

Hello Chair Hall, Vice Chair Ferguson, Ranking Member Humphrey, and members of the Government Oversight Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill (HB) 29, legislation concerning feminine hygiene products and shower access for people who are incarcerated in municipal, county, and state correctional facilities.

I spent 23 years incarcerated in women's prisons throughout the State of Ohio, including one and a half years in Montgomery County Jail as I awaited trial. Today, I work as the Community Outreach Strategist at the Ohio Justice & Policy Center, the firm that secured my release from prison in 2017, for the past seven years.

Being a protected class in this country means being guarded against discrimination or unfair treatment based on having certain characteristics or gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, or any combination of these. Being denied access to period and menstrual products is not only discriminatory, it's also inhumane and degrading.

Simply having access to menstrual supplies is the bare minimum. The products we have access to are not only of poor quality, but the quantity made available to us is insufficient. Making better quality products available through prison commissaries is another form of discrimination because most people who experience incarceration can't afford the marked-up prices of commissary items.

According to a 2022 survey conducted by Data USA, over 70% of prison correctional officers in the United States are cisgender men. While I don't have any data specific to Ohio, I would imagine that our state is somewhere in the same ballpark. There is an anxiety that women experience to make sure their periods are managed hygienically, that those who don't menstruate would never understand. We are subject to constant humiliation for a natural bodily function. I've witnessed firsthand how carceral control is wielded by way of period products and its impact on someone's self-esteem.

In an attempt to appeal to those whose empathy won't allow them to understand the challenge that women in this situation face, imagine the discomfiture of having to go to someone to get bathroom tissue every time you have to pass waste from your body. Each time you went to this person, you didn't know how much you would need, but you had to make do with whatever they decided to give you.

Not having the proper amount impacted your physical health, your mental health, and possibly having a stench on your body that others in your living quarters could smell. Imagine the loss of dignity you would experience.

Bacterial infections and toxic shock syndrome are a very real danger that can result in death when we aren't able to have access to the proper amount of products to manage our periods. The biology of blood pathogens also puts other people in the prison at risk.

There is often a reticence to see individuals who are housed in carceral institutions as people due to a built-in, selective disdain for those who have been convicted of crimes. There is also a tendency to want to deny certain civil rights to the same people. But denying access to the proper amount of quality period products is more than an issue of civil rights. It's a human right; a right that is inherent as a result of being alive.

Prison policies have always centered men in their practices. Since 1980, the growth of women's populations in prisons has increased by 750%. Women experience very unique challenges, and unfortunately, prisons have not changed their approach or policies much in that period. Menstrual health is just one component of these differences. However, it impacts women physically, mentally, and socially.

Passing HB 29 makes prisons cleaner and safer for everyone there, both residents and staff. It says that those who have been convicted of crimes should not be denied very basic human rights. This is our opportunity to recognize the dignity of others and demonstrate the humanity that we ask all Ohioans to show.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.

Warmth,

Tyra Patterson