

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and this is Empowered Health. We all remember when we were young and got our periods for the first time, how it was really embarrassing and sort of uncomfortable in terms of like figuring out when it was going to happen and when it did happen, what to do and I sort of feel like most of us are lucky enough that we have the resources around us, that we learn how to use tampons, we have pads; but it recently has come to my attention that [ACOG estimates that it's about two thirds of low income women](#)<sup>1</sup> who don't have enough money to buy menstrual products at least one time per year. If you think about that in the context of like, okay, what if we thought of pads and tampons like toilet paper, that would be outrageous, right? Like if men didn't have access to toilet paper in schools, in prison, in public buildings, or even like homeless people, this would become something that everybody would sort of say like this is an issue of humanity. It's an issue of modern plumbing. It's an issue of dignity. But for whatever reason we don't think about it that way when it comes to women. This first came to my attention when my eldest child was in preschool and there was a mom in the preschool community who was starting a nonprofit called [Dignity Matters](#)<sup>2</sup>. And they were asking for donations for pads and tampons as well as bras. And I sort of thought like, well, what is this about? And having just had a baby, I had tons of bras that I could donate. That was the first time that I really developed an awareness of what this need was about.

Kate S-B: My name is [Kate Sanetra-Butler](#)<sup>3</sup> and I'm the founder and executive director of Dignity Matters. We are an organization that collects and supplies feminine hygiene products and underwear and bras to women and girls in Massachusetts.

Emily: Will you tell us a little bit about the origin of Dignity Matters? Like how did this organization come about?

Kate S-B: It's not something that I envisaged doing. It kind of came to me. I'm not from U.S. And I came here pretty much as a tourist five years ago. And during a tour of Boston I was approached by homeless woman and asked for a tampon. And this very unexpected and counter, I guess turned out to be transformational. And after doing a bit of research and calling shelters around, I found out that a lack of access to period protection, it's a really big issue, not only in Massachusetts but in New England. So I didn't really want to reinvent the wheel. So I spent about six months doing my research and actually visiting places all the way from Rhode Island to New Hampshire. And everywhere I went, I heard the same story that people continuously donate clothing, toiletries, but nobody thinks about sanitary napkins or tampons for women. It's just not something we think about. At that point, there was no organization like that in Massachusetts so I started it. And from very humble beginnings in my basement, we grew to a medium-size organization and serving almost 3000 women every single month now

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[https://journals.lww.com/greenjournal/Citation/2019/06000/Unmet\\_Menstrual\\_Hygiene\\_Needs\\_Among\\_Low\\_Income.34.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/greenjournal/Citation/2019/06000/Unmet_Menstrual_Hygiene_Needs_Among_Low_Income.34.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dignity-matters.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dignity-matters.org/who-we-are/>

Emily: That's wonderful. And you also were, you're still doing bras or you were doing?

Kate S-B: We are.

Emily: Okay. So how did that connection get made?

Kate S-B: So initially when we started, it was all about period protection. But after going to shelters and we do that on weekly basis, we realized that giving women sanitary napkins was great, but they did not have underwear. If you don't have underwear, sanitary napkins are not very useful.

Emily: Right.

Kate S-B: So we were asked all the time for underwear. And again, it's something nobody donates because you have to purchase it new and people usually donate to shelters what they don't want, they don't need anymore. So we introduced probably after three months, we introduced, you know, serving women in Massachusetts, we introduced underwear and bras go with underwear. And again, the same story, nobody donates bras. The first place we ever went to was [Shadows](#)<sup>4</sup> and [Meadows](#)<sup>5</sup> shelters in Ashland. And a director there at the time told us they have had not any donation of underwear, feminine hygiene products for probably seven years. And women have a lot of bras. And we all change sizes. We have children. So we have bras somewhere at the back of our drawers and we can donate them. We have a pretty high bar for gently used. Again, something we realized that we learned, even women in shelters when they don't have anything, they still want to have a choice. They still know what they like and surprisingly are very picky maybe because we gave them choice, but we really try to stick to our dignity in Dignity Matters. So everything that comes to us, even if we think it's new, but that's not have a tag gets washed, looked through, packaged, tagged. So it looks like new when it goes to shelters and women are delighted because it feels, well, they often say it feels like Christmas or my birthday. And we provide every woman with three bras, usually they new or like new. Three new bras, a package of underwear for the whole year and period protection for entire year.

Emily: Wow. So how does that work? Like how do you plan ahead for that kind of a thing?

Kate S-B: So again-

Emily: I think it's so important to like emphasize this is now becoming a big organization and you guys are really successful, but it literally started in your basement with a few moms who sort of wanted to make a difference. And that wasn't that long ago. I mean that was a couple of years. It's incredible how fast you've grown the organization and the response you've gotten

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.shelterlistings.org/details/31801/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.smoc.org/meadows.php>

from the communities. And I mean, you were just saying before the interview started that like your phone's constantly ringing with people saying that they need this.

Kate S-B:

Emily: Yes, yes. So how have you figured all that stuff out? Like if other people wanted to try to replicate this?

Kate S-B: Well, there was a lot of mistakes on the way too. It wasn't an easy path, but I think what was really very helpful was the response from the community. We were very lucky from day one. I think we always had frankly more volunteers than we can accommodate right now. Dignity Matters runs with about 200 regular volunteers and we cannot accommodate more. So there was always interest

Emily: You can't accommodate more. Explain that a little bit.

Kate S-B: We just can not have more volunteers coming in. So unless we have some—

Emily: Because there's nothing for them to do or like it's sort of not. You don't have the systems—

Kate S-B: Space. It's a space issue. And it's also, I guess it's just a very fun thing to do for volunteers. So once we have, they come back.

Emily: That's wonderful.

Kate S-B: It is. Now our work is, I would say much more custom in a way because [every shelter or place we work with](#)<sup>6</sup> and we serve shelters, schools, food pantries, medical centers for homeless people, for Boston healthcare. All of these places have different requirements, different number of women, women at different age so they require a different product. So, we really try to stick to the same volunteers who learn over time how to do their job and they can kind of replicate that.

