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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: ADDRESSING MENSTRUAL EQUITY THROUGH POLICY CHANGE

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The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

As an advocate to end hunger, I have also become passionate about menstrual equity. The main factor driving the need of clients at food pantries is an inability to afford food. But those who need assistance with food often lack access to other necessities including menstrual products. The business community can be generous in donating food to address hunger -- as a tax write-off, for positive press, or to release products close to their expiration date. The same generosity, however, does not exist for donated menstrual products. Because these products do not expire, corporations are less likely to donate them. When they do, it's often because a package has been ripped apart and cannot be sold. Therefore, those struggling are less likely to be able to access these products from charitable organizations offering food.

While some may view access to menstrual products as a public health issue, at its core, it is an equity issue. I was a member of the New York City Council's Task Force on Menstrual Equity in 2015 and 2016. Council leadership recognized that bringing nonprofits, public health professionals and government leaders together can make a difference in reducing stigma and increasing access to menstrual products. Because schools did not offer menstrual products to students, some students would have to stay home and miss school each month during their period. Access to menstrual products in corrections facilities was also severely limited -- sometimes there were no products, other times inmates were given seven menstrual pads for an entire month. Still another issue was access to menstrual products in city-funded shelters -- women turned to the shelter system when they had no place to go and limited funds, yet the shelters could not supply clients with these basic necessities.

Working as part of the Task Force led to the creation of twenty-five food and household product pantries in the New York City public schools. In addition to food, these pantries also provide items including laundry detergent, deodorant and menstrual products. Any time I visited one of these pantries, access to menstrual products was highlighted as one of the most important items available. Fathers were especially likely to share what a difference regular access to menstrual products meant to their daughters. While we have known that children who face food insecurity struggle in school, we are now recognizing that young women who do not have the necessities to care for their bodies' needs are also unable to attend school.

As a result of the Task Force's efforts, menstrual products are now provided in all NYC public middle and high schools, the NYC Department of Corrections must now provide inmates with access to menstrual products as soon as "practicable upon request," and a supply of menstrual products is now distributed by city government to nonprofits that operate temporary shelters. This is a significant step forward because the city government has recognized that caring for one's body involves more than providing food, it also involves providing products that allow individuals dignity.

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