

HCC launches campaign to promote menstrual equity

HOLYOKE – In March 2014, at an International Women’s Day conference in Geneva, Switzerland, Jyoti Sanghera, chief of economic and social issues for the United Nations Human Rights Office, said “stigma around menstruation and menstrual hygiene is a violation of several human rights; most importantly, the right to human dignity.”

The issue of “menstrual equity,” Sanghera and others argue, is inexorably linked to other fundamental rights as well, such as access to clean water, adequate sanitation, and personal hygiene products.

“A life with dignity requires access to adequate menstrual health and hygiene for individuals who experience this natural biological process,” lawyer Ashley Ward wrote in the *Immigration and Human Rights Law Review* in November 2021.

This spring, Holyoke Community College launched a menstrual equity initiative of its own to ensure menstrual products are widely available on campus and free for anyone who needs them.

“Menstrual equity really is a contemporary conversation,” said HCC student J. Gi, a former student trustee leading the “HCC Cares About M.E.” campaign. “It’s something that is taking off in different areas around the world. Access to menstrual products not only affects health, but can also impact attendance in school. Providing products to people who just don’t carry them around in their bags all the time means they will be able to sit through longer exams and stay in class all day.”

The initiative places M.E. boxes containing a variety of free menstrual products in public areas around the

HCC campus. The boxes were decorated and assembled by Gi and Rosemary Fiedler, coordinator of HCC’s Thrive Student Resource Center, which operates the college food pantry and is sponsoring the M.E. campaign. So far, there are nine M.E. boxes spread around campus in locations including the HCC Library, the Student Activities office, and Office for Students with Disabilities and Deaf Services.

“I’d like to see at least one box on every floor in every building,” said Gi. “Students should not be required to divert their attention from their classes to ambulate across campus to find something that is so critical. Having strategically placed stations will expand access.”

Gi and Fiedler rolled out the “HCC Cares About M.E.” in February, in advance of Women’s History Month. Before that, the only places on campus to secure menstrual products were the coin-operated vending machines in the women’s bathrooms, which are not always fully stocked, and in Thrive, where they are offered free through the food pantry.

“Menstrual products are expensive,” said Fiedler. “Students who are on SNAP (federal food subsidies) cannot use their benefits to purchase menstrual products. It’s all about breaking down non-academic barriers. It goes along with school supplies, housing, food, and transportation. This is one small thing we can do as an institution that can profoundly improve a student’s day-to-day experience, and that’s what Thrive’s mission is all about.”

Gi took on the menstrual equity campaign as a personal project in

2021. As student trustee, she served on the Massachusetts Student Advisory Council, where she got a fuller understanding of basic needs and other issues as experienced by students across the state. In talking to other student trustees, she learned about a similar initiative at UMass Dartmouth.

“At HCC, the faculty has been extraordinary in their support of this,” said Gi, a computer science major and HCC STEM Scholar. “HCC has so many powerful women, starting at the top with President Royal. It only seems natural that women, powerful women, would want to see other women succeed, and that’s what menstrual equity will help to accomplish.”

Besides the boxes, Gi put together an “HCC Cares About M.E.” promotional campaign with the help of designers in the HCC Marketing office. She also created a survey to solicit feedback on the types of products people want. For her STEM Scholars service-learning project, she is designing a computer inventory management system to track the stock of supplies in the M.E. boxes, which each contain tampons, pads in a variety of sizes, and Diva Cups, a reusable menstrual device that can cost \$30 each.

“Using this kind of grassroots-style platform is superior to a third-party system like vending machines,” said Gi. “These open-vend baskets are more equitable. By making them visible we are also challenging period stigma. We’re acknowledging that menstruation is something that happens every single day all around us, and it’s really not something we should be afraid to talk about.”