Emily: So like a certain group is designated to one specific—

Kate S-B: Correct, it's exactly right. So we may, one day we may be packing, you know, three bras and underwear, we call it care packages for a small shelter in MetroWest. And the next day we are packing tens of thousands of loose tampons for Boys and Girls Club in Boston. It's a very different job. And because we do every job every single month once, we try to rely on repeat volunteers to do that. So there is a lot of logistics and customization, but I think the impact is big because of that. Every place we work with, we commit to working with them for a

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dignity-matters.org/about-us/>

year. We vet places. So we only work with other nonprofits. We don't work with individuals as such. We found that it's more scalable if we're able to provide product to a school or a shelter and they are the experts in serving their own clients, not us.

Emily: So do they say to you like, oh, we have a hundred women and the average size is X or-

Kate S-B: So with the period protection, it's fairly straight forward.

Emily: That seems like a much easier.

Kate S-B: Yeah, it is. That's pretty easy. So it may be a place with mostly senior people, we see that especially at food pantries around MetroWest. Senior women very often have nowhere to go to for help, they very often suffer with [incontinence](#)<sup>7</sup>. So we provide incontinence underwear to senior women; mainly for food pantries but sometimes also drop-in center for homeless people. It's really terribly sad to see women who are in their sixties, seventies, even eighties, coming for help. So, again, with periods protection, it's just a matter of knowing how many women use shelter. But with bras and underwear and incontinence, we actually need to know exactly who is there. In some places were able to get the exact sizing and we may have, let's say 30 women and we actually get an order. So it comes and it may say Emily's size bra 36 C, and she likes bras padded and her underwear need to be hipster size eight, because we give them choices. We have every type of underwear and every type of bra on the market. And we package them.

Emily: Have you– That's so special too. I mean I can see why they feel like it's like Christmas or their birthday. It's not just like rummaging through a garbage bag of somebody's hand me downs. Yeah, that's a totally different approach.

Kate S-B: Totally different approach. It's time consuming, but again, it speaks to the dignity in our name, Dignity Matters. And that probably takes majority of our time and the time of our volunteers to package it, to make it look beautiful. We always try to have at least first name so women feel like it was made for them. We always send spare because as you and me know when you try bras and even if it's the right size, sometimes it's just– or we may just not like the type. And so we always send more. And we hope that at least out of three, four bras two will fit them well. So the response has been very positive.

Emily: I mean, I think this idea of dignity is such an important one in this because the people we've been talking to for this episode. across the country really, it's so interesting to me because it's like everything from schools to jails to, you know, sort of underserved communities across the board of women that are suffering in this way. And I think it's, you know, the idea that like women in prison for instance, are fined if they soil their clothing with their period blood.

Kate S-B: Yes.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/urinary-incontinence/symptoms-causes/syc-20352808>

Emily: And it's like yet they have to pay for tampons on their own and are sometimes not allowed to go to the commissary for a few days. I mean, it's like you're setting them up for a system of failure. So we're going to pause the interview with Kate for a second and switch gears and talk to somebody who was basically told that there was no way to help these women in prison who literally don't have access to tampons. But then when they bleed on themselves and their clothing gets dirty, they get punished. And then they're basically told that they can work all day, sometimes for like a dollar a day pay and then use that money to either call home or go to the commissary to buy feminine hygiene products. It's really, it's such an awful system that you can imagine how angry it would make you and how frustrating it would be to want to follow the rules, but have this sort of system designed against your own bodily needs.

Rep. Herod: I'm state representative [Leslie Herod](#)<sup>8</sup>. I represent house district eight in central and northeast Denver. I am in my third year and I chair the finance committee and I vice chair the judiciary committee.

Emily: So I wanted to just talk a little bit just to get us started about [this bill](#)<sup>9</sup> that you guys just passed in April on April 25th, which seems like a huge triumph and yet at the same time, like that kind of drives me crazy that we're considering this to be a triumph in 2019.

Rep. Herod: Initially I ran a budget measure that required the Department of Corrections to provide tampons to women in our prisons. Initially they said they couldn't afford to do so. So we decided to run that measure. It costs about \$40,000 out of a billion dollar Department of Correction budget and they said they couldn't afford it. And so what we did, and I say we as me and my colleague at the time Representative [Faith Winter](#)<sup>10</sup>, decided to take the Department of Corrections on. We move the money from their executive director, their budget line and moved it into the line new line item for tampons for women. Of course when we made that move, the department got very concerned and all of a sudden found the money out of nowhere to be able to provide tampons to female inmates on their own.

Emily: So I want to stop you right there because I feel like that's pretty ballsy and incredible that you guys did that. Can you talk a little bit about the process of making that call? Cause it feels like in politics that things are always weighed pretty heavily before you do them. And my instinct is that you guys must have felt you'd exhausted like all the other resources before doing that.

Rep. Herod: Right, I mean initially I went to the Department of Corrections with this concern and asked them to change their policy. Right? It started with me just saying, you know, this is problematic. I've visited women in these correctional facilities. I've come to understand that women are bartering and trading everything from clothes and other odd toiletry items to sex for access to tampons. And that's just not right. So we need to create a more dignified environment

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<sup>8</sup> <https://leg.colorado.gov/legislators/leslie-herod>

<sup>9</sup> <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb19-1224>

<sup>10</sup> <https://leg.colorado.gov/legislators/faith-winter>

quite simply by providing tampons. And the Department of Corrections just said they would love to do it, but they couldn't afford it. So when we moved into to the budget cycle, which was my first year, I never run a budget amendment before. You know, I decided that we had to amend their budget to include this line. However, we were told that if the departments couldn't pay for the new budget request of a legislator, that we had to find the money from somewhere else and we didn't want to take away from our other members good ideas and good bills. And so what we did decide was the Department of Corrections executive director was probably getting paid too much, that Democrats and Republicans would feel fine cutting their budget to be honest with you, and was able to get that into the measure. Behind the scenes then they said they found the money and then moved the money around so that when it went into the next chamber for concurrence, they were able to keep the executive director's budget whole and then also provide the money for tampons. Now we've figured that they would find money to, you know, not cut the executive director's budget by \$40,000 dollars but it was no guarantee and we were just fine knocking that salary down if we needed to.

