



Rising from the Ashes—The Signature Healthcare Response to the Unimaginable

In late 2023, ASPR TRACIE hosted [a webinar](#) and published [an article](#) highlighting the lessons learned from the Signature Healthcare Brockton Hospital fire that took place the same year. This 10-alarm electrical fire led to the evacuation of 162 patients and an extended closure, recovery, and rebuilding/repopulating process. ASPR TRACIE met with Kimberly Walsh, MSN, RN, and Sr. VP and Chief Operating Officer for Signature Healthcare, who shared how the hospital overcame numerous challenges to recover, rebuild a 125-year-old “beacon of the community,” and eventually reopen to serve the community in 2024.

Background

Brockton Hospital (located in Brockton, Massachusetts) opened its doors in 1896 and continues to be the largest inpatient facility in its service area. It is licensed for 216 beds and provides medical/surgical, pediatric, inpatient behavioral health services, and obstetric services; cardiac catheterization; a Level II nursery; and magnetic resonance imaging. On the morning of February 7, 2023, the hospital experienced a 10- alarm fire which required immediate shutdown and complete evacuation.

The next day, staff realized they had more questions than answers. The extent of the damage was unknown, and it was unclear how long the hospital would be closed, whether staff could return/get paid, and—perhaps most importantly—how staff could continue to support patients and the community that relied so heavily upon their services.

They held a leadership meeting the next morning, published information via social media, and placed a banner on the hospital’s website with a status update. Managers contacted their staff directly via phone or text. Their goals were to continue to care for patients and staff and to create a long-term strategy (and associated marketing plan) for safely reopening the hospital as soon as possible.

Signature Healthcare’s Three Tenets

The leadership team focused on three tenets upon which to focus recovery efforts:

1. Continue caring for the community
2. Care for staff
3. Safely reopen as quickly as possible

Related ASPR TRACIE Resources

[Experiences from the Field: The Signature Healthcare Brockton Hospital Fire](#)

[Healthcare Facility Evacuation/ Sheltering](#) Topic Collection

[Lessons Learned from the Signature Healthcare Brockton Hospital Fire \(Webinar\)](#)

[Rising from the Ashes—The Signature Healthcare Response to the Unimaginable \(Speaker Series Recording\)](#)

Caring for the Community

Financial issues had long troubled surrounding private practice providers, some of whom filed for bankruptcy with no notice, leaving approximately 65,000 patients displaced. Brockton residents needed medical care, and the team was determined to provide it. After the fire, they identified 25 medical services where hours could be increased (e.g., primary care and imaging), moved some hospital staff to ambulatory sites, and very quickly developed, built, and staffed two brand new urgent care centers (still operational) within three weeks of the fire, serving nearly 150 patients/day. Just a few months later, the hospital was able to provide wound care, outpatient surgeries, infusions, and colonoscopies.

Caring for Staff

Retaining staff was critical to ensuring continuity of care. The leadership team paid all full-time employees for 60 days post fire. They stood up a staffing agency to facilitate and track temporary staff redeployment to 15 healthcare organizations in the region. In some cases, surgeons were credentialed by other facilities to provide support. Leadership continued engaging employees through information sessions and social events. Yet, many left healthcare entirely or pursued other opportunities, making it hard to keep track of those who had been redeployed to nearby facilities.

Safely Reopening as Soon as Possible

Reopening a hospital that was devastated by an electrical fire and built over 100 years ago was rife with unforeseen setbacks, extremely high costs, and countless lessons learned. New facility drawings were created from scratch. The building needed a new electrical system, generators, water system, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, and sanitary lines. These systems had to be brought to code and required parts with months on wait times in some cases, forcing leadership to create contingency plans. For example, they opened the hospital without a dialysis unit, performed endoscopies in the operating room, and kept pediatric and behavioral health unit closed for the first year of operations.

Hospital staff met with industry leaders and the local delegation to help acquire the equipment on a timelier basis while the volume of patients in surrounding hospitals was becoming overwhelming and gaining media attention. In fact, leadership staggered the opening of some areas of the hospital based upon the lead time for air conditioning units. Simultaneously, delays in acquiring approval from insurance companies contributed to delays in repairs.



Figure 1. The Signature Healthcare leadership team meets the day after the fire. Courtesy Signature Health.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

The hospital had to issue many messages to the public and to staff throughout the response and recovery phase. Residents needed to know that while the hospital and emergency department (ED) were closed, they could receive care in other locations, including Signature's outpatient facilities and urgent care centers. The hospital had a security officer posted in their parking lot for 18 months to redirect people seeking care. Mobile message boards were posted across town to inform residents and encourage them to call 911 versus going directly to Signature Healthcare's ED.

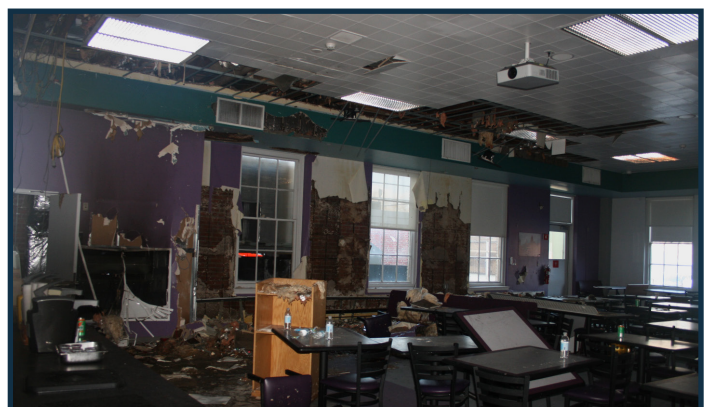


Figure 2. Photo of damage to the hospital. Courtesy of Signature Health.

