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Hygiene Product Accessibility Matters, Period.

By Representative Melissa Sargent, 48th Assembly District

On October 19th, we celebrated the first annual National Period Day. It was my honor to stand in unity with the movement of young people and others from across our nation together to rally in efforts to promote awareness, equality, and justice for all people who menstruate. These young student organizers recognize the fact that menstrual hygiene products are necessities, not luxuries, and that those who menstruate here in Wisconsin should not have to continue to face the undue and unjust burdens of inaccessibility to, and unaffordability of, essential hygiene products.

Menstruation has long been highly stigmatized, hidden, and treated with shame and derision around the world, despite it being a natural bodily function that is experienced at one time or another by 50% of the world's population. Byproducts of this stigma and underrepresentation include laws, norms, and practices that inherently financially penalize menstruation and decrease accessibility to hygiene products like tampons and sanitary pads.

Throughout their lifetime, individuals who menstruate have their periods for an average of 2,535 days, or 7 years of requiring access to tampons or sanitary napkins to achieve safe and healthy menstrual hygiene. Furthermore, the average menstruating person uses almost 17,000 hygiene products throughout their life, while one study found that 2 out of 3 people living below the poverty line have experienced being without hygiene products due to costly expenses. Lacking access to menstrual care has serious implications, from poor health outcomes and lost work and educational instruction hours, to demoralization and embarrassment for those unable to afford essential hygiene products. No one should have to miss work or school, risk their health, or compromise their dignity, because they menstruate.

It is well past time for the conversation of hygiene product accessibility and equality to be brought to the forefront. The unfortunate reality is that, right here in Wisconsin, many people continue to lack access to and have the ability to afford menstrual products. In our state, people who menstruate face an unjust tax burden on menstrual products, which are seen as a "luxury item," and more often than not do not have access to menstrual products in public restrooms- including schools and government owned buildings. According to Wisconsin tax code, food, electricity, and prescription medication, are not subject to sales tax, as they are deemed necessities. At the same time, items such as potato chips, Kit Kats, Viagra, and gym memberships are also not subject to state sales tax, yet hygiene products continue to face unjust taxation. Additionally, there are no other examples that represent such a clear gender-based tax.

Hygiene products are not optional; they are necessities. The ability to manage this normal bodily function is essential, not an entitlement or privilege, and is oftentimes an urgent, unexpected need. Menstrual products are not a luxury good, nor a government handout—when those who do not menstruate walk into a public restroom they have everything they need to take care of ordinary bodily functions, while those who do menstruate do not. Further, data from programs around the nation show that the cost of providing these products is significantly less



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than the cost of soap, toilet paper, paper towel, and other bathroom supplies currently being provided in bathrooms everywhere.

No individual should have to be without menstrual products when they are in need. As such, I am proud to continue to sponsor legislation that takes crucial steps in helping to bring menstrual equality to Wisconsin by providing menstrual products in state, local, and school building, and ending the unjust “tampon tax”. It is past time that we have legislation that works towards gender equality and justice for people who menstruate.

We must do more to ensure equality for those who menstruate, to reduce the stigma around periods, and to bring awareness to this issue. I am committed to being an outspoken leader fighting for menstrual equality because I know that in order to have a fully equitable society, we must have laws and policies that take into account the reality that half the population menstruates. I am beyond proud to continue to work for a more fair, just, and equitable Wisconsin.

Menstruation should not be a factor that holds anyone back, period.