Health authorities and state and local governments are recognizing the linen, uniform and facility services industry as an essential service. Consisting mostly of small, independent family-owned and operated businesses, the industry supplies, launders and maintains essential, environmentally friendly reusable textiles for industries that need these most, including restaurants, hotels, healthcare facilities, manufacturing, infrastructure, other businesses and government agencies. In addition to linens and uniforms, personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as hygiene, first aid and other facility services, are provided.

During quarantine/isolation mandates, the “essential services” designation allows laundries to stay open to serve other businesses designated as “essential” including those mentioned above plus grocery stores, food processing, home-based and long-term care, public utilities (water and energy), first-responders, laboratories, pharmaceutical manufacturers and other fundamental supply chain businesses.

Members of TRSA, the association that represents the $40-billion linen, uniform and facility services industry, are on the front line of providing clean, safe environments for their customers’ employees, customers and the general public, noted TRSA President and CEO Joseph Ricci.

According to Joseph Ricci, President & CEO of TRSA, “Despite this designation and critical role of the textile services sector. We are seeing very different results from the impact of COVID-19. Companies serving healthcare facilities are nearly at capacity, but those serving restaurants and hotels are laying off workers. We anticipate sales to decline by $10 billion during the next three months, prompting the loss of between 80,000 to 100,000 jobs. Without
aggressive and immediate action from the federal government, many laundries will close their doors, permanently eliminating providers of these essential services and leaving the country ill-prepared to rebound.”

In San Francisco and Contra Costa County, Calif., health officers’ orders directing individuals to shelter in place indicates they may leave their residences to “engage in certain essential activities and work for essential businesses,” with laundromats, drycleaners, and laundry service providers classified as such businesses.

A TRSA member in Wisconsin reported the applicability of a broader classification of “processing and distribution facilities” encompassing linen and uniform service, reflecting these large-scale laundries’ importance to public health and their greater resemblance to manufacturing plants and warehouses than retail establishments open to the public.

Reusable equivalents are critical to mitigating COVID-19 impacts as shortages of disposable surgical gowns and drapes are possible given the likelihood of interrupted international supply chains and the preponderance of smaller medical facilities with limited storage capacity of these items. In contrast, reusable surgical textiles deployed and maintained according to their controlled life cycles and properly sterilized are less dependent on supply replenishment.

Other linen and uniform service users highly susceptible to contamination include food manufacturers, laboratories, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and first responders. These businesses also take advantage of the industry’s provision of other hygiene-related products, including personal protective equipment (PPE) for their employees and facility services products such as cleaning chemicals.
“Because our industry serves virtually every type of private- and public-sector organization across the economy, most Americans benefit at least once per week from the hygiene and safety of products we provide to our customers. This highlights the imperative that laundries be considered essential to a sound public health policy,” Ricci said.

The industry consists of nearly 1,000 companies operating about 2,500 business locations. More than half of these companies have less than 20 employees. Wages are estimated at $19 billion and impact on gross domestic product (GDP) at $176 billion. The industry processes 15 billion pounds of laundry annually, including 90% of the linens, scrubs, gowns, barrier curtains and other reusable textiles used by healthcare facilities across the United States.

Addressing COVID-19, TRSA is guiding members in continuing operations and disseminating accurate, relevant information to their respective customers, employees and the general public regarding the hygienically clean handling and processing of reusable textiles. Representing the industry in numerous regulatory matters at the state and federal levels, advocacy has accelerated to ensure the role of its operator members is considered essential by all policymakers.

Author Profile
Thomas R. Cutler is the founder of the 7000+ member Manufacturing Media Consortium and CEO of TR Cutler, Inc.