

Help a Mother Out's Bay Area Diaper Bank: Alameda County Interim Evaluation Brief

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About this Brief

Help a Mother Out (HAMO) works to improve baby and family well-being by increasing access to diapers for families in need. This brief describes the importance of diapers to families' wellbeing and success, HAMO's role in reducing diaper need in Alameda County, and how HAMO's diaper programs strengthen partner organizations' abilities to serve families. The brief contains data from a literature review, interviews with HAMO's staff members and partner organizations, administrative data, and a survey of Alameda families receiving diapers. HAMO's Bay Area Diaper Bank serves families throughout the greater Bay Area region; this brief focuses on HAMO's Bay Area Diaper Bank in Alameda County.

Diapers are critical to families' health and economic security.



All infants and toddlers need diapers – and lots of them.

Infants need up to twelve diapers a day and toddlers about eight a day.¹ It costs approximately \$18 a week to diaper one child, and \$1,872 per year to diaper two children.² For a parent earning the federal minimum wage, diapering two children accounts for about 12% of their annual gross income.³ This cost places a huge burden on many families living in the United States.



The high cost of diapers creates “diaper need.”

The National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) defines diaper need as “the lack of a sufficient supply of diapers to keep an infant or child clean, dry, and healthy.”¹ More than a third of families in the United States experience diaper need.^{1,2,4} The majority of families experiencing diaper need are employed and almost half have a member who holds a bachelor's degree or higher.² When families do not have enough diapers, they are forced to make difficult decisions, choosing between diapers and other necessities.⁵ Families may also find ways to reduce costs, such as keeping their child diaper-less, borrowing diapers from friends or family, stretching diapers by not changing their child as often as they would like, and getting diapers from a diaper bank or charity.² These decisions are challenging and will become increasingly difficult as the price of diapers rises due to pandemic-related inflation.⁶



Having enough diapers is important to maintaining a family's physical and mental health.

Families who experience diaper need may face social and emotional consequences, including parental guilt, frustration, embarrassment, and poor parent-child interactions.⁵ When parents cannot change their child's diaper as much as the child needs, children are at greater risk of diaper rash and infections, and may experience pain.⁵ In a 2017 nationwide study, more than half of families experiencing diaper need brought their child to the doctor for diaper rash at least once, and about a quarter of those took their child three or more times in one year.²



Diaper need can limit a family's economic opportunities.

Nearly all childcare centers require families to bring a day's worth of diapers in order to drop their child off.^{1,5} This requirement can prevent caregivers from going to work or attending school or job training. A 2017 nationwide study found that the majority of parents experiencing diaper need reported missing work or school during the past month because they did not have enough diapers to leave their child at a childcare center.²

Public benefits, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) do not cover or provide diapers, and no federal child safety-net programs allocate benefits specifically for buying diapers.¹ Only one state, California, provides \$30 a month for families receiving CalWORKs to purchase diapers.⁷ Of the 46 states who have a sales tax, only 10 have exempted diapers, lowering the cost somewhat for families.¹ Thirty-six states continue to charge sales tax on a product that families need.¹

The Bay Area Diaper Bank is a unique addition to existing family supports in Alameda County.

Established in 2009, Help a Mother Out's Bay Area Diaper Bank provides community organizations with an innovative way to meet the concrete needs of children, build trust with families, and offer additional support and services. HAMO's Bay Area Diaper Bank serves families throughout the greater Bay Area region; this brief focuses on the **Alameda County** component of the Bay Area Diaper Bank.

Diapers are distributed to families in need through a network of partner organizations, including family resource centers, voluntary home visiting, facilitated parent support groups, homeless and foster children services, and public health departments. Partner organizations integrate and layer diaper distribution within their current programming for families.

“The core of our business is really to support families and to keep them coming back to the resources. They have this connection with a family resource center and that's where they're getting their diapers. That's the distribution model.” – Kai Forsley, Senior Program Manager at HAMO

In 2019, HAMO received additional funding from the California Department of Social Services to expand their diaper distribution in the San Francisco Bay Area. This flexible funding allowed for HAMO to formalize a deeper commitment to their partners and clients. Families now receive a full supply of diapers each month for children up to age 3.

