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Ajax Workforce Unites Behind "Essential" Status

Colleagues Accept "Special Responsibility"

Minneapolis, April 13, 2020 – Kent Djubek, president of Ajax Metal Forming Solutions, has seen a lot in his 35 years at the company. But what he sees now from his Ajax coworkers is unique. "I'm just so impressed with this workforce, and so appreciative," Kent said. "They're clearly inspired to keep producing parts despite what's going on."

What's going on is unprecedented in the company's 75-year history. On March 19, the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, issued its Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers. It reads in part:

"If you work in a critical infrastructure industry, defined by the Department of Homeland Security . . . you have a special responsibility to maintain your normal work schedule."

The Memorandum spells out the industry DHS definitions. Among them:

"Critical Manufacturing - Workers necessary for manufacturing materials and products needed for medical supply chains, transportation, energy, communications, food and agriculture . . ."

And:

"Transportation and Logistics - Employees supporting or enabling transportation functions, including dispatchers, maintenance and repair technicians, warehouse workers . . ."

Kent quickly realized his company would fit the DHS critical infrastructure definition. Ajax makes parts for companies that manufacture essential products in climate control, transportation, architecture, construction, auxiliary power, and related industries. The lights would stay on.

But that coin has two sides. The first was a mild sense of relief. Ajax has never closed its doors since the company's founding at the end of World War II. A government-ordered shut-down, even if temporary, would be hard to bear. That scenario was, thankfully, avoided.

Then there's the chilling side to the DHS edict. Coronavirus is a nasty bug. Death is unlikely, but it's happening all too often, seemingly at random. Ajax people would now stay on the job while most Minnesotans remain safely at home through May 4, as ordered Wednesday by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

In response, the Ajax maintenance team modified and intensified the company's already-rigorous daily cleaning schedule. Daily reminders for each shift help keep safety measures like hand washing and social distancing front and center in everyone's minds. Protective gear is widely distributed.

But that's playing defense. Those efforts yield no guarantee. Regardless of what his team does, Kent's colleagues at Ajax might fall ill. What's more, as Ajax people commute to and from the plant, they will need to stop for gas and supplies. That means more interaction, more public touchpoints, more risk. Ajax colleagues would need to be courageous.

So Kent is staying positive. "We have contingency plans in place," he said. "If the country's economic picture darkens, we have the resources to support our colleagues and their families. Heartland Partners, our ownership partner, has our back on this. Our financial footing is solid. We're fortunate in that regard."

Brandon Holmes, Ajax Production Manager, said that spirits remain high on the plant floor. "I can tell that our colleagues are proud of their designation as an essential supplier, he said. "Everyone seems happy to be working. We know we're making a difference."

Brandon said that communicating with coworkers before and after shifts is vital. "We share safety ideas and any new information from the CDC. We also go over the extreme-sounding information we pick up on the news or social media and set priorities. So far, we've made the right moves."

Tom Ahonen, Chairman of Heartland Equity Partners, a mission-based private equity firm and an Ajax partner, said in a letter to the entire company that his firm would continue to support Ajax operations and colleagues through this crisis.

"As we navigate this crazy and unprecedented time together, I want my Ajax colleagues to know that my partners and I are grateful for your hard work, commitment, and spirit," he said. "We are in this for the long haul, and shutting down isn't good for our customers, our suppliers, or you. Together we'll get through this season and come out the other side stronger."

Kent agrees. "I am so very thankful that our colleagues here at Ajax are showing great courage despite unavoidable adverse conditions," he said. "With a team like this, success is not merely possible; it's likely."

More content is available on the Ajax Metal Forming Solutions blog. Please visit www.Ajaxmfs.com/ajax-news.

About Ajax Metal Forming Solutions

Ajax Metal Forming Solutions is an ISO 9001:2015 manufacturer that produces engineered parts for companies in climate control, transportation, architecture, auxiliary power, engineered products, and related industries. The company's diverse ownership group includes 3rd generation family members, key

company leaders, and Heartland Equity Partners, a mission-based private equity company. Ajax employs about 75 colleagues at the company's Minneapolis campus. Visit Ajax at www.ajaxmfs.com.

About Heartland Equity

Heartland Equity Partners is a Midwest investment fund focused on value creation through a process of investment, growth, and long-term retention. The fund invests in successful Upper Midwest manufacturing, value-added distribution, and business services companies that demonstrate stability and profitable growth opportunities. Visit Heartland Equity Partners at www.heartland.fund.