

# **The San Francisco Diaper Bank: The Power of Diaper Availability in the Lives of Families in Need**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Within the last decade, medical studies have begun to explore in more detail the link between diaper availability and early childhood health and wellness, especially for low-income families.<sup>1</sup> Adverse Childhood Experiences, (ACEs), of which trauma and health are a core component, can lead to many negative health and economic outcomes which manifest in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to reduce the generational reliance on public assistance programs through additional services is a trauma-informed approach gaining popularity in welfare policy design methodologies. However, notably absent from many anti-poverty and child wellness programs nationwide are diapers<sup>3</sup>. SNAP and WIC do not allow for diaper expenses and research has shown that the availability of diapers leads to both

greater child health outcomes but also increased parent mental health and wellness.<sup>4</sup> There is a small diaper supportive service payment for Welfare-to-Work families with children under the age of 3, but at \$30 a month per child, this payment has a small impact on family needs. The average costs for diapers nationwide in 2023 range from \$42 to \$108 a month per child, well above the special payment for diaper needs.<sup>5</sup>

With the relative low cost and high impact of diaper availability on low-income families, San Francisco County developed the first publicly funded diaper bank program in the United States in 2015. The program began with CalWORKs families and was expanded to CalFresh households in 2019 and to Medi-Cal only families in 2022.<sup>6</sup> The Diaper Bank provides two packs

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, M. V., Kruse, A., Weir A, Goldblum, J.(2013, August 3). Diaper need and its impact on child health. *Pediatrics*. 2(2):253-9. doi: 10.1542/peds.2013-0597. Epub 2013 Jul 29. PMID: 23897910; PMCID: PMC3727676.

<sup>2</sup> Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Preventing Early Trauma to Improve Adult Health. (2021, August 23). Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Smith pp. 253-255

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<sup>4</sup> Smith p. 255

<sup>5</sup> How Much Do Diapers Cost in 2023 [Yearly, Monthly, Weekly Range]. (2023, February 8). Natural Baby Life. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from <https://naturalbabylife.com/how-much-do-diapers-cost-yearly-monthly-weekly/>

<sup>6</sup> Cano, L. (2022). Improving Take-up of the San Francisco Diaper Bank. Report for San Francisco Human Services Agency, p. 6

of diapers to families with children under three, totaling 176-256 diapers per month.<sup>7</sup> The diapers provided by this service have made an impact on people's lives, with over 97% of families receiving diapers reporting that their family felt less stress and 96% stating that their child was healthier after taking part in the diaper bank.<sup>8</sup> There are limited diaper resources within Marin County. Exploring opportunities for Marin to adopt similar diaper bank policies and programs could lead to better outcomes for Marin's most vulnerable families.

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<sup>7</sup> Cano, pp. 6-7

<sup>8</sup> Services to be Provided Help A Mother Out Diaper Bank Services Term: 7/1/2021- 6/30/2026, Appendix A-2, p. 5

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## Introduction

Diaper need, the gap between the number of diapers needed to keep a child dry and what parents and caretakers can provide, affects more than 5 million children in the United States.<sup>9</sup> One in three families do not have enough diapers to change their child frequently enough and children of color are disproportionately affected by diaper need.<sup>10</sup> Lack of adequate diaper supply can lead to health issues such as diaper rash, severe dermatitis, infections, and in some serious cases hospitalization.<sup>11</sup> Diaper need can also lead to other consequences among the parents and caretakers of at risk children. Studies show an increase in high levels of stress, anxiety, and guilt among caregivers. From the lack of childcare options to economic instability from missing too many days of work to care for child health issues, parents struggle with many issues related to not having enough diapers.<sup>12</sup>

Most existing state programs do not support low-income families by providing diapers. Families cannot purchase diapers using benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).<sup>13</sup> Cash benefits from CalWORKs or other Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs can be used to pay for

diapers but with cost of living and inflation, modest grant sizes do not often meet the basic needs and leave room for families to purchase diapers. State or local governments do not typically fund diaper distribution programs, with California being a notable exception. Where diaper distribution programs have been implemented, they usually follow similar organizational structures to food banks.<sup>14</sup>

The benefits of diaper distribution programs, and the diaper bank model akin to food banks, are substantial. A review of diaper distribution programs provided by Mathematica as part of The Office of Community Services in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Diaper Distribution Demonstration and Research Pilot has provided in-depth analysis on the benefits of diaper programs.<sup>15</sup> Benefits of diaper availability are felt by children and caregivers alike. Children have improved health and well-being, caregivers have increased workforce participation and financial stability, and families feel an increased connection to social support services and feel an increased sense of social inclusion and dignity. There are also benefits at the organizational level as research shows diaper distribution leads to a strengthened relationship and increased level of trust between community organizations and participant families.<sup>16</sup>

## San Francisco Diaper Bank (SFDB)

The objective of the San Francisco Diaper Bank is to ensure all families in San Francisco have the necessary supply of diapers so that children do not have to reuse or go without diapers.<sup>17</sup> The San Francisco Human Services agency (SFHSA) provides

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<sup>9</sup> Gates, D., Callaway, I., Campbell, S. E., McCormick, M., & Zaveri, H. (2023). Diaper Distribution Programs Overview of Programs and Available Research. Evcap AFC Evidence Capacity report, January 2023. OPRE Report #2023-019. p. 1

<sup>10</sup> Gates et al p. 1

<sup>11</sup> Gates et al p. 1

<sup>12</sup> Randles, J. (2017). The Diaper Dilemma. *Contexts*, vol. 16, no. 4, November 2017, pp. 66–68.

