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VP Pence Recognizes Reusable Medical Garments Amid COVID-19 Crisis

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Photo Credit: Evan Vucci/AP

In a recent briefing on COVID-19, Vice President Mike Pence (R) asked whether it is feasible to return to reusable healthcare garments that can be laundered and reused. The resounding answer is 'Yes!' Reusable personal protective equipment (PPE) has already proven to be safe and effective and their use needs to be greatly expanded to prevent the types of shortages that hospitals are now experiencing.

"We applaud the administration's recognition of reusable products as a more sustainable option than disposables," said Joseph Ricci, TRSA president & CEO. "The current pandemic and the sudden need for huge volumes of safety equipment makes the case that reusable items should be a major part of the nation's stockpile and supply chain. Requiring healthcare institutions to use at least 50% reusable PPEs would improve the environment and better protect healthcare workers."

The dangerous shortages of supplies for doctors and nurses fighting the COVID-19 pandemic has focused new attention on the need for more reusable protective medical garments. Part of the spectrum of PPE that supports frontline care providers that are in high demand includes isolation barrier gowns (ISO), surgical gowns, scrub suits and cubicle curtains. PPE protects healthcare workers as they treat patients. Failure to have enough of these critical items available hinders patient and medical staff safety.

"An isolation gown is the first defense for healthcare providers, patients and visitors who spend time in a medical facility that faces the threat of emerging infectious diseases," said Joe LaPorta, president & CEO, Healthcare Linen Services Group. "These gowns control and protect against infectious hazards in a medical workplace. The gowns adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines during patient care and procedures and are carefully examined and tracked during their lifetime."

David Potack, president of Unitex, a healthcare linen service which serves the hard-hit New York area, said that, "Reusable PPE items can be sanitized and used between 80 to 100 times versus only one time for a disposable item. Due to the shortage of disposable items we have significantly accelerated the turn times to get reusable items back to the healthcare facilities we serve."

“Reusable PPE items that can be quickly hygienically cleaned, processed and put back in a hospital’s inventory are a force multiplier in a crisis and are changing how people think about reusable PPE products now and in the future,” Potack added.

Reusable (i.e. washable) gowns are typically made of polyester or polyester-cotton fabrics and can be safely laundered and reused. “Our trucks are on the road daily and our laundries are working 24/7 to meet the needs of the healthcare facilities we serve,” LaPorta said. “During a pandemic, such as the one we are now experiencing, the disposable market and supply chain are not guaranteed especially when one country makes most of the disposable items.”

The White House is considering the feasibility of cloth gowns over disposable PPE, Vice President Pence said during an April 9 briefing. The White House Coronavirus Task Force has asked the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) to review the possibility of healthcare workers using and reusing cloth gowns instead of disposable PPE. “Twenty years ago, most physicians and most surgeons wore cloth gowns every day and laundered them,” Pence said, adding that the Task Force may release new guidance soon regarding the matter.

Industry is Gearing Up to Increase Production

“We have focused our development and production processes to help fight the battle against COVID-19,” said Halsey M. Cook, president and CEO, Milliken & Co. “Many of our U.S. customers are now manufacturing personal protective equipment, and we’re right alongside them, supplying the medical-grade, protective textiles they need.”

Milliken is manufacturing these critical textiles in the U.S. This enables Milliken to utilize strong supply chain relationships to quickly deploy these fabrics to customers where they are made into final pieces of PPE.

Milliken’s BioSmart™ antimicrobial technology, for example, is used for scrubs, lab coats and hospital privacy curtains, harnessing the power of bleach to kill up to 99.9% of common bacteria on contact and making reusable items even safer and more effective.

“Medline is increasing its manufacturing capacity for reusable isolation gowns, patient gowns and scrubs to help support the needs of healthcare providers,” said Jeremy Fogel, vice president, Textiles Division, Medline. “Over the last several years, there has been a continued shift from reusable isolation gowns to disposable ones. Due to the current crisis, hospitals should consider implementing a more diversified supply chain strategy in the future by moving to a hybrid program that uses a combination of disposable and reusable isolation gowns.”

Dan Schwartz, vice president, Fashion Seal Healthcare, added that, “Over the past few weeks we have seen a tremendous increase in our garment orders for medical caregivers because of this pandemic, not only on reusable isolation gowns, but on scrub apparel, reusable masks and other reusable garments as well.” While I can’t speak for the disposable market outside of the massive supply shortage we have seen, we do anticipate a larger need for reusable garments in the future and will continue to support our laundry and distributor partners with their efforts.”

“While we feel we were more prepared than most with ample inventory on hand, a situation like this teaches us that medical products can’t simply be treated as ‘just-in-time inventory.’ In the future, healthcare systems will need to work with their laundry partners and other suppliers to create inventory reserves that better satisfy their needs in an emergency,” Schwartz added.

LaPorta said that, “In the past it has sometimes been difficult to compete with disposable gowns. Now our phones are ringing off the hook with healthcare facilities that are realizing that reusable gowns have a big advantage and should always be part of their supply chain as well as in emergency stockpiles.”

Liz Remillong, vice president, strategic alliances, Crothall Laundry Services, said that, “Orders from current customers as well as new customers are asking that we help fill the void left by the shortage of disposable products with ISO gowns and cover gowns that are reusable. This crisis is changing the paradigm for the supply chain of the future as hospitals recognize the importance of being able to stock and reuse items that are critical to safety.”

According to recent studies, including the Comparative Life Cycle Assessment of Reusable vs. Disposable Textiles prepared for TRSA by Exponent, Aug. 7, 2014. Accessed Nov. 21, 2017, and a more recent LCA underwritten by TRSA and other reusable textile organizations in 2018, a life-cycle analysis shows the environmental impact of reusable versus disposable isolation gowns. The study concluded that reusable gowns offered the following benefits over their life cycle:

- 28 percent reduction in natural resource energy consumption
- 30 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions
- 41 percent reduction in water consumption (specifically, blue water, which is water used and not returned to the source)
- 93 percent reduction in solid waste generation.

Questions can be directed to Ricci at jricci@trsa.org or mobile at [703.966.5933](tel:703.966.5933).

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