



Policy Proposal: Reduce Diaper Need Among Families in Poverty

Jennifer M. Randles, California State University, Fresno

Policy Challenge: Low-Income Children and Caregivers are Harmed by Lack of Affordable Diapers

Diaper need—lacking sufficient diapers to keep an infant dry, comfortable, and healthy—is a common, distressing, and often hidden consequence of poverty in the United States. One in three families in the U.S. experiences diaper need, and 45 percent of U.S. children younger than three—5.2 million—live in low-income or poor families that struggle to provide diapers. Yet, for the most part, U.S. social policy does not recognize diapers as a necessity. Diapers are categorized as “unallowable expenses” under public programs that provide food for young children, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Parents can use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or cash aid to purchase diapers, but the \$75 average monthly diaper bill would alone use between 8% to 40% of the average monthly state TANF benefit. This has serious repercussions for parents and children. Children without clean diapers get more infections and rashes and can experience developmental delays, while their parents miss more work and school and experience more depression and anxiety. Poor parents utilize numerous distressing strategies to afford, stretch, and compensate for diapers, including: rarely leaving the house; going without food; limiting their children’s liquid intake; reusing soiled diapers; selling blood plasma; and creating makeshift diapers out of paper towels and duct tape. Cloth diapering in poverty is nearly impossible given housing constraints that limit access to personal washers and dryers, laws against washing diapers in public laundry facilities, and daycare center requirements for disposables.

Policy Solution: Offer Diaper Vouchers for Low-Income Families Through Federally Funded Grants

If they live near one, some parents cope with diaper need by utilizing diaper banks, which have proliferated in the U.S. since the mid-1990s. The country’s more than 300 diaper banks distributed 50 million diapers to 200,000 children in 2016, meeting only a fraction of the actual need. To improve access to diapers, California lawmakers approved \$10 million for diaper distribution through food banks and passed AB 480: Diaper Assistance for CalWORKs Families, the country’s first state diaper voucher policy, in 2017. As a result, California TANF recipients with children younger than three became eligible for \$30 monthly diaper vouchers. However, TANF vouchers are only currently available to parents who have welfare-to-work cases and have not timed out on their lifetime benefits. California is the only state pursuing these policy strategies to reduce diaper need. Additional tax-funded grants to support diaper banks and the expansion of diaper voucher eligibility to recipients of WIC, SNAP, and TANF cases covering any child under three years old would enable public programs to better address this fundamental need of early childhood. Given that all three programs—WIC, SNAP, and TANF—are federally funded and state administered, diaper voucher provisions would target

policymakers at the national level for initial funding and state-level policymakers for implementation, specifically those who serve on legislative committees that address health and human services.

As an initial step, this proposal recommends \$25 million in competitive federal-level funding to support state demonstration projects testing the efficacy of diaper vouchers and diaper distribution programs. This would allow states to test the most feasible approaches to public support for diapers through existing needs-based programs that serve families with young children. States could apply for three-year grants through the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Family Assistance. Starting with a competitive demonstration grant program would encourage states and municipalities to identify best practices for the public provision of diapers through voucher programs and existing infrastructure, such as diaper banks, food banks, and TANF and WIC offices, and inform a future federal voucher program.