

Time for a Change: Diaper Need, The Scourge Right Under Our Noses

Alescia Marie Teel 27 January 2016

One of Pat Kennedy's first partners, a social worker, may have framed the problem best. When they met with clients who were homeless, they would find them a local shelter. When they met a client who was hungry, they would pair them with a local food pantry and SNAP benefits. When they met with someone who needed diapers, there was absolutely nothing they could offer them. That is, until 2011 when Pat Kennedy was so moved by an article in Time magazine that she dedicated a small inheritance she received to jumpstarting The Greater Philadelphia Diaper Bank (PDB). The organization that started out of Pat's garage today distributes 400,000 diapers a year to residents across Pennsylvania and South Jersey.

When Pat founded the PDB, there were no other organizations in the Philadelphia area providing diapers for the many that were in desperate need of clean, disposable diapers. Those in need included families living on the edge of poverty, adults on fixed incomes with terminal illnesses, and seniors with limited resources fighting to maintain their independence and dignity. The

void that existed created a world of opportunity for the fledgling organization and an immediate "cannot wait" list of partner organizations that had clients clamoring for free diapers.

PDB stepped in and immediately started to support the daily needs of thousands who finally had a place to turn to for help. Just for context, a newborn baby can use about ten to twelve diapers a day with costs of up an estimated \$100 per month (RWJF Community Health Leader Convenes "Diaper Rights" Colloquium 2010). For young families without disposable income who cannot afford a package of diapers, local corner stores offer an even more expensive option: single diapers that they sell loose or in small repackaged amounts that cost about \$1-2 per diaper.

Pat, a former school teacher from Michigan, modeled the PDB after the Detroit Area Diaper Bank and the New Haven Diaper Bank, two of the nation's earliest diaper bank organizations. Focusing on serving the population of low-income Pennsylvania and South Jersey residents in need, Pat rolled up her sleeves and has been known to pack more than 3,000 diapers into her car to get them from one site to the next. She relies on the expertise and support of her close friends and family who serve as executive and advisory board members. The organization measures its progress through basic performance management by calculating the number of diapers distributed and the number of partner organizations.

Fundraising continues to be a hurdle for the nonprofit, although Pat refuses to allow her organization to be underestimated and relies on creative bartering to acquire everything from the correct diaper sizes to a 10,000-square-foot warehouse that houses the PDB diaper stock. She has kept the nearly five-year-old organization growing each year and estimates the most recent annual operating budget at around \$125,000 (which is comprised of in-kind assets).

Funding is used solely for the purchase and transport of diapers with mostly every other service from accounting to grant writing to public relations gifted in-kind to the organization or won through a grant like the one from Walmart which funded the organization's website. Another notable donor has been Huggies' "Every Little Bottom" campaign that has pledged to donate an estimated 600,000 diapers over the span of five years to the organization. This particular donation has helped to elevate PDB and expand its reach regionally by ensuring that it could meet the needs of an even larger portion of the families and individuals in the area facing diaper need.

Diaper need among low-income people exists in part because diapers are not covered by SNAP or WIC dollars. For adults and seniors, disposable diapers are only covered on a limited basis through Medicare at the final stages of life when someone receives hospice care. This means that parents and individuals often have to make a decision between providing clean diapers or other critical

needs like food, prescriptions and more (Polaneczky 2015). Diaper need is arguably one of the most prevalent forms of poverty that hides in plain sight. 5.3 million Americans are living in homes that earn low to poverty levels of income. One in three American families have identified themselves as having diaper need (National Diaper Bank Network 2015). One in twenty American families currently reuses disposable diapers because they simply do not have any other alternative (DC Diaper Bank 2015).

The costs of not having an adequate supply of diapers can be devastating for families, individuals and caretakers. Consider a common theme at daycare centers that serve low-income families called Monday Morning Rash (RWJF Community Health Leader Convenes "Diaper Rights" Colloquium 2010). The name comes from the fact that daycare providers discover the acute rash on a Monday morning after a child has been in a single dirty diaper during the course of an entire weekend. Parents make this decision to ensure that they have an adequate supply of diapers to send the child to school so that they can attend work. The more permanent impacts of not having enough clean diapers include abuse that can evolve from frustrated parents and caregivers who simply cannot provide the needed clean diapers to keep babies from crying, or developing rashes and infections that can include hepatitis, and the humiliation that comes from the inability to maintain a sanitary and hygienic home without

clean diapers.

Diaper need continues to be a form of poverty that is almost never acknowledged despite its serious health implications, lost salaries due to parents missing work because children cannot attend school, and a level of shame that simply cannot be measured. The barriers to clean, disposable diapers do not end there. Impoverished Pennsylvania residents also face a challenge posed by this year's state budget. In the FY2015 budget (which at the time this article was written was still being deliberated), there is revenue language that would tax diapers at the same rate as nonessentials. Young families and adults and seniors who rely on disposable diapers will have to bear even higher costs for this basic necessity that they already cannot afford. In an effort to continue to advocate for the poor, sick and elderly, PDB President Pat Kennedy is working with the National Diaper Bank Network to call for legislative changes that would increase access to this basic necessity for those most in need.

Beyond this advocacy, Pat continues to use creative practices like trading diaper sizes with diaper banks across the country to ensure an adequate supply of the sizes needed to cover the Philadelphia region. PDB partners with other organizations like the National Diaper Bank Network, a clinic run by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, two clinics run by Drexel and key nonprofits across the region to bring diapers to those without. This has helped to expand the nonprofit's reach and provided

the organization with access to its partners' resources like office space. PDB distributes diapers through its partner organizations and has become a critical fuse in keeping those in need involved as participants in social welfare programs. The diapers act as an incentive to many who would otherwise refuse additional support and drop off from programs that require long-term involvement to break the cycle of poverty.

The organization relies on funding from a foundation as well as many small individual donors who believe in the organization's motto, "helping a friend." The organization also credits large and small donations from diaper drives, gifts in-kind from unusual sources such as bridal showers where brides-to-be request diapers in lieu of gifts, to large contributions like the one from Huggies' "Every Little Bottom" campaign. Pat still cannot accept the fact that any family or individual should have to reuse dirty diapers and wants to ensure the future of PDB. As she explained, the organization is at a pivotal juncture and she feels the need to grow. Pat realizes the growth of PDB is reliant on factors that include increasing its budget, while expanding its board and even hiring a paid staffer.

Many parents grumble simply about changing a dirty diaper but there are thousands of parents who stay up at night because not having clean diapers means they are at risk of losing their jobs and endangering the health and welfare of their children. This is occurring simply because under the existing assistance and social welfare

programs, diapers are seen like a luxury item. Pat knows too well that those in need cannot afford to lose the services of PDB. She often references the dire circumstances of Detroit residents after its diaper bank closed. PDB has developed into a heavily-relied-on organization in Greater Philadelphia rather quickly and Pat wants to make sure that it continues to grow beyond her tenure. She envisions a future for PDB that includes establishing permanent roots as a fixture in the region and securing long-term funding to enable PDB to continue to have a positive impact on the lives of the many who benefit from its services.

One day, maybe, diaper need will be addressed at a federal level, but today PDB is making clean diapers, a basic life essential, available to those in immediate need. PDB is helping people in Greater Philadelphia change diapers and this is changing lives.

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