



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

SEAMS June Newsletter: MMI Textiles article

MMI Textiles among SEAMS' members engaged in association coalition focused on PPE

By Devin Steele

As SEAMS engaged in conversations with a coalition of textile and nonwovens associations to address the critical shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) when the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading in the U.S., Westlake, Ohio-based MMI Textiles was among a handful of SEAMS' members that participated in early discussions.

The company's president and founder, Amy Bircher, as first vice chairman of IFAI, was asked to participate in an industry call with the associations and Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio). Her company, a converter of a wide range of textiles, was one of a number of SEAMS' members that moved quickly into PPE supply.

After being contacted by White House official Dr. Peter Navarro on the PPE scarcity, Kim Glas, President & CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based National Council of Textile Organizations (NCTO), asked the Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI) and INDA, the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry to join the discussion – and SEAMS was swiftly brought to the table to help fill the cut-and-sew void.

"It's really nice to see these associations come together to collaborate and show a common concern and passion and care for the industry, jointly messaging it, and being each other's cheerleaders, with one common goal: to help the current needs of supply," Bircher said. "Those discussions were centered around supply of both the finished PPE, and the raw materials to make PPE."

From a legislative and regulatory standpoint, the NCTO has been "phenomenal," she added. And from messaging and cooperation standpoint, the other associations have been "incredible," she added.

"Everybody's staying in their lane and bringing something to the table," she said. "SEAMS has their specific member group, IFAI has their specific member group, INDA has their specific member group, and NCTO has members from all of those. So we're getting the message out to a whole body of member organizations, not just the same one. I think that's pretty cool to see."

The crisis has brought to light the vagaries of the global trading system for manufactured products, which left the U.S. and many parts of the world scrambling for PPE, Bircher noted. Local, state and federal governments, healthcare systems and the general populace quickly became aware of the gaps in the domestic supply chain, she added. Plus, she said, the industry should use this awakening as a salient talking point around the importance of U.S. manufacturing.



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

“It is a perfect time for textiles to say, ‘see what happens when you put all your eggs in the China basket or non-U.S. basket,’ she said.

MMI’s PPE pivot

Working with the coalition also has benefitted MMI Textiles, which decided to do its part to assist in the PPE effort in March. The company began working with customers to create products mostly for medical workers but also for consumers. One of its partners was able to commit more than 300,000 gowns to NYC health workers, and another made face shields for Ohio health, she noted.

Since entering that realm, MMI has begun developing a “boutique-type” division that will focus on reselling PPE that is made in the USA to a large GPO and other medical facilities, she added.

“I would equate it to doing a start-up business in three months,” Bircher said. “We went from sourcing nothing before for PPE to developing key, strategic relationships with partners that are now providing long-term supply options to MMI.”

In March, she was contacted by a friend who is a senior-level executive of a Cleveland, Ohio-based, 640-member private practice group purchasing organization (GPO), an entity that helps healthcare providers realize savings and efficiencies by aggregating purchasing volume. Bircher broached the subject of an MMI division focusing on PPE, telling him, “We’re going to be mindful and structured – and offer 100 percent made in the USA PPE.”

He told Bircher he was passionate about USA-made PPE and agreed to send a survey prepared by Bircher to his members. Some questions centered around the importance of made-in-America products vs. price.

“I got this survey back, enlarged it and spent a Saturday taping it to my wall – red lining, circling, totaling up things – and the overwhelming common denominator was that price matters more than country of origin,” she said.

With this eye-opening information, Bircher initiated a Zoom meeting with representatives of 17 practices within the GPO, including one of the group’s biggest buyers.

“One lady I spoke with told me she was sick and tired of all the imported stuff,” Bircher said. “She said she was willing to pay a higher price for U.S.-made product. She said the problem is that they are a private practice, not a big hospital organization, and they are tied to margins because they operate like a business. But she also said, ‘we have a group that would absolutely buy all the product from you if you could bring us gowns and masks that are made in the USA. Yet, you may not have success if the big hospitals don’t get behind this effort.’ We absolutely need large healthcare groups that are powerful in their messaging and lobbying in Washington.”

With so many healthcare groups struggling with their bottom lines during these precarious times, it will take a herculean effort to convince the large players to buy into Made in America, Bircher added. Yet,



THE ASSOCIATION & VOICE OF THE US SEWN PRODUCTS INDUSTRY

organizations such as the NCTO and others should work diligently to convince the federal government to either mandate or provide incentives to hospital groups to buy U.S.-made PPE, she added.

As the pandemic was spreading, the Berry Amendment, which mandates the Dept. of Defense purchase certain U.S. goods, was one of the “saving graces” for immediate supply of materials for PPE, she pointed out. A similar law for American-made PPE would help ensure the U.S. never finds itself in a similar situation again, and would help supply chains ramp up quickly, she added.

“The biggest hurdle the industry still faces is capacity and raw materials,” she said. “You can’t just make up meltblown, for example – these machines can only make so much. So you need to get investments in bricks and mortar, equipment and people. It isn’t going to happen overnight because it’s still a supply and demand thing. It’s definitely a hurdle that everyone’s still struggling with.”

Which is why the U.S. textile/sewn products/nonwovens industry needs to strive to get the government, healthcare operations and others on board the Made-in-America PPE train, Bircher said.

“There are some senators – (Rob) Portman and Brown from my state of Ohio, for instance – that have a bipartisan message to try to get PPE made in USA mandated,” she said. “It certainly is going to take some diligence and hard work to continue to drive this.”