

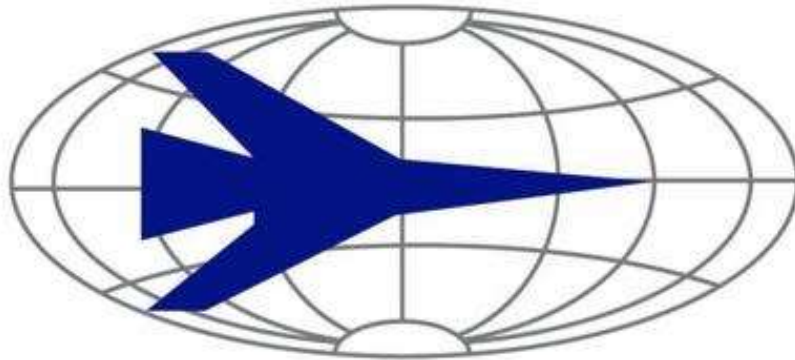
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# Journal Inquirer

## Whitcraft pivots to make ventilator parts

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The Whitcraft Group, a supplier to aerospace manufacturers such as Pratt & Whitney and Sikorsky, is temporarily switching out precision-engineered aeroparts for breathing machines.

Officials with the Eastford-based firm announced Friday that they are immediately retooling some facilities to make ventilators, the lifesaving medical devices that can help COVID-19 patients take in oxygen even as the coronavirus attacks and inflames the lining of their lungs.

Ventilators have been in dangerously short supply in certain coronavirus hot spots since mid-March, when COVID-19-related hospital admissions began to increase dramatically.

Whitcraft CEO Doug Folsom said his company is working in partnership with Jeffrey McCutcheon, an associate professor of chemical engineering at the University of Connecticut, to plan and design the badly needed machines.

“We have been provided specifications from Dr. McCutcheon’s team and we are now in the process of creating a prototype ventilator that will be used as the basis for a new manufacturing project,” Folsom said.

Steve Ruggiero, who serves as Whitcraft’s chief operating officer, said the effort came together in about a week’s time.

“We got a call from (Connecticut chief manufacturing officer) Colin Cooper on Good Friday, we went to UConn on Tuesday to get the design information, and now we are completing a prototype which should be complete within about a day,” Ruggiero said Friday.

Once the prototype is reviewed and evaluated, the company expects to produce between 12 and 24 ventilators within a week.

After that, Ruggiero said, “we will keep making them as needed, as fast as we can.”

Whitcraft has been able to expedite development because each of its facilities houses what’s known as a “moonshine shop,” where engineers come up with novel solutions to manufacturing issues that arise on the job, according to Ruggiero.

“These shops have the ability to make just about anything, so initiating this type of project is right up our alley,” he said.

The firm also has the workforce to keep production going, with about 1,800 employees across its various divisions, Ruggiero noted.

Folsom said Whitcraft staff want to be of use in the fight against the coronavirus, and if the state needs the company to make something else in addition to ventilators, they're eager to oblige.

"We are donating our services for creation of the prototype," the CEO added. "We'll figure out our costs some time later. The important thing is to get these things built and get them into the hands of the medical professionals as quickly as possible."

The nationwide shortage of ventilators and other critical medical equipment, including masks, protective gear, and hospital beds, has hobbled the U.S. response to the coronavirus, which as of Friday had infected more than 676,600 Americans and killed just over 31,000.

In New York, public health officials have been forced to requisition ventilators from upstate hospitals for use in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, where emergency rooms and intensive care units are overrun with the critically ill. At some city hospitals, nurses and technicians are retrofitting CPAP machines for use on COVID-19 patients and manually affixing new tubes to respirators normally set aside for people with COPD, cystic fibrosis, and motor neuron disease.

In March, President Donald Trump invoked special powers under the Korean War-era Defense Production Act to order manufacturers such as General Motors, Hamilton Medical, and Royal Philips to start making ventilators. Ford, General Electric, and Xerox, among others, have since joined the effort, recalling thousands of workers who had been sent home from factories due to social distancing requirements.