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Rosedale company brings high-tech cleaning robot to Maryland

By: Johanna Alonso Daily Record business reporter January 21, 2021



The robots use ultraviolet-C light to deactivate viral cells in the air and on surfaces. They were originally designed to be used primarily in hospitals. (Submitted Photo)

The nearly-5-foot robots look almost like something out of a science fiction film as they emanate bright beams of blue light and meander through hospital rooms, kitchens and offices. But their job isn't to shoot deadly lasers or fight aliens — instead, the robots' simple mission is to clean.

Manufactured by Skytron, a medical equipment company based in Michigan, these robots use ultraviolet-C light to deactivate viral cells in the air and on surfaces, and were originally designed to be used primarily in hospitals. Since the onset of the pandemic, though, there has been an increased interest across all sectors in keeping areas as clean as possible.

That's where OEM Medical Solutions, an 11-year-old seller of medical equipment that operates out of Rosedale, came in. A July acquisition of Destiny Surgical Products, Skytron's mid-Atlantic distributor, put OEM in charge of selling Skytron's robots to buyers in the region — and business is beginning to boom.

Jails, which have seen high numbers of COVID-19 outbreaks across the country, have been prominent buyers of this technology throughout the country; so far in Maryland, OEM has sold several robots to the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office, one of which is being used to disinfect spaces in the county's detention and rehabilitation center on a weekly basis.

The center bought the robot in anticipation of Maryland's current spike in COVID-19 cases, according to Mary Ann Thompson, the detention center's deputy warden. More staff are being trained to use the machine so that the

detention center can increase its use.

“The Skytron is an excellent tool for us to clean and sanitize,” Thompson said. “Any safety measures to ultimately stop the spread of COVID in our facility is paramount and ultimately protects our community.”

Two other units were sold to the county’s sheriff’s office to help disinfect other offices and vehicles, said Michael Milan, executive sales manager at OEM. The company is communicating with other municipalities interested in buying robots to use in hospitals, prisons, and on emergency vehicles like helicopters and ambulances.

The robots work by using sensors to navigate the room, which they bathe in UVC light. Because the rooms have to be prepared for this process by removing living things and cleaning up dirt and spills, the UVC process is not necessarily faster than a traditional cleaning.

Instead, its benefit, says Ted Honeywell, principal and co-founder of OEM, is that it is significantly more effective. Human error can be an issue in manual cleaning and can lead to areas being only 50% disinfected — whereas Skytron’s robot can achieve rates as high as 98%.

“UVC has been used in our water treatment plants and in a lot of HVAC systems to clean the air as well as surfaces for a really, really long time. So it’s not necessarily new, but putting it on wheels and calling it a robot with some intelligent sensors, is definitely driving things forward,” Milan said.

At almost \$40,000 each, the Skytron robots are too expensive a purchase for many companies that would like their spaces sanitized. For those businesses, OEM offers the use of the machines as a service — for a fee, OEM employees will bring a few robots to a nail salon, restaurant or dentist’s office, where they will run the robot.

Honeywell said this tends to happen when a customer or employee tests positive for COVID-19, but the business does not want to shut down for an extended period of time.

“What they do now is, they shut the facility down,” Honeywell said. “Many (restaurants) have been closed because ... they didn’t have a terminal cleaning plan, they didn’t have a way to safely reopen the business.”

Bob Chaney, president of the Kingsville Fire Department in Baltimore County, said that the station has to be sanitized because the volunteer firemen, all of whom work in different municipalities, risk bringing COVID-19 into the station — especially those who work in health care. The station also has a medic unit that transports patients.

“The real advantage is it doesn’t miss anything. No crack, no crevice goes untreated,” said Chaney, who has utilized the robot’s services once and is scheduling another visit. “It’s kind of a backup to the things we already do, but we know that it got everywhere.”

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