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**Helping the Community from the Bottom Up:  
Distributing Diapers to the Williamsburg Community**

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**Abstract**

There is a great need for a sustainable supply of clean diapers for low-income residents of Williamsburg since this region is without a diaper bank. Being unable to afford diapers can have a myriad of negative consequences from being unable to send children to child care to increased health risks involved in leaving a baby in a soiled diaper. Our model of a diaper bank differs from most because we mail diapers directly to families, eliminating transportation needs. We hope to partner with community agencies and The College of William & Mary to expand our services and create a more sustainable model in order to serve families in the Greater Williamsburg area. We believe that providing diapers will help break many unhealthy cycles and create a brighter future for our community.

*Keywords:* pregnancy, poverty, disposable diapers, diaper bank

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## Helping the Community from the Bottom Up:

### Distributing Diapers to the Williamsburg Community

Currently, many low-income families in Williamsburg, Virginia may struggle to obtain an adequate supply of diapers. The closest banks are Capital Diaper Bank in Richmond, Virginia and the Greater Hampton Roads Diaper Bank in Portsmouth, Virginia. Williamsburg, James City County is wedged between the regions of Richmond and Portsmouth, with each bank located over 60 miles away. Neither Food Stamps (SNAP) nor The Women Infants and Children program (WIC) vouchers can be used to obtain diapers, leaving women dependent on their own disposable income (of which many have very little) to purchase clean diapers. Nationally, the plight of diaper financing is great, and affects about one out of every three families (National Diaper Bank Network, 2013). One mom's request for our diaper provision service recounts a critical need for diaper subsidy, "I am a single mom and have a special needs son and I'm unable to work due to the fact that he needs care. Receiving diapers for my youngest would be such a blessing."

Diaper banks in Richmond and Hampton Roads work on a referral basis so a mother must go to a different agency (e.g., social services) first to be identified as needy enough to receive diapers. In addition, our research indicates that these banks are woefully understocked. Greater Hampton Roads Diaper Bank receives requests for roughly 90,000 diapers a month; however, they only have stocks to provide 18,000 diapers a month (Leadbeater & Allen, 2014). Additionally, once determined eligible, mothers must provide their own transportation to pick up diapers. Utilizing public transportation to either city from Williamsburg can be expensive, time consuming, and these trips may prove wearing for a low-income mother with young children.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), the cost of living in Williamsburg, VA is 11.7% higher than the state average and 8.6% higher than the national average. The median household income for Williamsburg residents is \$50,865, compared to the Virginia median of \$63,636. The percent of residents in James City County living below the poverty line is 18.4% a rate higher than that of the rest of Virginia (11.1%). The cost of diapers may seem minimal but can become a hefty expense when considering a month's supply of diapers for one child can cost a family over \$100 (National Diaper Bank Network, 2013). As one mother writes on her request form, "My toddler goes through diapers so fast and diapers are so expensive. It can be hard to balance diaper expenses with other necessities. I'm requesting diapers because any help is a huge help and I need all the help I can get."

We first became aware of this major gap in the resources for diaper assistance through our work with The William & Mary Healthy Beginnings (WMHB) Project, an intervention which aims to improve the birth outcomes for pregnant incarcerated women. When the women we worked with were released into the community the re-entry process was a struggle. Many of the mothers were unaware of the social services they were entitled to upon release, and further, the social services their children were entitled to when in the temporary care of someone else. Through our work with the incarcerated mothers, we made ourselves aware of all the different local services women were entitled to (e.g., free car seats, WIC, housing) in order to educate the women. In the process, we realized from our research and hearing the women's plights about being unable to finance this essential item, there was not a service which covered the expense of diapers. We have since expanded the program to the families in the greater Williamsburg area. It has become clear to us that the need in our community can no longer be ignored. Because of this

immense need, WMHB has sought to expand our diaper distribution from just our participants to focus on the community at large.

One alternative option to the expense of constantly buying disposable diapers is investing in cloth diapers. Cloth diapers are seemingly inexpensive, and can be found on Amazon.com for \$12 for a 10-pack. However, this option may not be feasible for low-income families because many child care centers require families to provide disposable diapers. If parents are unable to supply diapers it will limit their access to childcare. This could have long term implications for the child. Children with access to early childhood education tend to have better health, lower crime rates, and are 2.5 times more likely to go on to higher education compared to children without early childhood education (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Finally, many women who are of low income do not have in-home washer and dryers. Most laundromats will not allow reusable diapers for sanitation reasons, so cloth diapers may not be a viable option for many families (National Diaper Bank Network, 2013).

A further impediment faced by low-income families is the limited access to wholesale discount stores. If a family lacks transportation they are reliant on going to whichever store is within walking distance of their homes, which tend to be convenient stores with higher prices and smaller packages of diapers. Higher income families have the ability to buy memberships to whole-sale clubs and front larger amounts of money to buy large quantities of diapers in bulk which ultimately cost less per unit.

Many people do not realize the long-reaching physical and mental health consequences of an inadequate supply of diapers. The average infant needs to be changed 6-10 times a day with newborns needing upwards of 12 times daily (National Diaper Bank Network, 2013). However,

in low-income households with a scarcity of resources to afford diapers, infants are often changed far less than necessary and parents often resort to rinsing and reusing disposable diapers (Karp, 2011). This habit can lead to a myriad of health problems such as severe diaper rash, urinary tract infection, and staph infection (Jordan, Lawson, Berg, Franxman, & Marrer, 1986; Nuutinen, Huttunen, & Uhari, 1996). These infections usually go untreated until they are of emergency status which puts more pressure on the community health systems to provide subsidized care (Detroit Area Diaper Bank, 2010). Furthermore, a baby who is not being changed may cry at a higher frequency and have trouble sleeping through the night, which could contribute to sleep deprivation of the family (Detroit Area Diaper Bank, 2010).

