

## EDITORIAL

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## Editorial: Make tampons freely available for women prisoners

By the Editorial Board Feb 26, 2019



123rf.com/Anna Maslikova

Imagine if public bathrooms didn't provide toilet paper or soap. It would violate basic hygiene needs and pose obvious health risks. Yet women in prisons are routinely denied the same access to supplies needed to take care of routine bodily functions.

Women don't choose whether to menstruate. Yet, tampons are treated like some kind of luxury product. St. Louis-area Democratic Rep. Tracy McCreery has proposed providing female prisoners free access to tampons and quality sanitary napkins to address this issue in Missouri's prisons.

The measure, part of House Bill 303 restructuring prison commissary operations, deserves the Legislature's full support. No legislator can rationally argue that women inmates should be penalized financially for basic sanitary needs.

McCreery based her amendment to HB303 on research by the nonprofit Missouri Appleseed in cooperation with the Missouri Department of Corrections, which supports McCreery's amendment. In September, Missouri Appleseed distributed surveys on feminine hygiene to women inmates, prison nurses and correctional case managers. Two wardens and the corrections department's director of adult institutions also participated.

The vast majority of menstruating respondents use the free pads currently provided by the corrections department. But half of the women who use the free pads reported needing to change them more frequently than every 30 minutes on days of heavy flow. An even greater percentage, 89 percent, reported having had a period accident in which they leaked blood onto their clothes, bedding or the floor.

The report found that 80 percent of menstruating respondents said they used tampons they had crafted themselves. Paper towels or socks have been materials of last resort. Prison nurses and correctional case managers reported being aware of such practices.

Of those who have used homemade tampons, the self-reported incidence of vaginal infection was 28 percent, compared with zero among those who didn't use homemade tampons.

The vast majority of respondents said they believed that receiving free tampons from the department of corrections would reduce their risk of infections. This suggests that respondents recognize the risk posed by using homemade tampons, yet women inmates continue using them because they lack adequate access or can't afford to purchase the supplies they need.

Male inmates face no comparable problem. Other institutions have already begun to address this blatant inequality. Last year, the Federal Bureau of Prisons mandated that free feminine hygiene products be available to all female federal inmates. Several states, including Colorado, Maryland and Louisiana, also mandate access to free sanitary pads and tampons for women prisoners.

Currently, the department of corrections provides women prisoners with free pads produced by a correctional supplies company but not tampons or panty liners. Those items are available for sale in the prison canteens. Many prisoners lack money to purchase them on a monthly basis.

This bill addresses more than health issue. It's one of basic human dignity.