

## **What's Missing in Public Restrooms?**

*Partnership provides free and accessible menstrual products to Columbus women and girls*

[COLUMBUS-OH] On Wednesday, January 18, 10:30am, at the Van Buren Center, 595 Van Buren Drive, Councilmember Elizabeth Brown will announce two efforts to make menstrual products free and accessible to women and girls in recreation centers and homeless shelters around Columbus.

“Is there any restroom outside your own home where you are expected to bring your own roll of toilet paper,” said Brown. “Yet there is a nearly ubiquitous expectation for women to supply their own tampons and pads.”

A monthly period is a normal bodily function for women just as going to the bathroom is for men. However, there is no evidence of this in most bathrooms. While free toilet paper and soap are universally expected, tampons and pads are rarely, if ever, provided.

A national study commissioned by Free the Tampons, a Columbus-based nonprofit that aims to end restroom inequality, found that 86 percent of women have started their periods while out in public without the supplies they need. Seventy-nine percent end up creating a makeshift (and poor) substitute out of toilet paper.

“On an errand, in a meeting, or in school, being caught without an accessible tampon or pad derails thousands of women every day,” said Brown. “For an adolescent, the experience can lead to insecurity, embarrassment, and sometimes shame. For the most vulnerable populations, like homeless women, the cost of obtaining reliable menstrual products can even compete with the costs of supporting a family.”

To address this gap, City Councilmember Elizabeth Brown is spearheading an effort with Columbus Recreation and Parks, LOLA, and Community Shelter Board to bring menstrual products to more women.

First, Councilmember Brown and the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department have launched a pilot program for free and accessible tampons and pads in recreation centers, which are the city’s largest interface with the public. Given the success of the pilot, free and accessible tampons and pads soon will be in all of our recreation center bathrooms across the city.

Second, LOLA is teaming up with Community Shelter Board and Councilmember Brown to distribute product to the homeless women whom our shelters serve. LOLA, as a feminine care company for women and by women, is aiming to change periods for the better – for everyone. To date, LOLA has donated more than 100,000 tampons to low-income and homeless women nationally and has pledged to donate at least 400,000 tampons nationwide by the end of 2017. The initiative in Columbus homeless shelters marks their first effort in Ohio.

“LOLA will donate 60,000 tampons to our community in 2017,” said Michelle Heritage, executive director of Community Shelter Board. “That means every woman walking through the doors of a homeless shelter in Columbus has access to tampons, thanks to LOLA.”

On average, 100 families are sheltered each night in Columbus and 95% are headed by women. An average 160 women without children are sheltered each night in Columbus.

“It’s important to help people take care of their most basic health and hygiene needs so they can focus on obtaining job, an apartment, and anything else that stands in the way of getting back on the road to self-sufficiency,” Heritage continued.

The initial purchase of menstrual products, dispensers, and disposal receptacles by Columbus Recreation and Parks cost \$2,000. Currently, the menstrual products are in four of recreation centers: Douglas, Driving Park, Glenwood, and Linden.