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## **CALL OF DUTY: SEAMS' members going above and beyond to address PPE shortage**

By Devin Steele

Here, in SEAMS' continuing series of stories highlighting some of our members who are rallying around the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage, we are featuring three companies – Minnesota Knitting Mills, Hemingway Apparel and Shuford Yarns – who have answered the call.

As the go-to resource for the sewn products industry, we appreciate those members who are stepping up to address the critical need for these products during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you well know, our industry plays a vital role in the health, safety and well-being of our citizens, and we're excited to call out these incredible efforts. We are proud of you.

If you are a member and would like to be recognized in a forthcoming article, please send your story to [dsteele@etextilecommunications.com](mailto:dsteele@etextilecommunications.com).

### **Minnesota Knitting Mills**

During the pandemic, Minnesota Knitting Mills (MKM), based in Mendota Heights, Minn., has had to make only a slight pivot into PPE and other medical goods to address the demand for these products for the healthcare industry.

The company already was supplying PPE products and other related medical products, including medical cuffs and several types of fabric, but in lower volumes than it is producing currently, according to Britt Moore, director of Sales & Customer Services. Some of its fabrics are being repurposed for new types of applications, he added.

“The biggest shift has been determining the different levels of PPE protection and how our fabrics can be used, along with assembly needs for the different products,” he said. “Determining the areas that we could participate in while also temporarily turning away from our other major product lines was the most challenging aspect, and one needed leadership to determine which areas of the business – both in personnel and operations – were flexible enough to move into the PPE area.”

As a critical manufacturer supplying healthcare supplies, MKM was granted an exception from the state's State-At-Home Executive Order. The company isn't fully staffed, but it is looking to bring back additional team members in response to the demand for the PPE products, Moore said.

Minnesota Knitting has had numerous partners reach out to see what MKM can offer in comparison to what the partners can offer in order to develop additional PPE products, he noted. Many of MKM's customers have also pivoted into the PPE arena, and the products they are making are being distributed in new channels that are not completely defined, Moore reported.

“For many of our products, we don't know the final distribution plan,” he said.



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Employees are “very willing” to help with the production of the PPE and other mainline products, but they are also concerned about the risk that COVID-19 carries with it, and the company is taking every measure to ensure their safety, according to Moore.

“While there is a certain amount of pride in providing the needed products in a time of crisis/need, there is also a high level of stress and tension that surrounds such efforts – stress surrounding the future outlook of the industry and company, tension around what might happen next, and most importantly the stress that surrounds how we can take care of our most important resource – our team of employees,” he said.

MKM is running two main shifts, and this is about 50 percent to 60 percent of its normal production, he added.

Some of the biggest pressure points, Moore said, are sewing machinery as well as consistent – and possibly long-term – demand on some of the newer products. And the uncertainty of demand for the next 60 to 120 days makes for difficult planning decisions, he added.

“Our goal is to weather the current situation while expanding our product lines to allow MKM to be more flexible long term,” Moore said. “The goal during the social-distancing phase is to remain viable with the less-than-full production plan and then expand to higher-than previous levels once the restrictions are lifted.”

One thing is certain, he pointed out – when this crisis is over, some of the issues Minnesota Knitting Mills has been at the forefront of addressing with industry partners will begin to crescendo to a larger audience.

“If the last four weeks has shown us anything, it is clear that the vision of the SEAMS organization is urgently needed in the textile industry in the U.S.,” he said. “Much of the conversation that we have had with customers and other partners are the same conversations that we have had within the SEAMS organization for the past few years. Coordination, collaboration and a ready-made supply chain need to be more fully developed so that the ramp-up time can be shortened the next time a need appears.”

### **Hemingway Apparel**

Cut-and-sew contractor Hemingway Apparel is part of the Parkdale coalition initiated by the White House to produce PPE during the COVID-19 crisis.

The company, based on Apparel Drive in Hemingway, S.C., has always sewn a variety of products for customers, so joining this effort was a natural fit, according to President Chris Marsh. About 20 percent of its production dried up fairly quick shortly after COVID-19 became a pandemic, but Hemingway was able to pivot to act as a manufacturer in conjunction with the initiative in order to make the face masks, he said.