Emily: And so that had to be a real priority for you. I mean it feels like that's a bold move and something that was really important and that you sort of leveraged your power to make that happen. You must have seen that it was like really necessary and I just commend you for doing that.

Rep. Herod: Well, thank you. I mean it's a team effort. You know, I think it's very helpful that we had a female on the joint budget committee who was very passionate about this once they found out about the issue as well. And that there is a lot of female members in the House and the Senate and quite frankly all the way up to the governor's office where [Governor Hickenlooper's](#)<sup>11</sup> partner at the time, and now wife said, yeah, you better get this done. So I think that that made it a really important, quite frankly, it's awareness, right? People don't know that this is an issue. People don't know that women are treated this way who are incarcerated and we have to change it.

Emily: Can you talk a little bit about what the state of feminine hygiene products were in the sense of their availability before this bill was passed?

Rep. Herod: So basically, this was just the Department of Corrections budget measure. Now the bill actually decided to take it statewide. So all jails and all facilities including [?] facilities across Colorado. The state before was a hodgepodge. Some would provide tampon, some wouldn't. Some provided access to diva cups and some didn't. Some said that you had to pay for them on your own, even if you only make a dollar a day and you know it's eight to \$12 dollars a box for tampons. And so it was a pretty broad range of different options in different counties. I will say that was consistent though, was that women were getting sanctioned if they soiled their clothes. So if they couldn't afford the tampon and a pad wasn't adequate for their cycle, which I

say pad very loosely, really, most of the time it's this thin panty liner type situation, and they bled through their clothes that they would get sanctions. It was ridiculous.

Emily: I feel like that's a direct contradiction, right? Because on the one hand it feels like this is something that's being treated like a luxury item. At the same time, it's something that if you don't have and you can't pay for on your own, that you're simultaneously being punished for not having it. So somebody's being fined for not protecting their clothing. At the same time, they're not given access to the things that will allow them to protect their clothing.

Rep. Herod: Absolutely, it's absurd. Let me just be honest with you. It is completely absurd. The other thing that we found was that in some cases in the Department of Corrections and other places could get access to tampons if they could prove a critical need to often male guard, which means what? Showing them that you bled through your clothes and then maybe they'll get you a tampon if they feel like it. I mean it's ridiculous. The policies were put in place were obviously written by men who have never had a cycle, but also just were not helpful.

Emily: Do you interpret that to be a power play or do you interpret that to be ignorance? Because one of the quotes that I read from you that I loved was that if you don't want to say the word tampon, then you shouldn't restrict access to them. And my instinct would be that men sort of don't understand, or I guess they don't want to talk about it. Right. I would think most men would say like, okay, that's fine, they need it, I get it. I don't want to hear about it. Whatever they need, just sort of give it to them. This is a health need, this is something that we want them to have so that we don't have to hear more about it. And so when I hear that that women are having to like work for this, it makes me think like, this is some sort of like power play manipulation. Like I have something that you need that's necessary and I'm going to withhold it from you because that is a way of me showing my power over you.

Rep. Herod: Absolutely. I definitely think it's a power play and it's been used as a power play, right? So regardless of what the intent was, when the policy was put in place, the policy wasn't changed because the people were getting power from it, right? They felt like women should be put in undignified, unsanitary situations when they have committed a crime. Right. And are behind bars or incarcerated and they didn't care or they thought that, I believe they thought and assumed that one, they could keep their power by having this leverage over women, but also that these women wouldn't speak up for themselves. And so nothing would change. Well, when I went and visited facilities, women did speak up for themselves. And that's why I started running this measure. The reason why I ran the bill though, because I was initially told when the budget amendment passed that they realize that the general assembly had changed their perception of this issue, that the jails better get in line or we will be coming for them next, but that they will all fall into place because it's the best practices for jails.

Rep. Herod: Right. And instead, what we found out was that was just not true. There's a woman, her name is [Elizabeth Epps](#)<sup>12</sup>. She went to jail and got on social media very vocally about the fact that she was restricted access to even the commissary to buy a Tampon for days. And anyone who's had a period knows that that means you're done with your cycle. Right?

Emily: The first days are definitely the worst.

Rep. Herod: Right, exactly. Well and if you're restricted for five days before you can access to the commissary— you're done. You know the math doesn't work out for you there. And so when I saw her story, I realized that I was going to have to pull that bill and we pulled the bill title within days after I saw that on social media. But since pulling the story, more women have come to me, I mean, think about it, right? You have someone who maybe is in jail pretrial, so they haven't gone to trial. They're not convicted of anything, but they're in jail over the weekend and they don't have access to their birth control because they don't have to have access to their birth control, they are not required to be given their birth control. All of a sudden your period starts because you're stressed, your cycle's changed, you don't have access to your birth control. And then you look for a tampon or you asked for a tampon and you're told no, you try to use a pad and you bleed through and then you're told that you can wait five to seven days to have access to the commissary. By that time you're out. Right. Or you have to raise the money somehow to be able to buy those products. And if you are lucky enough to have a job when you're incarcerated, you're lucky enough in the way that you're getting paid one to two dollars an hour. So you're having to make decisions about whether to use that money to call home to your family, right. Or to you know, get some other item or buy a tampon. And that's just not okay. Our Department of Corrections, our jails, they're required to provide basic necessities to anyone in their facilities. And they are not. A tampon is a basic necessity. It doesn't matter if you're public, you're private, you're county-run, you're state-run. Every facility, every detention type facility must have tampons available without restriction. So I'm not saying you get five and you have to deal with it, you know. You get access to them without restriction. And that's important too.

