

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 8, 2022

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of the accessibility and availability of menstrual products to inform legislative efforts to advance health and economic equity for people with menstrual cycles in the United States.

Approximately one quarter of people living in the United States have menstrual cycles, and the average menstruating person uses 16,000 tampons in their lifetime.¹ Yet, many menstruating people across the United States lack access to adequate and affordable menstrual supplies. Those who are unable to afford menstrual products often miss extended periods of school and work, and many also report experiencing social isolation or being forced to choose between purchasing menstrual supplies or other necessities, like food.² The coronavirus pandemic only exacerbated these inequities.³

People of color are more likely to experience consistent lack of access to menstrual supplies because they disproportionately experience poverty. For example, many students of color are unable to consistently access menstrual supplies at home as a result of their families' inability to afford the products. In one recent study, 50% of low-income students of color indicated that they wear pads and tampons well beyond recommended use because they cannot afford enough for an entire menstrual cycle. Many rely on schools to provide menstrual supplies.⁴

¹ Congresswoman Grace Meng, *Press Release: Meng Unveils Bold Proposal to Provide Menstrual Equity to All* (Mar. 26, 2019) (online at <https://meng.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/meng-unveils-bold-proposal-to-provide-menstrual-equity-to-all>); United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, *Press Release: Fast Facts: Nine Things You Didn't Know About Menstruation* (May 25, 2018) (online at www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation).

² Anne S. Kuhlmann et al., *Unmet Menstrual Hygiene Needs Among Low-Income Women*, *Obstetrics and Gynecology* (Feb. 2019) (online at https://journals.lww.com/greenjournal/fulltext/2019/02000/unmet_menstrual_hygiene_needs_among_low_income.2.aspx).

³ Marni Sommer et al., *Menstrual Product Insecurity Resulting from COVID-19–Related Income Loss, United States, 2020*, *American Journal of Public Health* (Mar. 23, 2022) (online at <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306674>).

⁴ PERIOD, *State of the Period 2021* (May 2, 2021) (online at <https://period.org/uploads/State-of-the-Period-2021.pdf>).

New York City and New York State have led the way in providing free menstrual products to students in need.⁵ However, there is no federal mandate for public schools and universities to provide students with free menstrual products. Students who are forced to miss school because they are menstruating and cannot afford adequate or appropriate menstrual supplies are at higher risk for poor educational outcomes. One recent study indicated that more than 10% of women attending college cannot afford menstrual products to meet their monthly needs.⁶

Incarcerated people often go without adequate access to menstrual supplies because the facility where they reside does not provide supplies or requires people to pay for their own supplies. As a result, people in carceral settings have historically been forced to re-use menstrual products or barter for them.⁷ In 2018, Congress passed the First Step Act, which required that the Federal Bureau of Prisons provide pads and tampons to incarcerated individuals at no charge—a crucial step to expand access for people in detention facilities, prisons, and jails.⁸ However, menstruating people who are incarcerated or in immigration detention still experience barriers to accessing menstrual products and may be forced to re-use products or forgo other basic necessities. This long-standing health inequity jeopardizes the physical health and safety of incarcerated people across the United States.⁹

On January 20, 2021, President Biden issued an Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. One of the stated goals of this order is “for agencies to recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity.”¹⁰ The federal government can advance this goal by taking steps to ensure that menstrual products are accessible to every person who needs them.

So that Congress can better understand what policies are necessary to advance menstrual equity in the United States, we request that GAO evaluate access to menstrual care products through federal programs and federally funded institutions from four broad perspectives:

Period-2021.pdf).

⁵ City of New York, *Mayor de Blasio Signs Legislation Increasing Access to Feminine Hygiene Products for Students, Shelter Residents and Inmates* (July 13, 2016) (online at www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/611-16/mayor-de-blasio-signs-legislation-increasing-access-feminine-hygiene-products-students-).

⁶ Lauren F. Cardoso et al., *Period Poverty and Mental Health Implications Among College-Aged Women in the United States*, BMC Women’s Health (Jan. 6, 2021) (online at <https://bmcwomenshealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12905-020-01149-5>).

⁷ American Civil Liberties Union, *The Unequal Price of Periods: Menstrual Equity in the United States* (Nov. 2019) (online at www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/111219-sj-periodequity.pdf).

⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, *The First Step Act is a Small Step for Incarcerated Women* (Dec. 2018) (online at www.aclu.org/blog/prisoners-rights/women-prison/first-step-act-small-step-incarcerated-women).

⁹ *Id.*

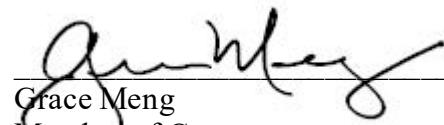
¹⁰ Exec. Order No. 13985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (Jan. 20, 2021).

1. Under what circumstances may state Medicaid programs cover the cost of menstrual products for eligible beneficiaries, and what is known about the extent to which states cover menstrual products in their Medicaid programs?
2. To what extent do the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) cover menstrual products for eligible beneficiaries? For people who qualify for SNAP and WIC, what is known about the potential monthly costs of menstrual supplies, particularly as a proportion of their total income?
3. For incarcerated or detained populations, what is known about the availability of such products and any concerns regarding the accessibility of menstrual products?
4. What is known about the availability of free menstrual products at public colleges and universities?

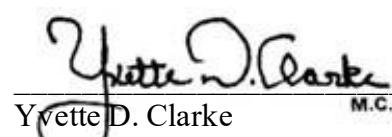
If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Sarah Jackson, Leesa Klepper, and Miles Lichtman with Chairwoman Maloney's staff at (202) 225-5051 and Judith Teruya with Congresswoman Meng's staff at (202) 225-2601.

Sincerely,

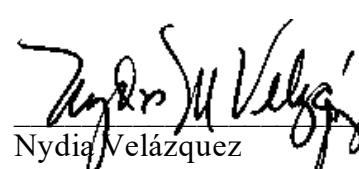

Carolyn B. Maloney
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Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform