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## Paras and Nurses Win Pay Raises, Reduced Healthcare Co-Pays

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Derby, CT

Long before their contract expiration last June, the bargaining committee for UE Local 222 Sub-local 43 surveyed their members to learn which issues needed to be addressed in negotiations. The most important issue for all members was maintaining the current Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO health insurance plan, and limiting the cost increase for these hard-working, underpaid professionals.

*Picture: From left, Vice Pres. Maria Ryan, Pres. Brenda Cayer McCarthy, Treasurer Rita Mammano and Samantha Mayhan. Not shown, nurse and bargaining committee member Francie Mengold, a strong voice for all the members.*



The union represents 49 paraprofessionals and four nurses, working in the four schools of the Derby school district. The nurses also wanted to add a half hour to their work day, so that their services would be available to students during all hours of the school day. Paraprofessionals wanted their wage scale, which had been frozen for the last several years, to be reinstated.

But the members' goal would not be easy to achieve. The two other non-certified bargaining units in the Derby district (represented by unions other than UE) had already given up their health insurance for lesser plans that require employees to pay more of the costs.

The union and the board of education (BOE) met in April 2013 to set the bargaining ground rules. Shortly thereafter, the superintendent of schools approached the union, and said the BOW was interested in bargaining without its attorney. The union bargaining committee was initially suspicious of the BOE's intent, since it has always used an attorney in the past, but after some discussion agreed.

At the first bargaining session, the superintendent gave the union a booklet containing the BOE's proposals, which included these troubling words: "NO WAGE INCREASE... we will provide

you with additional days of professional development – so technically, you will receive more in wages from the previous year.” The BOE also proposed painful changes to the health insurance. Although the board did not propose eliminating the Blue Cross plan that members like, it wanted to more than double the co-pays for services. For example, the hospital admission co-pay would jump from \$200 to \$500. The employer also proposed increasing out of network deductibles by 600 percent, and offered a high-deductible healthcare plan with a \$4000/\$8000 out of pocket maximum for combined “in-network” and “out-of-network” services.

The union committee stood firm, and from the beginning said that although they would appreciate more professional development, that is no substitute for wage increases. The committee also told the employer that while they wanted to keep current medical insurance, they could not agree to such drastic increases in cost.

Over the next several bargaining sessions, the UE committee explained the increased job responsibilities of bargaining unit members, and hammered the harmful economic impact of the board’s proposals on members and their families.

In late January the parties finally reached a tentative agreement which maintained the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Plan and *reduced* co-pays for the majority of services. The co-pay for office visits went from \$20 down to \$15, and inpatient hospital treatment from \$200 down to \$150. Other co-pays were cut in half: outpatient services from \$100 to \$50; emergency room from \$100 to \$50; and urgent care from \$50 to \$25. The employee’s contribution to the health insurance premium increased from 16 percent to 17 percent, and will increase 1 percent each year for the remaining two years.

The board also agreed to allow the union to distribute the money available for wage increases in a way that would provide the most benefit for the majority of members. After much discussion, the committee decided that nurses would receive 2 percent retroactive to July 1, 2013. This is the same wage increase other bargaining units had negotiated. They would also receive a 2 percent wage increase for each of the second and third years.

For paraprofessionals, in the first year those hired prior to September 15, 2012 will begin receiving step increases February 10, 2014. Paras who were at “max step” will receive a one-time signing bonus of \$200. In the second year, on July 1, 2014 paraprofessionals will receive a 1 percent general wage increase, and those hired prior to September 15, 2013 and still in the step process will gain a step increase. On July 1, 2015, paraprofessionals will gain a 1 percent general wage increase, and those hired prior to September 15, 2014 who were not at max step will also gain a step increase. Those receiving these additional step increases will gain 5 percent a year in pay. Paraprofessional Virginia DiPaola said, “Thanks to the committee for their hard work and determination. It’s great to be ‘stepping up’, and keeping our health insurance!”

The committee also made several improvements to contract language. Summer school positions will now be posted and filled by seniority and covered by all employee rights in the contract. Under the former contract, paraprofessionals assigned to toileting duties received a \$1 per hour stipend payment. The committee fought for improvement that extended the stipend payment to those working in pre-school and increased the hourly stipend to \$1.25.

The employer had proposed broad language on evaluations which would provide several evaluations per year, and which could be administered by any certified employee of the district or by anyone from outside the district authorized by the BOE. The union negotiated language that allows only one evaluation per year, and only by certified employees of the district.

President **Brenda Cayer McCarthy** said, "It was a hard-fought battle against both the board of education and the economy, trying to gain a modest wage increase for our members, while protecting their health insurance and its cost. The committee did our best, and we truly believe that this contract provides that. Reducing the cost of medical copays is huge, and will benefit all of us."

The union bargaining committee consisted of President Brenda Cayer McCarthy, Vice President **Maria Ryan**, Treasurer **Rita Mammano**, **Samantha Mayhan** and **Francie Mengold**, who was the nurse representative. They were assisted by Field Organizer **Colleen Ezzo**.

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