

# Volunteers sew face masks for health workers facing shortages

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Image 1. Briana Danyeale sews cloth face masks that say "We Got This!" in her mother's living room in Greer, South Carolina, March 22, 2020. The masks will be sent to health care workers. Legions of everyday Americans are sewing masks for desperate hospitals, nursing homes and homeless shelters amid the coronavirus pandemic. Photo: Christina Hunter via AP

For the last few days, Bill Purdue has been helping his buddy make face masks. He cuts rectangles of cotton fabric that his friend sews into the masks.

Fashion designer Briana Danyeale left Italy in February to return to her mother's Greer, South Carolina, home. Now she has turned the living room into a mini sewing factory, making masks that she embroiders with the words "We Got This!"

Purdue and Danyeale are among scores of people making personal protective equipment for desperate hospitals, doctors and nurses. In the middle of a viral coronavirus outbreak, healthcare workers have turned to the public, saying do-it-yourself face masks are better than nothing.

## Helping From Home

Coronavirus is a flu-like illness. It began in China and has been spreading across the globe since December 2019. Health officials have been encouraging social distancing. This means staying home and staying away from other people to help slow the spread of the virus. Many schools have shut down. Many companies are telling employees to work from home. Major sporting and entertainment events have also been canceled or postponed.

For people at home, sewing masks makes them feel less helpless.

"Whatever it takes to get the job done, that's what I want to do," said Purdue, 57 years old. His daughter works at the women's hospital in Evansville, Indiana. He and his friend Mike Rice responded to a Facebook post the week of March 16 from Deaconess Health System in Evansville asking the public for help.

The efforts mirror those in other countries, including Spain. There, mask-making volunteers include a group of nuns and members of the Spanish Air Force.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority recover.

However, the virus is spreading rapidly and starting to max out health care systems in several cities.

Deaconess spokeswoman Pam Hight said the hospital system realized it could face a shortage if local infections shot up as they have elsewhere. So officials made and posted a how-to video.

People began offering masks from all across the country. "It makes your heart warm; people are so good," she said.

She said Deaconess expects to collect thousands of masks the week of March 23 at an off-hospital site. It will sanitize the masks before distributing them.

Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, New Hampshire's largest hospital, is preparing kits with fabric and elastic. It is encouraging volunteers to sew face masks for patients, visitors and staff. Then, medical-grade protective equipment can be conserved for front-line health care workers.

Providence St. Joseph's Health in the hard-hit Seattle, Washington, area put together kits using special material and distributed them to people willing to sew them. On March 24, though, it ended the effort. Local manufacturing companies had begun making masks and face shields quickly and on a larger scale.

Government officials had previously advised hospital workers to use surgical masks when treating possibly infected patients. Supplies of fitted and more protective N95 respirator masks were beginning to run low.

"If nurses quit or become too fatigued or even become ill themselves, then we don't have a front line anymore," said Wendy Byard of Lapeer, Michigan. Her daughter is a nurse. She began



organizing friends to make masks after learning her daughter was told to wear the same mask all day.

The week of March 16, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, quietly updated its guidelines. It now says that hospitals low on surgical masks should consider ways to reuse them or to use them through an entire shift. Scarves or bandanas could be used "as a last resort," the CDC said. However, some health officials warned cloth masks might not work.

### **"A True Grassroots Effort"**

Mary Dale Peterson runs a Corpus Christi, Texas, children's hospital. She declined volunteers' offers to make masks. She said construction and manufacturing industries should donate or sell the high-grade masks they have to hospitals.

"It would be only an extremely, extremely last resort that I would have my staff" wear homemade masks, she said. "I really hope it doesn't get to that point in the U.S."

Board members of the Missouri Quilt Museum in Hamilton, Missouri, asked local hospitals if masks were needed. Director Dakota Redford said "they emphatically said yes." Soon other health care providers, including ambulance crews and nursing homes, were requesting masks.

"This has been a true grassroots effort that has exploded across the country in the quilting world," she said.

Businesses also are stepping up.

Crafts chain Joann Stores offered up its locations. People can use the stores' sewing equipment to make masks and hospital gowns, spokeswoman Amanda Hayes said.

Only 10 people are allowed in each store, sticking to CDC guidelines. The sewing stations will be six feet apart, and staff will continuously sanitize the work areas and materials. The company also has special kits for customers who want to make masks at home.

"We're enabling people to feel like they are contributing at a time when we don't have control," Hayes said.

In Baltimore, Maryland, almost 285 volunteers with 618 3D printers are making plastic face shields. The equipment will go to Johns Hopkins and other area hospitals.

Danyeale, the South Carolina fashion designer, said she made about 200 masks.

"If I'm one person creating 200 masks, imagine what we all could do," said Danyeale, 24 years old. "It's super sad that we're at this point, but this is encouraging."