

The Diaper Bank: Making the Connection Between Children's Diapers and Family Health

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Joanne Goldblum is the founder of the Diaper Bank, which distributes 200,000 free diapers a month to low-income families in Connecticut through food pantries, soup kitchens, social service agencies and churches. Launched seven years ago in Goldblum's living room, the Diaper Bank was inspired by Goldblum's observation as a social worker that for people in poverty, "the small things affect the big things." Without the simple resource of a clean diaper, she realized, a low-income child was vulnerable to pain, behavior problems, illness, and even abuse. Since receiving her Community Health Leaders award in 2007, Goldblum has focused on professionalizing the Diaper Bank -- and changing policy on providing such hygiene products to low income families nationally.

CHL: Please tell us how you came to create the Diaper Bank.

JG: I'm a social worker, and while working directly with families who live in a state of abject poverty, I began to realize that they did not have the ability to meet their basic needs, to obtain diapers and other hygiene products. The more I looked into it, the more I learned there were no public subsidies for these needs, and no programs -- not food stamps, not WIC [a federal nutrition program for the poor] -- would pay for them. What I found, too, was that nobody knew about these needs. We have become a country that has turned necessities for the middle class into luxuries for poor people.

CHL: What are the implications of going without these necessities?

JG: We can't expect children to develop optimally when their needs aren't being met. I feel that we have come so far from Maslow's hierarchy of needs [a 1942 developmental theory in psychology]. If a child's diaper can't be changed, she's going to be crying more, she's going to have diaper rash, she's going to feel bad. I think we have set poor children up when they face so many disadvantages. It's not an extra having toilet paper in your home, having a diaper for your baby. Dirty children are referred to child protection agencies. We're removing children from their homes because their families are poor. If we expect them to keep a clean house, we need give them the tools they need.



CHL: Why not recommend cloth diapers?

JG: First of all, most day cares require disposable diapers. Number two, most poor people don't have access to Laundromats. And it's not clear that it's any better for the environment for people to use a diaper service. Most Laundromats don't allow people to wash diapers because it's too expensive to keep their water hot enough. Now you may ask, how do poor people wash their clothes? I know anecdotally that it's much cheaper to get clothes than to wash them. You can go to a food bank or a church and get clothes for free. You can go to some poor peoples' homes and see bags and bags and bags of laundry. It takes money to ride the bus to the Laundromat, to use the Laundromat and to ride the bus home.

CHL: Tell us about the project you developed with the CHL award.

JG: Basically, my project has been to sustain The Diaper Bank. The award allowed us to professionalize The Diaper Bank, to make it sustainable. When I won the award, I was an unpaid executive director, we had one half-time employee, and everything else was done for free by the board or me. That is not a sustainable model. We used a lot of the award for strategic planning. We got help with fund-raising. We bought computer programs. I think we used some of it to hire an employee. From beginning, my goal has been to change policy. We knew you couldn't do that from my living room with just my kids' friends' parents. We knew we had to provide broader support because we didn't want to just sort of tootle along. We wanted to make real change. And we knew we wanted to have a professional organization.

CHL: What change do you want to achieve?

JG: I want to make children born into poverty have the things that they need. In the beginning I wanted to change WIC or food stamps to provide for things like diapers. After a lot of research I realized that it is not feasible. The food stamp and WIC programs are both run through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It makes sense to provide diapers to the average person, but it would take huge change – it's not going to happen. So the way we decided to go about is through the back door. We are introducing small bits of legislation that change the way people actually think about it. For example, we have legislation that one of my board members drafted and that Rosa Delauro, a U.S. representative, will introduce in the House this fall. This proposal would allow states to use childcare block grants for diapers. We've been looking at things like that -- small things that don't require large outlays of cash.



CHL: How much of your work is devoted to getting your ideas out?

JG: I talk to anyone who will talk to me. I do a lot of speaking; I talk to people who want to start diaper banks. I talk about the policy. I worked for Yale Child Study Center – it's where they do support and research for young children. My supervisor was great. She said, "Joanne, change policy, don't just give out diapers." But the reason people listen to me is I give out 2 million diapers a year. Otherwise, if I just talked about it people would look at me like I was crazy. Now that we've got people talking about it, change can be made.

CHL: Have there been surprises as you've gone about making your organization more professional?

JG: A lot. This award helped us raise a lot of money . You can leverage that. But the bigger an infrastructure becomes, the more you have to maintain. The bigger we are, the more the demand we have. The other thing: We had a symposium at Yale University Law School. It was the first national conversation on diaper rights. We had people from many different organizations: Children's Defense Fund, Annie E. Casey. We're starting this coalition called the Diaper Difference. [The Diaper Difference is dedicated to improving the social and economic wellbeing of families who need diapers, and to ensure that all who need diapers have access to them].

CHL: Did you come up with new data, or answers to questions that you couldn't answer before?

JG: The lessons have to do much more with how hard it is to run a professional organization. We began to switch from a founder's board to a more broad-based board. Having my friends and family and me as the board – it's just not a sustainable model. We needed a board that wasn't just there because they were connected to me. We needed a board that was not necessarily connected to me. We began to do that. And it was really exciting. We have a board that was not necessarily just going to go along with what I had to say.

CHL: Was there anything painful about that transition?

JG: Well, we just hired an executive director, and I am now just the founder. That's a little harder. I'm not running the place; I'm not making the day-to-day decisions. I think it's really important to do it sooner rather than later. I think it's really hard if you wait until something happens and you're required to. Life gets in the way, and you need other people. While I was really honored to win the Community Health Leader award, I think a lot of other people do these things too. I think we have to recognize other people's talents and let them help. And also, people want to help.

