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Jury finds Luzerne hospital group liable

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HAZELTON - A Luzerne County jury has awarded more than \$19 million to a Hazelton woman who suffered severe brain injuries when hit by a courier van belonging to the Greater Hazelton Health Alliance while working as a flagger on a construction site along Airport Beltway in Hazle Twp. on May 30, 2001. County court officials said they believe the award is the largest in a civil suit in county history.

Alliance officials yesterday said that contrary to reports circulating in the area, the alliance is "fully protected: against the award, and details are being worked out with the alliance's insurance carrier. The award should not affect alliance efforts to make up for a \$2 million loss at its two city hospitals in 2003, said officials.

The jury, after five days of testimony, found that alliance employee Edward Washko, 71 of Tresckow, was negligent when he drove into McManamon as she waved a red flag and moved orange cones to direct traffic for Lagana Construction Services of hazelton during a paving project in a business driveway along the beltway.

Washko testified he did not see McManamon, who was wearing a vest and hard hat while working along the shoulder of the road. He also said he did not see warning signs.

Attorneys [Shanin Specter](#) son of U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, and Matthew Casey, son of former Gov. Robert Casey Sr., argued the case on behalf of McManamon and her brother and sister, who are her legal guardians.

McManamon is incapacitated at a medical center near Philadelphia. She has undergone five brain surgeries since the accident.

Specter and Casey said after the award that they were pleased the jury rejected arguments by hospital attorneys that McManamon was responsible for the accident. The attorneys told the jury in closing arguments that the hospitals "wont accept...corporate responsibility for what they did...[and] you are going to have to tell them." Alliance attorneys declined comment after the award.

Former Alliance CEO Bernard Rudegeair resigned Jan. 1, and a "turnaround company," Wellspring Partners Ltd., is evaluating ways to improve the alliance's financial problems, according to hospitals spokeswoman Joni Edmondson. No layoffs are expected in the "belt-tightening" process under way, she said.