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**Wisconsin manufacturers pivoting during pandemic**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Manufacturers in Wisconsin are ramping up their efforts to supply personal protective equipment such as face shields, as well as crucial parts for medical devices used in the pandemic response.

Midwest Prototyping President Steven Grundahl says his company intends to produce 1 million face shields for health care workers after pivoting in response to the current crisis.

“We’re used to doing short runs and unique projects; problem-solving is our daily business,” he told WisBusiness.com.

In a recent interview, Grundahl explained that assembling the masks themselves isn’t very complex. The trick, he said, has been putting together the supply chain for elastic, plastic lenses, foam pieces and other product elements.

“It’s been a real challenge, but now we’ve got our supply chain locked down,” he said, noting most of his suppliers for face shield parts are based in Wisconsin.

At the moment, his Blue Mound-based business can create up to 10,000 face shields per day and is adding more remote production sites over the next week. Once those are set up, Grundahl expects to be able to produce as many as 30,000 face shields per day.

While Midwest Prototyping is fielding requests for face shields from here in Wisconsin and worldwide, Pindel Global Precision in New Berlin has been churning out thousands of ventilator parts for machines needed to treat COVID-19 patients.

Company CEO Bill Berrien says Pindel is making seven different parts for ventilators, with capacity to produce more than 7,000 of each part. He explained the parts are “critical” for these machines.

Both Pindel Global Precision and Midwest Prototyping made rapid changes to their operations to meet the explosive demand for critical medical products. Neither of the companies was producing these materials before the crisis, but each was able to turn over large orders on relatively short notice. Both companies would have qualified as essential before producing these new products.

Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing and Productivity CEO Buckley Brinkman noted states are “scrambling” to purchase personal protective equipment and other medical supplies to prepare for the expected peak in cases.

“We’ve discovered that all the traditional access points to those supply chains and producers behind them are being stretched to their limits,” Brinkman told WisBusiness.com. “Mask producers have long lines of states waiting for their production … all traditional pieces of the supply chain are operating at full capacity and maybe even beyond.”

As a contract manufacturer for precision machine parts, Pindel normally creates parts for automation, industrial controls, airspace and medical equipment. After receiving multiple emergency purchase orders, Berrien said the company was able to focus production on the ventilator parts.

“Obviously there’s a big need for ventilators, in addition to all sorts of other medical items,” he said, noting he wanted to help “charge through the bottleneck and get ventilators made as quickly as possible.”

He also gave a nod to his vendors for delaying orders for other customers to make the ventilator parts the top priority.

Midwest Prototyping has been getting plastic lenses from a Cross Plains business called Plastic Ingenuity, and foam cut-outs from Wisconsin Foam Products of Madison. Meanwhile, elastic bands for the face shields have been sourced from industrial equipment manufacturer Curt G Joa in Sheboygan Falls.

“They make machines that make diapers and feminine products,” Grundahl explained. “They pivoted to provide us with elastic-like material that’s similar to a diaper waistband. It’s latex-free, durable and available in Wisconsin.”

He noted he’s taking “some financial risk” on the current endeavor, but said it’s “certainly worth the effort” to help out with the pandemic response.

“Overcoming regulations and putting together a new supply chain is a pretty complicated task,” Brinkman added. “How do we get that focus on products that are most critical on that list, and find manufacturers that are willing to make that pivot?”

Midwest Prototyping and Pindel Global Precision are just two examples of companies that have rallied around the effort to supply care providers with equipment needed to fight the virus. Numerous news reports, releases and announcements show well more than a dozen other Wisconsin companies have shifted elements of their production to meet increased demand for these and other products during the pandemic.

A packaging company called Placon is expanding its manufacturing capabilities after connecting with UW-Madison professor Tim Osswald, who has been working with Madison-area companies to source parts for health worker face shields.

Placon agreed to donate plastic die-cut sheets to the project, and it wasn’t long before the company began to receive more requests for the sheets.

“We knew we had to automate the process if we really wanted to deliver a significant number of visors quickly to make a positive impact and protect our healthcare workers and first responders battling the Coronavirus,” said John Rhoades, director of engineering for Placon, in a statement.

The company is now producing the plastic face shield component for several businesses who are putting together the finished product.

A Wausau manufacturer called Greenheck Group has begun expediting orders for air-movement machinery used in health care settings, a report in the Wausau Daily Herald shows. This company was already creating commercial ventilators and other such equipment, but is now prioritizing its medical customers and waiving any fees associated with faster production, per the report.

Meanwhile, Monterey Mills of Janesville is partnering with another Wisconsin company called Elder Flag to create cloth masks for health workers to use and reuse in place of the medical masks that are in such high demand. According to a report in The Gazette, the companies have supplied one of the state’s regional health systems with more than 20,000 masks.

Harbor Freight, which has 17 stores in Wisconsin, is donating its entire supply of N95 masks, face shields and gloves, and has created a web portal for hospitals to request resources.

A report in the Daily Herald shows Wausau Coated pivoted to producing face shields and thermometer labels in response to the pandemic. At the request of the Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce, the company started working on the new orders in just a few days, the report shows.

Kenosha-based Jockey International recently announced plans to donate 250,000 gowns, 10,000 N95 masks and 10,000 surgical masks, and began shipping these materials near the end of last week.

And in the Beloit area, several companies have shifted production to emphasize hand sanitizer products, according to a report from the Beloit Daily News.

Ecolab has been producing more dispenser parts for soaps and sanitizer products in response to greatly increased demand. And Simply Solutions of Janesville has begun producing two different kinds of hand sanitizer in the past two weeks, after previously focusing on CBD products from hemp.

Also in Janesville, DeVere Chemical has ramped up production of hand sanitizer by partnering with Viking Chemical across the Illinois border in Rockford. And Prent Corp. has been creating prototype face shields in response to shortages at Mercyhealth Hospital and Trauma Center in Janesville.

The 45th Parallel Distillery in New Richmond is one of many distillers that have been tapped to create hand sanitizer during the pandemic, and recently held a community event where the company handed out at least 250 gallons of sanitizer to local businesses and others. That’s from a report in the Leader-Telegram.

Other companies making sanitizer in the Madison area include Doundrins Distilling, Attwill Medical and Yahara Bay Distillers, a report in the Wisconsin State Journal shows. And UW-Madison’s Zeeh Pharmaceutical has also been producing and delivering bottles of hand sanitizer.

GE Healthcare has been making ventilators through an emergency contract with the Machinists Union, the State Journal report shows. And Promega and Aldevron are making components for a COVID-19 test.

Pindels’ Berrien says examples like these illustrate that U.S. manufacturing “can be extremely competitive” for cost even when lead times are very short.

“I believe that one of the lessons learned, or insights coming out of this tragedy is going to be a realization among equipment manufacturers that capabilities and resources to provide production parts quickly are here in the U.S.,” Berrien said.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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