

Testimony in Support of SB0427/HB0205 Public Schools – Provision of Menstrual Hygiene Products – Requirement

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Dear Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee Members,

I'm writing as a resident of district 42A, represented by both Delegate Cathi Forbes and Senator Chris West, and as the volunteer Period Project Coordinator for the Student Support Networkⁱ. Our organization's mission is to improve the lives of Baltimore County students living in poverty by providing food, other basic necessities, and advocacy support. We strongly support SB0427, cross filed as HB0205 the Public Schools – Provision of Menstrual Hygiene Products – Requirement.

Student Support Network recognizes the impact that period poverty or the lack of access to menstrual products has on our student's ability to attend school, both remotely and in person. Over 50,000 students (nearly 44% of all students) qualify for Free and Reduced Price Meals in Baltimore County Public Schools. Pre-pandemic we ran comfort closets in 12 Baltimore County Public Schools, where students can come to receive food and essential hygiene items that they can take home, including menstrual products that enable them to attend school by meeting their nutritional and hygienic needs beyond what schools provide. WE recently became allied program in the Alliance for Period Supplies, which has found that nationally about 1 in 4 teens have missed class due to lack of access to period supplies.ⁱⁱ In Maryland 37% of female students in public school grades 7 to 12 attend Title 1 eligible schools and 40% of middle and high school students receive free or reduced-price meals. Public benefits programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits do not cover the cost of purchasing period supplies. Since Student Support Network began our weekly food and essential items distributions in March 2020, we have distributed close to half a million individual period products, in the form of pads, tampons and liners packaged into period cycle packs for families in need. We estimate that the value of the period supplies we distributed in 2020 is over \$56,000. Each week at our 3 distribution sites, we serve between 4000-5000 individuals, who line up to 3 hours ahead of the start of distributions in over 500 cars, many picking up for multiple families. Our families greatly appreciate the period supplies and that our organization recognizes and meets this need.

In Baltimore County, several Delegates have actively participated in our distribution sites including district 42 Delegates Cathi Forbes and Michelle Guyton who have led distribution sites as well as District 8 Delegate Harry Bhandari who has volunteered with his high school daughter to distribute our period packs. They were among the 52 cosponsors of this bill last year when it passed the house of Delegates by a vote of 100 to 31. Unfortunately the abbreviated session

meant the bill did not get a chance to make it out of this Senate committee. I am pleased to see that this bill has bipartisan sponsorship in the Senate this year, including from my own Senator Chris West. Baltimore County Councilman David Marks has also recognized the work that my daughter and I have done to address period poverty by naming us 5th district citizens of the year in 2020. The bipartisan support we received in Baltimore County mirrors the support for similar legislation that passed in other states, including Virginia, New York, California, Illinois, and New Hampshire, and has been proposed this year in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Florida.

Our efforts to combat period poverty and promote period equity in Baltimore County during the pandemic have been youth initiated, starting with my daughter Abby's Girl Scout Gold Award project and continued by other Towson High school girls after she left for college in Virginia, a state which last year passed menstrual hygiene product requirement for schools. These students have built a network of over 50 female middle and high school student volunteers who assemble packs of period products that have been donated by community members or purchased with funds donated to our organization. These girls understand the embarrassment of period poverty, the need for period equity, and the impact of this legislation on their ability to attend class. They know what it is like to go to the school bathroom, discover that their period has started and realize they don't have access to period supplies where they need them. They have wadded up toilet paper as a temporary measure, only to worry that they will leak blood on their cloths. They have put their health a risk by keeping a tampon in longer than recommended. They have had to ask peers and teachers for a pad or tampon when they didn't have one. Teachers report that they regularly keep a stash of these products at their desks that they purchase themselves. We don't expect students to have to ask for toilet paper, which is required by government regulation to be stocked in every bathroom. Not providing period products in school bathrooms, puts one sex of students at a disadvantage to the other in meeting their hygienic needs. While schools are required to supply period products in school nurses' offices, this fails to place the products where they are needed and wastes both the student and the nurse's time when a student has to make a separate trip to the nurses office to get a supply that should be stocked in the bathrooms. Placing the products where they are needed will also eliminate the stigma and embarrassment for the student in having to announce to others that they are menstruating and need supplies. In my work addressing period poverty, I've had students and other mothers tell me that students will call their mom to pick them up from school because they aren't feeling well rather than ask someone for a period supply. Students are missing school and denied an education because our schools aren't stocking menstrual products where they are needed. This bill will remedy an impediment to equal access to education. It will benefit every student who has found herself in a school bathroom with out access to a period supply, but especially our students experiencing homelessness or income insecurity.

The fiscal impact for our public school systems for the this bill is low for a high benefit of keeping students in class. This is especially important given the amount of educational loss that students have experienced due to the pandemic school closures this year.

Thank you,

Phoebe Evans Letocha

ⁱ <https://studentsupportnetwork.org/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.allianceforperiodsupplies.org/index> For Maryland State factsheet see https://cdn.b12.io/client_media/HJ1wIVtI/e5c8dfb4-95f9-11ea-a54f-0242ac110003-Maryland_APS_Period_Poverty_Fact_Sheet_052020.pdf