



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022

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Inquiry into the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022

We appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing in respect of the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Bill 2022. We welcome this ground-breaking legislation, which we whole-heartedly support.

Who We Are

We represent a number of grassroots organisations that provide period products to various community services and organisations that support those experiencing financial difficulty. We also provide support directly to individuals and indirectly through one of the community pantries that can be accessed anonymously (The Ainslie Community Pantry).

Exclusion from Education because of period poverty

We are aware of incidences where girls at high school are unable to attend school for approximately a week each month due to period poverty. Scrunched up tissues, toilet paper and face washers are not effective for period management and render the girls liable to embarrassment when these methods fail. To avoid possible embarrassment, some girls avoid school. We have heard of this anecdotally from a number of sources, a number of times. That this could happen even once in the ACT is very concerning. Access to education is a huge driver of individual autonomy and development in a young person's life.

Access to period products in ACT Mental Health facilities

Access to period management products should be a priority in locations where women do not have free movement, and where they experience financial difficulties.

One of the authors of this submission, Jane, is a former Mental Health Official Visitor. During the term of her appointment from 1 July 2019 to 1 July 2022 she routinely delivered personal care products to patients in a range of facilities. The sense of relief patients felt when they were given sanitary products and new underwear was palpable. These products were entirely provided by altruistic organisations and persons.

Access to Period Products

We hear much anecdotal evidence of mothers who have to make choices between feeding their children and paying utilities, or dignified period management. As noted above, people also experience situational difficulty in accessing products, such as being an involuntary patient in an ACT health facility.

The donations we deliver are in large part provided by Share the Dignity and community donations. Share the Dignity have made a significant contribution to access and availability of period products to those in need. The Dignity and Desire Women and Children's Pantry provides lovingly personalised pamper packs for women in need which are then distributed by Pam's Pantry and Red Flag Canberra.

This Is My Brave Australia provided new bras and underwear to patients who were staying in an ACT mental health facility and to residents of mental health community housing. This support is absolutely vital to a person's dignity and sense of self-esteem. If a person is focusing on recovery, they should be spared the indignity of not being able to access period management products.

Some of the ACT community pantries are intentionally not registered as charities and operate independently. A strong network has been established between our pantries to offer support and to share donations and supplies to support our communities, including period products. The Ainslie Community Pantry is a pantry that can be accessed anonymously and we are keen for that to remain the case. We know that we reach members of the community that might not otherwise engage with other community services or organisations for various reasons (location, convenience, transportation barriers, religious connections, shame, negative former experiences of engaging with services for example). We are unable to quantify the numbers that access the pantry but know we have high turnover of items. We would like to ensure that we can continue to provide access to period products and would like to explore how this will continue to be possible under the Bill's restriction to "Approved Suitable Place". We are all motivated by the same outcome of reaching people in need.

A great initiative in Canvey Island in the UK is now offering free sustainable period products at Foodbanks, alongside training and education on how to use and care for sustainable items: <https://www.essex.gov.uk/news/canvey-island-joins-sustainable-period-movement>

Normalising and Transitioning to Sustainable Period Products

The Bill offers a great opportunity to prioritise and normalise the use of sustainable period products and to switch the default from single-use, disposable items to sustainable, reusable products. Reusable items can be more empowering for those using them, and are definitely more cost effective in the medium and long-term, as well as being better environmentally. This aligns strongly with the ACT government's progressive leadership on waste reduction and sustainability.

In the examples of period products in the Bill, it would be good to include reusable pads explicitly above 'sanitary pads', which is often associated with disposable, single use items.

At the Ainslie Community Pantry we are very grateful to receive donations of period products from Share the Dignity and from community members. We receive regular donations of tampons and sanitary pads and have also asked specifically for sustainable period products, as we know that these are very popular with those accessing the Pantry. We have not had our recent requests for sustainable items met either by Share the Dignity or the community – we know that this is most likely connected to the higher cost of the products and also the stigma that is still associated with reusable items. We would love to see significant funding allocated to sustainable items in the initiative and programs accompanying the Bill, to help overcome cost barriers and to increase the normalisation of their use.

Importance of Education

We need to overcome societal stigma about periods in general and sustainable products in particular; distributing free reusable items would help overcome stigma, barriers to using sustainable items and address period product waste. It is interesting that lots of people seem conditioned to respond with shame and disgust around their periods and the idea of bleeding. There is also language that reflects discomfort with understanding our bodies intimately, e.g. "You don't want to be going around putting things 'in there'." We need to start the conversation at primary school level. This conversation sits within the broader discussion about respectful relationships and sexual expression. The discussion around periods necessarily needs to involve everyone; everyone is impacted by periods, whether directly or indirectly and there needs to be openness and non-judgement around responding to and managing them.

Learning from the Victorian Experience

We have connected with Paula McIntosh, who runs the Zero Waste Schools Australia (Instagram Account @zerowasteschoolsaustralia) who started a GetUp! petition in response to the announcement from Premier Daniel Andrews on accessing free pads and tampons at school: <https://me.getup.org.au/petitions/eco-friendly-periods-4-vic-schools-3>. 23 million was spent for period products over three years which would have gone a significant way to covering the cost of sustainable items that would last longer and not require regular access. We would strongly urge against the government solely subsidising single-use items for free access. We also would caution against putting items in vending machines, which require on-going maintenance, are an unnecessary expense and gate-keep access.

It is great that the bill is not time limited, as we know that people transition in and out of period poverty at different stages.

Offering Genuine Choice

Cost prohibits personal use and regular supply to the pantries and even requests made to Share the Dignity for cups, period pants and reusable pads; supply does not match need, and sustainable products are not often donated. The Bill provides the opportunity to offer genuine choice by making sustainable items available for free.

We hear that sustainable items are often considered to not be 'appropriate' for homeless women, given concerns over access to sterilisation. This is an access to sterilisation issue that needs to be addressed. There are cup sterilisers that could be made available in community services and other approved suitable places. Setting up arrangements for laundry services for reusable items is also an option.

Given menstrual cups can be used for 8-12 hours, these could be a better option for homeless women than needing to find a way to change more frequently if using single, disposable items. To ensure that there is choice for everyone to manage their periods with the items they choose, this is an important consideration to resolve.

It is essential that there is training, education and awareness-raising around the sustainable items in how to use, how to choose and how to care for them.

Sustainable Products – Scope for a Pilot Study in a Secondary School

It would be ground-breaking for period pants, cups and reusable pads to be offered to all those interested at primary/high school level. Offering sustainable options gives students control and is more empowering than needing to access single use items regularly. In the long term it's cheaper to fund sustainable products as they last longer and there's significantly less waste to landfill. The students at Melbourne Girls College, a public school in Victoria, commented that when using sustainable period products they felt more comfortable and spent less time in the bathroom (more information on this case study is available if required).

We believe that consideration of the Bill provides a timely opportunity for the establishment of a pilot project to test the feasibility of providing period products on a more sustainable footing. Products which are sustainable include menstrual cups and washable period pants.

We have informal interest from a secondary school, which we consider would be a very useful site for a pilot program.

Funding

The issue for us is funding such a pilot. We will be making overtures to Modi, a leading provider of period pants, to ask for their assistance with a trial. We also believe that there would be merit in the ACT Government financially supporting such a trial. It would further the effectiveness of the implementation of the Bill.

It would be great for this pioneering bill to be accompanied by progressive initiatives like free sustainable period product programs.

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