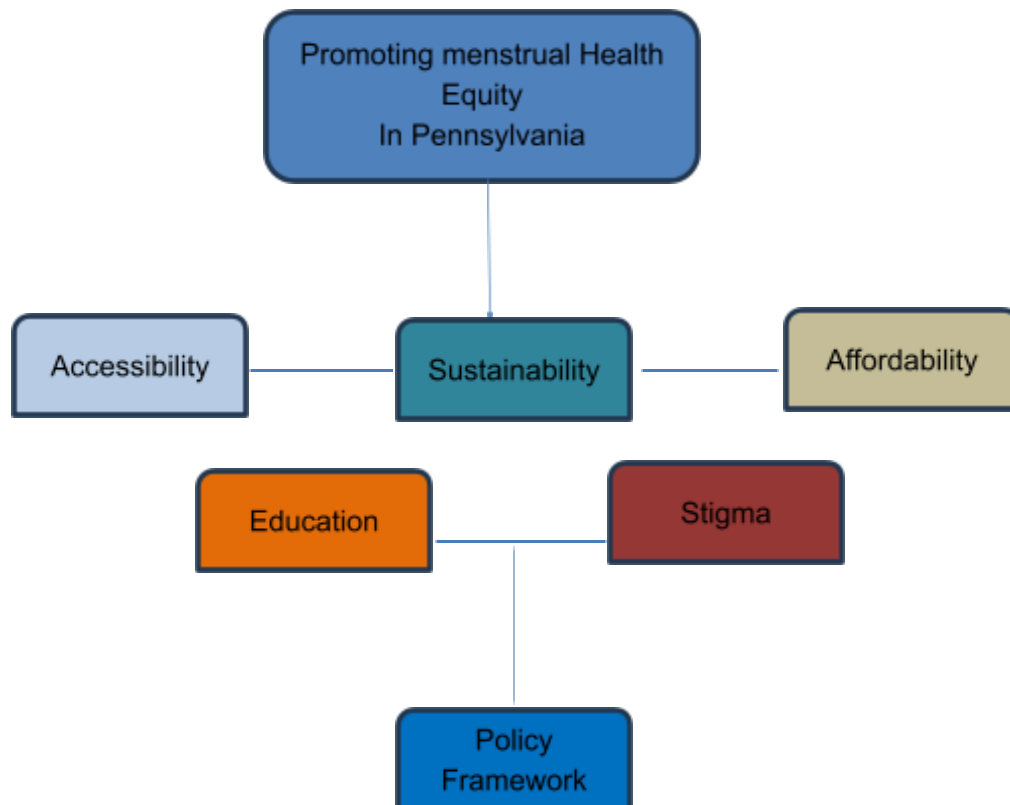


Promoting Menstrual Health Equity in Pennsylvania: A Comprehensive Public Health Assessment

Abstract

This document introduces a comprehensive public health assessment on menstrual health in Pennsylvania. We aim to identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities for promoting equity in menstrual health, considering dimensions such as accessibility, sustainability, affordability, education, stigma, and policy frameworks. Utilizing available data and involving stakeholders, the assessment seeks to recommend effective strategies and interventions. Notably, statistics from the Pennsylvania State Fact Sheet on period poverty highlight the urgency of the issue. By evaluating various aspects of menstrual health, including access to products, education, infection prevention, proper usage, sustainability, and socio-cultural factors, the assessment aims to inform advocacy efforts and promote better menstrual health outcomes in the state, ultimately striving for equal access to menstrual products for all individuals.



