

CT is struggling with a high rate of period poverty and a lack of menstruation product access. Here's how it's fighting back.

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Hartford Courant

Aug 25, 2022 at 12:02 pm



Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz speaks to supporters of the non-profit, Dignity Grows, which provides tote bags full of one month's worth of free comprehensive hygiene essentials paired with period products. Since its founding in 2019, Dignity Grows has distributed more than 15,000 totes per year. (Douglas Hook)

About a quarter of women in the U.S. don't have access to menstrual products each month, with many forced to choose between buying them and food, Jessica Zachs, founder and CEO of Dignity Grows, said in Hartford Wednesday.

Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin, along with Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, U.S. Rep. John Larson, and Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez gathered to shine a light on period poverty and to call for action.

Zachs created Dignity Grows — which was founded in greater Hartford in 2019 but launched nationally in the fall of 2020 — to start to combat the problem. The organization provides tote bags packed with one month's worth of free comprehensive hygiene essentials and period products to women who need them. Since its founding, Dignity Grows has distributed more than 15,000 Dignity Grows Totes per year in Connecticut.

“I learned pre-pandemic 20% or nearly 1 in 5 American girls and women couldn't access menstrual products each and every month,” said Jessica Zachs, Founder and CEO of Dignity Grows. “Today that statistic has increased to 25% and with some studies showing even more. That is a minimum of 1 in 4 American women and girls who needs help.”

Zachs said that in just three years, Dignity Grows has distributed more than 46,000 hygiene filled totes across Hartford. The initiative, which collaborates with the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, has become a national movement addressing period poverty and hygiene inequity

“This is shining a light on the enormous need that Dignity Grows in trying to fill,” Bronin said. “The need is vast. A quarter of women around the country are facing period poverty. Think about what that means in a community like Hartford.”



Hartford Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, left, speaks to supporters of the nonprofit Dignity Grows. Torres-Rodriguez said the district learned that some students' absences are related to lack of period products. (Douglas Hook)

Bronin said that providing hygiene products is about “providing dignity” when, due to inflation, prices on hygiene and period products “have risen 10% this year alone.”

Nearly 30% of menstruating people in the U.S. suffer from period poverty, lacking the financial resources to purchase basic menstrual hygiene necessities — as the products are not covered by SNAP, WIC or other government programs — and are rarely available at food pantries.

“It’s time to act,” Larson said. “I’m going to work with all members of Congress to make this so evident to everyone what an injustice this is. It only happens when people care enough to come together.”

The effect period poverty on school-aged children is even more profound. One in four teens in the U.S. has missed school due to the lack of period supplies. In Connecticut, 40% of female public school students in grades seven through 12 attend Title 1-eligible schools, meaning they have high concentrations of student poverty.

“Since October 2020, 5,000 hygiene totes have been dropped off at our schools and delivered to our families,” Torres-Rodriguez said. “The cost of feminine products adds up and when we think about women relying every month on having to figure out how to have access while accessing school every day, we have to think about the impact that has on them.”

Torres-Rodriguez said that when the school system dug deeper into Hartford’s absentee problem, they discovered that young women not having access to hygiene and period products was a contributing factor.

“Some of our students say they cannot prioritize school because of that reason,” she said. “We realized we had a big problem.”



Jessica Zachs, CEO of Dignity Grows, speaks at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford Wednesday. Zachs founded the nonprofit in 2019. Since then it has distributed more than 15,000 Dignity Grows Totes per year. (Douglas Hook)

Most menstruators have their period for about two to seven days and for a total of seven years or 2,535 days in their lifetime. The lack of menstrual products isn’t just a barrier at school and work, but it also is a public health issue. When people resort to unhygienic alternatives, they are vulnerable to harmful physical and mental health risks including reproductive issues and depression.

Earlier this year, on this International Women's Day, State Rep. Kate Farrar of West Hartford highlighted legislation that would address period poverty in Connecticut. House Bill 5272 or — “An Act Concerning Menstrual Products” — would provide free disposable menstrual products in Connecticut's public school restrooms, at public universities, and in shelters. The proposal expands upon legislation previously enacted to provide free menstrual products to individuals who are incarcerated in Connecticut.

Other places like New York City distribute menstrual products for free in places like public schools, prisons, and homeless shelters.

“We can address period poverty and advance menstrual equity in our state by passing House Bill 5272,” Farrar said in a press release earlier this year. “No one should have to choose between food, housing, their education, and access to menstrual products, but menstruators across our state, country, and even globally, must make that decision. This bill takes immediate steps to remove those cost barriers and stigma in Connecticut and raise greater awareness about period poverty's impact in our communities.”

Several provisions of that bill, which was sponsored by the Public Health Committee, passed as a part of the final budget implementer bill. Those provisions will expand upon prior law requiring menstrual supplies to be provided by the Department of Corrections and require menstrual supplies in public school bathrooms starting in September of 2023. The provisions also require state colleges and homeless and domestic violence shelters to provide menstrual supplies.

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