<sup>13</sup> Randles, J. (2022b). Fixing a Leaky U.S. Social Safety Net: Diapers, Policy, and Low-Income Families. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 5, August 2022b, pp. 166–183.

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<sup>14</sup> Gates et al., p. 2

<sup>15</sup> Gates et al., p. 1-5

<sup>16</sup> Gates et al., p. 5-6

<sup>17</sup> Cano, p. 5

primary funding and oversight to the SFDB while the nonprofit Help a Mother Out (HAMO) operates the diaper bank's distribution network, supports key program logistics, and operates a point-of-sale system for monitoring inventory and verifying eligibility.<sup>18</sup> Founded as a grassroots movement to improve baby and family well-being, HAMO has distributed over 53 million diapers since its founding. HAMO works closely with diaper manufacturers creating their own diaper label, ELO baby. These diapers undergo regular testing to ensure they continue to be a high-quality competitive product comparable to other household brands.<sup>19</sup> HAMO provided more than 2.6 million diapers to San Francisco Diaper Bank partners from July 2020 through June 2021. During that year, the SFDB served over 1360 families and 1463 children.

The SFDB is funded by a blend of local, state, and federal benefits. Eligibility is tied to other public assistance benefits.<sup>20</sup> When San Francisco began with the diaper bank serving only CalWORKs families, funding was drawn almost fully from the CalWORKs single allocation. As the program expanded to families on other public assistance programs, funds were drawn from various sources to help pay for the program expansion. Since June 2022, diapers have been distributed to nine sites in high need locations. Two of these locations are government sites and the other seven are Family Resource Centers or other community-based organizations.<sup>21</sup> HAMO also helps train SFHSA and distribution partner staff on how to use the point-of-sale database, as well as on distribution

procedures and program marketing. HAMO manages a SFDB website in addition to the organizational website which provides information on eligibility procedures and access to the diaper bank program.<sup>22</sup>

Families are automatically enrolled in the SFDB when they enroll in CalFresh, CalWORKs, or Medi-Cal in San Francisco County. Families are informed of their eligibility by a letter sent to them in the mail and a brochure with instructions on how to access the program. Families are supplied with 176-256 diapers, for each child, the amount which national research suggests meets monthly diaper needs for most families.<sup>23</sup> To promote objectives and create accountability, HAMO is required to meet certain objectives and report essential data to SFHSA. This reporting culminates in an annual report identifying accomplishments and challenges, and summarizing activities implemented to make progress toward contracted service outcomes and objectives.<sup>24</sup>

## Program Success

When families participate in HAMO's diaper programs, including the SFDB, they report benefits throughout all areas of their lives. Recipients report improved economic stability as 29% of caregivers stated that it was easier to look for work or take their child to daycare or to school while receiving the diaper benefit. The consistent supply of diapers also increases the mental health of the entire family unit, as seen by 97% of caregivers stating involvement with the diaper bank reduced stress in the family. Additionally, 93% of families receiving diapers reported they have more money in the budget for food and 91% said it is easier

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<sup>18</sup> Cano, p. 5

<sup>19</sup> Homepage. (n.d.). Elo Baby by Help a Mother Out. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from <https://www.elobaby.org/>

<sup>20</sup> Cano, p. 6

<sup>21</sup> Cano, p. 6

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<sup>22</sup> Help A Mother Out Diaper Bank Services Term: 7/1/2021- 6/30/2026, p. 2-3

<sup>23</sup> Cano p. 6

<sup>24</sup> Help A Mother Out Diaper Bank Services Term: 7/1/2021- 6/30/2026, p. 5

to pay their bills. With some financial relief from diaper services, caregivers can focus on providing for their child's other immediate needs, thus instilling confidence in the caregivers' parenting abilities.<sup>25</sup>

Connecting with community partners is also a successful element of the SFDB. The SFDB is a tool for both SFHSA and partner organizations to build trust and deepen relationships with families. Free diaper distribution leads to more engagement with a wide variety of social service programs; 67% of staff at SFDB distribution sites state participants in the diaper program had increased attendance and participation in related programs, 61% of workers state the SFDP leads to more trust with clients, and 56% of workers state longer lasting client relationships.<sup>26</sup> The strength of that relationship can lead to more engagement, program reporting rules being met more often, less program recidivism, and an overall clearer pathway for client success and self-sufficiency.

