

County of San Diego: 2023 CSAC Challenge Awards Executive Summary

TITLE OF THIS ENTRY: Promoting Menstrual Equity in San Diego County

OVERVIEW: The County of San Diego’s program to promote menstrual equity is expanding into all facilities, serving as a model to other jurisdictions to replicate.

CHALLENGE: Nearly two-thirds of low-income people with periods in the U.S. report having been unable to afford menstrual products during the previous year, and frequently must decide between purchasing food or other necessities and menstrual products. This is referred to as “period poverty” and disproportionately impacts people experiencing homelessness, transgender people, youth, and low-income individuals. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the pandemic, young people and community members shared their difficulties in accessing these products. In another effort to advance equity in the region, the County of San Diego took measures to identify strategies to address period poverty.

SOLUTION: With input from community partners, the County developed the Free 4 Menstrual Equity, or Free4ME, pilot program, and installed over 50 free-vend menstrual product dispensers in 24 public-facing County facilities. These included libraries, community centers, Public Health Centers, and Family Resource Centers. Following the successful pilot of this program, the County committed to expanding Free4ME into all facilities. Data on all restrooms throughout all facilities were collected. The costs of various scenarios were compared, based on the variables; public or employee-only, gender, and Healthy Places Index (HPI) Quartiles. With this information, the County is undergoing a phased expansion plan that prioritizes locations where these resources are most needed. Many more installations are planned in the HPI Quartile 1 and 2 facilities throughout the coming year.

INNOVATION: The County became the first known county in California and the nation to tackle period poverty in this way. Free4ME focuses on the County’s Strategic Initiatives of Equity, Workforce Empowerment, and Community Quality of Life, and is founded on the *Live Well San Diego* vision to build healthy, safe, and thriving communities. In contrast to many traditional menstrual product dispensers, the dispensers installed are visually appealing with positive messaging in English, Spanish and Braille. The products dispensed are 100% organic and plastic-free to align with the County’s Strategic Initiative of

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Sustainability. The County is currently in the process of expanding this pilot program to all County facilities and has served as a model for other jurisdictions to replicate similar programs to address period poverty.

RESULTS: Janitorial service contracts order products for restocking, similar to other restroom supplies, and are reimbursed for these costs. Monthly orders are tracked using these reimbursement invoices. During the program's first two years, over 277,500 menstrual products were provided from the dispensers (additional dispensers were installed over this period, bringing the total by the end of year 2 to 69). Many facilities operated under modified hours with limited traffic due to COVID-19 policies in the first year, however usage from the second year shows that these resources continue to be highly needed. Ongoing user feedback of this pilot program is captured via a QR code on signs next to each dispenser. Results show that users range from 18-63 years old, over 50% worried about paying for menstrual products in the previous year, and almost 50% were unable to purchase products in lieu of other necessities. Many users expressed their gratitude that such a service now exists, highlighting the quality of the organic products.

REPLICABILITY: The County has already served as a model for other jurisdictions to replicate similar programs to address period poverty throughout the country. During the first year of the program, the County hosted quarterly Menstrual Equity Community Roundtables to bring together local advocates working on this topic to increase our collective impact towards menstrual equity. The County has created numerous materials to assist in replicating this program and is eager to provide support to other jurisdictions and organizations. The City of San Diego reached out with questions prior to their Free4ME program pitch and were allocated funding in October 2022. They plan to launch their program at the end of summer 2023, and lines of communication remain open for collaboration and promotion. The County has also spoken and shared resources with the County of Santa Cruz, County of Los Angeles, and City of Los Angeles, who respectively launched their programs in April 2022, October 2022 and April 2023. The County is enthusiastic in continuing to speak to other jurisdictions interested in combatting period poverty.

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ADDITIONAL MATERIALS: www.livewellsd.org/free4me
<https://www.livewellsd.org/home/showdocument?id=1246>