



Free feminine hygiene products for inmates approved by Ohio House



By Laura Hancock, cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio - The Ohio House passed a bipartisan bill Wednesday that would require state prisons, as well as city and county jails, to provide free menstrual hygiene products to women inmates. House Bill 29 passed unanimously, 91-0. It now heads to the Ohio Senate for consideration.

In 2022, when lawmakers had started looking into the issue, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction instituted a policy providing free feminine hygiene products, said state Rep. Latyna Humphrey, a Columbus Democrat and a sponsor of the bill.

However, not all county jails follow this policy. Some local jails will have to begin providing period products under HB 29, according to an analysis of the bill conducted by the legislature's nonpartisan staff. There was no estimate for how much it will cost them.

Humphrey said by putting the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's policy in the books, there's no chance the state could rescind the policy. At jails where inmates have to buy pads or tampons from the commissary, the products become prized commodities, said Rep. Marilyn John, a Richland County Republican who is also a bill sponsor.

John said the limited supplies have been sometimes used as "leverage against them."

"Their testimonies compelled me to investigate whether this issue existed within my own district," John said. "Although my county sheriff's department assured me that it does not, the fact that it persists anywhere in Ohio is unacceptable."

Courtney Alspaugh, who was incarcerated at the Dayton Correctional Institution for five years, testified in a House committee that her period started shortly after she arrived in prison. She had no money in her commissary account. She asked for pads from corrections officers, who told her to talk to a sergeant who wasn't on duty for days.



"I took one of my state-issued washcloths and rolled it up and put it in my underwear. It was one of the most demeaning moments of my life. I never want to feel that way again," she told the committee. "And you have the power to keep other women from feeling that way too. Although I was released a few years ago, some of these issues are still a problem."

Dianira Garcia, who also said she was a former inmate, said officers sometimes made fun of inmates asking for extra pads. "This caused me to not further report my menstrual issues," she said.

Erin Noll, who said she was sentenced to 12 years of prison at a young age and is now out, said women used toilet paper or made tampons out of the pads provided by the state if they had a heavy flow. This put them at risk for toxic shock syndrome, she said.

The Office of the Ohio Public Defender estimates between 3,000 and 4,000 women are incarcerated in Ohio.

"The denial of these products to incarcerated women also subjects the state and taxpayers to potential civil rights litigation," said Zachary Miller, the legislative policy manager for the Office of the Ohio Public Defender. "Federal courts have ruled that the failure to regularly provide incarcerated women with these products constitutes a denial of personal hygiene and sanitary living conditions, therefore a violation of the Constitution."

HB 29 requires state prisons and local jails to provide a designated area with containers for disposal of feminine hygiene products. They would also have to provide women inmates on their periods a minimum of one shower a day with access to hot water for washing.

Wednesday was the third time the Ohio House has passed this bill, Humphrey said. One bill died in the Senate. Another time it died in conference committee, where members of each legislative chamber meet to negotiate their differences.

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