



Menstrual Products Go Mainstream

BY KASSANDRA KANIA

CleanLink

December 1, 2017

In the wake of tampon tax repeals, free feminine hygiene products are infiltrating restrooms

Push For Free Feminine Hygiene Products

Along with toilet tissue, paper towels and hand soap, facilities nationwide are beginning to stock women's restrooms with complementary tampons and sanitary napkins. The initiative to offer these items free of charge began amidst controversy over the so-called tampon tax categorizing feminine hygiene products as a luxury item.

In most states, tampons and pads are considered nonessentials, on par with candy and manicures, and taxed accordingly — a charge that has led to heated debates over what critics claim is a discriminatory tax against women.

Some states are beginning to fight back. In July 2016, New York became the 11th state to eliminate taxes on menstrual products. That same month, the city passed legislation to provide free menstrual products in all public schools, shelters and correctional facilities. And beginning in 2018, Illinois will follow New York's lead and introduce a new state law requiring all schools to provide free feminine hygiene products in restrooms.

Many student-led initiatives are also underway at colleges and universities. According to Newsweek, Brown University, in Rhode Island, was one of the first higher-education institutions to implement a free tampon program. The initiative was led by Brown's student body president, Viet Nguyen, who, with the help of fellow students, hand delivered menstrual products to all nonresidential restrooms and committed to replenishing stocks once a week.

At North Carolina State University, members of the student government are preparing to roll out a similar initiative.

"We've received sponsors from Always and Kotex, and we are graciously receiving sponsors for funding to help make feminine hygiene products more accessible on campus," says Jacqueline Gonzalez, student body president.

These are just two examples of what is happening on campuses around the country.

"This is a movement," says Bill Hemann, vice president of sales-healthcare/national accounts at HOSPECO, Cleveland. "The goal is to permanently change the definition of a well appointed women's restroom. That means putting up a [menstrual product] dispenser, just as you would a soap or paper towel dispenser. It should be a given, not a maybe."



Schools Pilot Free Tampon Program

When New York piloted its program to bring free menstrual products to schools, councilwoman Julissa Ferreras-Copeland turned to HOSPECO to provide a free dispenser and products to evaluate the program's feasibility and assess costs. While the initial dispenser is free of charge, schools are responsible for funding the program once it is up and running.

The first rotary mechanism dispenser was installed at Corona, New York's High School for the Arts. Thereafter, the program expanded to multiple schools in the Bronx and finally — once the bill was signed — district-wide.

"For most women, menstrual-care products are personal, and they have their own preferences," says Hermann. "The products dispensed from these machines are not their product of choice; having said that, if they require it, they're going to use it."

Most importantly, tampons and pads should be easily accessible. Annie Lascoe, a supporter of menstrual equity, had this goal in mind when she co-founded Conscious Period, a company that makes environmentally friendly, organic tampons. For every box of product sold, Conscious Period donates product to organizations that serve homeless or low-income women.

"Schools are such an important place to start [this initiative]," says Lascoe. "If you're at school and you forgot your pad at home, it can be totally humiliating. You have to ask for a bathroom break from the teacher, get permission to go to the nurse's office and get a pad, then go back to the restroom, and then back to class where the teacher asks you why you took so long. Also, from a psychological standpoint, going to a nurse's office tells girls they're sick when they have their period, and that's not true."

For low-income students, a tampon tax only adds insult to injury: A box of tampons or pads can cost anywhere from \$7 to \$10, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, does not give allowances for feminine care products. As Lascoe points out, a single mother on food stamps with three menstruating daughters is likely to spend an estimated \$40 a month on feminine care products.

"That's insane — and unjust," she says.

Some students may even skip school when they have their period because they can't afford to purchase tampons or pads. According to Hemann, New York schools have reported an increase in attendance as a direct result of offering free menstrual products.



Facilities Benefit From Offering Feminine Products

While schools are a good starting point to implement programs offering free menstrual products, advocates hope to see changes in all facilities.

“New York has become the template for others,” says Hemann. “This will have a halo effect, and eventually places like fast-food restaurants that encourage people to linger will provide these products because they’re a necessity.”

Even federal prisons are recognizing these items as a basic requirement. According to a CNN report, the Federal Bureau of Prisons recently issued a memo that requires all federal prisons to provide female inmates with a range of hygiene products, free of charge.

“There’s a huge issue in prisons with women not getting sufficient product every month, and they have to pay exorbitant amounts of money in commissary for them,” says Lascoe. “Every public facility should have free feminine-care products. No matter what your background is, all women have been without a tampon when they need it, and it can be distracting and shameful.”

While some businesses are just beginning to hop on the free-tampon bandwagon, others have been offering them for years. According to online news sources, Nancy Kramer, founder of marketing agency Resource/Ammirati and freethetampon.org, a national campaign to make feminine products freely accessible in every restroom, has offered free feminine products in her company’s restrooms since 1982. The decision came after she was pleasantly surprised to see them in the ladies rooms at Apple’s corporate headquarters.

And at M&T Bank Stadium in Baltimore, patrons have had access to free tampons and pads in all first aid and guest services stations since 2007. The service is funded by the Baltimore Ravens and Medstar, the healthcare organization in charge of the stadium’s medical needs.

Stadium employees are aware of the service and direct women to guest services when needed. There are also signs in all women’s restrooms informing them that feminine products are available in the first aid stations.

“We used to have dispensers in the restrooms when the stadium was first built, and the cost was about 50 cents per product,” says Bart Shifler, manager of stadium operations. “But what if you don’t have two quarters in your pocket and you really need it? It just caused a lot of confusion and created problems.”

Stocking the dispensers was also time consuming, and if a custodian was out sick, the dispensers could potentially run out of product. Finally, in 2006, Shifler had the dispensers removed.

“Why charge somebody because they forgot something?” he says. “Providing free tampons and pads is a good service for our fans.”



Gaining Momentum

Programs that support free feminine hygiene products are gaining momentum as more businesses, women groups, student activists and politicians fight for reform.

“Menstruation is a biological function,” says Hemann, “and, as a matter of gender equality, menstrual-care products should be as readily available and free of charge as toilet paper, paper towels, toilet seat covers and soap.”

Universal access to tampons and pads is not only a necessity for women, but a necessity for businesses.

“If you’re at all concerned about optimizing the customer experience, then menstrual care products in the restroom should become a requirement,” says Hemann. “Providing this necessity really demonstrates high regard for your customers, employees and patrons. If you have any doubt, just ask your wife, daughter or significant other.”

<http://www.cleanlink.com/hs/article/Push-For-Free-Feminine-Hygiene-Products--21662>