

End Period Poverty in MA. Support the I AM Bill!

Increase Access to Disposable Menstrual Products in Prisons, Homeless Shelters and Public Schools: H.534/S.1381, or the I AM bill, provides access to free menstrual products!

The Problem

- 56% of school nurses report students **miss class** because they don't have menstrual products.
- Over **9k** people who menstruate **experienced homelessness** in MA last year.
- MA is one of **26 states** that does not provide free menstrual products in prison.



Here's What MA Voters Had to Say:



"Having that **easy, reliable access**—knowing where something was, being able to get it for free, having quality period products...can definitely **save people who menstruate a lot of anxiety and stress** while they're trying to learn."

-Esther, 21, a menstruating person who attended Massachusetts Public Schools K-12.

"Menstruators who are already going through difficult situations and shouldn't have to go through even more **hurdles to receive basic care**...When everyone can have their **basic minimum needs** met, they can do a lot w their lives and situations. **Nobody deserves to be living in shame**".

-Grace Lasila, (pictured on the right), Advocacy Chair of Period Activists at 'Deis (PAD)



What We Know

- Non-menstruating people go into a bathroom expecting their **basic bodily needs** will be met (toilet, toilet paper, soap, water etc.) – this is not the case for people who are menstruating.
- Both reported that period products in school would have **improved their education and reduced shame around menstruation**.



How Can I Help?

See who has signed ActionWork's petition to pass the I AM Bill.



Schedule a hearing for the I AM Bill this legislative session.

Join the MA Menstrual Equity Coalition.



■ Op-Ed

Amanda Lanciault

How Massachusetts' Period Product Bill Hopes to Promote Equity and Reduce Stigma Around Menstruation

In March of 2023, during a time of extreme housing insecurity, increasingly unreasonable food costs, and a climate crisis, the Florida legislature chose to push forward in their legislature one particular bill banning students from discussing menstrual cycles. This proposed legislation (HB 1069) would ban educators in elementary schools from teaching about periods and students from discussing it with their teachers. The bill has moved out of committee, and in an increasingly conservative state legislature, has a chance of becoming law.

Florida, amongst other states, displays that, while we have come far, period stigma is alive and well in the United States. This stigma prevents individuals from discussing a normal, regular body function that millions of Americans face. Stigma is a huge issue facing menstruators, and due to this, inequality in access to these products arises, commonly known as period poverty. Period poverty is defined as the struggle or inability for a menstruator to obtain period products. Often, this can cause individuals to use methods of managing menstruation that are not hygienic or are medically dangerous to the individual. While all menstruators have periods, not all have access to products to manage them.

According to a 2019 survey by the Massachusetts chapter of the National Organization for Women, more than half of school nurses said they assisted students who missed class so they could obtain menstrual products. The average menstruator spends between \$150-\$500 a year and uses between three to six menstrual products a day. This can be an unreasonable expense for communities, such as those experiencing homelessness or the incarcerated, that rely on fixed incomes or donations from others to manage their periods.

To combat the rising prevalence of period poverty, other states have implemented their own legislation to normalize periods and offer free menstrual products in public spaces. In 2018, New York passed legislation requiring free menstrual products be available in all middle and high schools across the state. While the state led the charge in providing period products for one of the most prevalently vulnerable populations, they have lagged behind in recent years in extending this right to other communities such as the incarcerated and homeless. This legislative session, Massachusetts has put forward the I AM Bill, which would

offer free menstrual products for menstruators. When someone uses the restroom, they have the reasonable expectation that toilet paper will be waiting for them. However, for those who menstruate, they have been left to fend for themselves.

No one should be ashamed to menstruate in public. Legislation such as Massachusetts's I AM Bill could not only provide access to thousands in the Commonwealth, but could move the needle of public perceptions of periods, taking us from Florida's situation to a world where periods are seen as just as normal as any other bodily function.

Vishni Samaraweera

"Ewww, what's all over your butt?" My best friend Sarah quickly looked over her shoulder as she and I were filing out of our school's auditorium in suburban Massachusetts. Her white pants were stained with a large red blob. Panicked and confused, she grabbed my hand and we left as a group of middle school boys cackled away. I went with Sarah to our favorite teacher Ms. McAllen's classroom to ask her for advice. Once we arrived, Ms. McAllen quickly noticed Sarah's pants and distraught expression. She came over and comfortingly explained to Sarah that she likely just got her period and that nothing was wrong. Ms. McAllen reached inside her desk for pads and explained how to wear them and then she told Sarah to go to the nurse's office for a change of pants.

If Sarah didn't have a connection with another teacher like Ms. McAllen or a nurse, she likely would have had to go to the bathroom and use a wad of toilet paper as a make-do pad. For the next couple of hours, Sarah would have had to sit through classes fearful of bleeding out while feeling incredibly uncomfortable. If menstrual products were available in Sarah's public school bathrooms, she would have had an accessible and private option for menstrual hygiene. Over 56% of school nurses in Massachusetts report that the inability to access menstrual products has caused students to miss out on class time to seek products.

Not only are there advantages to having accessible products in the school bathrooms, but it also provides students whose families are undergoing financial burdens relief with regard to products. The average menstruator uses between three to six pads or tampons every day and spends up to \$50 a month. This expense for a normal bodily process is excessive. Sixty state laws have been enacted across 26 states that have passed menstrual product access legislation across the United States – and Massachusetts is not one of those states.

Massachusetts has a chance to act by passing the I AM Bill (S.1381/H.534) which will mandate free menstrual

products in all public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons. When we go into a bathroom, we expect there to be products that we can use to take care of our bodies: toilet paper, soap, paper towels, etc. As menstruators, our bodily needs should still be met with products that we need, like pads or tampons. At the low cost of around \$2.95 per menstruator, we can end period inequity in public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons.

The I AM Bill is a step forward in changing the narrative around period stigma which is currently being threatened nationwide. While Massachusetts currently has no statewide legislation, states like Florida are attempting to pass legislation putting menstrual equity even further out of reach. Republican-backed legislation in Florida aims to ban teachers from talking to students under the state-sanctioned age of menstruation about periods. When Sarah bled through her pants in our school auditorium, we were in the fifth grade. She was eleven years old. If this legislation passed, and we were in Florida, Sarah and I would not have been able to seek the help of our teacher Ms. McAllen legally.

Massachusetts is supposed to be a pioneer in equity and healthcare rights but has failed to pass menstrual equity legislation for several sessions. Incarcerated menstruators suffer from prisons using menstrual products as bargaining chips against them, often leaving no choice but to use unhygienic alternatives. Meanwhile, homeless shelters report that menstrual products are the least donated item that they receive.

With restricted access to menstrual products in prisons and a post-pandemic rise in homelessness in the state, the passage of the I AM Bill is no longer a subject that can be pushed to the next legislative session. Menstruators in Massachusetts deserve accessibility to menstrual products as it is a matter of healthcare dignity with respect to a natural bodily process.

■ Letter to the Legislator

Dear Senator Feeney,

My name is Amanda Lanciault. I am a public health scholar, a member of your district, and a menstruator. My partner, Vishni Samaraweera, and I believe that period poverty is a health equity issue, and I urge you to call a speedy hearing concerning S.1381/H.534, or the I AM Bill, to provide free menstrual products to Massachusetts public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons.

No one should have to choose between taking care of their bodies and other necessities such as food and shelter – but for many Massachusetts menstruators, this is a reality. Menstruation is a normal bodily function that many