

## Feasibility of Providing Free Menstrual Products in Shelters

**Date:** October 22, 2019

**To:** Economic and Community Development Committee

**From:** General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

**Wards:** All

### SUMMARY

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This report responds to City Council's request to conduct consultations with operators of City-funded shelters, respite and drop-in centres, program participants, community stakeholders and menstrual equity advocates such as the Period Purse, on the access, distribution, the real costs of menstrual products and the feasibility of providing such products free of charge to low-income menstruators in Toronto.

Toronto's emergency shelter system serves equity-seeking groups including women, transgender and non-binary individuals. All programs must meet the operating requirements set out in both the Toronto Shelter Standards (TSS) and the purchase of service contracts, and they are evaluated using a quality assurance review process. Both the Toronto Shelter Standards (TSS) and 24-Hour Respite Site Standards (TRS) require service providers to provide menstrual hygiene products to their clients.

This report describes the results of consultations with City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites, drop-ins, and menstrual equity advocates on the access, distribution and cost of menstrual hygiene products. Funding in the amount of \$222,359 is included in SSHA's 2020 base budget, subject to approval through the 2020 budget process, for the provision of menstrual hygiene products to individuals using these services. SSHA will allocate the funding to increase access to free menstrual products for users of City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

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The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, recommends that:

1. Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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There are no financial impacts in 2019 from the recommendation in this report.

The financial impact for 2020 will be considered as part of the 2020 budget process. Shelter, Support and Housing Administration has included \$222,359 in its 2020 base budget for the provision of menstrual hygiene products to service users of City-administered shelters, 24-hour respite sites, and 24-hour drop-ins.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer have reviewed this report and agree with the financial impact information.

## **EQUITY IMPACT**

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Toronto's emergency shelter system serves equity-seeking groups including women, transgender and non-binary individuals. Access to free of charge menstrual hygiene products is important in ensuring that essential products are available to equity seeking groups and is an important component of the City's efforts to address poverty.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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On June 26, 2018, City Council directed the Deputy City Manager, Cluster A to report back through the 2019 Budget process on the cost and implementation of providing shelters, drop-in centres, respite centres, 'Strong Neighbourhood' Community Centres and others working with homeless, street involved, and low-income women, girls and trans individuals access to free menstrual hygiene products. The Council decision is available here:

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2018.MM43.15>

On March 7, 2019, City Council adopted EX2.5 2019 Capital and Operating Budgets approving an increase to the 2019 Budget Committee Recommended Operating Budget for Shelter, Support and Housing Administration by \$222,359 gross and net to provide the 76 City-funded shelters, drop-ins and respite centres with funding for menstrual products and distribution for clients and program users.

At this meeting, City Council requested the General Manager, Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration to conduct consultation with operators of City-funded shelters, respite and drop-in centres, program participants, community stakeholders and menstrual equity advocates such as the Period Purse, on the access, distribution, the real costs of menstrual products and the feasibility of providing such products free of charge to low-income menstruators and to report back to the Economic and Community Development Committee at its meeting on May 27, 2019.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.EX2.5>

## COMMENTS

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Toronto's emergency shelter system serves equity-seeking groups including women, transgender and non-binary individuals, through direct service provision and by providing funding to community agencies. There are 65 shelter locations in the City, which serve more than 6,500 people, including spaces provided through hotel/motel programs.

In addition to emergency and transitional shelters, the City also funds complementary low-barrier services that provide people with a safe, warm place indoors and connections to other supports. These services include: two 24-hour women's drop-ins that operate year-round that serve vulnerable, street-involved women, transgender and non-binary individuals; 24-hour respite sites; and additional Warming Centres during extreme cold weather alerts.

### **Current Access and Distribution of Menstrual Products**

All shelter programs must meet the operating requirements set out in both the Toronto Shelter Standards (TSS) and the purchase of service contracts, and they are evaluated using a quality assurance review process. All 24-hour respite sites must meet the operating requirements set out in both the Toronto 24-Hour Respite Site Standards (TRS) and the purchase of service contracts. Both the TSS and TRS require service providers to provide menstrual hygiene products to their clients (section 9.1.2 of TSS and section 7.1.2 of TRS).

