

Access to Feminine Hygiene Products in Missouri Prisons

In the past two years, federal and state prison systems have begun to address the dearth of adequate feminine hygiene products available to incarcerated women. The Federal Bureau of Prisons and several states, including Colorado, Maryland, and Louisiana, now mandate access to both free sanitary pads and free tampons for women in their prisons (p. 7).¹ Currently, the Missouri Department of Corrections (MDOC) provides incarcerated women with free pads produced by a correctional supplies company, but not with free tampons or panty liners. Brand-name sanitary pads, tampons, and panty liners are available for sale in the prison canteens, but many prisoners lack money to purchase them on a monthly basis.

Missouri Appleseed's Research

In September 2018, in cooperation with MDOC, Missouri Appleseed developed and distributed surveys on feminine hygiene to 90 incarcerated women, 20 prison nurses, and 20 correctional case managers. The surveys asked about the state of feminine hygiene in the prisons and about unmet hygiene needs. Missouri Appleseed also interviewed two wardens and MDOC's Director of Adult Institutions.

Research Findings

- 87.3% of menstruating respondents use the free pads provided by MDOC (p. 12).
- 50.0% of the women who use the free pads report needing to change the pads more frequently than every 30 minutes on days of heavy flow (p. 13).
- 88.7% of menstruating respondents report having had a period accident in which they leaked blood onto their clothes, their bedding, or the prison floor (p. 13 – 14).
- 80.3% of menstruating respondents use homemade tampons made in the prison (p. 12).
- 84.6% of prison nurses and 88.2% of correctional case managers have heard that the incarcerated women use homemade tampons (p. 19, 20).
- 46.2% of nurses agree or strongly agree that free tampons and better pads would improve incarcerated women's mental health; 30.8% neither agree nor disagree (p. 19).
- 22.5% of menstruating inmates report having had at least one vaginal infection in the past 6 months while in prison. Of those who have used homemade tampons, the self-reported incidence of infection is 28.1%. Of those who have not used homemade tampons, the self-reported incidence of infection is 0.0% (p. 17, 18).
- 74.6% believe that receiving free tampons from MDOC would reduce their risk of vaginal infections, which suggests that the women have identified homemade tampons as a possible contributor to infections but continue using them anyway, due to lack of adequate alternatives (p. 17).

Summary and Policy Suggestions

Access to feminine hygiene products in Missouri's two state prisons for women is inadequate. Most incarcerated women supplement the feminine hygiene products available to them with homemade tampons, which may possibly contribute to their high rate of vaginal infection. How can access to feminine hygiene products in Missouri's state prisons for women be improved? Missouri Appleseed recommends MDOC follow the lead of the federal government and states like Louisiana by adopting these policies:

1. Providing incarcerated women with free quality-tested tampons.
2. Changing menstrual pad vendors to a vendor that sells quality-tested, absorbent pads.

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¹ Missouri Appleseed. (2018). *An Exploration of the Menstrual Needs and Health of Women Incarcerated in Missouri State Prisons*. St. Louis, MO. All page numbers refer back to this research report.