

US Special Committee on Aging

Hearing – “A Changing Workforce: Supporting Older Workers amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond”

April 29, 2021 at 9:30 AM

Opening Statement by David Poston, President and CEO of Palmetto Synthetics

Good morning Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee. My name is David Poston, and I am President of Palmetto Synthetics in Kingstree, South Carolina.

We are a textile manufacturing company that produces specialty synthetic fibers for a wide variety of applications like automotive carpet, military uniforms, performance apparel, and industrial uses. We ship our fiber all over the world.

We started Palmetto Synthetics in 1998 with 5 employees in one 50,000 square foot building with the goal to be the highest quality specialty fiber producer in the world. It was a green field startup. Literally in a soybean field.

Today we have 250 employees working in a 375,000 square foot facility and we produce more specialty fiber, with a wider variety of applications, than any other company in the world. We operate our facility 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I am blessed and thankful for our success, which is the result of our talented and dedicated employees.

Today, 50 percent of our production employees are over 50 years old, and 70 percent are over 40. Furthermore, 100 percent of upper management is over the age of 50, as well as 90 percent of middle management. We employ more managers in their 70's than in their 20's and 30's.

We do this because we found, while tracking attendance statistics a few years ago, we noticed that employees over the age of 40 had much better attendance records than our younger associates. Older workers were late less often, did not leave before the end of their shift, and were our most reliable workers.

Since an employee who is late or absent has to be covered by a full-time person from a different shift, the teams with older employees translated to less overtime and higher quality production. We also discovered how older workers are a valuable asset to mentor and set strong work examples for younger workers as we build our workforce for the future.

Our production and manufacturing jobs are not strenuous. The majority of our employees are monitoring the control panels of the production lines. Without the job requirements being physically taxing, we made the effort to recruit an older workforce to improve employee reliability and production.

Over several years, as our workforce has aged, we continued to increase production and efficiency. We now actively recruit older production and management employees.

Like other sectors of the economy, the American textile industry has been especially hard hit by the pandemic. In the span of just a few weeks last March, we went from 100 percent capacity utilization to less than 15 percent. In the face of countless lost orders and idle production lines, and the growing need for PPE, we retooled our equipment to help with the COVID response. We retooled to make fiber for COVID testing swabs as well as antimicrobial fiber for medical gowns. During this difficult period, we were able to keep 100% of our employees on the payroll because of a PPP loan we received.

I do not know where our company would have been without the lifeline we received from our PPP loan. PPP saved most if not all of our jobs. I want to thank Senator Scott for his leadership on this program to ensure our nation's small businesses had the resources they needed to weather the storm.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we implemented several social distancing practices on the production floor, instituted a mask requirement, and conducted temperature checks at the start of each shift to ensure our worker's health and safety. In 2020 we did have four seniors in management and 12 manufacturing employees choose to retire. We intend, as the economy opens, to recruit older associates to replace these recent retirees.

Hiring, training, and retaining older workers is the key to our successful and efficient workforce at Palmetto Synthetics. Because of modern technology, manufacturing and production jobs are no longer out of reach of older workers. Meanwhile, more and more employers are discovering the unique advantages of older workers in their workforce to mentor younger workers, retain institutional knowledge, and increase reliability.

Thank you Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and the rest of the Committee for inviting me today to share this testimony. I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.