

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Access to Menstrual Hygiene Products in Missouri Prisons

Background

In August 2017, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) began to address the inadequacy of the menstrual hygiene products available to women in its prisons. They issued a memo requiring federal women's prisons to supply regular and super-sized tampons, regular and super-sized sanitary pads with wings, and pantyliners free of charge. In 2017 and 2018, several states followed BOP's lead, passing laws requiring their prisons to provide more free menstrual hygiene products.

At that time, the Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC) purchased single-size wingless sanitary pads from a correctional supplies company and distributed them in its two women's prisons free of charge. Tampons, panty liners, or any other size of pad had to be purchased at the prison canteen.

Missouri Appleseed's Initial Research

In September 2018, in cooperation with DOC, Missouri Appleseed distributed surveys to 90 randomly selected respondents incarcerated in Missouri women's prisons. The surveys asked about respondents' menstrual hygiene practices and needs. The results (with a 91.1% response rate) were concerning:

- 50.0% of respondents who used the free DOC pads reported needing to change them every 30 minutes or more frequently on days of heavy flow.
- 80.3% of respondents who menstruated reported having used homemade tampons fashioned out of materials available to them in the prison.
- 57.9% of respondents who used homemade tampons said they used them because they did not have enough money to buy tampons at the prison canteen.
- 22.5% of respondents who menstruated reported having had a vaginal infection in the past 6 months.

Public Response to Missouri Appleseed's Research: A Timeline

- April 2019: The St. Louis City Board of Aldermen passes a board bill requiring city jails to provide free industry-standard tampons as well as pads in St. Louis City jails.
- May 2019: The Missouri state legislature passes an appropriations bill to fund the purchase of tampons for Missouri women's prisons.
- November 2019: St. Louis County Executive Sam Page signs an executive order mandating that the St. Louis County jail provide free tampons as well as pads.
- May 2021: The Missouri state legislature passes a law requiring that Missouri women's prisons distribute free tampons as well as pads, ensuring that the state will keep appropriating funds to buy them.



Missouri Appleseed's Follow-Up Research

In April 2023, in cooperation with DOC, Missouri Appleseed distributed surveys to 90 randomly selected respondents incarcerated in Missouri women's prisons. The surveys asked about respondents' menstrual hygiene and needs now that Missouri DOC offered free tampons as well as pads. Some of the results (with a 51.1% response rate) were heartening:

- Only 10.3% of respondents reported having used homemade tampons since DOC started supplying free tampons, and only 48.7% reported having ever used homemade tampons while in prison, compared to 80.3% in 2018.
- Only 10.3% of respondents reported having had a vaginal infection in the past 6 months while in prison, compared to 22.5% in 2018.

The survey results suggested that the free products' absorbency could be improved. Survey answers suggested the free products were not very absorbent:

- When reporting how often they changed the free pads during heavy flow days, 44.7% said every 30 minutes or more frequently.
- When reporting how often they changed the free tampons during heavy flow days, 54.3% said every 30 minutes or more frequently.

Conclusions

These results suggest that providing free tampons and pads to women in prisons yields improved outcomes, such as less homemade tampon use and fewer self-reported vaginal infections. While these results show significant improvement in women's health and homemade product use, survey responses suggest that the absorbency of the free DOC menstrual products can be improved. Missouri Appleseed recommends that when DOC's contract with its current menstrual hygiene product supplier expires, they contract to purchase more absorbent products.

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