

Dear Honourable Minister Patty Hajdu, and Minister Marc Miller,

We would like to thank you for your statement and the announcement that *“All students in First Nations-operated schools on First Nations reserves and in federal schools across Canada will have access to free menstrual products in the coming weeks.”*

As a group of period equity organizations, we are excited and grateful for this initiative and the positive impact it will have for many Indigenous menstruators. From our grassroots engagement, we have worked to advance menstrual equity across Turtle Island in many different sectors, and have collectively developed significant skills and knowledge from doing this work. We are hoping for clarification on topics including equitable access for youth, community engagement, autonomy of choices, and transparency in policy and procedure across Turtle Island. We ask that you take our questions and comments into consideration when implementing this initiative. As a collective, we also welcome any questions the department may have for us based on our experiences over the years.

Supporting Indigenous Youth is vitally important. They are the heart of Community, and will move forward with the teachings and guidance passed to them from their Elders. Supplying schools in northern communities with menstrual products is crucial to the support and success of those communities and supplying students with free menstrual products is a huge first step towards menstrual equity. While we applaud this effort, the average age of menarche is between twelve and thirteen years old and menstruation can continue up into late adulthood. We strongly suggest that consideration be given to providing support for menstruators who do not attend school and may need to access products outside of the classroom. Through the work of Moon Time Sisters (MTS), an Indigenous-led period equity group founded in 2017 and a partner of True North Aid, free period products have been supplied to elementary schools, high schools, midwife organizations, health care centres, social services, food banks and other community based programs in over seventy First Nation and Inuit communities across Turtle Island, ensuring that entire Community is supported, a concept supported by the teachings of the Medicine Wheel..

As shared by Laura-Jeannie Gibbons, a local from Sanirajak, Nunavut who runs the community food bank:

“Spending money on period products can often mean making tough decisions when it comes to choosing to stay healthy and clean during their cycles or using the money for food. It is very important for the community food bank to see the reality of living up north and that the community is struggling between purchasing the food or the feminine pads. Many of its working families can’t afford necessities. Whether struggling against the rising cost of living or the devastating impacts from covid-19, families are often forced to make impossible compromises between paying for basic needs, like food and rent and purchasing other essentials like pampers, menstrual care products and baby formula.”

In order to facilitate access to menstrual products and truly accomplish period equity for all northern communities, we believe this initiative needs to be extended to each First Nation and Inuit Community as a whole. One of the main barriers to menstrual equity is affordability, and we

know that this is an issue in all northern communities, including both First Nations and Inuit. Can you confirm that those living in Inuit Nunangat are also included in this initiative?

Success of this program hinges on acknowledging that engagement with northern Communities has been tarnished by years of colonial mindset. Regardless of the well-intended donation programs that send “what we think is best for the community”, this type of assistance exemplifies and perpetuates the paternalistic thinking under which colonial frameworks typically operate. In the words of Emily Eby, a Registered Midwife in Attawapiskat, Ontario:

“After birth, blood flow is quite heavy for a few days. It’s much more comfortable to have some proper heavy pads. Certain brands can cause irritation to healing skin, so it’s nice to have access to a variety of different types to see what works for your body. In remote communities, options tend to be much more limited, in both size and brand. They can also be incredibly expensive depending on where you are buying them, which is prohibitive to many people.”

Through consultation with Emily and others in different communities, Moon Time Sisters has learned that some products and brands are preferred over others, just as is the case for all Canadian menstruators. As groups who have always consulted with and listened to the needs of Community, we wonder how the voices of the youth and the entire community will be heard with this initiative? Can you assure us that the provision of products will be done in consultation with the intended recipients (as we have always done with our programs), and that requests for preferred items will be respected?

We understand that things can move slowly when trying to implement new programs, and this initiative is surely no exception. That said, we are seeking clarification on when provision of products to Communities will begin. We would also like confirmation on the quantity of products being allocated per student and (hopefully) per community member; and a clear description of the plan to support this rollout. For example, will schools be asked to keep these products in all washrooms in order to support two-spirit community members? How will they be dispensed and re-stocked quickly? Will they be accessible to all community members wherever there is a public washroom? Lastly, how can communities quickly reorder products once their original shipment has been depleted?

Statistics have always been a vital way to ensure that initiatives have a positive impact on the community they are designed to serve. Over the next few years, we are hoping transparent information on the data collected by the government will be provided to both Community and the grassroots movements who will be following this initiative. We trust that this data will be representative of the longevity of the program, and not just captured during the initial stages. We acknowledge that a scarcity mentality will likely occur, as this typically happens with items that are expensive or hard to come by, in any community regardless of location. The most important metric collected is *usage*, and is indicative of overall success of a program. Each community is unique and will use their products at a different rate, due to the population and their menstrual cycles and we are wondering if this will be taken into consideration when measuring the success of this rollout.

A survey currently being conducted by MTS will obtain qualitative statistics on menstruation specifically in northern regions. Data on preferred products and brands will be collected along with access and stigma related to menstruation. Once this information becomes available MTS would be happy to provide it to assist you in devising an effective and inclusive plan for distributing menstrual products and to add to any measurements collected by the government.

Canadian provinces have already begun to roll out similar campaigns, with Ontario being one of the most recent, and seemingly, the province that pushed this Federal announcement. Nonetheless, it is a movement that has been developing at the provincial level for years. In April 2019 British Columbia announced the first requirement in the province to all publicly funded schools, with Nova Scotia following suit in September. In November 2020, Prince Edward Islands integrated their announcement with one providing free products in food banks and shelters as well. In May 2021, a pilot initiative supporting school districts was announced by the government of Alberta. In October 2021 a new policy was announced by the Ministry of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick announced a plan only weeks ago in January 2022. In many of these provinces, First Nations communities have been left out.

Our final observation is to clarify what the Federal government's plan of action is to ensure access to these products in a manner that is sustainable. As you know, Ontario has partnered with a multi-billion dollar private corporation for their period product initiative, which now enables this business to be directly engaged with high schools across the province. We believe in having an equitable public/private partnership business model that supports smaller Canadian period product distributors to address menstrual equity. This is a wonderful opportunity to support many women-led, Canadian businesses such as Joni, Aisle, and Only, who have supported period equity groups across Canada since their inception. Joni has recently designed a pad and tampon dispenser that makes products easily accessible in all bathrooms. Only has sustainable (biodegradable and reusable) period products which consider impact not only on menstruators' choices but also on the environment. Days for Girls Canada (DFGC) produces patented, washable DFG Menstrual Kits for distribution and is willing to supply any menstruator who would prefer them, in communities not experiencing clean water issues. Through our collaboration with these organizations, we have learned that it is possible to prioritize not only community engagement, but also higher quality and sustainable options for menstruation.

Once again, we want to express our gratitude for this announcement and the leadership this government is demonstrating to advance period equity in Canada. Because there are so many questions to consider, we are ready to step up to offer our support and expertise. Our goal is to ensure that this roll-out is equitable, that it reaches as many community members as possible, that it is respectful of the teachings we have experienced over our years working with Community, and above all that it is sustainable.

We are eager to collaborate as Canada moves forward with period equity for all menstruators on Turtle Island.

Sincerely,



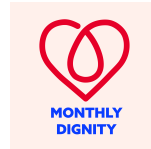
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