Emily: It's in effect now. Do you know how the rollout has gone?

Rep. Herod: It is an effect. And the rollout ended, department of corrections has gone very well. In fact, I went back and visited and it was like I walked into like a rockstar or something. I mean, women were having access to products quite frankly they asked for, right? And at the jail level before the bill was signed, people were like, okay, we've ordered them. Please don't call us. You know, I think because once folks heard about it, women were sending tampons, right? Women were— and men— were sending tampons to these facilities. And so they were like, please stop. We will make sure this happens and they ordered them. And so, as of today, I've heard of a 100% compliance on this issue. And then I just want to correct my language just one bit. I should say women and gender non-binary people. I mean, obviously we know that more than

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<https://denverite.com/2019/02/07/tampons-in-jail-rep-herod-is-looking-into-statewide-provisions-after-a-personal-story-emerged/>

cisgender women need access to tampons and we provide it for everybody in facilities, not just in the female facilities, but anyone who is menstruating has access to tampons.

Emily: That's a really important distinction to make because that's a whole different set of people who are probably having to, you know, sort of interact on a different level. And as you know, there is sort of a sense of humanity and dignity certainly that's important and probably more vulnerable in those populations. So can you talk to me a little bit about your interest in this topic and I know there's a personal story with your sister if you could share.

Rep. Herod: Yeah, so my sister has been in and out of the criminal justice system for, I don't know, 20, 30 years. So most of my life, and unfortunately most of hers. And when you know, you know how these issues are complicated for families, but I remember that when, you know, my mom would put money on her books or couldn't put money on her books, the number one thing, the number one worry was that she wouldn't have access to tampons or be able to call home to her kids. That's real. That's a real struggle that people who are in these facilities have to face and the choices that they have to make are not only inhumane, but they actually don't keep prisons any safer. Right. They don't keep anyone any more willing to comply or to have good behavior behind bars. I mean, think about it, if you're sitting there bleeding through your clothes, being treated like an animal, not being able to call home to your children, I mean, you're not going to necessarily want to follow any more rules. Right?

Emily: I feel like I have to stop you right there because one of the things that makes me so angry is this idea of [recidivism](#)<sup>13</sup> and how people are treated in prison. In a way that like we're supposed to be rehabilitating them. Right. And yet in the ideal sense of the word, the way that they're treated is anything but rehabilitation and we're expecting them to go back and then reintegrate with their families in a normal way. And I feel like there's a standard here that we've created by the way that we treat our prisoners that's so horrific that the fact that either expected to go back and join the general population as if they haven't been traumatized from the experience that we've created for them is just heartbreaking. Right. I mean it's like the idea that we're kind of like breaking up families essentially by making them choose and I don't think anybody is going to like pick the tampon over calling their kids, but even the fact that calling their kids is so expensive just feels brutal to me.

Rep. Herod: Right. I agree. It is, it is brutal. And I mean, you know, we can get into why people are charged to make calls to their families in the first place, you know

Emily: And often [charged much higher rates than like I would be charged to call somebody](#).<sup>14</sup>

Rep. Herod: Oh yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And with no need. I mean, it's not any more expensive anymore to have these types of phone calls. Right. You know? Right. So absolutely.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/pages/welcome.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/high-cost-of-inmate-calling-charges-injustice\\_b\\_8285802](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/high-cost-of-inmate-calling-charges-injustice_b_8285802)

And those are things that we, that I'm looking at, you know, and yes, it comes from my experience, you know, having a family member or loved one that has been incarcerated. And many of us have at this point. But it also comes from the experience of me just going and doing my job as a legislator on the judiciary committee. Going to jails, going to prisons. Speaking to people and asking them what they need. That is important. People are people and no matter if they're incarcerated or not, they should have respect.

Emily: And then in terms of your colleagues, was there any pushback about the fact that these were convicted felons who can't vote? Right. So these are not the people who are gonna help reelect you directly.

Rep. Herod: The vote conversation didn't really come up, but we did get the, why do they need this? Why do they need this luxury item? And that's when I said, you know, if you don't know how to use one or if you can't say the word tampon, then I don't need you restricting access to one. And so I really don't want to have this conversation with you and I'm not going to. And so, there was some push back, but at the end of the day, I think that people either thought it was the right thing to do or knew better than to have to offend every single female in the legislative body by acting like these things weren't necessary.

Emily: So how much of this would you attribute to the fact that there are more women in positions of power?

Rep. Herod: One hundred percent, one hundred percent. If we didn't have women fighting for women and fighting for these needs, no one would have brought this issue forward. You know, a woman in a correctional facility. Might not have felt as comfortable coming up to a man who was on a tour as a legislator saying, I need to tampons. You know, and men would probably have just written something saying, you know, you have access to menstruation products, whatever that means without being specific. And then people would interpret them the way that they have, which is all over the board and in the, you know, least expensive or, and not even expensive but in the cheapest way possible, which means, you know, again, like a panty liner that's basically a napkin. So I think it's 100% important that people who have real life experiences, which also yes means having a vagina, you know, legislating these types of policies is important.

Emily: And has there been any sort of thought given to the idea that women are penalized for soiling clothing that's related to their periods? To me that sort of feels like a tax on femininity.

Rep. Herod: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And those policies have been abolished through the, through their processes because when that came up, they wanted to make sure that that was not the case any longer. And so those have gone away as well. I will say that when we introduce the tampons in jails bill, so this year we introduced it with every single female member of the Democratic Party signing on as cosponsors. And so basically we put everyone on notice that we had the votes to get this through and we expected you to fall in line and not [?] the

offensive rhetoric that could come out around this bill. Most people took that notice, some didn't. But we had a powerful group of women who said that we were going to make this in Colorado. I will tell you that one of my male colleagues came up to me and said, can I please sign on as a cosponsor to your bill? And I said, you, you know, of course you can just not an introduction you can sign on later, later on. And I was like, but I really appreciate your support and he tells me, my daughter saw the bill get introduced and is so mad at me that my name isn't on there. Can you call her and tell her I'm with you.

