

Hospital workers say yes to union

Caritas Carney is second in Catholic chain to join SEIU

By Robert Weisman
GLOBE STAFF

Nearly 500 workers at Caritas Carney Hospital in Dorchester will join the Service Employees International Union, making it the second Caritas Christi Health Care hospital to unionize this spring.

In April, more than 800 employees at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Brighton, the flagship of the six-hospital chain, voted to affiliate with the same labor union, Local 1199 of SEIU United Healthcare Workers East.

The vote at Carney was 299 to 78, with about 79 percent of the 377 workers who cast ballots opting to join the union. Another 115 eligible workers did not vote in the two-day election, which ended yesterday afternoon.

The bargaining unit will represent 492 licensed practical nurses, respiratory therapists, radiology technicians, nurse assistants, dietary and clerical workers, and housekeepers at the 159-bed hospital.

Union officials yesterday said there are organizing campaigns underway at every other hospital in Boston and predicted more votes later this year.

After decades during which no hospitals were unionized, "St. Elizabeth's was a breakthrough," said Mike Fadel, executive vice president of Local 1199. "The workers at Carney took tremendous inspiration from that. And it's creating ripples across the city."

While other hospitals have resisted

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organizing efforts, Caritas Christi group, which was founded by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and is the state's second-largest hospital system, signed an agreement with the SEIU in January to allow "free and fair" elections. The deal restricted managers from lobbying workers to reject the union and prevented labor leaders from disparaging the hospitals.

"We share a commitment to a core principle of Catholic social teaching that workers have the right to decide through a fair process — free of coercion and based on accurate and truthful information — whether and by whom to be represented in the workplace," said Teresa Prago, vice president of marketing for Caritas Christi.

As the union's momentum builds, leaders of other Boston hospitals will have to decide whether to fight the organizing efforts or acquiesce, said Jeff Toner, labor consultant at Dietz Associates in Kennebunk, Maine. He said the SEIU is a pioneer in a new style of organizing called "corporate campaigns," which seek to damage the reputations of hospitals that work to oppose union efforts.

"Corporate campaigns can target executive compensation, they can picket the homes of board members," Toner said. "They make it as uncomfortable as possible for executives, and they cast aspersions on a hospital's standard of care to the patient community."

Bob Stanley, mental health counselor at Caritas Carney, said workers at the Dorchester hospital were energized by the union drive. The hospital has 1,300 employees, including 210 doctors. Local 1199 will now seek to negotiate its first contract at Carney.

Stanley said Carney employees hope to improve their working conditions and pay and bring

the union's clout to bear in pressing for more public resources for the community hospital, which has struggled financially.

"This union is very strong," he said. "They have a good legislative presence. When you have a voice and you can address issues, working conditions improve and relationships improve. Expectations become clearer."

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The Service Employees International Union will soon negotiate a contract for Caritas Carney Hospital workers.