“Since we were leveling up in our distributions, we thought that it would be really useful to be able to go deep in the communities that we're serving. And when I say go deep, it really also means we go deep with the families that we're serving. Our goal is to remove the cost of diapers from the monthly

household budget. In most cases, program clients are eligible to receive up to two cases of diapers per child per month.” – Lisa Truong, Founder and Executive Director of HAMO

HAMO sees clients as customers. HAMO provides high quality private label diapers and forecasts client needs to ensure families can reliably pick-up diapers in their needed sizes.

“I feel like that is in the organization's DNA that we're always trying to see our clients as our customers..... Also, it's so the experience is more like, here's a gift to you. This is not a handout. This is a gift for you and your child.” – Lisa Truong, Founder and Executive Director of HAMO

“I think that is a key thing about what makes HAMO different is the commitment to families in terms of getting them exactly what they need and in a reliable manner, rather than just whatever's available and not knowing if it's going to be available next month and not knowing if it's exactly what your child needs.” – Lisa Truong, Founder and Executive Director of HAMO

HAMO’s Alameda County Programs serve the clients most in need.

In 2020, HAMO provided over 3.7 million diapers to community partners who serve children in need in Alameda County. These diapers reached an estimated number of 1,700 children each month.⁸ Families who accessed the diapers lived in high-need neighborhoods. Nearly all of these families identified as people of color. More than three quarters of families identified as African American/Black or Hispanic/Latinx.

Figure 1. Alameda County Diaper Program clients most commonly live in...



Sources: HAMO Diaper Bank Enrollment Data at Neighborhood Ready for Schools sites compiled by First 5 Alameda (Jan-Dec 2020), MPCAH program enrollment data compiled by MPCAH (Jan-Dec 2020), and HAMO Bay Area Diaper Bank in Alameda County Client Survey (Feb-March 2021).

Alameda County families greatly benefit from free diapers.

Families benefit from HAMO's diaper programs in many ways. Low-income families already struggle to stay afloat with paying rent, utilities, and other necessities to live and thrive in the Bay Area. For some families, access to free diapers alleviates economic pressure and provides them with extra money in their budget for rent, bills, and other necessities.

“Definitely gives us one less thing to be worried about each month and allows us to use the money that we would be spending on diapers toward other bills.” – Alameda County Diaper Program Client

When caregivers have access to free diapers, they feel more confident in their ability to care for their children.

“The diaper program has helped me feel less stressed about changing diapers. I don't have to wait until the diaper no longer holds more pee to change it. My baby is more comfortable.” – Alameda County Diaper Program Client

Families are also less stressed when they have access to free diapers. It can be worrying for families to spend a significant amount of money on diapers. The HAMO diaper programs help eliminate the stress and worry for many families having to figure out how to purchase diapers.

“The program really helps me take off some of the stress in budgeting or going to the store and not finding her size and having to buy multiple small packs, which is more expensive purchasing that way.” – Alameda County Diaper Program Client

From first-hand experience, staff distributing diapers witnessed the impact of the access to free diapers on their clients, such as relieving stress and easing financial burdens for families. Staff members from HAMO's partner organizations noted that families were very appreciative of free diapers and were happy that they could go somewhere in their community to access and pick-up diapers for their children.

“[I love seeing] the specific relief when they pick up their diapers. They're there on time. They can't wait. And the thanks that we get! It's my favorite day, because we get to see people, and we get to see the enormity of the relief that this is for families. ” – Union City Family Resource Center staff member

In early spring 2021, diaper program clients in Alameda County were surveyed about their diaper need before and since their participation in HAMO's diaper programs. Before being in the diaper program, only 8% of clients reported that they always had enough diapers. But since being in the diaper program, 54% reported that they always have enough diapers.

Figure 3. Alameda County families are healthier and happier after receiving diapers from the HAMO Bay Area Diaper Bank



Source: HAMO Bay Area Diaper Bank in Alameda County Client Survey n=292, (Feb-March 2021).

Partner organizations also benefit from HAMO’s diaper programs.

Many of HAMO’s partner organizations offer a wide range of services that support families and children to live in a safe, healthy, and secured environment. HAMO’s diaper programs serve as an “entry point” for clients to gain access to other services and programs that are provided by partner organizations. In some cases, clients would come to pick up diapers, and stay to take advantage of other services and resources, such as parenting and child development, mental health services, and housing support.

