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February 2, 2016

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell
Immediate Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell:

I write today to urge you to include feminine hygiene products in the list of eligible costs for Homeless Youth Act funds administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Feminine hygiene products are a healthcare necessity for all women and girls; homeless women and girls in shelters face serious hygiene and health issues when they do not have access to these products. There are reports of homeless women and girls who “use rags or bleed through clothes until they throw out or get donated clothes” when they do not have access to appropriate hygiene itemsⁱ. According to Dr. Mary Marfisee, program director of the UCLA Student Run Homeless Clinic, “many [homeless] women reuse pads or towels or clothes when they’re menstruating, which can lead to irritation and urinary tract infections.”ⁱⁱ

Feminine hygiene products should be included in all lists of basic necessities. In a recent Feeding America survey, individuals in all income groups indicated that feminine hygiene products fall in the category of “basic essentials.” Other items that fell in this same category included toilet paper, toothpaste, deodorant, laundry detergent, bath soap, disposable diapers, and shampoo. These items “cannot be foregone or easily substituted.”ⁱⁱⁱ

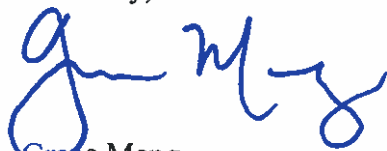
Earlier this month, I wrote to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson to urge him to include feminine hygiene products in the list of “eligible costs” for homeless shelters to supply with funds provided in the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program (EFSP),

administered by his agency. On January 8, 2016, the National Board for the EFSP voted unanimously to approve this request. The next EFSP Responsibilities and Requirements Manual will include information on this change, and is expected to be disseminated in support of the Fiscal Year 2015 grant by April 2016.

Homeless assistance providers will often provide homeless individuals with toiletries and other basic necessities in the context of their outreach activities. HHS is the primary grantor for federal funds to protect the health and well-being of all Americans. As such, HHS administers the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (RHY), which provides shelter, transitional housing, and street outreach services for runaway and homeless youth. Toiletries and hygiene products are not mentioned in the statute or regulations for RHY. However, the grant applications for at least two program components, Street Outreach^{iv} and the Basic Shelter Program,^v do include references to “hygiene-related items” in services to provide “food, clothing, and hygiene-related items to meet basic needs and develop trust between a youth and youth outreach worker.”

I ask that you review the RHY Program to ensure that homeless assistance providers are able to use grant funds for feminine hygiene products. This would be a small, but necessary step towards filling a necessary healthcare need for homeless women and girls. Thank you for your prompt consideration of this issue.

Sincerely,



Grace Meng

Member of Congress

ⁱ Sue Kerr; If You Can't Afford Tampons, What Do You Do?; (July 19, 2014); http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sue-kerr/if-you-cant-afford-tampons-what-do-you-do_b_5352396.html

ⁱⁱ Nikki Somani; We Care Collects Feminine Hygiene Products for Homeless Women in Need; (March 5, 2015); <http://dailybruin.com/2015/03/05/we-care-collects-feminine-hygiene-products-for-homeless-women-in-need/>

ⁱⁱⁱ In Short Supply: American Families Struggle to Secure Everyday Essentials; <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/in-short-supply/in-short-supply-executive.pdf>

^{iv} Street Outreach Program Grant Application; p.5; http://www.acf.hhs.gov/grants/open/foa/files/HHS-2015-ACF-ACYF-YO-0956_0.pdf#page=7

^v Basic Shelter Program Grant Application; p. 5; http://www.acf.hhs.gov/grants/open/foa/files/HHS-2015-ACF-ACYF-CY-0957_1.pdf#page=7