Emily: I love that.

Rep. Herod: And so I did and I just think it's so important that this conversation is public that we don't shy away from it because everyone has a woman or someone who needs access to menstruation products in their lives and they will be our advocates from the outside. And that's just as important.

Emily: We're going to go back to Kate now and hear a little bit about how she really did her research when she started this project to try to figure out why wasn't this covered. And she takes the approach of that she wasn't from the United States. And so this was all sort of new to her, but I think that she's being modest because the truth is she really wanted to unpack this problem and understand like, why aren't feminine hygiene products considered something that you can buy with food stamps? Like why have we made so many barriers to entry for low-income women to have these necessary products that they need every month?

Kate S-B: Dignity matters started, we did a very big research with Suffolk University, with the law department, looking at why food stamps do not cover feminine hygiene products. And looking at the history of different people trying to do something about it because there were I believe two or three times where people try to change the law at the federal level because food stamps are set up at the federal level. But then we went down and we look at state by state at what has been happening and what's happening. And I can tell you that already, two years ago when we concluded that research and then presented it to the State House, there were eight states going through this motion of trying to change legislation in some places. It was mostly or only for schools. In some other states it was about prisons. And in other states it was about providing free period protection at state prisons, schools, and homeless shelters, which is probably the most comprehensive version of providing period protection in public places too. So, that's what's happening in Massachusetts right now. There are [two](#)<sup>15</sup> [bills](#)<sup>16</sup> introduced at State House. And the hearing I believe is happening in August and if the bill passes, we will have for a period protection in our state and our mission will be completed.

Emily: And that is one of the comprehensive bills that would be for public places basically.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H565>

<sup>16</sup> <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H1959>

Kate S-B: That's correct.

Emily: What is your temperature read on how people are viewing that bill?

Kate S-B: Well from my conversations with many representatives, apparently it takes six years in Massachusetts to have a bill introduced and passed. That's the average. So that does not fill me with a lot of hope. However, as you said, I think that there is a very big movement going on generally around women's rights. There is already over 70 state representatives that gave their support for the bill.

Emily: Great.

Kate S-B: So I imagine that it will come to money at the end. It always does, but hopefully

Dignity Matters will have some part in that too because we were able to pilot last year a very innovative solution. We received a lot of help from banks, big shout out to Eastern Bank and Blue Hills Bank, thanks to them we're able to start manufacturing of sanitary napkins in North Carolina for a fraction of a cost of retail costs here in Massachusetts, which is the only way why we are able to really provide hundreds of thousands of these item.

Emily: Like what about like Tampax or any of the big manufacturers? Have you reached out to any of them?

Kate S-B: We were trying with Kotex and we were trying with a lot of local kind of small producers. One of them [Love Jane](#)<sup>17</sup> was very helpful in the first year, but people do not realize how big this issue is and how much product you need. And we've estimated we have about 22,000 homeless women and girls. If you would like to provide them with a product every single month that's about five million units of feminine hygiene care. That's a lot of product. Which is why, as an organization after about a year and a half, we started producing our own product, which is very affordable, it costs us about a \$1.15 to produce and have the product shipped and delivered to a woman. And that's the entire cost of supporting a woman for a month, which is significantly less than retail cost of sanitary napkins.

Emily: And what do you like the most?

Kate S-B: Being with women one on one being at shelters and actually being, so as I said, we do not work with individuals. We work with nonprofits. However, one of our five programs that we run is called "dignity beneath the blouse."

Emily: Who comes up with the names?

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.lovejane.com/>

Kate S-B: Not me. I'm not that creative. It's my favorite program. It's a program for which we go to shelters and we directly fit women with bras. It started again small in the first year. These were shelters with five, ten women. Now we pretty much do not do these events if we do not have at least 150 homeless women at the time. So when we have an event like that, we run them in Boston and Cambridge and Framingham. We bring every single bra size on the markets. We have tens of volunteers, we have professional bra fitters, we bring our change rooms and women can come and shop for free and try the bras and I always say we treat them like our best customers and they have a wonderful experience. And that's probably my favorite part because we see the impact

Emily: Right and directly, immediately. I can image that's really wonderful.

Kate S-B: What this whole experience made me realize though is how close we all are to become, maybe not necessarily homeless, but in financial hardship most people we work with are not actually people with mental issues or substance abuse issues. These are people who have financial trouble because something happened. It may have been a death of a spouse or a sudden sickness and inability to pay the medical bills. And this was the biggest eye opener for me, that homeless shelters are full of families and people that work often work full-time and they still can't afford roof over their head. And that there were often people just like me and something that happens usually not one, but two or three things consecutively that pushed them over the line. So I'm there often dealing with people just like that. We've been fitting bras on women that have PhDs, that were professors at universities, that run businesses. It's quite amazing.

Emily: I had a similar experience in high school. We had community service requirements that we had to do and a friend of mine had found this, it was a food pantry slash shelter at the bottom of a church that was like right near school. And so we went. And what was different about it than other places that other friends picked or other people that I knew had worked was that we cooked the food, but then we served it and we sat and ate together. And so you weren't just like slopping food on someone's tray, you were eating a meal together.

Kate S-B: Yes. That's wonderful.

Emily: And I think in terms of your idea of dignity, it's a very different experience to sit and listen to them. And I remember, so there was a guy who always sat at our table and he was really quiet. But when he eventually opened up, he had a degree from Harvard, he had all of these, you know, sort of wonderful life accomplishments and he lost his wife, and I think in a car accident, it was so devastating to him that he couldn't go to work anymore. He became so depressed that he just basically decided he didn't want to do anything anymore. And that rewrote my whole idea of, you know, sort of this idea of like, well you did that to yourself. Right? Or like there must be something wrong because nobody wants to take care of you. Or all of those stigmas that we associate, maybe because it makes it easier to walk by somebody and not pay attention to them. But that experience was transformative in a very similar way that

you're describing because you realize like, no, this is— I mean obviously people are people— but these are also people who have experienced hardship in a way where they weren't supported by their communities or they didn't feel the ability to rally and now they're just sort of disregarded. And that is I think a huge sort of travesty of our time.

