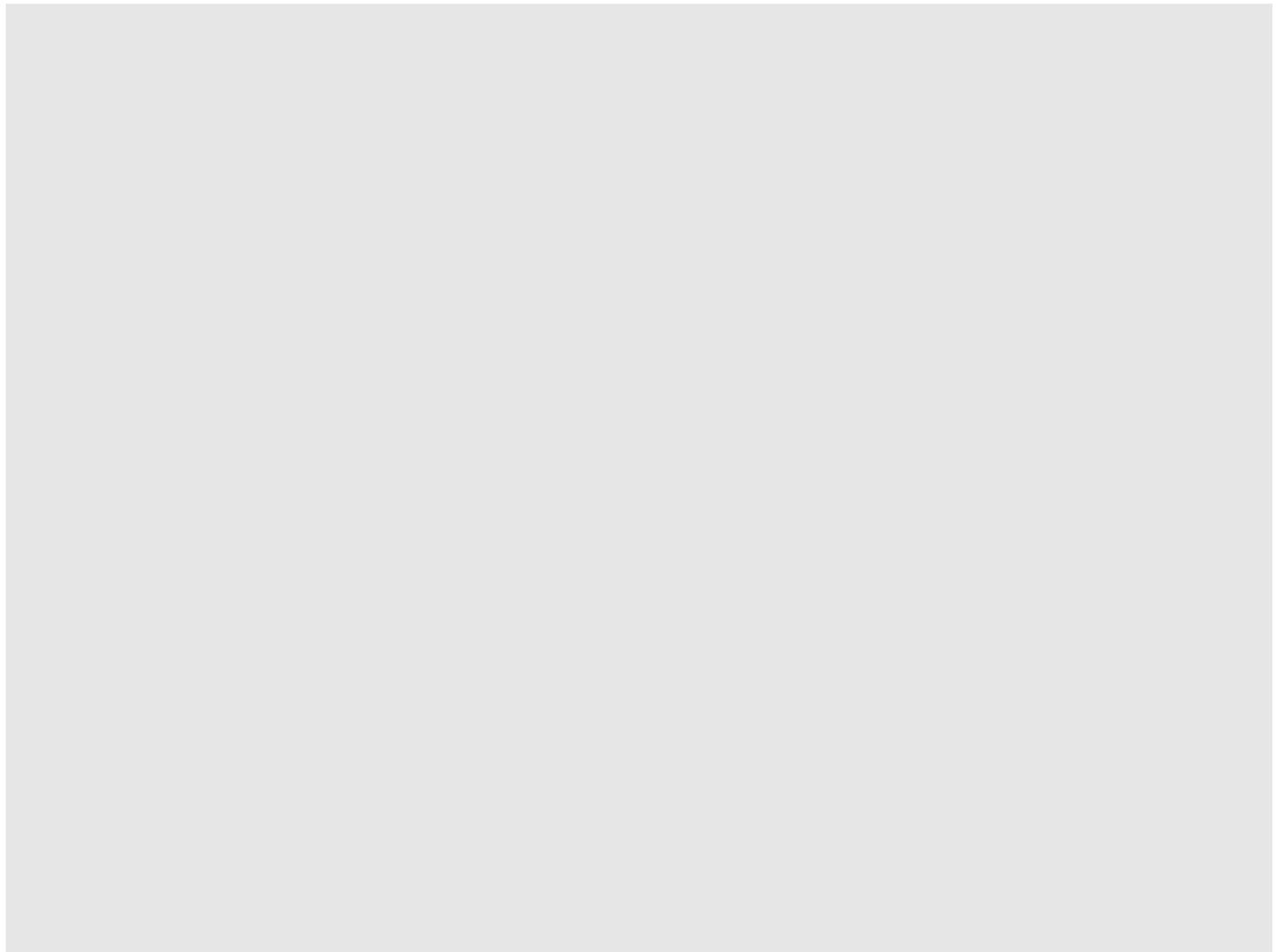


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# Inmates have to buy their own tampons, but Missouri prisons provide pads for free

By Lexi Churchill St. Louis Post-Dispatch Apr 29, 2019



The Missouri Capitol in Jefferson City. Photo by Kurt Erickson, [kerickson@post-dispatch.com](mailto:kerickson@post-dispatch.com)

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**JEFFERSON CITY** • The Missouri Department of Corrections currently supplies female offenders with one size of menstrual pads for free, but if they want tampons, they have to buy them.