Lessons Learned

Do not provide a specific date for reopening.

Unfortunately, the first opening date slipped due to unexpected challenges with the facility. The delayed opening upset employees and patients.

Leverage crisis into a relationship building opportunity.

On a positive note, staff were able to leverage this crisis into an opportunity to meet with many local and state leaders and partners, particularly in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The day after the fire, staff met with the fire chief, building inspector, city construction manager, and the city electrical engineer to discuss infrastructure damage and next steps. These meetings occurred seven days a week for several months.



Figure 3. Photo of a new reception area. Courtesy Signature Health.

Ensure business interruption is covered by your insurance policy and hire a business interruption expert. Having a policy that covered these types of “interruptions” and a liaison between the hospital and insurance providers was key, as it saved staff time and helped ensure finances flowed as efficiently as possible.

Negotiate, negotiate, negotiate. For example, the hospital was able to negotiate with vendors specific to equipment that was working on the day of the fire and failed once the electricity was restored (e.g., backup generators, water systems, and in-room air conditioners). In those cases, leadership negotiated with vendors for replacements that were essential to the re-opening and partially covered by the insurance company. Negotiation became an important tool the hospital used to reduce the cost of business interruption and open the doors to the community in a timely manner.

From the Ashes: Reopening Accomplishments

The team developed timelines for reopening. Overall, they faced major challenges including the acquisition of generators, rebuilding the electrical infrastructure, constructing a new power plant, and managing supply chain lead times. Teams of electricians worked 6 days a week to install new systems over 250,000 square feet of building infrastructure. Other systems failed in the 18 months of closure, including water and sewer systems, medical gases, and fire suppression systems. All the in-room heating units had failed and required replacement. The doors in every in-patient unit had become swollen from the lack of consistent temperatures over the 18 months and had to be removed and trimmed.

2023

September 2023

The Limited Services Hospital was opened, and endoscopy and outpatient services were performed in the operating suite which was not impacted by the fire. This suite includes a six-room operating room, critical care unit (CCU), and a sterile processing department. Additionally, the wound and infusion program was relocated to the hospital's former CCU, allowing patients with chronic illnesses and wounds to receive care.

2024

February 2024

Teams installed two new catheterization laboratories that had been planned for upgrades before the fire. Outside, solar panels were installed, covering parking and providing a new source of energy for the organization.

2024

May 2024

Laboratory services—which serve all of Signature Healthcare—were restored. Restoration of these critical services reduced the turnaround times for all of Medical Group and Urgent Care Centers and was essential to the opening of the hospital.

July 2024

Staff were recalled and travel staff were hired. All members of the care team completed a hospital orientation including core competencies. The staff were deployed to their units two weeks ahead of time to assist in setting the patient care areas up with supplies. The teams also reviewed emergency procedures and patient care scenarios.

The information technology and telecommunications teams worked tirelessly to install devices in all locations and test systems.

Radiology services were restored in July, and a new MRI machine was delivered in anticipation of the opening in August.

Teams of environmental service vendors worked to clean and prepare the units for occupancy.

The leadership team met weekly with the Department of Public Health to discuss plans for opening and obtain waivers for services that were not ready for opening.

August 2024

On August 13th the ED accepted their first patient and the CCU opened 8 beds and provided inpatient dialysis services. Two medical surgical units and the cardiac catheterization lab also opened.

Due to ongoing construction, the pharmacy, kitchen, endoscopy suite and dialysis unit had to activate interim plans while the facility was still under construction. For example, the dialysis unit was temporarily housed in the CCU. The hospital had a cold meal service that was prepared and delivered in the cafeteria. The pharmacy was in a remote location and all the medication that was prepared had an 8-hour expiration limit as they were not prepared in a clean room under a hood.

October 2024

The maternal/child program and Level II nursery opened (this maternity unit delivers nearly 1,400 newborns annually). All the providers working in other locations returned to care for patients at Brockton Hospital.

Kitchen construction was completed, hot meals became available to patients, and the staff meal services opened.

The interim pharmacy was closed, and the new suite was occupied. The clean room was ultimately certified in June of 2025.

The endoscopy suite and dialysis services were opened.

On October 30th a sprinkler head in the operating suite released, flooding rooms in the OR and recovery room. An investigation revealed that this was unrelated to the fire, but the incident closed ORs for another 90 days. Volume was shifted to the new Ambulatory Surgical Suite. The ORs were ultimately fully re-opened in January 2025.

Continued Challenges

The hospital opening has been a remarkable testament to the staff's dedication to the residents and the organization that provides a safety net to the community. The ongoing challenges are not unique to Brockton but are truly a test of this fragile organization. While many staff returned and remain committed to the mission of Signature, for example, the cost of labor and the shortages of registered nurses, physicians, technical staff, and support staff have strained the financial health of the organization.

Conclusion

The community truly felt the impact of the hospital's closure. Signature Health overcame challenges, incorporated lessons learned, and came back better than ever, offering the community a new facility with even more comprehensive services. At the time ASPR TRACIE met with Ms. Walsh in August 2025, the inpatient behavioral health unit had recently opened, and the hospital was making plans for the next fiscal year. One focus will be to recruit and retain staff in addition to maximize efficiency. The organization is proud of its long-term commitment to Southeastern Massachusetts and appreciates all the support during such a challenging time.