



Promoting Menstrual Equity: Providing Free Menstrual Hygiene Product via Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC

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ABSTRACT

The policy of providing free sanitary pads for girls in schools, along with the option of purchasing them using vouchers, addresses a crucial aspect of gender equality, health, and education. This policy recognizes the importance of menstrual hygiene management for young girls and aims to alleviate financial barriers that may hinder their access to sanitary products. While such a policy is not yet widespread in the United States, it has gained momentum in discussions about ensuring equitable access to education and healthcare.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Alliance for Period Supplies, 25 states and Washington D.C. have passed legislation to help students who menstruate have free access to period products while in school (as of July 27, 2023)¹. Some of these states include California, Hawaii, Delaware, Maine (in grades six to 12), New Jersey, New York, Utah (in certain restrooms), Virginia and Washington².

While it's commendable that free sanitary pads are available for female students at school, we must consider the limitations of this provision. Instances such as school vacations, weekends, or periods when educational institutions are not operational can leave teenage girls without access to the critical menstrual hygiene products they need. It is within these gaps that the true test of support lies. To genuinely empower and uplift teenage girls, we must extend beyond the confines of school premises and embrace a broader, more inclusive perspective.

By incorporating sanitary pads into assistance programs like Medicaid, SNAP, or WIC, a powerful message is sent: women's health and well-being take precedence. This integration not only recognizes the necessity of these products but also guarantees their easy accessibility for all, including the often underserved demographic of female students.

Adolescence is a phase marked by sensitivity and self-discovery, and young women should not bear the weight of

challenges or discomfort related to menstrual hygiene. The classification of sanitary pads as essential items through programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, or WIC proactively eases these burdens. Let's unite to ensure that during this critical juncture in their lives, female students have unobstructed access to the tools they require to thrive, while also eradicating potential embarrassment or obstacles. By doing so, we not only empower young women but also cultivate a more equitable and supportive society.

This essay embarks on a journey to emphasize the necessity of catering to the menstrual needs of not only teenage girls but also women across various life stages. Suggesting the extension of free sanitary pad provisions to include programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC represents a significant step in this pursuit. By designating sanitary pads as essential items within these programs, assurance is provided that both teenage girls and women of all ages can access the fundamental menstrual hygiene products essential for leading healthy, dignified lives. This exploration delves into the rationale, benefits, and challenges tied to this policy shift, highlighting its potential to bridge gaps, enhance well-being, and foster gender equality through comprehensive support systems.

PROMOTING GIRLS' HEALTH AND RIGHTS THROUGH MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

Inadequate access to sanitary pads can result in significant health consequences for girls. Infections and discomfort stemming from improper menstrual hygiene management can not only jeopardize their well-being but also impede their active participation in school activities. The provision

1 <https://allianceforperiodsupplies.org/period-products-in-schools/>

2 <https://allianceforperiodsupplies.org/policy-legislation/#model-legislation>



of free sanitary pads is closely aligned with the policy's overarching goal of enhancing girls' overall health and well-being. By ensuring access to these essential products, the policy aims to foster both emotional and physical resilience among girls.

The profound impact of menstrual hygiene on girls' educational participation cannot be underestimated. The absence of sanitary products often leads to menstruation-related absenteeism, causing educational disparities. Through the provision of free pads and vouchers, the policy seeks to tackle this issue head-on. By minimizing instances of absenteeism, the policy strives to create a level playing field for girls, facilitating equal educational opportunities.

The policy also takes into account the pervasive stigma surrounding menstruation. This stigma can severely affect girls' self-esteem and confidence, contributing to a culture of silence and shame. By normalizing the availability of sanitary pads and promoting open and informed conversations about menstrual health, the policy takes a vital step towards diminishing this stigma. Empowering girls to embrace their bodily changes and fostering an environment of acceptance are integral aspects of the policy's approach.

In conclusion, the policy's multifaceted approach not only ensures access to sanitary pads but also acknowledges the intricate connections between menstrual hygiene, health, education, and self-esteem. By actively addressing these issues, the policy strives to empower girls, enabling them to lead healthier, more dignified lives while dismantling the barriers that have long hindered their progress.

THE BENEFITS OF UTILIZING VOUCHERS FOR MENSTRUAL HYGIENE SUPPORT

In the pursuit of enhancing menstrual hygiene support, the utilization of vouchers presents a dynamic and forward-thinking approach that offers distinct advantages over the direct provision of free sanitary pads. Vouchers, as a means of empowering individuals to choose and access the products that best suit their personal preferences and needs, introduce a level of flexibility that resonates profoundly in the context of menstrual health.