“It has been an anchor for us to start thinking about how we can provide financial assistance, food, and resources, not just post-COVID, but thinking back to pre-COVID. [Our] families were facing many things before COVID. This is a jumping point for us on how we can continue to provide and support families. We are giving out a financial scholarship and referring families to food delivery and that has grown our capacity. – Lotus Bloom, Room to Bloom at Castlemont staff member

The diaper programs offer partner organizations additional ways to connect and build relationships with their clients. Partner staff acknowledge that providing free diapers may not solve all of their clients’ problems; however, it does open doors for clients to trust them for support.

“I think when you’re able to support families’ basic needs such as with diaper delivery, you’re able to focus on the other parts of parenting. You’re able to address child development, depression, and trauma because it’s one less thing for them to worry about... I think that it helps us to focus on those bigger, broader needs as parents... and really what we’re trying to do to

support parenting and to strengthen families.” – Alameda County Public Health staff member

Providing free diapers allows partner organizations to do more outreach in the communities they serve. Some partner staff see the free diapers as an opportunity to have more contact with their neighboring community.

“I’m so grateful to [staff member]. She has been so helpful and resourceful. She keeps my family well-informed about so many resources, especially the diaper program. We appreciate her and the organization overall as a presence in our community.” – Alameda County Diaper Program Client

Diaper need increased drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many families and caregivers to experience financial and economic hardships. While the economic recession has nearly ended for high-wage workers, job losses and economic hardship persists for low-wage workers, who are the beneficiaries of the diaper programs.⁹

“A lot of families are struggling right now on paying bills and keeping a roof over their head.” – Lotus Bloom, Room to Bloom at Castlemont staff member

Nearly 92% of HAMO’s diaper program clients said their need for free diapers increased due to COVID-19. Families shared that diapers became even more difficult to afford during the pandemic because of the lack of available jobs. The economic pressures families face, plus the lack of diapers in stores due to the pandemic, meant that some families and caregivers resorted to unhygienic or unsafe means to diaper their babies and young children.

“A dad was cutting up shirts and figuring out how to make cloth diapers. He was really trying to figure out how to best support his family because he had lost his job.” - Lotus Bloom, San Antonio Family Resource Center staff member

Partner organizations also shared how the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased diaper need, largely due to more families and caregivers not having the financial means to purchase diapers. Partner staff also saw an increase in families needing support with other essentials.

“[The diaper program] helps me to save money to have for food since in this time of COVID the work has slowed down too much.” - Alameda County Diaper Program Client

HAMO’s Bay Area Diaper Bank program model is built to support clients in unforeseen events, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the existing infrastructure of the Bay Area Diaper Bank, partner organizations were able to meet their clients’ diaper need during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. HAMO

allowed for partner organizations in Alameda County to be creative and adaptable with their distribution efforts.

“During the COVID pandemic, families were able to receive diapers (and wipes) when it was difficult to go shopping due to lines and fear of exposure. Home visitors did safe drop-off diaper visits that provided a needed resource and touchstone for contact with our programs. This helped families to know that they were thought about even in the crisis and isolation of the pandemic.” – Alameda County Public Health staff member

Partner organizations collaborated with other local community organizations to get diapers distributed and delivered to clients, especially those that were COVID-19 positive. Partner organizations also worked with food pantries, delivered to clients’ doorsteps, hosted drive-through pick-ups and even met clients at a half-way point to get diapers into clients’ hands.

“From May to July (2020) we were delivering diapers to family’s homes. We focused on families that were COVID positive, for families experiencing symptoms.” – Lotus Bloom, San Antonio Family Resource Center staff member

“Some programs would ask their Community Health Outreach Worker (CHOW) to do the diaper deliveries. The CHOW would spend significant chunks of their time just delivering diapers.” – Alameda County Public Health staff member

Although HAMO’s commitment is to first respond to their current Bay Area partners’ diaper needs, they were prepared and equipped to expand diaper distribution and serve additional local community organizations that saw an increase in diaper need due to the pandemic.

