



Senate passes menstrual period equity bill

IN A STEP toward menstrual equity, the Senate unanimously passed a bill on Wednesday that would make disposable menstrual products available at no cost in prisons, homeless shelters, and public schools.

"I don't say that very often for bills coming through the Legislature, but this one is simple," said Senate President Karen Spilka at a press conference following the Senate vote. "If we truly believe in equality for women and menstruating people, then making period products accessible is something that we absolutely need to do."



The legislation would require jails and prisons, homeless shelters, and public schools to make menstrual products "available in a convenient manner that does not stigmatize the individual seeking such products."

Sponsored by Sen. Patricia Jehlen, a Somerville Democrat, the bill has the backing of scores of groups that have come together to form the Massachusetts Menstrual Equity Coalition. Among the members are Dignity Matters, which provides menstrual products, bras, and underwear to low-income girls, Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston, Boston Public Schools, and Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund of Massachusetts. A similar [bill](#) was passed in the Senate last year but was not taken up by the House before the two-year legislative session ended.

For people who menstruate, not having access to menstrual products can be uncomfortable, embarrassing, and dehumanizing, say advocates who lobbied for the bill.

Sasha Goodfriend, executive director of Mass NOW, voiced optimism that the bill will make it to the governor's desk this session.

"I'm more encouraged that this bill will pass this legislative session because I think we are seeing an increase in visibility around period poverty as a public policy issue and because we've seen over 20 other states across the country pass policy on the state level to make period products free," she said. "So Massachusetts is now starting to fall behind the rest of the country even though we are also presented with this opportunity to pass the most comprehensive equity legislation in the country."

In some states, period products are not tax-exempt the way that basic necessities like food are. Massachusetts does not tax period products, but that still doesn't eliminate barriers to access to menstrual



products for those living in poverty. People are not allowed to purchase menstrual products with federal food stamps.

According to a 2019 survey conducted by Mass NOW, 56 percent of Massachusetts school nurses reported observing students missing class to obtain menstrual products. School nurses don't always have the budget to buy enough pads and tampons to meet the needs they encounter, say the bill's supporters.

"Inaccessibility and stigma mean that many [students] are missing their classes, missing their education and therefore harming their educational outcomes which leads to long-term setbacks over time," said Spilka.

A quarter of homeless shelters that responded to the Mass NOW survey did not provide menstrual products, which are among the least donated items to shelters.

Federal prisons are required to provide free menstrual products, but most incarcerated people are in state or local jails where they are not guaranteed such access. People with periods can be forced to pay for their own menstrual products, which leads to pads and tampons being bartered in prisons. Menstrual products have even been [withheld](#) by corrections officials in some prisons as punishment.

"For many of those people, these products that they require as human beings still need to be purchased and can be withheld and used as tools of control. That is plain wrong. This bill makes strides in the right direction and treats these products as the necessities that they in fact are," said Spilka.

Advocates say people often have to make choices between paying for food, housing, education, and menstrual products. Not having access to period products, they say, can lead people to use unhygienic substitutes like wadded-up toilet paper.

"If most men could menstruate, these products would be ubiquitous and free as toilet paper and would've been since the advent of toilet paper," said Sen. Julian Cyr, co-chair of the Joint Committee on Public Health.

"We have hundreds of years of stigma to combat to make it a top-of-mind priority so [that] when legislators are thinking about basic needs, they are thinking of period products," said Goodfriend, the Mass NOW official.

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