
REPORT TITLE: Provision of Menstrual Products at Region of Peel Buildings

FROM: Nancy Polsinelli, Commissioner of Health Services

RECOMMENDATION

- 1. That the Region of Peel implement the provision of free menstrual products, beginning at select Regional buildings sites to ensure access to essential products when needed; and**
- 2. That Real Property Asset Management staff be authorized to procure and replace existing menstrual product dispensers in women's and universal washrooms at 10 Peel and 7120 Hurontario Regional building sites with new units that provide free products; and**
- 3. That the Region of Peel Health Services staff monitor the impact of implementation and consider the expansion of the provision of free menstrual products through other Regional services and community partners to offer reliable and sustainable access to menstrual products.**

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- On February 10, 2022, Keyna Sarkar, the Founder/ Executive Director of the Red Mvmnt, presented to Regional Council on the provision of free menstrual products.
- The presentation ended with a call to action for the Region of Peel to provide menstrual products for free, with a focus on public washrooms.
- A jurisdictional scan and community consultations were conducted to inform the issue of period poverty in Ontario and how it is being addressed.
- Within Ontario, many municipalities and educational institutions have made steps towards offering free menstrual products using a variety of approaches including installing menstrual product dispensers in municipal public washrooms, providing a personal supply through school programs; and offering products through community-based programs such as food banks.
- The provision of free menstrual products contributes to gender equity to ensure that menstruating individuals have convenient access to hygienic products when needed.
- Staff propose offering free menstrual products in public washrooms at the primary Regional Office Buildings by installing new dispensers that will offer product free of charge. This is in addition to all Regional shelters and transitional housing facilities currently contracted to provide personal care products, including menstrual products, through budget or donation.
- As part of the Region's post-pandemic planning for 2023 and the reopening of the Region's public health clinics, staff will look to further expand the provision of free menstrual products through client-facing services. This would be accompanied by an assessment of impact and exploring the provision of free menstrual products with other Regional services and community partners.

DISCUSSION

1. Background

On February 10, 2022, Keyna Sarkar, the Founder/ Executive Director of the Red Mvmnt, presented to Regional Council on the provision of free menstrual products. The Red Mvmnt is working to provide reusable menstrual products for those facing financial obstacles and lobbying to have free disposable pads and tampons available in public washrooms. The presentation ended with a call to action for the Region of Peel to join the Red Mvmnt by providing menstrual products for free, with a focus on public washrooms. Staff were directed to explore opportunities to enhance access and provide free menstrual products in the Region, with a focus on public washrooms.

2. Findings

Period poverty refers to restricted access to safe, hygienic, and sufficient menstrual products, wherein menstruators living in poverty are forced to make decisions between having menstrual products or having other necessary items such as food and electricity. According to Plan International Canada (2019), this issue presents a subset of poverty that is gender disproportionate, as 63 per cent of Canadian women/girls have either regularly or occasionally missed an event or activity out of worry that they do not have access to menstrual products and/or facilities. In addition, 24 per cent of Canadian women and 1/3 of Canadian women under 25 cannot or struggle to afford menstrual products. The issue of period poverty was explored by the Town of Caledon where a survey found that 62 per cent of women have been forced to buy food or clothing over menstrual products.

a) Jurisdictional Scan

Within Ontario, many municipalities and educational institutions have made steps towards offering free menstrual products. In a three-year partnership with Shoppers Drug Mart, the Ontario government announced they will be providing six million menstrual products to school boards starting in the 2021-2022 school year. For municipalities, the focus has primarily been on providing menstrual products in public washrooms of municipally owned facilities. Locally, the City of Brampton has set up dispensers of menstrual products in public women's and gender inclusive washrooms and change rooms in municipally funded facilities. Costs related to City of Brampton's initiative were related to the installation of dispensers and annual operating costs. The City of Mississauga and Town of Caledon are also working towards developing initiatives to provide free menstrual products in their municipalities. Other municipalities, such as the City of Hamilton, have provided funding to community organizations to distribute menstrual products through their networks. The City of Toronto also increased their budget of shelter, support and housing administration to provide menstrual products at homeless shelters, community centers, and drop-in respite centers. A number of educational institutions, including school boards, are also offering free menstrual products in washrooms or on an as-needed basis. Further information is available in Appendix I.

