Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Q&A: Engaging Communities to Alleviate Period Poverty with Lynette Medley

Health Equity

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There are 16.9 million women, girls and all other people who experience a menstrual cycle in the United States living in poverty, many of whom are unable to manage their menstrual cycles in a healthy, dignified way. Two-thirds of those individuals could not afford menstrual products in the past year. Adolescents and young adults are uniquely impacted, with almost a quarter of teens struggling to afford period products. And with Philadelphia's high poverty rate, we know many of our neighbors and friends are affected by period poverty.

Lynette Medley is the founder and CEO of No More Secrets, Mind Body Spirit Inc., a grassroots sexuality awareness and consultative organization based in Philadelphia whose mission is to decrease disparities in uterine care and menstrual health in underserved communities through the eradication of societal stigmas and dissemination of resources and evidence-based information. Recently, Lynette has been appointed to Governor Shapiro's Advisory Commission on Women.

While there are not validated metrics for capturing the rate of period poverty here in Philadelphia, No More Secrets, who independently created the nation's first menstrual hub and uterine wellness center, The SPOT Period, has served over 1 million people and distributed more than 29 million menstrual products to the community since 2021.

I was thrilled to lean on Lynette's expertise as we published an issue brief with PolicyLab highlighting strategies to improve equitable access to menstrual health care and products for adolescents and young adults. I recently asked Lynette to expand on the recommendations in the brief and brainstorm ways to engage the community in advocacy efforts around this issue.

You can hear her responses in this video or read the transcript below.

Tell us about The SPOT Period and your work to provide education, period care, and menstrual hygiene resources to marginalized people who experience a menstrual cycle.

The SPOT Period (Safety Programming for Optimal Transformation) is the nation's first and only period hub and uterine wellness center, co-founded by myself and my daughter during the national pandemic to address the uterine health disparities especially in communities of color and other vulnerable populations. It is a safe space where people can come and get education and resources in addition to period care products and also learn about services they might need if they're having uterine difficulties or discomforts and get referrals. But more importantly, it's a space for people to feel vulnerable, share information and learn of resources to address period poverty and menstrual health insecurities or disorders.

What are some best practices for community organizations looking to connect young people with the period products they need?

Some of the practices that need to be implemented to provide our communities with the products they need are to first listen to the community. Listen to their wants, needs, and desires around period products, meet them where they are and provide a safe space. And also engage in information sharing, basically having a listening ear.

One of the biggest things I always talk about is to make sure you give full packages of products. Do not separate products or give loose products. That has a negative connotation in our community when people do these period packs, because [youth] deserve a whole pack. And if there's a recall, if they're having a reaction, if [the products] are expired, no one will know because they do not have the full package.

Another thing for people to realize is that oppression should not alleviate choice. So, you need to have their voice and their experience in the conversation to see what's best for them so you can provide the services they need. Otherwise, it's just a checkbox and you're not really reducing the maladaptive behaviors they might engage in to get the products they need.

For youth-serving groups (including schools/health care providers), what is best practice for connecting or referring youth to period focused organizations?

When we talk about best practices for referring people in need of period products, I would of course say that whatever the entity is that's talking about this with the young person or adult is to provide the services there.

The SPOT Period is completely self-funded. We're not funded by the city, state, or federal government and we are completely booked. As of [the time of publication], we have a waiting list of over 2,800 individuals. One thing I would encourage people to do is to create satellite locations wherever they are, whether it be in schools, in hospitals or in a business. Partner with us as the experts who created something that's never been created before and who have a success rate to create satellite spaces so that when you are talking to people, you can direct them somewhere inside your facility.

That is the best way to mitigate risk around period poverty. Assuming that you talk to someone, and they have to go somewhere else, travel somewhere else, or wait on a waiting list—it's just not advantageous. ***Let's create an ecosystem of equity and accessibility for our communities to get period products wherever there is someone in need.***

As someone with over 10 years of on-the-ground experience supporting vulnerable youth, what do you see as impactful approaches to addressing period poverty?

One of the things that makes myself and my daughter different is that we have been in this space doing this work for over 10 years and we have lived experience with period poverty. The best way to address period poverty is looking at menstrual health as a system of care. By looking at menstrual health as a system of care, the products will come.

By having the conversations around menstrual health and wellness and teaching people about their bodies, their reproductive systems and how everything works, people can feel vulnerable enough talking about irregular periods or issues with their periods or pain, and that way we can provide the services that need to be implemented in our communities.

Of course, the period products are another aspect of it, but if we look at it as a whole system, then we'll be able to address it as a comprehensive manner like we do at The SPOT Period. It's important to not just look at it as just a socioeconomic issue but as a health issue and a health disparity in a way that we can best impact our communities.

How has your work within the community given you a lens for advocacy at the local and state level?

The work that I've been doing at the local, national, and international level has given me a lens in the political arena to advocate about the importance of addressing period health as a system of care and providing a way for people to have access to free products. Most political systems do not have an understanding of period poverty or menstrual insecurity or the lack of access to menstrual health services.

But because we've been doing this work on the ground and in the community for so long, we're just bringing the community voices to the table they're not invited to. We're bringing their experiences so that we can counteract and contradict the misconceptions out there about period poverty. Many people in this space come from a privileged ideology and they've never experienced it and never really talked to the people in our communities, so it's important that we bring the reality of what's going on—whether it's a person using a sock or toilet paper [instead of menstrual products] or an adult who can't go to work because she has endometriosis and doesn't have resources or a person who has a bleeding disorder who is bleeding all month. My knowledge, my activism, and my advocacy comes from lived experience and being in my community doing this work every day, all day throughout the year.

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