

DIAPERING DETROIT

by Heidi Hagstrom



In July, thousands of ELCA youth and adults will descend on Detroit for the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering. Key messages from Mark's gospel are designed to inspire them to "Rise Up Together" and return to their home communities to "build bridges, bear burdens, break chains, and bring hope," the mission statement of the gathering's host synod, Southeastern Michigan.

The ELCA's approach to the site of each triennial youth gathering can be likened to walking a labyrinth, which often takes you places you don't expect. That is certainly true for our journey alongside the people of Detroit. While the media leads us down a discouraging path through the stories it tells of Detroit, those of us planning the event have witnessed stories of Detroit residents who are fearlessly and enthusiastically reinvesting in the city's rising. For example, Detroit's new mayor is making sure the lights get turned back on and neighborhoods are reclaimed and rebuilt.

And Marybeth Levine wants to supply enough diapers for everyone who needs them.

Marybeth, a.k.a. the "Diaper Lady" recognized a need and created a solution in 2009 by starting the Detroit Area Diaper Bank (DADB). She was motivated by stories of low-income families stealing or reusing diapers. She also heard stories of desperate moms and dads sending their toddlers to preschool wearing plastic grocery bags when their supply of diapers ran out.

Marybeth learned early that parents who rely on federal assistance programs like WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), food stamps, or Medicare, can't get diapers through those programs.

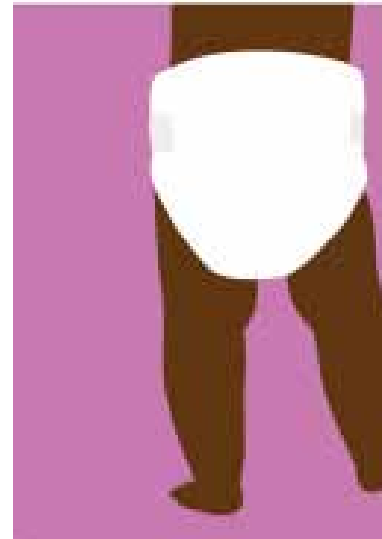
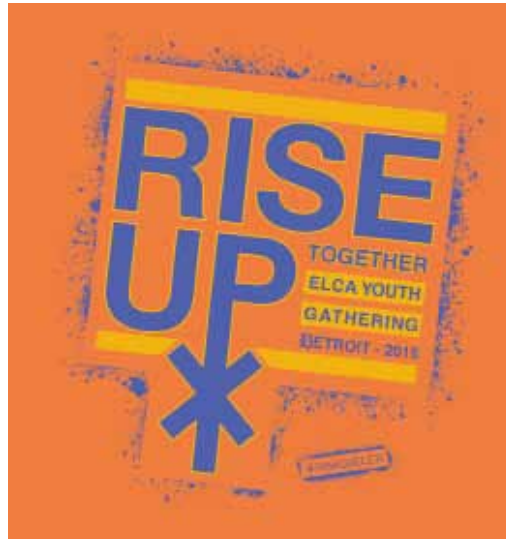
The implications of not having an adequate supply of diapers are far reaching:

Parents cannot leave children at daycare without disposable diapers. So if a parent can't afford diapers, he or she can't go to work or school, and the vicious cycle of poverty continues.

A baby crying uncontrollably from being in the same diaper for too long is at greater risk for child abuse, particularly in an already stressed household.

Seniors who can't afford incontinence supplies

ELCA Youth Gathering participants will collect diapers as a part of their in-kind gifts when they meet in Detroit, July 15–19. The youth are asking Women of the ELCA to partner with them in the diaper collection.



often lose their independence and become homebound, creating pressure on other social services like Meals on Wheels.

Some children with disabilities never outgrow the need for diapers and many will need them to go to school and job training.