Kate S-B: Yes. And I find it a lot of people who find themselves in this situation simply did not have family support. If you happen not to have family around or abroad, you're a refugee or that's a very common scenario. And, second thing that I found very surprising at shelters is that majority of women who are at shelters come from domestic violence situation. Again, not something I knew, but we noticed very quickly during bra fittings a lot of women were very shy and did not really want to be approached even in a way. And that's because they suffered trauma. We obviously learned over time how to deal with them, how to help them, show them that we had there for them. But it was quite startling for me at the beginning. That's probably number one issue for women who are at shelters. They just escaped domestic violence at home and very often they cannot return safely so are at shelters or transitional housing with nothing, a bag that they escaped with. They need everything and they need bras and they need underwear. And they often in this situation for a year or two before they can return safely home.

Emily: It's heartbreaking.

Kate S-B: It's heartbreaking.

Emily: I think there's a similar statistic about [women in prison where it's like 80% of women, or maybe even higher, are there on some sort of self defense](#). Something has happened.

Kate S-B: Yes, yes. And probably the last thing that made us actually really extend our services to youth and to schools was the realization that feminine hygiene products are not provided at the public schools. We work very closely with Boston public schools and Merrimack valley public schools. We actually support every single public school in Merrimack valley with our products. People were, people were not aware of the fact that this is not a line in a school's budget. That this product is not at schools because obviously in wealthier communities we have it at schools for our children. But where it really—

Emily: So it's town by town?

Kate S-B: It's town by town, school by school. And we personally visited schools in Mattapan, Jamaica Plain and Roxbury where we spoke to nurses who are telling us they are every single week dismissing girls. [Going home because they do not have feminine hygiene products to give them](#).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://always.com/en-us/about-us/end-period-poverty>

Emily: So girl comes in to the nurse's office and says, I have my period, I don't have anything. And they say, miss the rest of your classes go home.

Kate S-B: That's right.

Emily: And if you don't have anything, stay home tomorrow too probably.

Kate S-B: They have to come to report themselves back to school. But then they dismissed again. And the nurses were heartbroken by that. They usually very good people, but there's only as much as they can buy themselves from their own money.

Emily: What is the counter argument to somebody who would say, oh, homeless women, like who cares? I mean, I don't know what the argument would be, but maybe it would be something like this money would be better spent on food or whatever. What are the repercussions that you have seen directly in terms of when women don't have access to these products? How does it negatively impact their lives?

Kate S-B: Well, that's something that we see every week at shelters. We hear about it. Women who do not have access to period protection when they need it. It makes them feel very low. It's directly linked often to depression. So it's just the whole mental issue part, but also physical wellbeing because women who don't have sanitary napkins when they need them, they replace them with something. And that's usually bags, socks, papers. These are not hygienic items. So it leads to infections, incontinence, all sorts of issues like that. And that's got impact obviously on the Medicare too because they will go to doctor and someone will have to pay for it. So it just does not make any sense. Prevention would be so much better.

Emily: Right. I also feel like when you're trying to get somebody back on their feet, so to speak, to imagine having like a job interview or a meeting or a time where you're trying to be presentable in some way and being worried. Even the anxiety of thinking, I mean we've all been there where you have a meeting or something and you're like, oh wait, am I like, am I getting my period right now?

Kate S-B: Yes, it's the last thing you want to worry about when you have your interview, just going to work. Yesterday I was telling a friend a story about a man I met at [Women's Lunch Place](https://womenslunchplace.org/)<sup>19</sup>, which is a drop in center for people in Boston and man who showed up at a women's only place because his partner could not come because she didn't have a period protection. So he comes for food for her because she can't come in to ask for help because it's an embarrassing issue. So we hear that a lot. Very surprisingly, recently, I won't name which food pantry that was, but it was in MetroWest. We wanted to provide sanitary napkins to that food pantry because we were approached by women working there. It's a very common request. We had to battle for a year to be able to provide it there because man who are on the board did not

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<sup>19</sup> <https://womenslunchplace.org/>

want them. And their justification was well it's not something that men can use. So we only provide products that are for men and women. How ridiculous. We got there finally and we're providing the product now and it's on the shelf.

Emily: That makes me so angry. I can't even.

Kate S-B: Yes, me too. Because we work so hard to collect the product, manufacture it–

Emily: Also, you're like in the name of equality, like give me a break.

Kate S-B: Exactly. So this is type of things that we are still dealing with in educated suburbs, wealthy suburbs.

Emily: We heard that the bill in Colorado that just recently passed that will make the sort of like tampons available to everybody in prison. That only happened because of the women that were working on it.

Kate S-B: Yes.

Emily: I mean, that's, to me it's sort of at this point I'm like, where are the men? Like why can't we all get on the same page about some of the stuff?

Kate S-B: Yes. Every man has a mother

Emily: Right.

Kate S-B: Most men have a partner or a sister or a female friend. So it's not a men's issue. It's a society issue. It's humanity issue.

Emily: Morality in a way.

Kate S-B: Mortality and decency and– 98% of dignity matters funding, individual funding, comes from women. Regardless of how much we try to get to men and explain that this impact.

Emily: And like what is the analogy that would be compelling? It's like once a month you pee your pants for a week and no one's gonna help you. So you're going to have to go to work and you're going to have to go hang out with your friends with pee all over you.