As initiatives to provide free menstrual products are relatively new, beginning in 2019, evaluations have not yet provided much information on the uptake of the products and any other considerations.

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b) Community & Internal Consultations

Staff reached out to members of Peel's Community Response Table to understand existing barriers to accessing menstrual products in Peel, and to identify any current initiatives that are offering free menstrual products. Community partners indicated that they occasionally provide free menstrual products to their clients based on donations or available funds. However, this way of accessing menstrual products is limited and inconsistent due to the unpredictability of donations and available funding. Respondents also highlighted the need to provide free menstrual products in areas where there are higher rates of poverty, and to provide these products in spaces that individuals facing period poverty may frequently visit, such as community recreation centers, venues where programs or clinics for vulnerable individuals are being held, and points of access to government funding.

The Region of Peel offers many programs and services accessed by populations of interest where free menstrual products could be made available. For example, there is strong alignment in offering free menstrual products in public health clinics across the region, specifically in locations where healthy sexuality programming is held. Currently, the Fairview clinic is the only location providing the healthy sexuality programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all five clinics are very well accessed by the community and would be able to distribute free menstrual products. In addition, all shelters and transitional housing that are Regional facilities are contracted to provide personal care products, including menstrual products, through budget or donation. In terms of accessibility, individuals have to ask staff at the shelter or transitional housing facility to receive any personal care products, including menstrual products. Opportunity to explore these connections and others with community partners can be an important next step.

3. Proposed Direction

Across the Region of Peel, access to menstrual products is being enhanced through various mechanisms that include educational institutions, municipal facilities and some community programs. Based on current feasibility, the Region can consider initiating the provision of free menstrual products at the primary Regional Office Buildings (10 Peel Centre Drive and 7120 Hurontario Street) as a first step to assess impact and monitor utilization. The implementation of a program at these sites could involve providing free menstrual products in each of the women's and universal washrooms by replacing the existing dispensers with new free-vend units that match the footprint on the wall to mitigate labour costs associated with installation.

The provision of free menstrual products in a variety of settings across Peel through local municipal buildings, centres and schools offer interim support that can be used in one-time or emergency situations. However, for those that experience income insecurity, enhanced support and supply of free menstrual products through trusted and accessible service points may offer a positive impact. Additional consideration for other service sites, such as health clinics and housing and human services, can be explored with community partners to ensure sustainable access. As part of the Region's post-pandemic planning for 2023 and the reopening of the Region's public health clinics, staff will look to further expand the program and explore its implementation through client-facing services. This would include the Region's public health clinics, housing services, and other service points that are convenient and accessible.

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RISK CONSIDERATIONS

As many initiatives to provide free menstrual products have not been evaluated, there is uncertainty with the uptake of the products. There is also the potential for vandalism with free dispensing machines in public space, which will require monitoring by facilities management staff. Further, the ability to implement new dispensers may be impacted by supply chain delays that are occurring in several sectors.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The initial costs to supply and install new 'free-vend' style dispensers in every women's and universal washroom at the two primary Regional Office Buildings (10 Peel and 7120 Hurontario) has been estimated by Regional staff at approximately \$25,000. There are sufficient funds in the 2022 operating budget to cover these initial costs.

Ongoing operating costs to supply and maintain the menstrual products in the 'free-vend' dispensers would be based on the actual volume of product used. Historically, the operating costs and corresponding revenues have been negligible. Staff will monitor and reassess budget impact when sufficient data is available.

Additional costs would also be incurred should expansion of free menstrual products be provided through other community support and service programs.

CONCLUSION

The provision of free menstrual products by the Region of Peel is a step that addresses period poverty in Peel. Review of this service in Regional buildings will inform longer-term options. Discussions with community and other partners will inform other practices that could be implemented to support individuals experiencing barriers to accessing menstrual products.

APPENDICES

Appendix I - Jurisdictional Scan on the Provision of Free Menstrual Products in Ontario

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