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Mon Valley company sewing up face masks for front-line workers



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APRIL 24, 2020 2:52 PM

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A Duquesne company plans to turn out 360,000 cloth face masks that will be donated to medical personnel, social service employees and

others working in non-hospital settings in the Pittsburgh region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

American Textile Co. is producing the reusable masks through a \$750,000 initiative funded by the Henry L. Hillman Foundation, other local philanthropies and corporate donors.

Global Links, a Pittsburgh agency that ships surplus medical supplies to destinations around the world, will deliver the masks to nonprofits, including nursing homes, hospice facilities, veterans clinics, and homeless and women's shelters.

An initial shipment of 70,000 masks from American Textile's plant in El Salvador arrived in Pittsburgh Thursday night and was being distributed Friday morning, said Angela Garcia, Global Links' executive director.

At shelters, senior care facilities and other sites where people live, masks will be distributed to residents and staff, she said.

In some cases, workers will receive two masks so that one can be worn while the other is being laundered.

During a virtual announcement Friday on Zoom, American Textile's president and chief executive, Lance Ruttenberg, said he was contacted about six weeks ago by David Roger, president of the Hillman

Foundation, who asked if the company had the capability to manufacture face masks.

American Textile, a family enterprise founded almost a century ago, makes pillows and bedding coverings, including sheets and mattress pads, for hospitals, hotels and national retailers. Its products are sold under brand names including Sealy, Tempur-Pedic and private labels.

The company designed a face mask prototype that was approved by the Allegheny County Health Department and the Allegheny Conference on Community Development coordinated fundraising to produce and donate the masks.

“It was a gargantuan effort,” said Mr. Ruttenberg. “We were trying to find a way to get everybody in Allegheny County who needed a mask, a mask.”

Nearly half of the company’s total workforce of 1,200 is working on masks at plants in Duquesne’s RIDC Park; Dallas; Salt Lake City; Tifton, Ga.; and El Salvador, he said.

The El Salvador facility was shut down because of the pandemic, but officials there agreed to reopen it to meet “a humanitarian need in Western Pennsylvania,” Mr. Ruttenberg said.

As the pandemic spread worldwide in recent months, American Textile has also been contracted by companies in the Pittsburgh region and elsewhere to produce masks, he said.

Global Links expects steady demand for the masks as the coronavirus crisis continues — especially under a recent state directive that all employees and customers of businesses wear masks.

“We plan to vet the needs in the nonprofit sector,” Ms. Garcia said.

“This is our first and a very large purchase. We know there will be more need.”

Funders, in addition to the Hillman Foundation and American Textile, include Allegheny Housing Rehabilitation Corp., BNY Mellon, Dollar Bank, Federated Investors Foundation, Gateway Financial, Giant Eagle, Jewish Healthcare Foundation, Koppers, Pitt Ohio, Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation, PNC Foundation, PPG and the PPG Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, Robroy Industries, Dick and Ginny Simmons, The Heinz Endowments, and Wadhvani Impact Trust.

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