Leveraging public assistance to deliver diapers efficiently uses structures and programs already in place to match benefits with those families most in need.<sup>27</sup> Programs like Cal-WORKs and CalFresh already have a structure set up around client engagement and service delivery. Diapers are universally needed by every family with children regardless of their family or cultural background. Social service programs are a complex web of different federal and state rules and trying to find opportunities for innovation within those programs can be difficult. Diaper benefits build and solidify relationships between vulnerable families with young children and social service programs, thus providing a tangible benefit

that can serve as an incentivized entry point to access other social service programs.<sup>28</sup>

There is still room for improvement within the SFDB. Only about 22% of eligible families each month pick up diapers, though some families pick up diapers only every 2-3 months. Only 37% of participants found they "always" had enough diapers, suggesting the two standard boxes of diapers each month are not enough or that the distribution sites might be inaccessible.<sup>29</sup> San Francisco leadership has also noted that beginning with just the CalWORKs population meant that lots of immigrant households that are ineligible for CalWORKs are also ineligible for the diaper benefit.

## Diaper Resources in Marin County

There are limited diaper resources in Marin County. Although some local groups help with diapers, it is mainly the Marin Diaper Bank (MDB) facilitated by the Postpartum Support Center. The MDB serves 300-400 children a month with diapers, wipes, clothes, strollers, and other needs when available.<sup>30</sup> However, MDB resources for families are mainly obtained through donations. The MDB receives most of its diapers from diaper drives at faith-based community partners or from other mom support groups. As a result, they have limited supplies of diapers and sometimes recipients will only receive a few diapers at time depending on availability. The MDB tries to spread their resources so that at least every family looking for support gets some diapers. The need for diapers always out matches the supply.<sup>31</sup> This supply, though generous and well utilized, is not as

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<sup>25</sup> Cano, p. 5

<sup>26</sup> Cano, p. 5

<sup>27</sup> Cano, p. 8

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<sup>28</sup> Cano, p. 9

<sup>29</sup> Interview with SDHSA Diaper Bank manager Peri Weisberg

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Marin Postpartum Support Center Executive Director Ivana Jagodic

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Ivana Jagodic

consistent as the SFDB since there is no funding allocated to specifically provide diapers. The MDB uses whatever supplies they can gather from the community. Currently, the MDB distributes diapers only one day per month, due to diapers being stored in storage units. However, the Postpartum Support Center will soon be moving to a new office space in San Rafael with funding help from First Five.<sup>32</sup>

## **Recommendations and Implications for Marin County**

Marin Social Services should explore improving the lives of families with young children by studying and implementing a pilot diaper program for its CalWORKs clients. Diapers can be issued to CalWORKs families as a supportive service, which can be drawn down from CalWORKs single allocation. In previous years, Marin County has underspent the single allocation, so there are likely to be unspent funds for this benefit. Since staff are already tasked with issuing supportive services through the Welfare-to-Work program, adding a diaper benefit may not raise labor or union concerns. While staff may need to learn a new computer tracking system to manage diaper inventories, the task of issuing diapers as a benefit to clients fits within already defined job roles.

The proposed population of CalWORKs recipients also makes sense for a small pilot program. In May 2023, Welfare-to-Work issued 127 diaper supportive service payments. This number gives a general sense of how many families may have children needing diapers within CalWORKs. An automated search system would be necessary to capture the potential eligible population easily and correctly for a diaper benefit.

Diaper storage is an important logistical consideration. If Marin initiated a pilot diaper bank program with its CalWORKs families, a logical diaper distribution site would be at the main Public Assistance and Employment and Training building at 120 North Redwood Drive in San Rafael. This would require a storage space for diapers at that location. A consultation partnership should be begun with HAMO so they can share their expertise during the early planning of Marin's diaper program. Developing a relationship with HAMO will help Marin determine potential program costs, storage logistics, information management systems and for technical assistance. With a clearer understanding of cost and storage logistics, costs can be projected into single allocation spending.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the following steps outline the initial stages to begin offering a county diaper program.

- Refine searching methods to easily determine all families with children aged 3 or younger, within the CalWORKs program
- Build relationships and work with HAMO to determine potential costs, storage logistics, and suggestions on distribution methods and training
- Examine potential costs against single allocation funding
- Pilot with an initial population and expand, if possible, to assess if a larger, ongoing diaper bank program is affordable
- Enter a Request for Proposal (RFP) period for operating a diaper program, pending executive leadership support

A diaper bank could make a significant and positive change in the lives of public

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Ivana Jadodic



assistance clients in Marin County, and is worth exploring and piloting.

## **Acknowledgments**

Acknowledgements and thanks go out to the individuals who helped in the creation of this report. Thanks to Peri Weisberg and John Murray from SFHSA. Thanks to Mark Vanderscoff and Kristen Lawson from Marin County, Health and Human Services. Thanks to the teams at Help a Mother Out, The Marin Postpartum Center, and the BASSC EDP training staff and presenters.