Kate S-B: I often tell people because we have to compete with other nonprofits for funding and pretty much all missions that are around are valid. However, I often say not having period protection is actually a deal breaker. You might not have a shampoo. You may even get, you know, you may even deal without a toothpaste or a toothbrush. It's unhygienic but you can. But

you can't walk around bleeding. It's just socially unacceptable. It's number one thing for women has to be fixed. That's why dignity matters.

Emily: Our next guest is somebody who has done a great job organizing younger groups of people around this issue and she now has chapters at colleges and universities across the country who are trying to make a difference in terms of this effort. But one of the other things that she did for me was to call into question like just a general way that we treat these products like turns out that they're taxed at a higher rate as though they're discretionary items, which they're not. So low-income or not. We're all sort of being penalized in a way for having our periods.

Nadya: I'm [Nadya Okamoto](https://www.period.org/nadya)<sup>20</sup>, I'm 21 years old and I'm a rising junior at Harvard College and I'm taking time off to do more period activism. So I'm the founder and executive director of an organization called [PERIOD](https://www.period.org/)<sup>21</sup>. the menstrual movement, which is a global youth- run NGO that fights to end period poverty and period stigma through service, education and advocacy. And what that means is that we're distributing period products to people in need. Mostly homeless and low-income menstruators. We're trying to change the way people think, talk and learn about periods through education. And we're now fighting for systemic change through period policy from the local to the federal level around equitable access to menstrual hygiene. [So at the local level we're trying to pass legislation around getting period products into schools.](#) At the state level, we're advocating to repeal the tampon tax, [which still exists in 34 states](#)<sup>22</sup> and at the national level advocating for equitable access to menstrual hygiene overall. And to do all of this, we mobilize young people. So we now have almost [400 campus chapters](#)<sup>23</sup> registered at universities and high schools around the US and abroad. I mean, my passion for periods comes from a really produce and I'll place, you know, [my family experienced living without a home](#)<sup>24</sup> of our own in my freshman, sophomore year of high school. And since then, like I mean in that experience I had the opportunity to talk to a lot of homeless women who were in much worse living situations than I was in. And hearing their stories of, you know, using toilet paper and socks and brown paper grocery bags and cardboard to take care of their periods is really what sort of prompted me to want to do something about it.

Emily: One of the things that I'm aware of is just in Boston there's, there are some small sort of charity organizations that have popped up. I feel like you were sort of the first person on this in a major way.

Nadya: Yeah. So I mean, I definitely don't think I was the first one. I mean, I know that they're like, after getting into this, I was able to connect with a lot of, you know, activists who've been in

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.period.org/nadya>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.period.org/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/07/health/nevada-tampon-tax-repealed-trnd/index.html> - 15 states have this implemented currently, Ohio's bill still needs to go through Senate

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.period.org/chapters>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.allure.com/story/nadya-okamoto-period>

this fight for decades. But I think that what I was one of the first people doing was as one of the first people who was on the younger side and was able to use social media to really mobilize, right? So when you look online, we seem like we're the prominent ones out there, but I know that on the ground there's been activists who've been fighting this from like an academic perspective for a long time. Like a lot of professors, actually [some of them in Boston too](#)<sup>25</sup>. But I think that where the movement is now is that, you know, it's grown to be a lot bigger. I mean period alone has almost 400 chapters and we see a lot of, you know, as you said, smaller organizations that are starting to do this. And I think it's really exciting. Like the more people we have involved, the better. I think what I'm interested in is figuring out how we can translate these short term solutions of like collecting products and giving them out to really making sustainable, systemic, long-term change their policy.

Emily: And so how are you doing that?

Nadya: A whole arm of our organization and the fastest growing program of ours is our policy program where, you know, our network alone has passed about six pieces of legislation at the local level in the last few months alone because we've been fighting to get period products into schools and doing that through school boards, city councils and school administrations.

Emily: And what is the big pushback you get when you go to the Hill or you go local and you talk to the officials about why this wouldn't be a natural thing to do?

Nadya: The biggest push back is just that it's not a priority, right? That there are other issues that we need to be thinking about or like the tampon tax is a significant amount of money and like where would that come from? I think a lot of our work and why I'm really focused on like media and changing culture right now through media is figuring out like how can we make it an accepted idea that menstrual hygiene is not a luxury and it very much is a right and something we need to be prioritizing.

Emily: So talk a little bit about the tampon tax.

Nadya: Yeah. So the Tampon tax or something that when I started existed in 40 states, now we're at 34 so we've made some progress, but it's not actually a tax on tampons itself. It's a sales tax that applies to menstrual products because they're considered nonessential goods. Right. But products like [Rogan and Viagara](#)<sup>26</sup> are considered more of necessity so they don't

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/menstrual-health-programs-need-a-new-focus-in-developing-world-critic-says/2019/01/11/3ce3e528-e8e0-11e8-bbdb-72fdbf9d4fed\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5c4754c62122](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/menstrual-health-programs-need-a-new-focus-in-developing-world-critic-says/2019/01/11/3ce3e528-e8e0-11e8-bbdb-72fdbf9d4fed_story.html?utm_term=.5c4754c62122)

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<https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2017/jan/22/ashley-judd/are-pads-and-tampons-taxed-via-gra-and-rogaïne-not/> - Only Illinois has a sales tax on Viagra and Rogaine is exempt from taxes in eight states.

have that tax. So that's why people call it like the luxury tax on tampons and period products. Because like by not calling them essential goods, they're sort of put in that luxury category.

Emily: Right. Like our moisturizers or other things that are sort of more cosmetic.

Nadya: Yeah, exactly. And has that always been the case? Have you looked at the history of that at all? I'm curious if it's something that, you know, when tampons became, like when Tampax introduced tampons for the first time, people were like, oh, you know, you don't need this so we're going to tax it that way, or like—

Nadya: It wasn't thing that where it was like one day we woke up and it was like now going to be taxed. It was more that I think that as they entered the market they became, you know, they were just introduced in a way that wasn't framed as necessities.

Emily: And that's not a federal tax, that's a local tax.

