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Grace Meng

Congress of the United States

Sixth District, New York

January 7, 2016

The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Johnson:

I write today to urge you 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 administrated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The current list of eligible items under “supplies/equipment” for a mass shelter includes: “cots, blankets, pillows, toilet paper, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, cleaning materials, limited first-aid supplies, and underwear/diapers.”ⁱ It does not explicitly list feminine hygiene products, even though these are essential household hygiene items. In a recent Feeding America survey, individuals in all income groups (both low and high) 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.”ⁱⁱ

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

In the last year, we have seen a significant increase in public awareness and conversation surrounding menstruation and a lack of access to feminine hygiene products for low-income and homeless women. I am heartened to see that this increase in awareness has led to a corresponding increase in donations of feminine hygiene products to homeless shelters. There

are now drives,^v projects,^{vi} and even non-profits created for the purpose of providing feminine hygiene products to homeless and low-income women.^{vii} Unfortunately, this increase in donations does not come close to meeting the hygiene needs of homeless women. Including feminine hygiene products in the list of eligible costs for the Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program is a small but necessary step towards filling a necessary healthcare need for homeless women and girls. Thank for your prompt consideration of this issue.

Sincerely,



Grace Meng
Member of Congress

Cc: Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program

ⁱ Emergency Food and Shelter Program National Board Program Phase 30 Responsibilities and Requirements Manual, page 71.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/in-short-supply/in-short-supply-executive.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sue-kerr/if-you-cant-afford-tampons-what-do-you-do_b_5352396.html

^{iv} <http://dailybruin.com/2015/03/05/we-care-collects-feminine-hygiene-products-for-homeless-women-in-need/>

^v <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/15/more-pads-for-homeless-women-help.html>

^{vi} <http://news.uga.edu/releases/article/national-public-policy-entry-homeless-women-hygiene-0315/>

^{vii} <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/22/helping-women-and-girls-period-part-two/>