

Her school's restrooms didn't have pads or tampons. So she took matters into her own hands.



Alexis Lacks, left, and Mariah Smith examine free menstrual products in 2017 dropped off by the nonprofit BRAWS at Friends of Guest House, a residential reentry program, in Alexandria, Va. BRAWS also provides the items to schools in Northern Virginia. (Allison Shelley/For The Washington Post)

By [Debbie Truong](#)

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Natalie Baumeister's frustrations were long-running, stretching back to middle school.

Machines that were supposed to dispense sanitary pads and tampons in the restrooms at her Northern Virginia middle school were hardly ever stocked. Then, when she arrived at Justice High School, young women who needed pads had to retrieve them from the school health clinic, a potentially embarrassing and inconvenient exercise.

“The taboo kind of stems from centuries of sexism,” the 18-year-old said. “It’s a natural bodily function and we need to end the stigma.”

As one of her first orders of business this year as president of Justice High’s Girl Up chapter, an international club devoted to gender equality, Baumeister led an effort to outfit girls’ restrooms with feminine hygiene products.

[\[The once-whispered topic of women’s menstruation now has political cachet\]](#)

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The project at the Falls Church, Va., high school unfolded as efforts to increase access to women’s menstrual products, fueled by grass-roots activism, have attracted political attention from lawmakers across the country.

One November afternoon, a few dozen Justice students assembled, stocked and placed plastic drawers containing pads in girl’s restrooms. They affixed signs to the bins encouraging young women to “take what you need.” Club members are responsible for restocking the bins.

The school supplies sanitary pads in one size. But Baumeister would like to diversify the offerings to include tampons and menstrual products in different sizes.

Jen Golobic, an English teacher at Justice, said students may have avoided asking for sanitary pads from the school clinic because they felt uneasy.

“It should just be part of our culture,” said Golobic, who sponsors the Girl Up club. “Girls shouldn’t have to be embarrassed about something that’s just a natural, biological need.”

The Fairfax County School Board directed the system’s superintendent in November to explore what can be done to support students’ menstrual needs, particularly at schools with many students who receive free or reduced-price meals, an indicator of financial need.

School health offices in Loudoun County, Va., are supplied with tampons or pads, but they aren’t available in restrooms, school system spokesman Wayde Byard said. A church provides young women who struggle to afford menstrual products extra supplies during holiday breaks and the summer.

BRAWS (Bringing Resources to Aid Women’s Shelters), a nonprofit organization, donates menstrual products to dozens of schools across Northern Virginia and, this year, installed dispensers in Manassas Park City and Norfolk school restrooms that provide tampons and pads free.

[*\[Virginia lawmakers seek to make menstrual products more affordable, available\]*](#)

The organization began by distributing menstrual supplies to women in homeless shelters but also noticed young women at shelters were uncomfortable asking for the products in front of family members, said Holly Seibold, founder and executive director. So, the group started supplying pads and tampons to school counselors and parent liaisons, who distribute the products to students, sometimes through school pantries and other giveaways.

Lacking access to pads and tampons carries consequences, Seibold said. Young girls feign illness to avoid going to school while on their period, and women in shelters repurpose toilet paper, socks or diapers because they can’t afford feminine hygiene products, she said.

Lawmakers in several states, including Connecticut, Florida, Illinois and New York, have passed legislation eliminating the sales tax on tampons and pads. A similar bill in Virginia died in subcommittee earlier this year.

“The whole thing is inequitable,” Seibold said. “Products should be available in every public facility just like toilet paper and soap.”