In an effort to avoid the financial burden of diapers, caregivers may attempt to potty train far before a child is developmentally ready, which can lead to further frustration for the family and health problems for the child. Toilet training before a child is ready can lead to chronic holding, which ultimately causes serious bladder problems and urinary tract infections (Hodges & Anthony, 2012). One woman who utilized our diaper provision service recounts, “I have no income and I am depending on the support of my daughter's father which is often hard to rely on and I'm choosing between diapers and other needs of my daughter and myself. I'm going through a pack or more a week, especially now since my daughter has been getting rashes and I have to change her very frequently. I'm very much in need of diaper assistance.” It is clear that the financial strain of diapers creates tension throughout the entire family.

To fill the need we see for diapers in our community, we've hosted several diaper drives. We have put boxes throughout the campus of The College of William & Mary and in local child care centers with advertisements displaying information about the importance of diapers. From our collections, bake sales, and profit shares we have collected over 10,000 diapers for families

in need and have distributed diapers to over 80 local families. In addition, we have donated over 1,000 diapers to local partnerships such as Child Development Resources, which works to provide support and free childcare services to children with intellectual disabilities and Avalon, a shelter for women and children of domestic violence and sexual assault.

The WMHB model of a diaper bank differs from those in the neighboring regions because we have developed an online request process so that reporting in person is not necessary. Anyone who requests diapers online or calls our office for diapers automatically receives diapers. A big advantage is that we are able to provide diapers to women in need quickly as we do not require women to arrange an appointment or go through a tedious screening process. Additionally, we believe this method acknowledges the challenge of finding transportation to diaper banks and eliminates this hassle by delivering diapers directly to the mother's residence. However, like any agency trying to reach out in the community via Internet, we recognize that not all low-income families have regular access to the Internet and this therefore may limit the number of people we can reach. We hope by doing the diaper drives and posting in the local newspaper about our service we are able to reach a wider audience. Another issue of not having women come to our office is the issue of verification. While we do not feel our services are being taken advantage of, and we recognize the advantage of our model as being more expedient than others, we recognize as we begin to grow there will be an eventual need for verification. For example, a verification process could include coming to our offices for a one time screening or showing proof of being a WIC recipient. This will create a more secure model which will be able to cater to larger volumes and ensures diapers are going to families who need them most.

Our goal is to achieve a more sustainable model. Currently, a challenge we face is that between drives we run out of diapers, especially smaller sizes, as women with younger children

tend to be the most common demographic we serve. We are working to alleviate this issue by creating partnerships for obtaining diapers. We have begun contacting regional philanthropies and national companies to seek diaper donations. With the influx in diapers, we have realized a need for expansion of physical space and are working with the campus of The College of William & Mary to obtain proper storage and distribution space. Further, our model has an added cost compared to the diaper banks in Richmond and Hampton, VA. We ship our diapers to the women directly. This requires us to raise additional revenues to fund our postage. Currently, we are applying for small grants to fund this cost. However, these funding sources tend to only fund a project once and are not a renewable source of income. In addition, we are turning to alternative fundraising tactics such as hosting bake sales and partnering with local sporting events to solicit funds. Other options to circumvent the cost of postage include delivering the diapers directly to residents using a university provided car or van.

We have also tried to expand our name and mission to the community and have increased advertising of our diaper drive. One way we have done this is by partnering with local faith communities to raise awareness, collecting donations, and by publicizing our efforts in the local newspapers. Ultimately our goal is to establish ourselves as part of the National Diaper Bank Network. To do this we would need to increase our supply of diapers through drives and community partnerships, be able to collect and provide data for the National Diaper Bank Network, and we would have to register online to be part of the network. This network would help increase our advertising, make it easier for families to solicit our services, and help us with obtaining more community partnerships. This locality is in critical need for diapers and that would provide us with more resources for diaper collection and distribution.

We recognize our model is one of relief in that it works to offset some of the burdens that these in-need families face. However, inherent in the model is that it does not solve the issue of diaper need, it just temporarily suppresses the problem. The members of the WMHBP are working to create a model which goes beyond temporary relief by focusing solely on the Williamsburg community. As we continue to do diaper drives and advertise our mission to the Williamsburg community our personal mission is to create more partnerships and create a way to have a supply and means of diaper delivery great enough to eliminate diaper need in this area. However, this is only one community, and the way in which the WMHBP works to eradicate the nation-wide issue of diaper need is through education. We at the WMHBP hope through our efforts of disseminating information pertaining to the scope and gravity of diaper need we are educating the public on this issue. Because, only through awareness of the issue can diaper need go from a problem which can only be serviced through temporary relief to complete elimination of diaper need. For this problem to be fully eradicated in the future it would take a Department of Health or a social services program such as WIC to include full diaper provision as part of their mission. Those organizations have the connections and means to eliminate this social and health problem.

Poverty in Williamsburg is often overlooked because of its national recognition as a loved vacation destination. But after hearing the stories and seeing the quantity of families (over 80 families) who have reached out to us so far, it is evident that the need is real and begs for attention. One woman's request form read, "Live in hotel. No job. Fiancé just started new tree business & it's very seasonal. Cannot afford diapers right now. And [it is a] very scary feeling. Please help. My son is 18 months old." We hope that we are able to build upon the model we have put in place to serve even more families in the future. It is our hope that all families and

children have a healthy beginning and we feel strongly that distributing clean diapers is instrumental to this goal.

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