That has left many of the inmates to make their own tampons out of materials available to them — shirts, bed sheets and the pads themselves. About one in every four women who have used these makeshift feminine hygiene products has had a corresponding vaginal infection, a study from a St. Louis nonprofit group found.

State lawmakers are seeking to change this practice by passing legislation requiring the Missouri Department of Corrections to provide industry-standard tampons and pads without charge.

“This is such a basic need and a basic right that we treat people with dignity,” the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Mary Elizabeth Coleman, R-Arnold, told the Post-Dispatch.

The St. Louis Board of Aldermen passed a similar measure this month covering the city’s jails; it was sponsored by Alderman Christine Ingrassia, D-6th Ward.

The initiative mirrors a 2017 change by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons that indicated federal correctional facilities would start providing their female offenders with a greater variety of free tampons and pads.

That decision led Missouri Appleseed executive director Liza Weiss to question the quality of menstrual products in her own state’s prisons. Corrections officials, also seeking women’s feedback, allowed Weiss to work with its research team to draft a survey.

Missouri Appleseed’s study, a significant driver in this year’s legislation, asked 90 female offenders, 20 nurses and 20 correctional case managers in the state’s two female correctional facilities about their experiences with the provided products.

About 80 percent of respondents said they created their own homemade tampons, and an even greater percentage of staff said they were aware of the problematic practice.

These high response rates came as a surprise to Alana Boyles, who served as the Chillicothe Correctional Center warden for three years before moving into her new position overseeing all of the state's prisons. During her stint as warden, Boyles said, she was aware of the issue but believed it was far less common.

"I did not have a lot of offenders asking for tampons," Boyles said. "Not a lot of offenders necessarily complaining about the pads that we were providing. Not getting complaints from offenders about not getting access to the restroom or not having access to enough products and also not getting those complaints from the staff either."

Staff occasionally discovered female offenders selling the homemade tampons, but the use was "not near as large as it was portrayed in the survey results," Boyles said.

Weiss labeled the free pads women currently have access to as "nonabsorbent," which is why half of the women indicated that on heavy flow days, they need to change the pads about every 30 minutes.

"It's frankly not a product that anyone I know would willingly use if they had an alternative," Coleman said.

Women can currently buy tampons, pads with wings and panty liners at the prison store. A box of 18 Always maxi pads with wings ring up at \$5.38, while a 20 pack of Tampax tampons costs \$5.63.

The top reason women said they didn't opt to purchase these alternatives was the cost.

Though the price tags are similar to typical store prices, offenders without a high school diploma earn only \$7.50 a month while high school graduates earn \$8.50 over the same time at their prison jobs.

DOC spokesperson Karen Pojmann noted that wages fluctuated “quite a lot” and that there were opportunities to earn up to minimum wage. Families can also add money to an offender’s account.

Boyles said that the survey had “helped us be supportive about caretaking our female population” and that the department was in favor of providing more feminine hygiene options. However, the cost increase remains the biggest hurdle.

The Department of Corrections estimated a spending bump of \$171,678 if half of its nearly 3,100 female inmates requested tampons. Additional funds were allocated in an early version of the proposed state budget, which will be finalized over the next few weeks.

Coleman’s legislative language currently has three routes to make it to the finish line, including the original proposal, which has awaited a final vote on the House floor for several weeks.

It also has been attached to a separate bill that has been approved in the House, but it is pending in a Senate committee.

The legislation also is on an omnibus criminal justice reform package awaiting a vote in the House.

*The legislation is House Bill 920, House Bill 303 and House Committee Bill 2. The bill passed by St. Louis aldermen is Board Bill 212.*

*Mark Schlinkmann of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.*

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