

Toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and now elastic? Mask makers cope with unexpected COVID-19-related shortages

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As shoppers scavenge to find toilet paper and other quarantine essentials, some crafters who are making protective masks said they struggle to find

another necessary item: elastic.

With protection against COVID-19 spurring demand, hobbyists skilled in sewing have turned to making [masks](#) and are hunting down materials and sewing [machines](#). That's led to shortages of elastic and high demand for less pricey sewing machines and even the services of people who repair old machines.

The demand likely will jump even further after Gov. J.B. Pritzker required Illinois residents to wear masks when in public places where they can't stay 6 feet away from other people. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has some designs for simple masks, says that people should wear close-fitting masks and wash them frequently.

People across the city are pitching in to sew and donate masks made out of fabric and repurposed T-shirts, said Christine Baumbach, a member of the organization Chicago Mask Makers. The supply of elastic, the material used to secure the mask onto one's face, has been quickly depleted within the last month, she said.

"We're acutely aware of the shortage," Baumbach said. "We save the elastic for masks for our [health care professionals](#). Health care professionals appreciate elastic when they are wearing masks on their head for 12 hours straight."

The organization, which started a month ago, has more than 150 members across the western suburbs and has made more than 6,500 masks for emergency personnel and health care workers, she said. Most of the supplies being used have been donated to the group. Elastic needed for masks is especially hard to find because it's thin, about a quarter inch or narrower, she said.

Thicker elastic used to make waistbands, for example, is much easier to find in craft and sewing stores because it's usually in higher demand, those in the industry say.

"Half of our wealth is sitting in the back of our closet, it's amazing to see what people have dug up in their homes. But it is hard to get, it is very hard to get," Baumbach said.

Karen Graham, owner of sewing studio Sew on Central in Evanston, said her stock of elastic has quickly disappeared. Before the pandemic, she estimates she had about 700 yards of elastic in stock and is now on her last 20 yards. Each mask requires about 12-14 inches of elastic, she said.

The thin elastic retails for about a dollar a yard, she added.

"Most of what is left is wider elastic so there's been a huge run to get this particular size," she said.

Graham buys her elastic wholesale through a company in France and is waiting up to two weeks for new shipments, she said.

Graham said many crafters continue to sew masks despite the shortage and are coming up with new ways to secure fabric masks, like using fabric bands or ties, for example.

"During the Depression, people would use every last piece of fabric, and we're seeing the same thing now," she said. "People are trying to repurpose everything and find and use what we have on hand. Sewing is taking its own life now."

As more people seek to sew their own masks, Graham said she has seen retailers sell out of lower-end sewing machines as well.

"Finding an entry-level or beginner sewing machine is hard to track down right now, but there are a lot of sewing machines in storage that are coming out of retirement," she said.

Helping those machines get a new lease on life is Courtney Luken of Wilmette, who has been fixing vintage sewing machines over the last four years. She's seen an increase in customers looking to fix inherited sewing machines. Luken said she typically used to fixed about two to three machines in a given week. Last weekend, she fixed three machines in one day.

"They're pulling out grandma's sewing machine or mom's machine," Luken said. "People who aren't sewing regularly got their machine out of storage or are coming back to sewing, and their skills are a little bit rusty."

Luken said she has conducted a couple of video sessions with her customers to hold basic sewing refreshers like how to thread a machine, wind a bobbin or check the tension on their machines.

The crafting community is open to newcomers hoping to contribute or learn to sew, she said.

"Sewing is an art, it's a skill I wish was valued more," she said. "I wish we didn't have to supply our first responders and health care workers with (personal protective equipment), but I'm glad our community has stepped up."

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