“Our first priority is always going to be our partners, the organizations that we sign an annual agreement with, but we’re trying to do more outreach with COVID rapid response folks. For example, in Oakland, a lot of our regular partners have seen a decrease in their operational hours, but we’ve also added more rapid response partners like Oakland Unified School District. There’s an organization called Homie’s Empowerment that does a weekly free grocery store for the community. This was just to get the diapers out into the community.” – Kai Forsley, Senior Program Manager at HAMO

HAMO is part of a statewide diaper bank initiative thanks to state funding that expires in June 2021.

In 2018, Governor Newsom approved a \$10 million dollar budget supporting HAMO and three food banks across California in providing diapers to low-income families.¹⁰ The food banks that received this funding were San Diego County Food Bank, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, and

Central California Food Bank. The Orange County Food Bank also received state funding for diapers a year later.

Prior to receiving state funding, these food banks distributed diapers only when they were donated. The state funding allowed these food banks to become a reliable source of diapers for families who needed them. While each food bank obtains and distributes diapers a bit differently, they all partner with community organizations to get diapers into the hands of families. The food banks distribute varying amounts of diapers per child, ranging from 25 diapers to as many as a family asks for per month. In total, these food banks distributed approximately 35 million diapers as of March 2021. Combined with the nearly 13 million diapers HAMO distributed, these food banks and HAMO have collectively distributed approximately 48 million diapers to California families.

If the state funding for diapers is not renewed, these food banks would return to donation-based diaper distribution or would need to find other funding sources for diapers. This could greatly limit the number of diapers available to families in these counties and could have negative implications for families who depend on this basic need support to care for themselves and their children.

"There's no item for which I received more calls or requests for that we've not been able to satisfy, than the request for diapers. For years, I would get calls from women who were frantic young mothers who had made, you know, six, eight, 10, 12 calls. Nobody had diapers. And, and I would usually counsel them to stop calling, asking for diapers, because you're just going to continue to get frustrated by the answer that you're going to get, but let us give you food and the money that you would otherwise spend on food, then redirect that to diapers, let us pay your utility bill and the money you would otherwise spend on your gas or electric bill utility bill, redirect that to diapers." – Director of the Orange County Food Bank Community Action Partnership of Orange County, Orange County Food Bank

Conclusion

HAMO's Bay Area Diaper Bank provides a vital service for Alameda County families experiencing diaper need. The clients and the distribution partners alike greatly benefit from receiving free diapers from HAMO – children are healthier, families are less stressed, caregivers are more able to provide their families with the basic needs. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has created tremendous diaper need in Alameda County, and HAMO's Bay Area Diaper Bank is well-positioned to support families and communities during this time of added stress and challenge.

¹ The National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN). (n.d.). The Need. <https://nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org/diaper-need/>

² The National Diaper Bank Network and Huggies ®. (2017). Diaper Need and Its Impact on U.S. Families. <https://nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Diaper-Need-and-Its-Impact-on-US-Families.pdf>

³ Calculated by Public Profit. \$7.25/hour (federal minimum wage as of 07/2020) * 40 hours/week (parent working full time) * 52 weeks (1 year of work) = \$15,080. \$1,872 (estimated cost to diaper 2 children for 1 year) / \$15,080 (annual earnings for full-time work at federal minimum wage) * 100 = 12.4% of annual gross income.

⁴ Smith, M. V., Kruse, A., Weir, A., & Goldblum, J. (2013). Diaper need and its impact on child health. *Pediatrics*, *132*(2), 253–259.

⁵ Sadler, L. S., Condon, E. M., Deng, S. Z., Ordway, M. R., Marchesseault, C., Miller, A., Alfano, J. S., & Weir, A. M. (2018). A diaper bank and home visiting partnership: Initial exploration of research and policy questions. *Public Health Nursing*, *35*(2), 135-143.

⁶ Friedman, G (2021, April 29). Diapers, Cereal and, Yes, Toilet Paper Are Going to Get More Expensive. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/business/consumer-goods-prices.html>

⁷ CalWORKS: Welfare-to-Work: Necessary Supportive Services, AB-480. (2017). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB480

⁸ Number of children served per month is estimated based on the number of diapers distributed each month and the number of diapers allotted per child. For example, each family typically picks up 180 diapers per month so if a site distributes 18,000 diapers, we estimate that 100 children were served. (18,000/180=100)

⁹ The Economic Tracker. Retrieved March 1, 2021 from <https://tracktherecovery.org/>

¹⁰ Budget Act of 2018, SB-862. (2018). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB862