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Lawmakers address health risk posed by lack of tampons in prisons

BY NICOLE BRAHAM 19 hrs ago

JEFFERSON CITY — Incarcerated women in Missouri don't have access to free tampons or sanitary napkins that meet industry standards, which means many use homemade products that can put their health at risk.

Three bills pending before the Missouri General Assembly would change that, and Rep. Sara Walsh, R-Ashland, is working to increase the prison budget to deal with the problem.

Missouri Appleseed, a St. Louis-based nonprofit that focuses on policy issues in an intersection with criminal justice and public health, distributed surveys on feminine hygiene to incarcerated women. It found the free sanitary napkins were not meeting women's menstrual needs.

"Homemade tampons are unsanitary and dangerous to women's health," said Finola Prendergast, director of research for the nonprofit.

Eighty percent of respondents reported using tampons they made in prison. The report found that those women using homemade tampons had an increased chance of contracting a vaginal infection.

Additionally, approximately 90 percent of the women reported having their menstrual flow leak onto their bed, clothes or floor. The low-quality pads are not produced by a hygiene company but by a correctional supplies company that doesn't meet industry standards, Prendergast said.

Some women reported needing to wear eight pads at a time and changing as often as every 30 minutes to keep their menstrual flow from leaking.

The only way they can get tampons are by purchasing them from canteen funds, a privilege not many women can afford. Women reported having to make homemade tampons with paper and other available materials.

The Department of Corrections' state prisons hold 3,000 incarcerated women a year, said Karen Pojmann, communications director for the department. Pojmann said over 2.6 million pads are used each year.

House Committee Bill 2, sponsored by Rep. Shamed Dogan, R-Ballwin, was passed by the House last week and requires any correctional center under the state department to provide free tampons and sanitary napkins that "conform with applicable industry standards."

Walsh said she worked with the corrections department to essentially double its budget regarding feminine hygiene products for fiscal year 2020. The Department of Corrections is currently spending \$114,000 on feminine hygiene products among its two state prisons and about \$113,000 was added.

Walsh said this will provide women in Missouri prisons with similar options to federal prisons.

States like Maryland and Nebraska now require that both sanitary napkins and tampons be provided for women in prison.

Other measures

House Bill 303, sponsored by Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Frankford, concerns prison canteens and was amended on the House floor in February. The amendment, recommended by Rep. Tracy McCreery, requires correctional centers to have health care products, such as tampons and sanitary napkins, free and "in a quantity that is appropriate for the health care" of offenders.

The bill passed the House and is being considered in the Senate.

HB 920, sponsored by Rep. Mary Elizabeth Coleman, R-Arnold, is a similar bill to HCB 2. Coleman said the effort will help ensure "that women in the state of Missouri are treated with dignity."

Supervising editor is Kathryn Hardison.