“While we didn't lose much in the way of production, we needed to replace it fast,” he said. “Most of the loss was in our shirt department. While in talks about participating and trying to learn what we needed



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to do as a company, Hemingway was simultaneously tearing down a shirt line and rebuilding a mask line.

“The learning curve for us has been more about making sure we understood the supply chain and how to get everything ordered and in the facility in a timely manner,” he continued. “Our operators are certainly on a small curve, but they are familiar with product change and seem to be adapting well. I think one of leadership’s concerns is how to extend the terms far beyond what we normally operate under.

As a small operation, Hemingway has remained fully staffed, and has added a few people, he added. The company is actively working with legislators to understand what it needs to do to increase employment, he noted.

“If we go over 50 people like we once were, the dynamics change drastically for us because of the Employer Mandate 50 person ceiling in the Affordable Care Act,” Marsh reported.

Through the consortium, Hemingway Apparel has been tasked with manufacturing nearly 500 million face masks in a short period of time. The face masks it is producing will ultimately end up in households across America via FEMA, he said. Because of its current limitation in the number of employees it can hire, it has committed to produce 15,000 units per week, he pointed out. “It is our hope that we can expand that with the help of our legislators,” he said.

The company has remained a one-shift operation during the pandemic, but it is in “full-scale overtime,” he added.

He noted that his employees are extremely proud to be part of a larger effort aimed at public health in our time of need.

“Our employees have been outstanding at understanding the value of what they are doing,” Marsh said. “We are all highly conscious of how important it is for each of us to stay well and keep working. One of the new hires told us she could make more money at home with the relief effort being provided, but that she felt as though she needed to be helping people and knew this was a way she could do that.”

Being a part of a larger effort has benefited the company during its shift into PPE, Marsh said.

“Surprisingly, our industry and associates have come together to share data across nearly every facet of the supply chain,” he said. “This industry has responded to the crisis with strength and unification in a way I never remember in my 50 years of being raised in the industry.”

While Hemingway has committed to only mask production, the sheer volume of work that it has had to turn away because of capacity limitations is “magnificent,” Marsh said.

“Real, valuable, solid work is available to be done and we believe that there will be some long-term residual opportunities for the domestic supply chain to be a ‘go-to supply,’ at least in this hemisphere,” he said.

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Marsh admitted that he hasn't had much time to recognize the impact his company might be making, but he said he believes it to be immeasurable.

"It can be overwhelming to think about what you are doing in terms of it may help save someone's life," he said. "We may never know the impact a face mask may have on a family's life, but it's incredible knowing we had a part in helping."

### **Shuford Yarns**

Hickory, N.C.-based Shuford Yarns LLC is a 140-year old company that provides a broad product line of spun yarns for the industrial, home furnishing and apparel sectors, some of which already are provided to medical as well as military end uses.

Its yarns are used in face masks, surgical gowns, hospital towels, diabetic socks, hospital socks, medical sleeves, military towels and blankets, as well as yarn used in the food industry.

"We have a number of customers who asked us to continue to run, as they are a part of Homeland Security's Essential Business unit," said Marvin Smith, Shuford's president & CEO. "Most of these products are made year round, so it did not require us to change our production matrix."

The company has remained fully staffed and is keeping all of its associates on the payroll, he reported. Currently, Shuford has adjusted its running schedules to reflect the reduction in non-essential business and is focusing on essential yarns needed. Its customers are primarily knitters with a few weavers that are serving the essential needs of the industry.

"We are very proud to be able to be a part of a specific 'call to action' to make sure we supply much-needed inputs for the finished medical, military and food products," Smith said. "I have been proud of our associates not only helping us meet our customers' needs but also helping our local community by taking fabrics from some of our customers and making masks for them. Not only did we get fabric from our customers, but we got a customer to donate elastic straps so we can attach to the cloth masks.

"It is just a small way we can help on a personal level to provide PPE to our local community," he added.