

Bozrah company shifts to making hospital beds, partitions

Published April 03, 2020 7:27PM

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John Uliano, director of operations for Gilman Brothers, demonstrates how the company's new beds are assembled Wednesday, April 1, 2020, at its facility in Bozrah. The company focuses on foam board material products transitioned to making the beds and partitions.

Bozrah — Several weeks ago, as staff at Gilman Brothers watched the novel coronavirus outbreak unfold across the U.S. and here in Connecticut, they sat down to brainstorm.

Sensing there would be a slowdown in business, they began thinking of how their foam board materials, typically used for signage, displays and exhibits, could be used to aid in the response to the pandemic.

Given the ways in which the materials can bend and fold to create structures, the staff thought the materials could be used to make beds and partitions for medical facilities.

This week, as the state prepared for what's suspected to be the worst month for the virus, members of the Connecticut National Guard set up beds and partitions made by Gilman Brothers at Western Connecticut University's O'Neill Center, which has been transformed from a sports arena into a mobile field hospital.

The O'Neill Center and makeshift hospitals being erected at other sites across the state will provide places for coronavirus patients, who no longer require acute care, to recover safely away from other household members. Dr. Steven Choi, chief quality officer for Yale New Haven Health and Yale Medical School, said these would be patients who still require some oxygen, IV fluids and assistance with food.

The state's first order with Gilman Brothers was for 1,000 beds and 1,000 partitions, worth several hundred thousand dollars. The company turned around the order in 48 hours, including coordinating with other companies that cut the material and place it on pallets, and making adjustments to the design on the fly, said Bill VanHorn, director of sales. The company is working on its second order from the state, which is much larger than the first.

"It's been incredibly emotional to be able to be a part of the solution to help save lives, and in conjunction with that, to see the change from chin down to lifted up," VanHorn said, indicating the company faced tough financial decisions given the slowdown in the economy as a result of the pandemic. And other states, including Michigan, Texas, California and New Jersey, and even Canada, have reached out about ordering the beds and partitions, he said.

Without going into detail, VanHorn said the company has another three or four prototype ideas "along these kind of lines," temporary, quick-to-build structures that could help the homeless population and organizations like the Red Cross and Salvation Army.

VanHorn said responding to this public health crisis was a "full circle" moment for the company, which made comforters for the U.S. Army during World War II, producing nearly 750,000 by the time the war was over.

"It's about doing the next right thing and being a part of something bigger than all of us. The Gilman team and industry's response to work together toward a solution has been incredible," President Evan Gilman said.

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