Firstly, vouchers grant individuals agency and autonomy in their choices. Unlike the uniformity of providing pre-selected sanitary pads, vouchers acknowledge the diverse experiences and requirements of menstruating individuals. This diversity encompasses variations in flow, comfort, and material preferences. By allowing individuals to select products aligned with their specific needs, vouchers not only enhance comfort but also contribute to a sense of ownership over one's health decisions.

Secondly, the introduction of vouchers stimulates a competitive market environment. Manufacturers and

brands are incentivized to offer a variety of high-quality products to attract voucher users. This competition can lead to improvements in product quality, innovation, and affordability. As manufacturers vie to capture the attention of voucher holders, the potential for an enriched product landscape emerges, catering to a broader spectrum of preferences and ensuring that individuals receive the best available options.

Additionally, the implementation of a voucher system can contribute to reducing the stigma associated with menstrual hygiene. By enabling individuals to discreetly and independently redeem vouchers, the need for public distribution of sanitary pads is diminished.

Furthermore, the use of vouchers provides an opportunity to leverage existing retail networks. Collaborating with pharmacies, supermarkets, or other retail outlets to redeem vouchers can promote convenience and accessibility. This integration not only widens the distribution reach but also integrates menstrual hygiene products into the routine shopping experience, further reducing any perceived stigma.

In conclusion, the proposed policy holds significant promise in improving girls' health, education, and overall well-being. Its comprehensive approach addresses barriers to menstrual hygiene management and fosters gender equity. Nonetheless, the successful implementation of this policy necessitates a collaborative effort involving meticulous planning, community engagement, and the navigation of various challenges. By promoting accessible menstrual hygiene resources, the policy contributes to empowering girls to fulfill their potential in education and life.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SNAP AND WIC PROGRAMS: SIMILARITIES AND DISPARITIES

Federal assistance programs play a pivotal role in addressing the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations. Two prominent programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)³ and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), share a common objective of enhancing nutrition and well-being among eligible individuals and families. This research delves into the similarities and differences between these programs, shedding light on their respective scopes and implications⁴.

SIMILARITIES

1. Nutrition Assistance: Both SNAP and WIC embody the federal commitment to improving nutritional outcomes.

3 USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program 2014. SNAP Retailer Management 2014 Annual Report www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/merchants.htm

4 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support. WIC Vendor Management Study Final Report. November 2013 (Alexandria, VA)

They extend a helping hand to individuals and families in need, acknowledging the significance of proper nourishment for overall health and well-being.

2. Income-Based Eligibility: A shared feature between these programs is their foundation on income-based eligibility criteria. Applicants' income and household size determine their eligibility, ensuring that those with limited financial means can access essential nutrition support.

3. Nutrition Education: SNAP and WIC are not solely about providing food; they emphasize education. Both programs equip participants with knowledge, resources, and guidance on making informed dietary choices, fostering healthier lifestyles.

4. Health and Nutrition Focus: Addressing health and nutrition disparities is a common mission. Both programs center their efforts on vulnerable groups, such as low-income individuals, pregnant women, infants, and young children, recognizing the impact of proper nutrition on their well-being.

5. Federal Funding and State-Level Administration: Both programs are fueled by federal funding and administered at the state level. This approach acknowledges the states' unique needs while maintaining a consistent framework to ensure equitable access to assistance.

DIFFERENCES

1. Population Served

SNAP: This program casts a wider net, accommodating individuals and families of all ages who meet the income requirements. Its scope extends beyond specific demographic groups.

WIC: In contrast, WIC has a specific focus on pregnant women, postpartum women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk, honing in on critical developmental stages.

2. Benefit Types

SNAP: Eligible participants receive electronic benefit cards (EBT cards), granting them the flexibility to purchase a variety of food items, including groceries, in alignment with program guidelines.

WIC: This program offers tailored food packages, designed to meet the specific nutritional requirements of its target populations. These packages include items like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products, ensuring targeted nourishment.

3. Food Options

SNAP: Participants enjoy a wider range of food options within program guidelines, allowing for individual preferences and dietary needs.

WIC: WIC participants adhere to predetermined food packages, which focus on essential nutrients. Choice within these packages is limited to designated WIC-approved items.

