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HAWLEY

Furniture maker supplies masks for poll workers

By Patrick Johnson

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Fifty Western Massachusetts communities, from its largest cities to its smallest towns, have accepted an offer from a furniture company to provide face masks to protect poll workers from exposure to COVID-19 on Election Day.

AIS, a Leominster manufacture of office furniture, announced on Tuesday that it is working with the secretary of state's office to supply protective face masks to poll workers. So far, more than 200 cities and towns have signed up.

In Western Massachusetts, Springfield, the largest city in the region and third-largest in the state, has asked for 500 masks. Hawley, a Franklin County town of around 330 some 20 miles west of Greenfield, has requested and received 25 masks.

Hawley Town Clerk Pamela Shrimpton said she received her masks one day after she requested them ? although she almost didn't request any at all.

She said she had never heard of AIS before and was initially suspicious about accepting something that seemed too good to be true.

"We get so many callers who are offering to give you something, and it turns out they only want your email," she said.

She said she called the Elections Division of the secretary of state's office to check whether the offer of masks was some sort of scam.

It was only after Elections officials assured her it was a legit offer from a legit company that she placed an

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"This is a wonderful gesture on their part. It will help alleviate some of the financial burden on communities."

NANCY TALBOT, MASSACHUSETTS TOWN CLERKS ASSOCIATION

Face masks, produced by AIS of Leominster, are boxed and ready to be sent out. The company is donating masks to cities and towns across Massachusetts for use by poll workers on Election Day.

Masks

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order. "When they said it was real and go ahead, I ordered 25 and they came the next day."

She said she still does not know what AIS is or what it ordinarily does, but she said the masks seem nice, well-made and sturdy.

AIS began making masks in April as the pandemic gripped the nation. In May, it established a national Sew the Masks initiative. The company and its corporate sponsor partners have donated and distributed nearly 150,000 masks nationwide to date.

Bruce Platzman, CEO of AIS, said in a statement that democracy relies on the ability of citizens to be free to cast their ballots safely.

"These dedicated poll workers in each municipality ? many of whom have served their communities for years ? are in every way the frontline essential personnel that make the democratic process function," he said. Through Monday, the clerks and elections officials in 235 cities and towns in Massachusetts have requested a total of 22,000 masks, AIS said.

"That's a lot of masks," said Nancy Talbot, town clerk of Ware and president of the Massachusetts Town Clerks Association.

Secretary of the Commonwealth William Galvin has previously offered to provide protective equipment, such as masks and disinfectant wipes, to towns, but many towns have gone out and purchased additional supplies for Election Day.

Talbot said many communities find themselves cash strapped heading into the November election, so local elections officials across the state appreciate the AIS offer.

"This is a wonderful gesture on their part," she said. "It will help alleviate some of the financial burden on communities."

She asked for and received 300 masks, she said.

She has around 25 poll workers, many of whom are older and retired. And many of them are uneasy about being exposed to the coronavirus by working the polls.

Talbot said some of her regular poll workers have opted not to work this election.

"They are leery of exposure to people and opted to bow out," she said. "I appreciate their honesty."

She is now looking to find replacements.

Springfield Election Commissioner Gladys Oyola said she has requested 500 but has not yet received them.

On election day, Springfield employs more than 380 poll workers at more than 40 polling places. Additional staffers shuttle ballots and supplies between City Hall and the polling locations.

Oyola said the masks will be used for those who work Election Day and those working during early voting periods.

"The poll workers have been very grateful to receiving the masks and the PPE provided by the secretary of state," she said. "For the most part, our veteran poll workers do want to work the election, (but) with the understanding that we will be providing PPE to keep them safe."

Shrimpton said AIS masks make a nice addition to the upcoming election, but her election workers were in good shape in terms of protection before that.

She said there is a solid supply of paper masks made available from the town's emergency services department. Also, people in town have been donating homemade cloth masks.

"A lot of people in Hawley are sewing masks," she said. "We have masks coming out of our ears."

Workers at AIS, a Leominster office furniture maker, pose with some of the COVID-19 face masks they have produced. The company is donating masks to cities and towns for use by poll workers on Election Day.