Staff in shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins currently provide free menstrual hygiene products to clients and participants who require them. To date, SSHA has not received any complaints from clients that they are unable to access menstrual hygiene products.

The core operating funding that shelters and 24-hour respite sites receive can be used for program supplies, including menstrual hygiene products. Typically, shelter providers use donations to meet the need for menstrual hygiene products, so that operating funding can be used in other program areas. Shelter providers are provided an annual cost of living allowance increase (approx. 1 to 2%) to their funding allocation, however, this is generally used to address increasing costs that they have no control over, such as unionized pay increases or increased utility costs.

### **Consultations on Access, Distribution and Cost of Menstrual Products**

In November 2018, SSHA conducted a survey with drop-in providers. Over half (51%) of drop-in providers responded to the survey. The majority (87%) of drop-in providers reported providing free menstrual hygiene products to participants. Two-thirds of drop-in providers obtained menstrual hygiene products through donations. Drop-in providers reported spending an average of \$1,350 annually on menstrual hygiene products.

In May 2019, SDFA, in collaboration with SSHA, conducted a survey of City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites, and 24-hour drop-ins on the current distribution of menstrual products to service users. Over half (54%) of the sites responded to the survey. Almost three-quarters (72%) of sites responding to the survey reported that they served women; over one-quarter (27%) reported serving LGBTQ2S clients; and almost one-quarter (23%) of the sites reported serving families. The findings of the survey reported:

- The majority (82%) of responding sites reported making menstrual products available to clients on-site.
- 57% of responding sites reported having no dedicated funds for menstrual products in their operating budget in 2018.
- 91% of responding sites reported relying on donations to supplement the distribution of menstrual products to clients.
- 62% of responding sites reported that over half of menstrual products are donated to the site/program.
- 90% of responding sites reported that menstrual products are made available by staff upon client request; a further 38% reported that products are made available by staff at intake. One-quarter of responding sites reported that menstrual products are made available to clients in an open container or by free on-site dispensers for clients to access whenever necessary.

In September 2019, SDFA, in collaboration with SSHA, conducted consultations with eleven agencies serving women, transgender and non-binary clients living in poverty and/or experiencing homelessness on the access, distribution, and costs of menstrual products and the feasibility of providing such products free of charge to low-income menstruators in Toronto. Key themes from the consultations included:

- Service providers often rely on donations of menstrual supplies and must make choices within their budget about what they are able to provide; reliance on donations can impact the quality of the products provided to clients.
- Increased access to menstrual supplies for clients without any barriers and the importance of client choice in the type of products they need.
- Ongoing provision of menstrual supplies is needed.
- A broader and more systemic view of the issue as part of poverty reduction efforts that is inclusive not only of clients of City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins but low-income women more generally in Toronto.

When asked about models for distribution, participants spoke of the need for a multi-pronged and phased approach to addressing the issue as services may differ significantly. Options proposed included increases to operating funding for shelters, provision of a grant to a non-profit organization to purchase and distribute supplies, partnerships with City Divisions such as Toronto Public Health who already have a mechanism in place for the distribution of harm reduction supplies, or partnerships with the private sector such as the Shopper's Drug Mart menstrual products pilot project.

### **Allocation of SSHA Funding for the Provision of Free Menstrual Hygiene Products**

On March 7, 2019 City Council approved an increase to SSHA's 2019 Operating Budget by \$222,359 gross and net to for the provision of free menstrual products for service users in City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins. SSHA has

included a total of \$222,359 in its 2020 base budget for the provision of free menstrual products for service users in these programs.

There are an estimated 2200 women and transgender clients who access City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins on a given night. Based an annual estimate of \$100 per person, the funding provided in SSHA's Operating Budget is sufficient to fully fund free of charge distribution of menstrual products within these services.

SSHA will allocate the funding approved in the 2019 and 2020 Operating Budgets for menstrual products through amendments to existing agreements with City-funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins. This funding will increase access to free of charge menstrual products for individuals using these services.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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