4. Emphasis on Targeted Groups

SNAP: While accommodating a diverse range of individuals and families, SNAP doesn't have a specific demographic focus.

WIC: The program is finely tuned to address the nutritional needs of its designated groups, aiming to counteract nutritional deficiencies.

5. Scope of Coverage

SNAP: Encompassing a broader spectrum, SNAP covers not only food items but also extends to non-food items, aiming to alleviate food insecurity comprehensively.

WIC: Concentrated on the essentials, WIC hones in on nutritionally vital food items, placing emphasis on the health of pregnant women and young children.

In conclusion, the SNAP and WIC programs represent crucial facets of our societal commitment to fostering health and well-being among marginalized populations. Despite their shared purpose, they diverge in terms of their eligibility criteria, benefit structures, and scope. These differences are key to addressing the multifaceted needs of individuals and families, and through this diversity, both programs contribute to enhancing the nutritional status and overall health of those who need it most.

PROMOTING MENSTRUAL HYGIENE THROUGH MEDICAID⁵

Access to menstrual hygiene products is an intrinsic aspect of women's well-being and health. Unfortunately, it often remains an overlooked and challenging matter, especially for those who face financial constraints. In response, the integration of menstrual hygiene support into healthcare frameworks, such as Medicaid, emerges as a promising avenue to bridge this gap. By acknowledging the significance of menstrual hygiene and extending assistance to those in need, Medicaid assumes a pivotal role in fostering equity, well-being, and an enhanced quality of life.

Within the context of government-sponsored healthcare programs like Medicaid, a potent opportunity arises to address the menstrual hygiene needs of marginalized populations. By including menstrual hygiene products as eligible items for coverage, Medicaid can relieve the financial burdens faced by individuals and families struggling to afford these indispensable products. This approach resonates with the core objective of Medicaid: enhancing health outcomes and mitigating health disparities.

⁵ <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/index.html>

The benefits and impact of this integration are far-reaching:

Equity: The incorporation of menstrual hygiene products into Medicaid coverage ensures that economically disadvantaged individuals have access to the same level of menstrual care as their more privileged counterparts. This step not only bolsters equity but also diminishes the stigma associated with financial limitations.

Health and Well-being: Ensuring ample access to menstrual hygiene products has the potential to avert health issues stemming from inadequate hygiene practices. This, in turn, translates to reduced healthcare costs linked to preventable infections and complications.

Education and Employment: Enhanced menstrual hygiene directly influences the educational and professional trajectories of women. When individuals can manage their menstruation with ease, they are more likely to attend school consistently and participate in the workforce without unwarranted disruptions.

Dignity and Empowerment: By providing menstrual hygiene support through Medicaid, the inherent dignity of individuals is acknowledged and fortified. This support empowers individuals to exert control over their health and hygiene choices, fostering a sense of agency.

While the proposition of integrating menstrual hygiene support into Medicaid holds promise, certain implementation considerations necessitate attention:

Product Selection: Deliberating on which types of menstrual hygiene products to cover requires a thorough understanding of the diverse needs and preferences of individuals.

Logistics: Establishing an efficient process for beneficiaries to access these products, be it through pharmacies or other distribution channels, is crucial for the success of the initiative.

Budget Allocation: Striking a balance between covering the costs of these products and maintaining the overall budgetary integrity of Medicaid calls for careful financial planning.

Public Awareness: Conducting targeted public awareness campaigns is imperative to educate beneficiaries about the availability and significance of this support.

In conclusion, integrating menstrual hygiene support into Medicaid embodies a progressive approach to address a pervasive and often unaddressed concern. By acknowledging menstrual hygiene's importance and incorporating it into healthcare programs, we can foster equity, enhance health outcomes, and empower women to lead lives characterized by dignity and well-being. The collaborative efforts of healthcare institutions, policymakers, and advocacy groups are paramount to ensuring the successful implementation and lasting impact of this policy.

Expanding Access to Menstrual Hygiene Products: A Legislative Comparison Between Illinois and New Jersey

Menstrual hygiene remains a critical concern for individuals facing financial challenges, with the inability to access menstrual products causing health risks and educational barriers. This article examines the legislative efforts in Illinois and New Jersey to address this issue, exploring how the provision of menstrual hygiene products within federal safety net programs can mitigate "period poverty."

The execution of the free sanitary pads policy exhibits variations among states. While some states allocate state funding to ensure product availability in schools, others have introduced unfunded mandates. The age range of students covered by the policy also differs, with some states including elementary schools in addition to middle and high schools. Moreover, certain legislation extends the provision of period products to restrooms in public colleges and universities.

In New Jersey, menstrual pads are being provided free of charge in schools for female students. Nevertheless, in certain counties like Bergen County, Passaic County and Camden County within the state, there is a legislative proposal underway through the SNAP or WIC programs, aiming to enhance the accessibility of menstrual pads for women. If this initiative is put into effect, it would particularly ease the process of acquiring menstrual pads for female students during school breaks or periods when they are not attending classes.

Illinois Legislation: Villa Law: Illinois has taken significant steps to enhance menstrual hygiene product access through the Villa Law, sponsored by State Senator Karina Villa⁶. This law aims to allow federal and state food assistance program recipients to purchase menstrual hygiene products. Senator Villa highlights the importance of ensuring these benefits cover necessary menstrual hygiene products to combat period poverty and enhance accessibility for low-income individuals.

Benefits and Rationale: The Villa Law recognizes that benefits programs must include essential menstrual hygiene products to fully support the well-being of recipients. Menstrual hygiene is integral to individual comfort, confidence, and participation in various aspects of life, including education. By integrating these products into assistance programs, Illinois aims to diminish barriers that might otherwise hinder people's lives due to financial constraints.

⁶ <https://www.illinoisenatedemocrats.com/component/tags/tag/hb155>
<https://www.illinoisenatedemocrats.com/caucus-news/72-senator-karina-villa-news/>

New Jersey Assembly Resolution No. 242⁷: In New Jersey, a compelling legislative effort has been initiated through Assembly Resolution No. 242. This resolution urges the United States Congress to expand federal safety net programs, such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), to include menstrual hygiene products as covered benefits. Sponsored by Assemblywoman Lisa Swain and Assemblywoman Gabriela M. Mosquera, the resolution emphasizes the importance of addressing “period poverty” on a larger scale.

The Call for Federal Action: The Assembly Resolution underscores the significant financial burden that menstruators, particularly those living in poverty, face due to the cost of menstrual hygiene products. The inability to afford these products can result in difficult choices between basic necessities and menstrual care. This resolution emphasizes the need for federal intervention to ensure that these crucial products are included within safety net programs, thus relieving low-income individuals from this financial strain.

While both Illinois and New Jersey are taking legislative action to address “period poverty,” their approaches differ. Illinois’s Villa Law specifically enables purchases of menstrual hygiene products under existing benefits, enhancing immediate access. In contrast, New Jersey’s Assembly Resolution No. 242 urges federal action to include these products in broader safety net programs. Both approaches recognize the significance of addressing menstrual hygiene disparities and advocating for financial relief.

As the legislative landscape evolves, the efforts of states like Illinois and New Jersey contribute to a growing movement that seeks to enhance gender equity, and ensure that no individual’s education or well-being is compromised by lack of access to essential products.

CONCLUSION: ADVANCING MENSTRUAL EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT

In the pursuit of ensuring holistic well-being and equal opportunities, addressing menstrual hygiene barriers stands as an imperative endeavor. The availability of free sanitary pads in schools is undoubtedly a stride towards progress, yet we must not overlook the gaps this provision leaves during non-operational school periods. To truly uphold the health and dignity of female students, it becomes essential to extend this support beyond school confines.

By advocating for the inclusion of sanitary pads within programs like SNAP and WIC, we not only reinforce the commitment to women’s health but also send a resounding message that their needs matter. Such an integration acknowledges the indispensable nature of these products

while striving to ensure that they are accessible for all, particularly for those who are often marginalized, such as female students.

By designating sanitary pads as essential items through SNAP and WIC, we proactively alleviate these hurdles, promoting a sense of confidence and well-being among our future leaders.

Collective efforts are required to ensure that during this critical phase of their lives, female students are equipped with unhindered access to the tools they need to flourish. The elimination of potential embarrassment and hindrance is not just an act of empowerment; it is a pivotal step towards nurturing an equitable and supportive society.

In light of the legislative initiatives in both Illinois and New Jersey, the call for change reverberates. As states continue to advocate, legislate, and shape policies to eliminate period poverty, we edge closer to a future where menstrual hygiene is a right rather than a challenge.

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