

Face coverings for Durham County

Overview

Face coverings are an essential part of an effective COVID-19 suppression strategy. Covering the Triangle has distributed over 20,000 free face coverings to high-risk and marginalized populations in order to protect them. The county can improve public health and positively influence Durham's public health culture by buying and distributing free face coverings.

Why are face coverings so important?

Around half the people who get COVID-19 do not show symptoms. Wearing a face covering reduces by 99% the number of droplets ejected during speech. The science is clear that wearing a face covering greatly reduces the chance of spreading the virus.¹ No mask can prevent every virus particle getting in or out, not even an N95. A cloth face mask still likely lowers one's risk of getting COVID-19 as long as people maintain other public health habits like social distancing and hand washing.² In every country that has flattened its COVID-19 curve, the vast majority of people wear face coverings.

What is Covering the Triangle?

Covering the Triangle (CTT) is a group of doctors and organizers whose mission is to get free face coverings to people whose living or working conditions make social distancing impossible. CTT has paid local businesses and textile workers to produce and is funded entirely by donations. So far, CTT has distributed over 20,000 face coverings through over 70 organizations, focusing on people who are elderly, ill, unsheltered, incarcerated, essential workers, in cramped accommodation, or are otherwise high-risk and/or overlooked.

Why should the county provide free face coverings?

Implement the face covering requirement

Durham County has already recognized the importance of this public health measure and required face coverings in places where social distancing is impossible. However, without widespread availability, this mandate will not be universally respected. Indeed, it could discriminate against those without the means to make or acquire a face covering. Therefore, urgent action is needed to ensure that everyone in the county has one.

Save money by suppressing the virus

Each additional face covering worn saves \$3,000-\$6,000 in costs because of reduced mortality.³ Therefore, investing in this public health measure will reap significant dividends, especially compared to very costly measures like the closure of non-essential businesses. As we begin opening up our economy, it is vital that we do so in a manner that results in the fewest possible infections.

¹ [Face Masks Against COVID-19: An Evidence Review](#)

² [COVID-19: Why we should all wear masks — there is new scientific rationale](#)

³ [The Case for Universal Cloth Mask Adoption](#)

Changing the culture

Face coverings are most effective if **we all wear them**. By providing free ones to people in high-risk and/or under-resourced groups, the county will protect its most vulnerable residents and set a powerful example at the same time.

Who should the county provide free face coverings to?

Given limited resources, the county should prioritize people in two groups (note they overlap):

- 1) People whose living or working conditions make social distancing difficult or impossible
e.g. people in public housing, bus drivers and riders, grocery store workers, people in nursing homes or assisted living facilities, unsheltered people, incarcerated people.
- 2) People at higher risk of serious illness or death due to age or underlying conditions
e.g. unsheltered people, people in nursing homes or assisted living facilities,
[neighborhoods of Durham with higher incidence of underlying \(chronic\) health problems](#)

What are the options?

CTT has sourced face coverings from two local suppliers: a team of professional sewists and the Original Mattress Factory (OMF). We have also identified an international supplier for larger purchases but have not used it yet.

OMF face coverings - RMurphy@originalmattress.com - 919-861-6300 (Reed Murphy)

- Cost around \$1 each and are produced in Raleigh.
- Two layers of hand-washable, breathable, fluid-repellent, 100% polypropylene.
- Current production level: at least 5,000 per day.
- Potentially not as durable as cotton (though this is speculative).
- For every two that the county buys, Reed Murphy of OMF will donate another one.

Hand-sewn face coverings - tailorcostumes@gmail.com - 919-410-1409 (Kerri Martinsen)

- Cost around \$5 each and are produced around the Triangle.
- Two layers of machine-washable, breathable, 100% cotton.
- Current production level: 500 per day.
- "Nicer" than OMF - higher-quality, better-looking. People prefer these.

International supplier

- Cost \$1 each for orders greater than 10,000 with 8 days delivery time.
- Four layers of breathable fabric (cotton/polymer blend).
- Untested supplier - we have a sample but have not made any orders yet.

Recommendations

- Buy face coverings and distribute them for free to high-risk and under-resourced communities. If face coverings from OMF are chosen, a plan to replace well-worn ones will need to be implemented.
- Set up a distribution structure by partnering with local organizations.
- Launch a public information campaign to educate people about face coverings and empower people to make their own.