Nadya: That's a state tax.

Emily: And so who gets the money from that tax?

Nadya: It goes into general like wherever sales taxes is put in. It goes into the revenue [?].

Emily: And have you done any work with the big manufacturers to see if they would be interested in donating or, I mean most of them probably have charities.

Nadya: We have worked with and continue to work with U by Kotex, Tampax, Always, DivaCup, Lunette Cup, Aunt Flow. And we worked with Lola and Cora. Like I think one of the reasons period has been able to grow so fast is because we've been able to establish those sometimes exclusive partnerships with these manufacturers of product.

Emily: And I'm also really curious in terms of when you're dealing with women versus men. And I know this is a catchall, right? But one of the things that we talk a lot about on this podcast is this idea of the more women that get into positions of power or decision making roles, the more women sort of are considered as humans. And I wonder whether you found that, that like, you know, now that we have more women in the House of Representatives, there seems to be much more of an agenda towards women's health and sort of how that landscape has impacted the work you're trying to do.

Nadya: I mean, we definitely see that, you know, talking to women, when we talk to them about periods and period products, their reaction is like, yes, of course. How haven't we thought of this before? Versus like men, we have to kind of go through that conversation. I'm like, this is what menstruation is and the experience of taking care of your period and you know why it matters.

Emily: I'm having a flashback right now to like an old swim coach that I had where like if you didn't want to go to practice with the freezing cold pool in the morning, you'd just be like I have my, you know, and he'd be like, fine, that's fine. Just sit it out.

Nadya: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Emily: And so I mean I feel like there is almost like a, and I don't know whether this is because I'm almost 42 and so I'm much more comfortable with my body than I was when I was younger. But I feel like around the time that girls get their periods, there's like a, you know, a sense of almost like really like I feel like we were all excited. Like we had like a checklist about like who had gotten their period and who hadn't yet. And then it sort of develops into this sense of like shame. And I recently saw something really funny, I think it was on Instagram where somebody was like, can we all please just agree that we're not going to walk to the bathroom with our tampons up our sleeves anymore? Like, can we just hold them like this is a normal thing. And I wonder during the course of the work that you have done, if you've noticed any change. I mean it's so hard to like sort of say like, oh the world is changing versus like the people that I'm hanging out with now don't feel ashamed about having their periods.

Nadya: I mean for sure. And I mean definitely also wanting to get period products into restrooms, right. And workplaces, you know, restaurants and facilities like that to make sure that like this is treated as something that's, that you can expect to be there for you.

Emily: It's funny cause I, you know, have just covered a lot of maternal mortality issues and it's like no one's against moms and I sort of feel like in this case like I can't imagine anybody saying like, no, you know she should miss school today because she has her period and she doesn't have any sanitary products to use. Like that's still an issue though.

Nadya: Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's also, it's always very linked, right? Like, you know, periods are linked to pregnancy because it's what makes pregnancy possible and like. And we are more comfortable yet to talk about pregnancy and other related health issues than we are to talk about periods.

Emily: But why is that? Like what's your gut on that?

Nadya: You know, I think a lot of it is like the cultural link of what periods have meant, you know, in society. I mean periods because it marks when a girl can then become pregnant. Often it becomes also the time when society calls a girl can now become like a wife and a mother. Right? So I think, and that's still the case, very much so in other parts of the world and not so much in the U.S. anymore. But I think that the heavy link to what's happening in terms of society is something that we have to keep in mind for sure.

Emily: And so it, yeah, cause I mean it does sort of seem like that's like when gender really becomes a difference. Like you're differentiated, right?

Nadya: Yeah.

Emily: Like you're no longer a kid. You're a woman or a girl in a different kind of way. I think that's really interesting.

Nadya: Absolutely.

Emily: So just really quickly, are there any takeaways that you feel like are important for people to think about when they're thinking about this issue? Like are there little things that people can do, like going into your local restaurant that you eat at regularly and suggesting to them that they do this or—

Nadya: For sure. I mean there are all sorts of ways. I think, you know, standing up for the fact that period products should be in restrooms or should be provided in shelters and bringing that up to, you know, whoever's in authority is important, but also trying to, you know, make sure that you're being open about how you talk about your own period is also really important. And I think the other thing I always stress is like, try to be as inclusive as possible from the very beginning. So being gender inclusive, you'll hear that I use the term like, you know, menstrual hygiene rather than feminine hygiene and try to use the word menstruators when talking about this, because we're referring to the fact that, you know, not only women get their periods but also people who might identify as transgender men or nonbinary.

Emily: And in terms of the idea of how you would talk about your period in a different way, What are some examples of that?

Nadya: I mean, I think the biggest thing is like just talking about periods as like the natural normal thing that it is. Like one of the biggest things that I always tell, you know, women specifically is like just say period when you have your period, don't say like, you know, time of the month or on flow. Like don't be afraid to talk about it in like a very normalized way.

Emily: So not medical, but just sort of—

Nadya: Yeah, just in like a natural, not a big deal sort of way.

Emily: So I think Nadya's final point about trying to just treat this as though it's sort of a normal bodily function that we all experience is sort of thematic across this whole episode. The bottom line is that women get their periods and that it is messy and that it is something that like we need to take care of and we shouldn't have to take care of it in secret. Something that is a big takeaway for me is sort of this idea of like the more women that get into power, the more we're like, no, actually that's normal and it's weird that you have a problem with it because your mother, your sister, your daughter, they all get their periods and there's nothing wrong with it. It's actually like, it's probably the thing that makes us special in that we can make babies, right? So there's all these kinds of wonderful qualities about it and I'm just so sick of women being

punished for being women. I'm Emily Kumler and that was Empowered Health. Thanks for joining us. Don't forget to check out our website at [empoweredhealthshow.com](http://empoweredhealthshow.com). For all the show notes, links to everything that was mentioned in the episode, as well as a chance to sign up for our newsletter and get some extra fun tidbits. See you next week.