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Voice for New Jersey: Moms Helping Moms tackle the growing diaper need

By NICOLE ZANCHELLI Editor

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Moms Helping Moms collect clothing for babies, ranging from premie to 5T. Volunteers are invaluable assets, as they v
Photo by Nicole Zanchelli

WARREN TWP. – One in two American families with infants and toddlers struggle to afford diapers.

The United States is ranked among the richest nations in the world, yet 47 percent of families can't afford the diapers they need to keep their children clean, dry and healthy, according to the National Diaper Network, and as many as 31.8 percent of New Jersey babies live in households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line, according to Zero to Three.

Diaper-need isn't typically the first thought when a baby is born. This basic necessity ushers in a 'batteries included' mentality – of course, expecting families have a stack of Huggies and Pampers at the ready.

"I can't even tell you how many people walk in here and they say, 'I never thought about it,'" said Moms Helping Moms Co-Founder Megan Deaton.

Moms Helping Moms Foundation of Warren has been fighting diaper-need by supplying diapers and baby essentials to families in New Jersey since 2011. Last year, the nonprofit diaper bank distributed 834,538 diapers — representing a 52 percent increase over 2021.

Yet, the demand for diapers is growing.

"It's mind boggling," Deaton said. "I want everyone to say 'wow, I didn't know this was an issue,' to the point where they're just spreading the word."

"We need to do this, we need to change this."

In November, Moms Helping Moms celebrated the milestone of distributing its 1 millionth diaper in 2023 – 3.3 million since the nonprofit's inception – at its warehouse located at 223 Stirling Road, Suite E, in Warren.

"This was the first year we crossed the million diaper threshold distributed within a calendar year," Deaton said. "That just speaks volumes to how much need is out there, and pair that with the fact that there's 50 organizations on our waitlist right now...we're barely scratching the surface of diaper-need in New Jersey."

Moms Helping Moms started out as a simple idea by a group of new mothers who shared the common ideal that no baby should ever have to go without life's basic necessities.

"We were grassroots for two, three years," said Moms Helping Moms Co-Founder Bridget Cutler. "We didn't become an official nonprofit until 2013."

The plan started simply – to collect donations of essential baby items from families who no longer needed them and pass them on to families who did.

"We had just all had our first babies, so we were just doing this project to help other moms," Cutler said. "The intent was to turn around and find an organization that could get resources to families who need them, and I couldn't find one, so we started one."

Over the years, this simple idea has turned into a large network of passionate, caring, like-minded people who work together to help thousands of babies and young children each year.

'Highest Prices'

Moms Helping Moms has community drop sites for diapers, hygiene items, baby formula, and menstrual products. The nonprofit also collects baby clothing, which volunteers sort by gender, season and size.

Deaton highlighted the organization's new program, which is buying new car seats. Used car seats are not accepted.

However, it's diapers that remain the focus of Moms Helping Moms.

"It's the area of greatest need for families because they're so expensive, and there are no resources for them to get them even discounted," Cutler said.

Recent national news reports show that the average cost of diapers has increased 32 percent since 2019, which negatively impacts household budgets, particularly among low-wage earners and families living in poverty.

The annual cost to diaper one child is close to \$1,000, according to Moms Helping Moms.

“Especially if they’re in an urban environment, they’re going to the corner store to buy diapers, and they’re marked up incredibly,” Cutler said. “They may not have a car to go to the big box store, so they’re paying the highest prices for them.”

Moms Helping Moms conduct bulk distributions, where they give organizations a supply of diapers and other necessities so they can do their own distributions.

It also has partners who receive individualized bags based on child needs.

“Those partners fill out an application online for every child that they need items for, we will curate those bags according to what was requested, and then they pick them up here,” Cutler said.

Moms Helping Moms has 95 partners and about 50 on its waiting list. Partners run the gamut from churches, schools, parenting programs, food pantries, domestic violence shelters, and homeless shelters.

While Moms Helping Moms primarily support bulk distributions and partners, individuals who reach out aren’t ignored.

“We do have an emergency distribution program, which basically means if somebody contacts us and says, ‘I’m about to have a baby and I have nothing,’ or ‘we had a house fire and we’re misplaced,’ we will help them one time, and then we’ll help them get into our system,” Cutler said.

Deaton announced that the nonprofit is looking into getting a van to start a mobile distribution and access “diaper deserts.”

"We want to start going into these areas that we're not currently reaching," Cutler said. "Our goal is we want anyone in New Jersey who really needs diapers, period products, clothing or strollers to get it."

Cutler cited the Covid pandemic for having a "huge economic impact on everything."

"Prior to Covid, the statistic was one in three families who have babies in diapers can't afford a sufficient supply," she said. "But that number is now one in two families, so about 50 percent of families in the United States can't afford the essentials for their kids."

"Inflation really hit hard," Deaton added.

Deaton reported that the cost of diapers have gone up 20 to 30 percent in recent years, and government programs like WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) are not covering the diaper-need.

'Huge Barrier'

The mission of Moms Helping Moms is to help thousands of families across New Jersey, with the nonprofit currently serving 95 partners. However, its cause also reveals the grim underbelly of insufficient federal and state government assistance, according to Moms Helping Moms.

Diapers are not subsidized by any federal or state assistance programs. Leading manufacturers also implemented a major cost increase of approximately 20 percent on diapers between 2021 and 2022, according to NielsenIQ.

"There is a very minimal amount of help available to a very minimal amount of families," Cutler said.

Cutler cited the program TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), where the state offers temporary cash assistance for areas like rent, utilities and groceries.

"It's such a small amount of money and such a small amount of families actually receive it that, to think that there's going to be some leftover money to buy diapers, is ridiculous," she said.

Everyone understands why diapers are needed for babies, that's common sense, Cutler said.

"What people don't understand is that you can't utilize daycare centers or early childhood education centers, because they require the parents to provide their own diapers," Cutler said.

"If you run out of diapers, and you don't have money to buy more, you're not going to work because you're not dropping your child off," she continued. "That's a huge barrier that we're trying to get rid of."

There lies a disconnect between cemented legislation and the reality of child rearing.

"I think the people that have historically made the rules are not the same people that are raising babies or dropping them off at daycare," Cutler said. "There's not an understanding there."

Cutler and Deaton joked that their goal is to put Moms Helping Moms out of business, so the diaper crisis is a thing of the past.

"We do what we can, but it's an uphill battle," Deaton said.

Cutler added that "we're the voice for New Jersey on this topic, and we're just going to keep being the voice until everyone gets it."

For more information on Moms Helping Moms, and how to support the organization's cause, visit <https://momshelpingmoms.org/>.