following top-to-bottom and ongoing renovations. Today, this not-for-profit laundry is processing some 10 million lbs. annu-

ally for seven area hospitals and a number of clinics and doctors' offices. Located northeast of downtown New Orleans, Associated recently added an ironer line and refurbished another with rebuilt ironers and new laborsaving folders and feeding equipment from Chicago Dryer Co., Chicago. Another timely purchase was a new PulseFlow™ tunnel washer from Pellerin Milnor Corp., Kenner, LA. We'll take a closer look at the plant equipment shortly, but first, let's

which is operated by former TRSA Board Member David Gross. "Originally, we had sent most of the linen to Texas, and then we were trying to get it closer to manage the deliveries more," Elsensohn says. "David contacted us. He's hospitality, so they were down. So he needed linen and we needed a laundry," she adds with another laugh.

Gross says working with Associated gave both organizations a



At left, nearly six years after Hurricane Katrina, scenes like this one in a middle-class neighborhood near the Associated plant unfortunately are all too familiar. Abandoned, storm-damaged homes stand alongside others that have been rebuilt. Above is the entrance to Associated Hospital Services.

consider how Associated and Elsensohn got to where they are today.

Storm spurs changes

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005. A levee wall was breached during the storm and a large area of the city was flooded. Associated, which had operated since 1971 in a quiet industrial park, found itself inundated by floodwaters. While wind damage was limited, the high water destroyed virtually everything inside the plant. "Well, we got 3.5 to 6 feet of water throughout the plant," Elsensohn says of those late August/early September days when she and thousands of other area residents endured the most disastrous hurricane in U.S. history. "We weren't even able to get into the plant until the week after Katrina. It was basically total devastation. I could show you some pictures," she adds with a chuckle. "It was pretty ugly."

Elsensohn joined Associated in 1994, when she was working toward an undergraduate degree in accounting. She's never worked for another laundry. By the time Katrina struck 11 years later, Elsensohn had risen to the post of CFO.

After the storm, Elsensohn found herself thrust into a leadership role at the plant, while simultaneously juggling personal issues. For starters, she and her family were flooded out of their home. They relocated temporarily to Mississippi. "It was crazy," she recalls. "I live about 15 miles from here. But I live on the water in a coastal community. We had a lot of damage in my home, but personally, the most affect for me was just having to be relocated. I was pregnant with my third son for Katrina.

Reconstruction moves

It took eight months to get the plant up and running again. In the meantime, Associated outsourced work to a couple of different plants, including Gulf Coast Laundry Services Inc. in Gulfport, MS,

win-win opportunity as they struggled to recover from the hurricane. "We will be forever grateful for the opportunity to provide service to the customer's of Associated Hospital Services after Katrina," Gross says. "Their workload allowed us to keep 65 staff members working, until the hotel/casino business recovered in mid-2006. We formed a true partnership that continues to this day. We have an emergency-service agreement in place between our two companies and review contingency plans annually to make sure that both companies are prepared to help one another in the event of another catastrophe. We love working with Jennifer and her staff."

As Associated prepared to resume production, Elsensohn focused on locating the plant's 65 full-time and temporary employees. "We brought in employees that we could contact and were willing to come in on April 3, 2006," Elsensohn says. "We started production April 10." Today there are about 40 full-time and 15 temporary people employed at the refurbished plant. "I'd have to guess 80-90% of our employees are pre-Katrina employees," she says. "Most of them came back in April (2006), and we've gotten several more back since then over the last several years."

Today, production is growing, but it's about 30% off the pre-Katrina peak. "Before Katrina we were Monday through Saturday at about 14 million lbs. annually," Elsensohn says. "We're like between nine and 10 now, at five days a week."

One reason why Associated's healthcare business is off is that a number of the hospitals the co-op once serviced haven't reopened. An estimated 100,000 people who left New Orleans after the storm have never returned. They either moved to outlying areas, or other states, such as Texas. Pre-Katrina, New Orleans' population was roughly 450,000. The 2010 census showed 343,829 people.

While the French Quarter and downtown New Orleans look nor-

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mal to visitors, the city remains on a long road to recovery. The same goes for Associated. "I'm hoping that it moves back to normal," Elsensohn says. "We have the capacity obviously. Certainly if we had a Saturday shift. ... A lot of that volume is nonexistent hospitals. The Methodist Hospital closed and has never reopened. They represented close to 1 million pounds annually. Chalmette Medical Center, which has not opened yet, was a customer of ours. Another

rinses out suspended soil and chemistry from the goods. The result is the tunnel washer uses 0.30 to 0.45 gallons per pound of linen processed, depending on soil content.

Poy, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and former naval officer, likens the PulseFlow process to a "navy shower." "On a navy ship, you have a very limited amount of water," Poy says. "So there's a switch at the top of the shower nozzle and basically you turn it on,



Above is Associated's new tunnel. The second image from left has an indicator light that shows when PulseFlow is deployed. Next to that is the inside of a level, or weir box, showing the suds level. At right is a Multitrac control system; it shows progress in other systems. Below is a view of the tunnel inverter.

smaller local one was Lakeland Hospital. We're talking 2 million pounds that never came back to the hospitals."

