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**POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY**  
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

**'This is a Low-level Health Crisis': Families Struggle to Buy Diapers in Cincinnati and beyond**  
Emilie Eaton, San Antonio Express-News

Megan Fischer was 8-months pregnant with her second child when she scrolled upon an article posted by a friend on Facebook about diaper need.

Out of curiosity, Fischer clicked the link. She quickly learned that diapers are not covered under two government programs that provide nutritional and health assistance to women and families living in poverty.

She burst into tears.

"I said, 'How could this be?' What if I was trying my best and it still wasn't enough? You can't explain that to a baby," Fischer said.

Seven months later, in October, Fisher founded the first diaper bank that serves the whole Greater Cincinnati region. The nonprofit aims to serve roughly 16,000 children under the age of 3 who live below the federal poverty level, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

The agency has grown exponentially. In April, its first month of distribution, it handed out 5,000 diapers. In August, the nonprofit believes it will disperse over 20,000.

But still, Fisher imagines she's only providing diapers for small portion of needy children, 400 out of 16,000.

"We are growing so fast that we immediately give away diapers as soon as we receive them," she said. "We have no surplus."

Diaper need is an issue nationwide, according to The National Diaper Bank Network, a nonprofit based in New Haven, Connecticut that supports local diaper networks and advocates for policy solutions.

There are roughly 5.3 million children nationwide under the age of 3 who live in low-income families, meaning their parents may not have access to a regular, clean supply of diapers.

That's because two federal programs that provide assistance to low-income families – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC - do not cover diapers.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, does provide financial assistance for diapers. However, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [estimates that only 23 percent of families living in poverty](#) received TANF in 2014.

Plus, TANF is used to cover many expenses, including rent, clothing, transportation and heat, electric and water bills, leaving very little money for diapers, which can cost up to \$100 a month.

The consequences are dire. When mothers don't have access to diapers, they leave their children in dirty, wet diapers for too long, potentially exposing the children to urinary tract infections, rashes and painful chafing, [according to a study in Pediatrics magazine](#).

Additionally, many child care facilities don't allow parents to leave their children in the facilities without diapers—meaning parents can't work, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

"This is a low-level health crisis," said James Canfield, a social work professor at the University of Cincinnati who studies poverty and homelessness. "Diapers are needed, diapers are ubiquitous, and we

don't have them."

### **In Cincinnati, a grassroots effort**

The last thing Fischer wanted to do was start a diaper bank.

She works a full-time job developing content and editing textbooks at Cengage Learning, an educational technology company. Her son, Archer, was 1 ½ years old, and she was pregnant with her second child, Elsa.

So instead, when Fischer learned about the problem of diaper access, she went online and looked for an organization she could volunteer with.

She couldn't find anything locally, but did stumble upon the National Diaper Bank Network.

"I found a flyer that said 'So you want to create a diaper bank?'" Fischer recalled. "I said, 'No, I don't, but I want to see why no one else here has. Is it really that hard?'"

After looking at the flyer, Fischer decided she wasn't ready to start a diaper bank. But for seven months, the idea kept popping up.

In September, Fischer attended a spiritual entrepreneurship to build skills for her corporate job. But when she left the conference that was the last thing on her mind.

"Well clearly I'm supposed to create a diaper bank," she recalled saying.

What happened next was quick and intensive.

One week later, she hosted a diaper drive.

On her birthday, Oct. 4, Fischer's husband Brian asked all the guests at her birthday party to bring diapers in lieu of gifts.

And on Oct. 19, Fischer received a letter of determination from the Internal Revenue Service.

It was official. She was the founder of Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank, a 501c3.

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Megan Fischer, founder of Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank, and Jamie Mack, volunteer coordinator, pose for a photo in the warehouse where they sort, package and distribute diapers to local partner agencies.

### **A collaboration that connects mothers to diapers - and more**

It's a humid Wednesday afternoon in late July, and Veree Russell sits in a van at the Villages at Roll Hill, a 703-unit, low-income apartment complex located eight miles northwest of Downtown Cincinnati.

The apartment complex, which is also considered its own distinct Cincinnati community, sits in the 45225 zip code, where roughly 61 percent of residents live in poverty.

For 20 years, Russell has served as a nurse and health educator for Healthy Moms and Babies, a Catholic-based nonprofit that serves at-risk women and children.

The organization offers free services, including STD and pregnancy testing, at its mobile van in various low-income neighborhoods in Cincinnati. Nurses and volunteers can also refer mothers to the organization's free home visitation services.

And in May, the nonprofit began offering diapers to clients, in partnership with Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank.

On that humid Wednesday afternoon, Russell has already served dozens of moms. Three mothers have specifically asked for diapers for their children.

Around 2 p.m., another mom opens the squeaky door and walks in. Russell sets down her file of paperwork and greets her. "What can I help you with?" she asks.

The mom says she needs a blood pressure test. And diapers.

Russell said the new partnership with Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank is great because it incentivizes mothers who wouldn't normally use van services to stop by. Then, nurses and volunteers can connect the mothers to home visitation services and other types of support.

"Our numbers have shot up," she said. "It's been pretty amazing."

Amy Clasgens, a nurse and outreach coordinator at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, spends time on the van several days in a week. It allows her to work with in-need families and connect them to services at the hospital.

Through her work at the hospital, Clasgens also works for Cradle Cincinnati Connections, a nonprofit organization that connects moms-to-be with healthcare and social service professionals. She can connect mothers to those services, as well.