Introduction

In recent years, menstrual health has emerged as a critical area of concern in public health discourse, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges faced by people with periods (Sommer et al., 2015). Given the significant impact of menstrual health on overall well-being, social equality, and economic participation, efforts to tackle the inequalities in access to menstrual hygiene products, education, and healthcare services have gained momentum across the world (Jaafar, Ismail, & Azzeri, 2023). In Pennsylvania, a state with diverse populations and socioeconomic backgrounds, it is imperative to conduct a thorough assessment of the current state of menstrual health to identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities for promoting equity. This comprehensive public health assessment aims to delve into various dimensions of menstrual health, including but not limited to accessibility, sustainability, affordability, education, stigma, and policy frameworks. By analyzing available data, involving stakeholders, and considering various viewpoints, this assessment aims to not just identify the difficulties confronted by individuals who menstruate in Pennsylvania but also to recommend effective strategies and interventions for promoting fair menstrual health outcomes. According to the Pennsylvania State Fact Sheet on period poverty, approximately one in six women and girls aged 12 to 44 live below the federal poverty line. Additionally, one in four teenagers in the United States has missed classes due to insufficient access to period supplies. (Alliance for Period Supplies, 2023.). Menstrual hygiene and product accessibility are pivotal elements influencing the lives of women and girls across the state. This assessment seeks to comprehensively address menstrual health and hygiene by evaluating access to products, education, infection prevention, proper usage, sustainability, and socio-cultural factors. This assessment aims to identify needs and opportunities for improvement in menstrual health support and advocacy. By examining these aspects, we aim to discover insights that can help promote equity +. Our goal is to promote better menstrual health and equal access to menstrual products for all individuals in Pennsylvania.

Population Priorities

According to data from the U.S. Census fact sheet as of July 1, 2023, Pennsylvania (Pa) has a total estimated population of 12,961,683 (about twice the population of Arizona) individuals as of July 1, 2023 (United States Census, n.d.). According to the Pa. State Health Assessment, 50% of the PA population is between ages 10 and 49 and 51% identify as female. This varied Pennsylvania population encompasses people of all ages, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural identities, each with distinct menstrual health needs and challenges. In 2021, 12.1% of residents in the state lived below the poverty level, and disparities were notable, with higher poverty rates observed among Black and Hispanic populations and individuals residing in rural counties (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2023). Understanding these population priorities is essential for tailoring our efforts to effectively meet the diverse needs of our community members.

Assessment Methodology

This assessment was conducted through a conscientious process involving a review of available data, research studies, and community reports concerning the types and accessibility of menstrual products, education, and funding across Pennsylvania. Key stakeholders, including community organizations including members of the National Alliance for Period Supplies, Days for Girls, educational institutions in Pennsylvania, and advocacy groups such as PERIOD and The SPOT Period., were actively engaged in gathering both qualitative and quantitative data on the availability, affordability, and utilization of menstrual products across diverse regions and demographic groups within the state. Pennsylvania is home to numerous members of the National Alliance for Period Supplies, including programs such as the Period Supply Program at Mitzvah Circle Foundation in Harleysville, Healthy Steps Period in Harrisburg, The Shape of Justice, and others. These initiatives, distributed across various regions including the Philadelphia Area, Pittsburgh, and Northumberland, play an indispensable role in tackling menstrual health needs and advancing equity efforts on a statewide scale. Despite multiple legislative initiatives attempted by various stakeholders, the persistent challenge underscores the

urgency of addressing the disparity, particularly among marginalized communities. Notably, in December 2023, Pennsylvania took a significant stride forward by enacting legislation to provide free feminine hygiene and incontinence products to incarcerated individuals, signaling a tangible commitment to menstrual equity. Furthermore, conversations held in January and February 2024 with directors of Days for Girls chapters in Eagleville and Wayne shed crucial light on the pressing need for sustainable menstrual products in Montgomery County and Philadelphia. These discussions underscored the imperative of heightening awareness, securing adequate funding, enacting supportive legislation, and establishing efficient distribution channels to comprehensively address menstrual health equity issues.

Definition of Menstrual health

Defining menstrual health is crucial for comprehending its significance as a public health concern. In this assessment, a definition is proposed that aligns with the WHO's comprehensive definition of health, encompassing mental, social, and physical well-being. The provided definition in Box 1, developed by the Terminology Action Group from Hennegan et al., addresses these aspects.

Box 1. Definition of menstrual health

Menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle.

Achieving menstrual health implies that women, girls, and all other people who experience a menstrual cycle, throughout their life-course, are able to:

- access accurate, timely, age-appropriate information about the menstrual cycle, menstruation, and changes experienced throughout the life-course, as well as related self-care and hygiene practices.
- care for their bodies during menstruation such that their preferences, hygiene, comfort, privacy, and safety are supported. This includes accessing and using effective and affordable menstrual materials and having supportive facilities and services, including water, sanitation and hygiene services, for washing the body and hands, changing menstrual materials, and cleaning and/or disposing of used materials.
- access timely diagnosis, treatment and care for menstrual cycle-related discomforts and disorders, including access to appropriate health services and resources, pain relief, and strategies for self-care.
- experience a positive and respectful environment in relation to the menstrual cycle, free from stigma and psychological distress, including the resources and support they need to confidently care for their bodies and make informed decisions about self-care throughout their menstrual cycle.
- decide whether and how to participate in all spheres of life, including civil, cultural, economic, social, and political, during all phases of the menstrual cycle, free from menstrual-related exclusion, restriction, discrimination, coercion, and/or violence.

Figure 1

Julie Hennegan, Inga T. Winkler, Chris Bobel, Danielle Keiser, Janie Hampton, Gerda Larsson, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, Marina Plesons & Thérèse Mahon (2021) Menstrual health: a definition for policy, practice, and research, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:1, 31-38, DOI: [10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618](https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1911618)

Findings

Lack of access to products

Despite the crucial importance of menstrual products, many individuals in Pennsylvania face restricted access, especially within marginalized communities and low-income households (State of the period, 2023). Rural regions and underserved urban neighborhoods frequently experience challenges in obtaining affordable menstrual products, resulting in dependence on insufficient alternatives or a state of menstrual product insecurity. For instance, in 2019, the Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank took part in a national survey conducted by the Alliance for Period Supplies, an organization established through the National Diaper Bank Network to raise awareness of and address the underlying causes of period poverty (Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank, 2023). Survey findings revealed significant challenges faced by people with periods in the Pittsburgh region: 50% of respondents reported having to prioritize spending money on period supplies over other basic needs; 26% were unable to access period products every month; 60% had to resort to alternative methods for managing their periods, and 48% found that receiving these products alleviated stress, contributing to improved mental health and overall well-being. As a response to these findings, the Diaper Bank expanded its mission to include advocacy against period poverty and implemented initiatives to distribute period products within the community. It initiated the Period Advocacy Project, integrating the distribution of period products into its regular monthly supply distributions to agency partners. These partners were offered the option of ordering period kits containing a month's supply of tampons, pads, and liners for distribution to their clients. By 2022, the Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank had significantly scaled up its efforts, distributing nearly 300,000 period products to partners and schools across Allegheny and Westmoreland counties. (Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank, 2023). During the same period, the Diaper Bank organized its inaugural large-scale period product giveaway events, collaborating with Sister Friend and the University of Pittsburgh to provide period products and menstrual underwear to people with periods in need. As an active member of the Alliance for Period Supplies, the Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank advocates at the state and national levels to combat period poverty. It advocates for legislation aimed at mandating the provision of period

supplies in schools and public restrooms, striving to create a more equitable environment for people with periods (Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank, 2023). Mitzvah Circle provides products to individuals, in libraries, schools, and other locations in several counties.

Reports from No More Secrets have indicated a notable waiting list for their products in the Philadelphia Area since the onset of the pandemic, highlighting a pronounced surge in demand and an ongoing need. The Shape of Justice serving central PA also reports increased need while decreased funding is being received. It is crucial to recognize the importance of menstrual product access and education work towards providing equitable and affordable access to menstruation products. Access to products can help individuals overcome the challenges that menstrual product insecurity presents, ensuring that they can thrive both academically and economically.

Economic Barrier

The elevated expense of menstrual products presents a substantial hurdle to access for those grappling with financial challenges. Numerous individuals with limited financial resources find it difficult to afford menstrual products regularly, resulting in detrimental health consequences such as compromised menstrual hygiene and an elevated risk of infection. Approximately 25% of teenagers (and 33% of adults) continue to face challenges in affording period products, a situation that has remained unchanged since 2021 (State of the period, 2023). While legislative bills have been proposed, such as the PA bill aimed at allowing individuals on WIC and SNAP to purchase necessary menstrual products, these bills have not passed the Senate. Additionally, medical assistance does not currently cover these products (National Diaper Network n.d).

Period stigma

Sociocultural stigmas associated with menstruation contribute to feelings of shame, amplifying the difficulties related to accessing menstrual products. The absence of open discussions and education about menstruation sustains misconceptions, hindering effective efforts to address menstrual health needs

(Casola et al., 2022). The stigma surrounding menstruation can lead to social isolation, with individuals feeling hesitant to discuss their menstrual health challenges openly. This isolation can limit the sharing of experiences and hinder the formation of supportive communities. In Pennsylvania, various organizations, such as Days for Girls, The Shape of Justice, The SPOT Period, and PERIOD., are actively assisting with this issue. While the governor's inclusion of menstrual health in the budget is noteworthy, many remain unaware, and stigma persists.

Impact on Health and Well-being

Menstrual product insecurity has far-reaching consequences, particularly when it comes to education and employment. For students, the inability to access menstrual products can lead to missed school days, academic setbacks, and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage. Adverse health consequences can occur when there is a lack of education on menstrual health and inadequate provisions for menstrual hygiene management (WHO, 2024). Understanding this need, Days for Girls always provides educational material when distributing menstrual products. The SPOT hub also provides education. In rural areas, some of the schools do not provide menstrual education. Fifth-, sixth, and seventh-grade students can have increased anxiety without proper education. (Frank, D & Williams, T, 1999) In addition to infections from poor hygiene during menstruation, tampons pose a risk for toxic shock syndrome (CDC, 2021). Similarly, in the workplace, a lack of access to necessary menstrual products can lead to missed workdays, reduced productivity, and potentially adverse consequences for career advancement and financial stability (Schoep, et al., 2019). Apart from tangible impacts, menstrual product insecurity can also take a significant toll on individuals' mental and emotional well-being (Rohatgi, 2023). The constant worry and anxiety about managing menstruation without access to proper supplies can erode self-esteem and increase stress levels. Over time, this psychological burden can have far-reaching implications for individuals' overall quality of life, hindering their ability to thrive and fulfill their potential. Access to products can help individuals overcome the challenges that menstrual product insecurity presents, ensuring that they can thrive both




academically and economically.

Sustainability:

There is an increasing demand for eco-friendly menstrual products such as menstrual cups and reusable pads as people become more conscious about sustainability (Tu et al., 2021) However, accessibility is still a significant challenge, especially for underserved communities. Furthermore, conversations held in January and February 2024 with directors of Days for Girls chapters in Eagleville and Wayne shed crucial light on the pressing need for sustainable menstrual products in Montgomery County and Philadelphia. Days for Girls has noticed a surge in demand for sustainable menstrual products, indicating a growing interest in environmentally friendly options. Several universities, including Penn State and the University of Pittsburgh, offer sustainable product choices. Some women have suggested practical considerations to make the environment more user-friendly, such as having bathrooms with sinks inside the stalls, which would make it easier to use and maintain reusable menstrual cups. Additionally, designing bathrooms with individual unisex and handicapped-accessible features would improve accessibility for all individuals who menstruate. By considering diverse needs and promoting user-friendliness, we can encourage the widespread adoption of sustainable menstrual products. No More Secrets, (2023) emphasizes equity as ensuring everyone has access to the menstrual products that are best for them and their flows.



Figure 2

No more secrets (August 2023).   *Is your SCHOOL, COLLEGE, COMMUNITY ready to support students with PERIODS  ?* {status update} Facebook retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/NoMoreSecretsMBS>

There is a growing recognition of the need to include menstrual health provisions in the State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). Current legislation has made strides in addressing menstrual product access in Pennsylvania, but there are still notable shortcomings. Despite multiple legislative initiatives attempted by various stakeholders, the persistent challenge underscores the urgency of addressing the disparity, particularly among marginalized communities. Notably, in December 2023, Pennsylvania took a significant stride forward by enacting legislation to provide free feminine hygiene and incontinence

products to incarcerated individuals, signaling a tangible commitment to menstrual equity. Recent developments highlight an increasing awareness of menstrual health needs. With 25 states, including those surrounding PA, providing menstrual products in schools, Governor Shapiro's call on February 6th for \$3 million in funding in his budget proposal for schools to supply menstrual products in PA schools demonstrates a growing recognition of this issue. (PA Department of Community & Economic Development, 2024) However, despite these advancements, there remains a need for further policy measures to comprehensively address menstrual health needs across the state and the need for PDE, PDH, and stakeholders to work together to ensure proper education and provisions for adequate menstrual hygiene management at schools to prevent adverse health consequences.

