

# Innovations Spur Northwest Health Care Linen Forward

Healthcare textile services provider celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2013 with an eye toward growth

By Jason Risley

Northwest Health Care Linen is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> year in business in 2013. While this healthcare textile services provider has seen steady, consistent growth throughout those 20 years, it's keeping an eye on its future with investments in new technology designed to upgrade operations in its facility, located in Bellingham, WA, roughly 30 minutes south of the Canadian border.

## EARLY CHALLENGES

James Hall, president and CEO of Northwest Health Care Linen, entered the business from outside the textile services industry, but was intrigued by the opportunity to become a health-care launderer when the idea was first presented to him in the early '90s. "Originally, I was working in long-term care, extended healthcare for the elderly," Hall says. "The local hospital in Bellingham approached me about providing laundry service. I hadn't been in the laundry business before. I attended my first Clean Show in the early '90s, met with a consultant and made a decision to build a laundry. These five local hospitals within a three-county area of Bellingham signed contracts, which made it possible to build Northwest Health Care Linen."

While the company focused on these five hospitals at the outset, Northwest Health Care Linen quickly expanded based on business needs. "It wasn't long after the contracts were signed with those five hospitals that we started expanding south toward Seattle," Hall says. "That was the same period of time that the outpatient market started to grow—the era when hospital stays became shorter and more outpatient healthcare work was taking place. That's

when we began the outpatient division, which made it possible to expand into the Seattle area."

That expanded workload caused the company to renovate its facility to keep up with the increased poundage. Originally built at 13,000 square feet, the company's headquarters is now 36,000 square feet. The company also has a depot in Sumner, WA, to service the south Puget Sound area, and runs two shifts Monday through Friday and one Saturday, with six hospital routes serving 14 hospitals, nine outpatient routes serving several hundred customers and a total of 127 employees. "Our growth has been based on word of mouth and reputation, and it's been steady, continual growth over the 20 years," Hall says. "The original plant was designed for about 3.5 million pounds, and we were up to 6 million when we made the decision to expand in 2003. Once we increased that capacity, we went from 6.5 up to the current 16 million pounds."

While the company has grown at a steady clip, those early days provided some challenges for a newcomer breaking into the business. "I didn't know anything about the business, so it was a big learning curve," Hall says. "Previously, I was on the provider side; we owned and operated long-term care facilities. We were providing care to patients, and this was a completely different angle. Coming in the back door with product and serving providers. In some ways that was an advantage because I understood what providers wanted and could relate to that."

## HIGH-TECH HEALTHCARE

While the company has expanded throughout the years, they have consistently upgraded



Employees process clean healthcare linens on the finishing side of the plant.

equipment and capacity in the wash aisle, which has two tunnel washers from G.A. Braun Inc., Syracuse, NY, as well as a new Kannegiesser DL 300 washer/extractor, the only one of its kind in the United States that processes 600 lbs. of healthcare textiles per load. This large-capacity washer/extractor features a unique loading system, built specifically for Northwest Health Care Linen, with a custom-load conveyor located on the mezzanine level that quickly loads up to five slings of soiled goods at once into the machine, which tilts 90 degrees to allow the soiled goods to drop into the open wash wheel. The water and chemicals (supplied by Gurtler Industries Inc.) dispersed in the machine varies with each load, specifically the weight of the goods in each of these loads. This machine is a nice complement with the plant's steam finishing equipment, providing adjustable moisture-retention

levels that aids the finishing side for a superior finish and fold.

The other new equipment is a Kannegiesser garment system, located on the finishing side. The clean rail system by E-Tech Inc. holds flat goods and pillowcases on one side and all apparel goes to the garment system. All the garment hangers have RFID chips, which communicates what the product is and marries it to the hanger for movement through the Kannegiesser steam tunnel, processing all patient and staff apparel. These products are sorted on the mezzanine level and travel back down to the Kannegiesser robotic folders, which folds a garment every four seconds.

These Kannegiesser robotic folders have one fold that is consistent for each garment. "These machines finish and fold almost like retail without the need for human intervention," says

# 16M

The original plant was designed for 3.5 million lbs., and the company was processing 6 million when it expanded in 2003. After expanding, Northwest Health Care Linen increased poundage to 16 million.

Mike Alexander, director of operations, as we watch the system in action on a busy day in the plant.

A staff member will call up the type of garment for sorting through the computer. The garment system has a four compartment tunnel for garments with options for custom programming each type of product. Depending on the product and material, the temperature and speed varies. "This system has resulted in a significant decrease in man

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— James Hall, president and CEO of Northwest Health Care Linen

hours necessary in the finishing area,” Alexander says. “We have five people at the hanging stations to run the system and one to tie bundles, as well as one supervisor lead.”

The quality has been noticeable since the system’s installation last year and it creates a more professional presentation for customers. Hall says that, “The system has provided consistency in the gown packages, scrub tops, etc. Customers like it, and it improves the life of the textile and color retention. The colors aren’t fading as much, and are lasting longer.”

This system was installed in the fall of 2012 and was online by December of that year, replacing the small-piece folders the company previously used. As a result, Northwest Health Care Linen reduced its labor force by 13 full-time employees and removed four

small-piece folders from its production floor.

### CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

In addition to this investment in plant technology, Northwest Health Care Linen also is investing in certification to establish itself as a leader in its market. The company became certified in both TRSA’s Clean Green and Hygienically Clean certification programs. The side of its trucks proudly display the logos of each of these programs, in addition to the company’s logo.

“Clean Green is just good business,” Hall says. “Certainly it helps the business from a cost standpoint. We’re recycling all of our plastic, and we have been for four years. We recycle all of our textiles that are considered ragged out. We bale all those and we have an agreement with a rag company in Seattle; they come and pick up our bales

of rejected textiles, so we don’t throw any of those away. In addition, we just upgraded all the lighting in the plant, which resulted in reduced electrical costs. Those things are all good for the bottom line, but that’s also good overall business. Some customers are more concerned about your waste stream and carbon footprint than others. Reducing waste is the right thing to do.”

Bill Akers, vice president of customer relations, notes that, “The plastic bags were 80% of our solid waste stream. It’s always well received from a customer standpoint. Both current customers and customers that are prospects, are super excited about that kind of thing.”

Hall considers the Hygienically Clean certification program the next step in healthcare textile certification. “We obtained our certification to become HLAC certified four years ago,” Hall says. “From a customer standpoint, at least in this region, it’s becoming very common for them to ask us for our certificates, or what we are doing in that area. For years, they asked us what our processes were and they would ask, ‘How do you know your linen is clean?’ or ‘How do you know that what we’re getting is clean?’ There really wasn’t a process in existence to substantiate that. When Hygienically Clean came along, we saw that as the next level, the next

(l/r) Healthcare garments move along a rail system; the facility’s new robotic folders in action.





(clockwise, from top) A tractor-trailer with the company logo and TRSA certification program decals; the company's new large-capacity washer/extractor; one of the company's two tunnel washers; and the chemical injection system in the plant.

step up, a higher level of certification and verification of what we're doing."

Northwest Health Care Linen is making an effort to educate its customers on Hygienically Clean and why it chose this certification over getting recertified by HLAC through an information packet that it's putting together and distributing, according to Akers. The packet will educate the company's customers on what the differences are between the two programs, why it made the move to Hygienically Clean and why it's a benefit to them as a customer, Akers notes.

Hall says that, "The customers that we've had that conversation with, about what Hygienically Clean is, and that we're having independent lab tests done to certify the linen, they're extremely pleased to know that the linen—the product itself—is being tested, and not just the process."

With these recent investments in technology and certifications and with the second-generation of this family owned business on board in Linen Management/Marketing Specialist Kelsey Van Miert, Northwest Health Care Linen is poised to continue upping its share of the healthcare market in the Pacific Northwest. While the company has invested in its future, it hasn't forgot what brought success in its past—good, old fashioned customer service. "We have an honest, straightforward way of dealing with our customers," Akers says. "Our partnerships are based on their business being successful. I'd say that 80% of our growth in the last 15 years has been based on word-of-mouth reviews. We go over the top on service to solidify long-term customers and it's worked." TS

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