Diapers are expensive

A healthy change of diapers can cost up to \$100/month—for all ages. A family in Michigan must be more than 44 percent below the poverty line to receive any kind of cash assistance. Then, a family of three only receives \$492 a month. More facts can be found on the DADB's website (<http://tinyurl.com/ktosr2o>), which Marybeth maintains even though her husband's company relocated her family to Mexico City.

Because of her family's move, Marybeth had to close the diaper bank. Not wanting to leave families stranded, she de-centralized the bank's work by asking her nonprofit partners to continue highlighting the need and capitalizing on the momentum the DADB had created. Marybeth provided them with information and tools to take ownership of the diaper issue alongside the work they already did to get people on their feet and independent.

One of the agencies that accepted responsibility for the diaper crisis is Starfish Family Services in Inkster, Mich., a suburb of Detroit. Starfish has agreed to store and distribute the diapers to Detroit as in-kind gift offerings by youth gathering attendees.

In-kind offerings

ELCA Youth Gathering participants have historically left an in-kind donation in each of the host cities. Staff and planning teams consult with Lutheran Social Service, clergy, and other non-profit agencies and organizations to determine the most pressing needs in the community. Past offerings have included children's books, gift cards, and non-perishable food items.

When the youth gathering planning team charged with identifying the 2015 in-kind offering began its research in Detroit, diapers consistently emerged as a need. Non-profits that work with families and individuals living in poverty list diapers as a top concern.

Rose Coletti, Starfish's own diaper lady, said that some of her clients try to potty train their children too young to avoid needing or wasting diapers. Pediatric urologists believe that toilet training a child when s/he isn't developmentally ready can cause physical problems like frequent urinary tract infections and constipa-



tion. It also can have negative psychological and social implications for children, especially in preschool.

In the beginning, the team felt uncomfortable recommending disposable diapers for the in-kind offering because of the environmental impact. Disposable diapers didn't square with the gathering's value of environmental sustainability. The team studied cloth diapers as an alternative and through its study learned about the realities of people living in poverty. Most families on public assistance, those with the greatest need, don't have a washer and dryer, and their assistance doesn't cover laundry soap. Some of the families in Detroit are struggling to pay their water bills as well.

When interviewing staff from Starfish Family Services in October for this article, they had just distributed 4,000 diapers in two days. Rose said, "You don't know how it brightens our family's faces when visitors bring diapers and wipes."

Ultimately, the gathering planning team recommended disposable diapers, acknowledging that the need trumped the environmental impact in this instance. They also pledged to create study materials that would help youth address the systemic issues of poverty making the need so great.

You are invited

Women of the ELCA groups are invited to join ELCA youth in collecting diapers for their in-kind gifts to Detroit. Connect with young people in your congregation who are going to the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering to find out how you can help. Perhaps a gift of money would be easiest for the youth to carry. If so, they could buy diapers in Detroit and help its economy.

If your congregation is not sending youth to the gathering, you might connect with a gathering synod coordinator (www.elca.org/gathering) to find a congregation near you that is. At the request of youth in your congregation, you can send a check made out to Women of the ELCA with "Youth Gathering-diapers" in the memo line to ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009. You also can ship the diapers directly to Immanuel Lutheran Church, 13031 Chandler Park Drive, Detroit, Mich., 48213.

Collecting, sorting, and delivering diapers are among the service projects young people attending the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering will participate in. Diapers will be collected at the 150-plus hotels where youth groups will stay. On their service day, young people will load the diapers into trailers that will be hauled by local volunteers to the Starfish Family Services building. ELCA youth will unload the diapers into the Starfish facility, take inventory, and organize them by size. The greatest need is for children's sizes 3 and 4, but all sizes will be appreciated, including incontinence supplies for adults. Wipes are also needed.

Starfish will store and distribute the diapers. The Youth Gathering staff are grateful to the Women of the ELCA for supporting youth as they strive to leave a legacy of service and generosity in Jesus' name in Detroit this summer. 🌿

Heidi Hagstrom is director for the ELCA Youth Gathering.