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## How 400,000 Masks Were Shipped From China to a U.S. Nursing Home

Health-care executives and entrepreneurs are wading into the murky market for badly needed protective gear

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Nursing homes, many at the center of outbreaks of the new coronavirus, are struggling to find masks and other supplies their workers need to confront the pandemic.

David Reis, owner of a nursing home in Connecticut, found a solution through a friend of a friend who normally imports clocks. The importer, Jordan Steinberg, said he would deliver 400,000 masks to Mr. Reis from China—a month’s supply—if he were paid about \$300,000 upfront.

“I’m not trying to fool anyone, I did this to make money,” Mr. Steinberg said. “But I worked extra hard on it because I knew this would help someone stay alive. A clock doesn’t help anyone do anything but tell time.”

The makeshift supply chain connecting Mr. Steinberg to Mr. Reis shows how chaotic the market for protective gear has become, as desperate buyers put their faith in near strangers. The vendors Mr. Reis normally dealt with would only allot him masks based on the quantity he'd bought in past years, far below the supply his staff now needs, he said.

Mr. Reis agreed to the offer, joining with other nursing home operators to make the down payment on April 6 and hoping the shipment would come through. Accounts of fake-mask scams were spreading, but the new coronavirus had already infected patients at his nursing home, and he said he couldn't go any longer without more gear.



Pallets of PPE being unloaded into Mr. Steinberg's warehouse.

PHOTO: JOHNNY MILANO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The masks nearly got stuck when China imposed export controls on medical supplies, and Mr. Steinberg temporarily lost track of them, according to interviews with people involved. None of those in the deal—including a restaurant owner and a video producer—had prior experience procuring masks, a complicated task that even the federal government is struggling with.

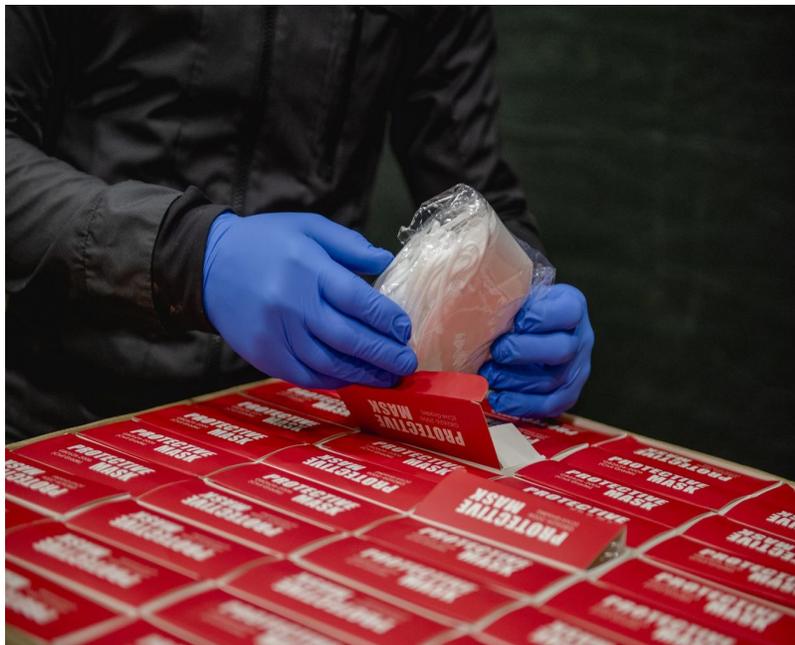
Covid-19 is ravaging senior facilities across the country, in part because some lack the personal protective equipment to stop it from spreading to their vulnerable elderly patients. Three out of four nursing homes and assisted living communities are running out of masks and other PPE, according to the National Center for Assisted Living.

In the hunt for masks, “our communities are competing with other health-care settings and even state or local governments,” said Josh Allen, a consultant to assisted-living facilities on coronavirus response.

Mr. Reis started hunting for N95 masks, which block 95% of particles that spread the coronavirus, in mid-March after the disease appeared in Meadow Ridge, the retirement community he owns in Redding.

Staff there started out using one mask a day, then one a week to stretch their dwindling supply. “We have created a similar [system] to what you see in a war,” said Kimberly Held, the 35-year-old nursing director at Meadow Ridge.

Mr. Reis put out feelers to business associates, and in late March he heard from Manhattan restaurateur Michael Sinensky. Mr. Sinensky had heard through a friend, video producer Stanley Meytin, of a supplier who could provide large quantities of KN95 masks, which can offer similar protection to an N95 if properly worn.



Having cultivated a network of Chinese manufacturers for more than a decade, Mr. Steinberg, 35, saw an opportunity when the PPE shortage hit.

PHOTO: JOHNNY MILANO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The supplier was Mr. Steinberg, who aims to be the country’s biggest importer of clocks in the U.S. and asks clients, including Walmart Inc. and Sam’s Club, to call him the Clock Doctor.

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He took a week sifting offers from factories, some of them dubious, he said. One manufacturer said he could produce large quantities of 3M Co. -branded masks, but Mr. Steinberg couldn’t find any connection between the factory and 3M. U.S. regulators and state officials have found a significant number of imported masks that are falling short of certification standards.

Eventually he found a KN95 manufacturer he trusted. But the mask maker, who normally accepted cash on delivery, requested 50% upfront, meaning that Mr. Steinberg’s company, Always Home International Inc., first needed to find a buyer.

His neighbor on Long Island, Mr. Meytin, connected Mr. Steinberg with Mr. Sinensky, who now runs a charity introducing PPE buyers and sellers, with a portion of shipments donated to front-line workers.

When the group connected with Mr. Reis in early April, he said Meadow Ridge was down to a few masks. Three patients at the nursing home had been diagnosed with Covid-19. One had died.



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PHOTO: JOHNNY MILANO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Every case feels like a failure,” said Ms. Held, the head nurse at Meadow Ridge.

Mr. Reis agreed to pay \$2.80 per KN95 mask and 75 cents per surgical mask. “He looked like a mensch,” Mr. Reis said of Mr. Steinberg, with whom he negotiated over video calls.

Getting the deal done wasn't a guarantee. Mr. Steinberg's shippers picked up 20,000 boxes of masks from the manufacturer on April 9, trucking them to Shanghai to await a flight to Chicago. Two days later, Mr. Steinberg woke to news that the Chinese government had tightened customs checks on PPE, a directive that stranded masses of medical equipment for large companies like 3M Co.

The masks missed their scheduled flight. The shippers then drove the boxes eight hours to Qingdao to make a new flight to the U.S. Mr. Steinberg, who was unaware of the change, grew anxious when he tried tracking the original flight through an aircraft monitoring service and was told his plane wasn't in the air.

The masks ultimately landed in Chicago via Anchorage, Alaska, and Meadow Ridge received its shipment on April 15, about two weeks after Mr. Reis and Mr. Steinberg connected. More shipments have followed, including a delivery scheduled for this week of 137,000 disposable gowns and 45,000 face masks.

"We're sticking with something we know is working," Mr. Reis said.



Medical staff at Meadow Ridge with KN95 masks imported from China.

PHOTO: RIDGE CREST AT MEADOW RIDGE