



COVID-19 Employee Innovations

Upholstery Shop Switches from Seat Covers to Face Covers During COVID-19

By Michael Ventre

Upholstery has always been a reliable place to find loose change, after-dinner mints and paper clips. Recently, LADWP searched around in upholstery and came up with a great idea.

During the COVID-19 emergency, face masks are essential. They're also in high demand. LADWP crews, especially those in the Power System who work near high voltage lines and equipment, not only need masks now to wear on the job, but ones that are fire-resistant, a.k.a. Arc Resistant (AR). The Power System has nearly 3,000 full-time AR clothing wearers who would potentially need a mask of similar rating to maintain their compliance with Cal/OSHA regulations.

To satisfy this demand, representatives from LADWP's Fleet Services, Power Construction & Maintenance and Power System Safety put their thinking caps on (hard hat versions). During the ensuing discussions it was mentioned that Fleet had an Automotive Upholstery Shop at the Main Street facility. They all uttered a collective "Hmmm."

Usually the Automotive Upholstery Shop handles tasks involving seats in a vehicle, or belts, or pouches, or other related items. During COVID-19, that stuff will have to

wait.

Quickly, out went some old equipment, in came two new industrial-strength sewing machines. Some fire-resistant material that was in storage at LADWP's Truesdale training facility was procured. And Francisco Villalobos-Casillas, already a master upholsterer after only two years with LADWP, suddenly became a master mask maker.

"This is a completely different animal," he said. "We brought in new cutting tables and special machines that clean the material as they cut. There was definitely a learning curve."



LADWP lineworker Jeff Hurley at work wearing one of the masks. Photo by Art Mochizuki

The masks are lined inside with a jersey material, while the outside is denim. Assisted by a PCM crew under the supervision of Chris Ianniri, Villalobos-Casillas first made 10 samples each of common masks and the fire-resistant masks. The masks also have to be washed before usage, per Power System Safety recommendations. When they were approved, he began production in earnest. He

and an assistant now produce up to 200 masks per day.

As of the end of April, Villalobos-Casillas and an assistant had produced some 900 masks, nearly one-third of the way toward meeting their target of 3,000, enough to immediately supply the critical employees working in Arc-Flash environments and keep them safe during COVID-19.

“This is a wonderful example of how diverse our tradesmen and women are at the Department,” said David W. Hanson, Assistant Director, Power Construction & Maintenance and a member of the mask brain trust along with PCM colleague Robert Gonzalez; Ken White in Automotive Upholstery; Dan Aeschleman, Adam Krause and Nazir Fazli in Power System Safety; storekeeper Carol Scott, and Tom Patzlaff and Mike McGeachy in Fleet.

Hanson marveled, “Who would have thought that the Automotive Upholsterer was part of our Critical Continuity of Operation plan? Thank goodness, Fleet Services still had an upholsterer on staff.”

You just never know what you might discover in upholstery.