Tunnel forward

Fortunately, Associated's hospital owners are in synch with Elsensohn's desire to rebuild the laundry, and they have invested in upgrading equipment aimed at improving efficiency and throughput. In late 2009, the co-op bought a new PulseFlow™ tunnel washer from Pellerin Milnor that's helping the company control costs, while improving productivity.

Before touring the plant, your correspondent was briefed by two of the men who helped develop this innovative technology for wash aisle production: Russell Poy, vice president of product development for Pellerin Milnor; and laundry machinery Consultant Sam Garofalo. As research efforts sometimes do, the initial focus was on saving water and energy over the traditional Milnor top transfer tunnel washer. The PulseFlow accomplished that—plus productivity gains. "Originally we wanted lower water consumption," says Garofalo, principal of Technical Consulting Inc., Charlotte, NC. "What we got was faster throughput. Fewer modules; more output. So this 8-module machine out here works like at least an 11 module and maybe a 12-module of our traditional machine."

PulseFlow performs better than traditional Milnor tunnels by using the water and chemistry differently in their counterflow CBW®. The PulsFlow process also employs counterflow in dual-action (water and rinsing) modules to speed up the laundering process, thereby boosting throughput. The process works with standing bath washing, efficiently utilizing wash chemistry for two-thirds of the transfer cycle. Then during the final third of the transfer cycle, a measured amount of water, pumped at high velocity, effectively



wet your body off and then turn it off. And you soap up, and then you turn it back on and rinse. That's really what we're doing here."

In 2006, as part of the plant reconstruction after Katrina, Associated rebuilt one Milnor tunnel, with eight, 150 lb. modules. Three years later, the first PulseFlow tunnel was installed at the Sheraton Hotel in New Orleans, shortly before the Clean Show in June. Milnor approached Associated in the fall of 2009 with an offer to purchase a conventional tunnel with PulseFlow. The co-op OK'd the purchase, and the PulseFlow tunnel began operating there early last year.

Seeing the tunnel first-hand, we watched an employee load soil goods from a cart onto a conveyor that moved up to the tunnel. Henry Polk, Associated's plant manager and a 32-year veteran of the co-op, said the tunnel, which has a 104-second transfer rate, nearly exceeds the staff's loading capabilities. After our tour, Elsensohn agreed, noting that, "I think they have trouble keeping up with the tunnel, because they're loading it from the carts. We do have to try to get a large active person in that position. Because, especially with the smaller items, he has trouble keeping up with the tunnel."

Once the tunnel has a full load, the patent-pending process

involves a special pump that shoots fresh water combined with clean recycled water from the press at a rate of about 125 gallons a minute to wet down the load in as little as 20 seconds. Water and chemistry is added to the goods in the first module, turning it into a working module, as opposed to just a wet-out module. Agitation with water and detergent then begins that's somewhat similar to the "standing bath" chambers used in bottom-flow tunnels. As the batch in the first

fabric encrustation (rinsing), whiteness, soil removal and bleach effectiveness. The PulseFlow's scores met all the criteria for quality washing set out by these two groups, says Poy, who offered the following excerpt from the Hohenstein report, "Basically the tests were carried out with hotel and hospital linen using PulseFlow technology in a continuous batch washer. The advantages of this technology in terms of reduction of water and energy were evaluated in a holis-



At left are tunnel washers under construction and a robotic laser for cutting metal at Pellerin Milnor's plant, located near Associated Hospital Services. Above (from left) are Milnor Vice President of Product Development Russell Poy, Plant Manager Henry Polk and Consultant Sam Garofalo.



chamber finishes the wash process, counterflow water shoots in, moving loose soil and dirty water away from the textiles. The textiles then are lifted up and dropped into the next chamber, where the process is repeated. In subsequent chambers, bleaching agents or other chemistry is added automatically as required by the formula for a given item. Reuse water is stored in tanks adjacent to the tunnel, beneath the load scoop. The tunnel's robust agitation—coupled with the PulseFlow counterflow rinsing in each module—cleans with a quality comparable to a washer/extractor, Poy says.

Tests prove positive

To an outside observer, the goods coming out of the 50 bar press and heading to the finishing side of the plant look clean and white. Elsensohn and Polk say they're happy with the quality of the clean goods—including heavily soiled bed pads—that are processed in the PulseFlow tunnel.

To analyze the capabilities of its new tunnel, Milnor approached two agencies, the U.S.-based International Fabricare Institute (IFI) and the German Hohenstein Institute. Milnor conducted a 50-piece wash test for both Hohenstein and IFI that measured tensile strength,

tic way. The studies have proven to give a significant economy in water and energy, while maintaining the same level of quality. PulseFlow technology on the tested batch washer obtained a good rinse result and at the same time a good soil removal, with a consumption of fresh water of 0.3 to 0.4 gallons per lb."