"The van has social workers and community health workers to help moms with everything else in their lives, not just diapers," Clasgens said. "To have that point person there for you all-the-time is great."

### **Starting small, but looking at the big picture**

Joanne Goldblum, president and CEO of the National Diaper Bank Network, was a community-based social worker in New Haven, Conn. when she first learned how difficult it is for low-income mothers to obtain diapers.

One day, she was visiting the home of a new mother when the mom took a diaper off her child, emptied it, and put it back on her child.

"At first, and this is embarrassing, but I thought the mother didn't know any better," Goldblum recalled. "But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that she couldn't afford it."

Goldblum said she became semi-obsessed with the issue. She, like many people, assumed there was some sort of public subsidy besides TANF to pay for diapers and hygiene products. But there wasn't.

"I saw a level of poverty that, even as a social worker, surprised me," Goldblum said. "I worked with families, a mile away from where I dropped off my kids for school, who didn't have heat or couldn't change their children's diapers."

So in June 2004, Goldblum founded the New Haven Diaper Bank. She went to the local grocery store with six of her friends, filled up a van with diapers, and soon thereafter, distributed 5,000 diapers from her home.

As time went on, Goldblum recognized the need to reach low-income mothers outside New Haven, but there wasn't the national infrastructure to support local diaper banks. She also realized someone needed to advocate for policy solutions in local, state, and national governments.

In 2010, in coordination with three other diaper banks in Washington, Arizona and Illinois, and with members of the Huggies leadership team, Goldblum founded the National Diaper Bank Network.

Since its foundation, the network has grown from 30 diaper banks to over 340 today, distributing over 120 million diapers to families in need.

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Goldblum recognizes that many people disagree with the idea of handing out money or products for free. Instead, she said, many people like to spend money on programs that offer poverty-based interventions.

“That’s not to say there aren’t people who benefit from those programs,” she said. “But we miss a critical point. Showing them parenting skills isn’t going to give them the money to buy diapers.”

Goldblum said no one solution will provide diapers to mothers in need. Instead, it needs to be a multi-pronged approach, including both charity and policy reform.

She doubts it would be possible to change the guidelines for SNAP or WIC, which are both nutritional programs, but she said amending TANF might be possible.

Alison Weir, director of policy, research and analysis at the National Diaper Bank Network, also pointed to local government efforts that can make a difference.

In 2015, for example, the San Francisco Human Services Agency, which is a department of the city and county of San Francisco, in partnership with a local nonprofit, helped found the San Francisco Diaper Bank with leftover budgetary money. The diaper bank distributes diapers free of charge to families with children under the age of three in the state-run welfare program, called CalWORKS.

Local governments in California, Connecticut, Utah, Illinois, Maryland, Tennessee and Washington, D.C. also reduced taxes on diapers last year. And in Missouri, the state legislature added an additional \$335,000 in its budget next year to distribute diapers to needy families.

On the national level, Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., introduced a bill in the Senate this year that would create grants, available to both public entities and local nonprofits, incentivizing the creation of diaper distribution programs.

The bill was referred to committee in June, and no further action has been taken. Last year, a similar House bill never passed subcommittee.

“I feel like this should be a bipartisan issue,” Weir said. “But so far, only Democrats have been the ones supporting it.”

Sister Tricia Cruise, president and CEO of Healthy Moms and Babes in Cincinnati, said nonprofits and local governments also need to look at the big picture.

“How do we get women out of poverty?” Cruise asked. “If we are just providing diapers, we are putting a Band-Aid on things. Not that diapers aren’t needed, but if we could provide diapers *and* connect women to other services, that would be even better. Diapers are representative of something much bigger.”

### **One day – and diaper – at a time**

Fischer, the founder of Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank in Cincinnati, has been overwhelmed by the response to her nonprofit.

So far, she has signed up eight agency partners, such as Healthy Moms & Babes, who work with her to distribute diapers locally.

In the four months since distribution began, Fischer received eight additional requests for agency partnerships. Right now, she doesn’t have enough diapers (or money) to meet those requests.

“We have just enough money to get by and provide diapers as is,” Fischer said. “There’s no extra.”

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Fischer relies on nine additional volunteers, who fundraise, set up diaper drives and package diapers. She would love for this to be her full-time job, but finances don't allow that yet.

This year, she plans to apply for several different grants, which she hopes will allow for more additional partners - and ultimately more diapers. But she doesn't think much beyond that. She's afraid creating a new plan will be useless.

"Originally, we hoped to sign up three partners agencies and distribute diapers to 100 kids in the first year," she said. "I don't know what the curve looks like for us. I don't want to create a new strategic plan, only to have it shred to pieces again."

For the most part, Fischer remains in the background, planning, fundraising, organizing and packaging. She doesn't interact with many mothers, as the agency partners are on the frontlines.

But occasionally, she still thinks about those moms. Recently, she watched a local TV news clip about the diaper bank and was overcome with emotion.

"What got me teary-eyed was hearing from the parents," Fischer said. "We don't talk directly to people every day. But when we do hear personal stories, it still gets me."

So, for now, it's one day, one volunteer, and one diaper at a time.

*Emilie Eaton is a Criminal Justice Enterprise Reporter at the San Antonio Express-News.*

Editor's Note: This article is part of a new effort at Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity to feature reported journalism as part of its efforts illuminate news and trends in the field to promote a bipartisan dialogue. To submit pieces, please contact Bill Nichols at [Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com](mailto:Nichols@TFreedmanconsulting.com).

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