Recommendations

To address the various challenges related to menstrual health, a comprehensive set of recommendations is necessary to promote accessibility and affordability, and combat period stigma. Firstly, it is important to implement initiatives that can improve access to menstrual products, especially in marginalized communities and low-income households. Community-based distribution programs, inspired by the Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank, can be established to provide free or low-cost menstrual products to people in need across the state. Collaboration with local non-profits and community organizations will be vital to ensure equitable distribution and reach underserved areas efficiently. Additionally, there should be advocacy for the classification of menstrual products as medical devices, particularly emphasizing the needs of individuals with conditions such as endometriosis, postpartum hemorrhage, heavy menstrual flow, and hemophilia. Recognizing menstrual products as medical devices could lead to mandated insurance coverage, thereby alleviating financial burdens on individuals requiring specialized products for medical reasons.

Addressing economic barriers to menstrual product access is crucial. We can advocate for policy changes, such as implementing menstrual product subsidy programs can help reduce the financial burden on

individuals menstruating and ensure affordability. To combat period stigma, we must launch comprehensive education initiatives in schools, workplaces, and community settings to normalize conversations about menstruation. Supporting initiatives led by organizations like Days for Girls and PERIOD. will be instrumental in challenging misconceptions and creating inclusive spaces where people feel comfortable.

seeking support and resources. Furthermore, it is important to address the impact of menstrual product insecurity on health and well-being. Advocacy for policies that mandate the provision of free menstrual products in educational institutions and workplaces will ensure that people have access to necessary supplies without barriers. Mental health support services should also be prioritized for people affected by menstrual product insecurity, offering resources and counseling to address the psychological impact of stigma and stress associated with managing menstruation.

Moreover, promoting the adoption of sustainable menstrual products is essential for environmental and health reasons. Collaborating with universities to establish more groups addressing this issue across all colleges and aiding nonprofits is vital. For example, Penn State and Pittsburgh University have student groups collaborating with Days for Girls to create such products, thus contributing to the effort of supplying sustainable menstrual products. Additionally, manufacturers and infrastructure improvements in public spaces, such as installing sinks inside restroom stalls, can enhance accessibility to reusable menstrual products. Designing bathrooms with individual gender-neutral and handicapped-accessible features will further improve accessibility for all individuals who menstruate.

In terms of promoting health equity and awareness, advocating for the inclusion of menstrual health provisions in the State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) is essential. Furthermore, the involvement and formation of the Pennsylvania Coalition on Menstrual Equity in collaboration with SHIP can enhance coordination and effectiveness in addressing menstrual health needs across the state. Collaboration among all agencies and stakeholders involved can lead to the development of further strategies and monitoring to ensure implementation in all areas of Pennsylvania. Additionally, regarding political policies, stakeholders, including PDH and PDE, interested in monitoring the implementation of funding allocation

for menstrual product distribution in schools will be critical. Recent legislation, such as the provision of free menstrual products in prisons, needs to be monitored and implemented. This collaborative effort will ensure sustained progress toward menstrual equity in Pennsylvania while promoting health equity and raising awareness.

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Conclusion:

In summary, the findings reveal significant challenges related to menstrual product access in Pennsylvania. These challenges encompass various factors, including restricted access to affordable products, economic hurdles, entrenched period stigma, inadequate education on menstrual health, and detrimental effects on health and well-being. The suggested recommendations advocate for collaborative efforts among all stakeholders, including legislators, the Department of Education, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, various agencies, libraries, and other relevant entities. These efforts aim to promote health in all policies and actions, fostering a comprehensive approach to addressing menstrual health needs. By prioritizing menstrual equity and implementing comprehensive strategies, Pennsylvania can create a more inclusive environment where all individuals have access to the health education, and menstrual products they need to thrive, thus advancing social justice and human rights.

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