Associated's results

After our plant tour, we sat down with Elsensohn to get her take on how PulseFlow is working for Associated. Before the tunnels were installed, post-Katrina, the plant used several large washer/extractors. While the tunnels improved efficiency, the addition of PulseFlow, which now processes about 60-70% of the volume going through the plant, has raised the performance to a new level. "When the new tunnel replaced the washer/extractors, we were able to turn off a hot water heater, which saved us a lot on gas usage," Elsensohn says. "And also less water."

The PulseFlow has generated plantwide savings of nearly 40% for natural gas and water, according to Elsensohn. "When you look at a water expense, that's everything for water and sewage," she says. "It's significant savings." When asked to translate those savings into a cash estimate, Elsensohn adds, "I think there was almost a \$200,000 savings in utilities from the 2010 to the 2011 budget. It really saved us this year with the budget because everything else was rising. Our productivity basically sets the owner's rate, and we're a co-op. So in order to keep the owners' rate low, we have to keep expenses low. And so expenses and everything has gone up, but not utilities."

The plant's pounds per operator hour (PPOH) rate also has increased significantly, from around 104-105 to 120-150 PPOH. "When we got PulseFlow, my first impression was productivity,"

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Elsensohn says. "It saved us right off the bat as soon as we turned it on. We started getting increased productivity by 20 lbs. per operator hour, minimum.

These improvements have boosted management staff morale—while on the finishing side, hourly employees are pleased that they no longer have to wait for linens coming from the wash aisle. The new finishing-side equipment complements the tunnel by helping to



canes has encouraged area hospitals to beef up agreements with laundries for additional linens in case of emergencies. "All of our customers, they want linen," Elsensohn says." Associated has signed additional reciprocal agreements with other launderers should another storm strike. "Yes, we've signed letters of agreement with more backup laundries. People inland and east and west. ... Anybody that would reciprocate. Nobody doesn't want to sign a



(at left) A view of a new PulseFlow tunnel bound for a customer in Istanbul, Turkey. (l/r) Pellerin Milnor President Jim Pellerin, Consultant Sam Garofalo, Associated CEO Jennifer Elsensohn and Milnor Vice President of Product Development Russell Poy.

ensure a smooth production process all the way through to packout. Cornerless feeding, available on the feeding equipment noted below, also saves labor and improves productivity. What's more, the ergonomic design of this machinery puts less physical strain on employees—another plus for staff.

Finishing-side machinery in the plant now includes four ironing lines, equipped with:

- 4 Chicago Edge feeders
- 4 Skyline folders
- 1 Skyline SP 4 small-piece folder
- 4 Chicago Air towel and gown folders
- 1 Chicago Skyline Mini Knitted Fitted Folder
- 1 Chicago Blanket Blaster System
- 1 Chicago Bridge Transfer Conveyor

Linen processed through this equipment automatically transfers to a central takeaway conveyor and carousel.

Future prospects

Given the improvements Associated has made to its plant since Katrina, the co-op is poised for growth. Of course the challenge of operating in a still-rebuilding New Orleans poses an "x-factor" that's difficult to calculate. The return of some pre-Katrina residents—coupled with an economy emerging from recession—has residents cautiously optimistic about the future. But along with everything else, there's always the possibility that another storm could wreak havoc again. "I tell you what, it makes you shell shocked," Elsensohn says of her outlook after experiencing several recent storms, including hurricanes Katrina and Gustav. "Anytime hurricane season starts coming around, you're like, 'Please God, don't do this to us again,'" she says with a laugh.

Heightened awareness of New Orleans' vulnerability to hurri-

letter of agreement to be a backup, and we can be a backup for them if necessary."

Beyond emergency planning, the equipment upgrades noted above and trying to gather more employee contact information should they leave in case of a storm, there isn't much more Associated can do to prepare for growth.

Thumbs up for recovery

After the tour, we walked around some residential streets off I-10 near the plant to see how the rebuilding process in surrounding neighborhoods is going. Among dozens of middle-class condominiums, apartments and single-family homes, we saw many unoccupied houses in various stages of disrepair. While photographing abandoned homes, a young man walks up. He stops for a moment, smiles, gives us a "thumbs up" sign—and walks on.

It may be some time before New Orleans gets back a large share of the people, businesses and hospitals it lost after Katrina. However, this much is clear: Those people that *are* here have learned how to survive. They are focused on building a better future. Some, like Elsensohn and her staff, rely on hard work, wash aisle innovation and a sense of humor to cope with the slow rebuilding of their city. Others, like Gulf Coast Laundry Services' Gross, figure if they've

made it this far, they can handle most anything. Gross and his wife Patti often paraphrase the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, by saying, "That which does not kill, does not kill us!" **TR**



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