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EDITORIALS

Missouri should give women in its prisons free, quality tampons and pads. It's a right

BY THE KANSAS CITY STAR EDITORIAL BOARD
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The [cost](#) to obtain basic feminine hygiene products inside Missouri correctional facilities can cause serious mental and physical health problems for poor, incarcerated women.

Missouri prisons distribute bare-bones, nonabsorbent sanitary pads to inmates, while offering for sale tampons, pads with wings and panty liners at the institutions' commissaries. There, most name-brand tampons and maxi pads cost close to \$6 for a box containing 18 to 20 pieces. That's a steep price to pay. Prisoners earn barely \$8 per month while incarcerated.

More women are behind bars on the county or municipal level than there are in the state's two prisons for female offenders. Most can't afford bail while awaiting trial, let alone the cost of sanitary products. And it goes without saying that not every woman behind bars has been found guilty.

Missouri lawmakers are considering three measures that would require correctional facilities to provide industry-standard tampons and pads at no cost to inmates. Missouri House bills [920](#) and [303](#) and [House Committee Bill 2](#) are at various stages in the legislature with less than three weeks left in the spring session.

Federal correctional facilities already [provide female offenders](#) with a variety of free tampons and pads. At least 10 states have passed [legislation](#) addressing the issue. Missouri should be next.

Any law that is approved must mandate state prisons, county and municipal jails, and juvenile detention centers provide [free pads or tampons to female inmates](#).

Sure, family and friends can put money in an inmate's account to cover the costs. But it's a no-brainer that the Department of Corrections provide needy inmates with basic needs.

"There shouldn't even be legislation," said [Topeka K. Sam](#), an advocate for menstrual equity. "This is something that should be given to every woman and girl throughout the country. Unfortunately, when women are in prison, pads and tampons are actually used to encourage good behavior. And that's a human rights issue."

According to [Liza Weiss](#), founder and executive director of the social justice nonprofit [Missouri Appleseed](#), the free pads issued in Missouri prisons are flimsy and unsafe.

"When jails and prisons provide women products that don't work, they make their own and place their health at risk," Weiss said.

In 2018, Missouri Appleseed, at the behest of the corrections department, developed and distributed [surveys on feminine hygiene](#) to 90 incarcerated women, 20 prison nurses, 20 correctional case managers and other top department officials.

The [survey found](#) about 88% of incarcerated women use Department of Corrections-issued pads. About half who use the free, substandard pads reported needing to change the pads about every 30 minutes on heavy flow days.

Another startling discovery: About 80% of respondents reported using homemade tampons made in the prison. And close to 23% of them suffered at least one vaginal infection over a six-month span while incarcerated.

Sanitary pads and tampons are not a luxury. Imagine inmates being charged for toilet paper.

“Without access to basic needs, one is truly deprived of their dignity,” said [Jennifer Weiss-Wolf](#), co-founder of [Period Equity](#) and author of “[Periods Gone Public](#).”

Missouri Appleseed recommends that the Missouri Department of Corrections follow the lead of the federal government and states such as Louisiana by adopting policies that provide incarcerated women with free, quality-tested tampons. The nonprofit also suggested the state change menstrual pad vendors to one that sells quality-tested, absorbent pads to resolve the current antiquated practice.

[Jessica McClellan](#), an [advocate for sexual assault and rape survivors](#), created the #NoFemaleWithout period products movement. She correctly highlights an obvious, essential fact: Inmates are still human regardless of the reason for their incarceration.

“Providing these items of dignity is no different than providing toilet tissue to all humans in the penal system,” McClellan said.

Women and girls incarcerated in prisons, county and municipal jails or juvenile detention centers across the state should have access to quality feminine hygiene products. And cash-strapped inmates should not have the added burden of paying for them.

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