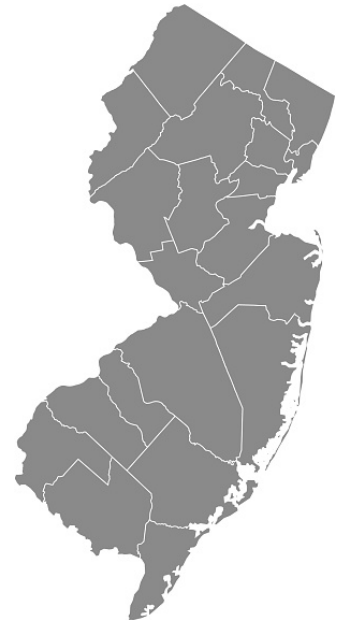




Menstrual products should be as available as toilet paper and paper towels in N.J., lawmakers say



By Susan K. Livio | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

It's a biological fact that women and girls menstruate. But try talking about it in public, and people avoid the topic out of shame or sensitivity.

On Thursday, a panel of state lawmakers who want to eliminate the stigma associated with the female monthly period approved a package of bills that would make tampons and pads available without cost in schools, homeless shelters and through public assistance programs in New Jersey.

"It is estimated that almost 17 million Americans who menstruate live in poverty," said state Assembly Women and Children Committee Chairwoman Gabriela Mosquera, D-Gloucester. "It's important for us to remember that menstrual products are not a luxury, but a necessity. Our income levels should not dictate your access to these products."

Assemblywoman Lisa Swain, D-Bergen, a prime sponsor of several of the bills, agreed. "This package of bills is about dignity," she said.

Much of the impetus for the legislation grew out of a research project led by Bergen County Technical High School graduates Lexi Palumbo and Alisha Veera when they were students in 2018, said Swain, who invited the students to the hearing. Now college students, Palumbo and Vera testified via Zoom that they chose to tackle the issue of menstrual equity for a class project. Students needed to go to the nurse's office if they got their period in school and didn't have a pad or tampon because they weren't available in the bathrooms.

"You go to the nurse's office if you are sick or hurt. This does not apply," Palumbo said. These products "should not be treated any differently that toilet paper, paper towels or even tissues," she added,

They researched the cost of providing menstrual products at their school and asked the administration for them to be made available for free, their former teacher Genevieve Allard and David Tankard, the principal, told the committee. "Their case was so compelling to me, it was a no brainer," Tankard said. The cost was "negligible- nearly zero."



One bill ([A3208](#)) would include menstrual products among the items that can be acquired through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – formerly known as food stamps – and the Women, Infants and Children or the [WIC program](#) that provides infant formula and nutritious food for young children and their mothers.

The legislation requires the state Department of Human Services to seek permission from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to include period products in these federally run public assistance program. If the federal government rejects the request, the state would allocate \$2 million to cover the anticipated costs, according to the bill.

The committee approved ([A3211](#)), the “New Jersey Feminine Hygiene Products for the Homeless Act,” which would require shelters in the state that serve women and girls provide free tampons, panty liners and pads.

Eiko LaBoria, chairwoman of the menstrual equity subcommittee for Thrive New Jersey, a reproductive rights group, said one homeless woman in Jersey City once told her that when she doesn’t have anything to wear during her period, “I just pick a corner and sit here until it passes.’ ”

“Period poverty is shrouded in silence, stigma and shame,” LaBoria said.

The committee also approved legislation ([A3212](#)), which would create a program to screen women for endometriosis, which involves uterine cells growing outside the uterus, and ovarian cysts, if they experience pain or excessive bleeding during their periods.

Diana Falzone, ambassador for the Endometriosis Foundation of America, testified via videotape and in written testimony that it took more than seven years for her to receive her diagnosis, and by then she was infertile. She conceived her son through in vitro fertilization. “I was weeks away from kidney failure,” she said.

The committee also approved:

[\(A1685\)](#), which requires manufacturers include the ingredients of menstrual products;

[\(A1935\)](#) which appropriates \$200,000 to create the “Menstrual Hygiene Products Program” for low-income people;

[\(A1938\)](#), which directs the state Treasury to negotiate the bulk-purchase of menstrual products that could be extended to nonprofits that hold state contracts;

All six bills passed by a 5-0 vote. They must be approved by both houses of the Legislature and before the governor could decide whether to sign them into law.

“I’m excited we are able to sit here and have this conversation and not be ashamed,” said Assemblywoman Shanique Speight, D-Essex, who sponsored several of the bills.

<https://www.nj.com/politics/2022/10/menstrual-products-should-be-as-available-as-toilet-paper-and-paper-towels-in-nj-lawmakers-say.html>