



MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

Every physician matters, each patient counts.

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H.534/S.1381, AN ACT TO INCREASE ACCESS TO
DISPOSABLE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS
BEFORE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH
June 6, 2023**

The Massachusetts Medical Society is a professional association of over 25,000 physicians, residents, and medical students across all clinical disciplines, organizations, and practice settings. The Medical Society is committed to advocating on behalf of patients, to give them a better health care system, and on behalf of physicians, to help them provide the best care possible. The Medical Society strives to promote health equity and has policy supporting access to free menstrual products in schools, correctional institutions, and shelters. For these reasons, the Medical Society wishes to be recorded in strong support of **H.534/S.1381, *An Act to increase access to disposable menstrual products***, which would provide access to free menstrual products, without stigma, to all menstruating individuals in the aforementioned settings. This legislation will ensure our young people and most vulnerable populations have access to the products they need to manage their menstruation safely and with dignity.

Menstruation is a natural biological process that affects roughly half of the world's population, and access to menstrual products is a basic human need and a matter of public health and hygiene. For people who menstruate, these products are necessities – not luxuries – and yet the federal government does not allow Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) subsidies to be used for menstrual hygiene products. The financial burden associated with purchasing menstrual hygiene products can create barriers to health equity for individuals with low incomes, people experiencing homelessness, and people who are incarcerated. Members of these populations with heavy periods can face even greater financial challenges, as they must purchase even more sanitary supplies than the average menstruating person. When individuals are unable to access the menstrual products they need, they may resort to using unhygienic materials or extending the life of products by using them for

multiple hours at a time, which can lead to irritations, infections, and can put them at greater risk for toxic shock syndrome, a life-threatening condition.¹

Inability to access menstrual products can also be detrimental to students' education, health, and overall well-being. According to a statewide survey on menstrual access, approximately 1 out of 7 children in the Commonwealth is living in poverty and struggles to pay for menstrual products.² Further, over half of Massachusetts school nurses reported seeing students miss class to get menstrual products.³ Requiring students to go to the nurse's office for menstrual products is humiliating and disruptive. When students are forced to miss class because they cannot obtain menstrual products, they risk falling behind in their studies. This can contribute to lower levels of educational attainment and limit future employment opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty inextricably linked to health disparities.⁴ By requiring free menstrual products in all school bathrooms, H.534/S.1381 would provide all public-school students with an equal opportunity to learn while ensuring their most basic bodily needs are met.

For people housed in carceral settings or in shelters, access to free menstrual products can be limited or non-existent, which can lead to health consequences for these populations. Inability to obtain menstrual supplies can also contribute to feelings of shame and embarrassment for people who menstruate. This can be particularly challenging for individuals who are already in a vulnerable and stigmatized position due to their incarceration or housing status. While the [Frist Step Act](#) mandates access to menstrual supplies in federal carceral facilities, this law does not extend to state prisons and local jails, where 95% of incarcerated women are housed.⁵ Restricting access to menstrual products not only impacts the health of incarcerated people, it also jeopardizes their safety as these supplies can be used as bargaining chips and tools of control.⁶ Despite these harms, the Commonwealth has yet to provide for menstrual equity in

¹ Farid, Huma M. *Period equity: What it is and why it matters*. Harvard Health.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/period-equity-what-is-it-why-does-it-matter-202106012473>

² Mass NOW. State of Menstrual Access Survey Fact Sheet. <http://www.massnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Menstrual-Access-One-Pager.docx.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zajacova, A., & Lawrence, E. M. (2018). The relationship between education and health: Reducing disparities through a contextual approach. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 39(1), 273–289. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031816-044628>

⁵ Polka, Erin. *The Monthly Shaming of Women in State Prisons*, Public Health Post. <https://www.publichealthpost.org/news/sanitary-products-women-state-prisons/>

⁶ Massachusetts Chapter of the National Organization for Women. I AM Fact Sheet. <http://www.massnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/5.13.19--I-AM-Factsheet.pdf>

state prisons and houses of correction. Furthermore, approximately 9,100 people who menstruate experienced homelessness in the Commonwealth last year.⁷ Homeless individuals often face significant financial and logistical challenges with purchasing and storing menstrual products, which are among the least donated items at homeless shelters in Massachusetts.⁸ H.534/S.1381 will ensure that people have access to the basic necessities they need to maintain their health and dignity, regardless of their socioeconomic status or history of involvement in the justice system.

Importantly, this bill also requires menstrual products to be accessible without stigmatizing the individual seeking them. Non-menstruating individuals can use public restrooms with an expectation that their basic hygienic needs met – this is not the case for people who menstruate. The stigma surrounding menstruation can lead to shame and embarrassment for those who menstruate, which can further exacerbate the negative impacts of access challenges. Providing menstrual products without stigma will help to normalize menstruation and reduce the taboos that surround it, improving public health outcomes and creating a more equitable Commonwealth.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and for your work on this important issue. The Medical Society respectfully urges a favorable report on **H.534/S.1381, An Act to increase access to disposable menstrual products.**

⁷ Mass NOW. State of Menstrual Access Survey Fact Sheet. <http://www.massnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Menstrual-Access-One-Pager.docx.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.