

Avery Ross
Peer Health and Sexuality Education (PHASE)
Testimony to the Committee on Health
October 27, 2011

Review of the School-Based STI Program and Recommendations for Its Improvement

Hello, my name is Avery Ross and I am 16 years old. I am a junior at Calvin Coolidge Senior High School in Northwest Washington, DC. I am involved in the Young Women's Project (YWP) under the phase campaign. Phase stands for Peer Health and Sexual Education. YWP is a non-profit organization that support teen woman to improve their lives, schools, and communities. Thank you for granting me this opportunity to testify to the Committee today.

As a researcher at YWP, I have done interesting work, and it has been a wonderful experience. It has been a privilege to be involved with such an organization that cares about teen's reproductive health. I enjoyed going out to the community and making report cards for the programs. One thing that really stuck with me is how my opinion was valued through majority decision making. I was for once not only seen, but heard. This summer I advocated for better sexual and reproductive health services. I worked with a group of young woman to research and visit different programs such as Us Helping Us, Planned Parenthood Ophelia Egypt Center, and Metro Teen Aids. During the research, we conducted interviews and made recommendations. Accomplishing these interviews made me feel like a professional business woman. YWP has taught me a lot from reproductive health to managing money to non violence to anatomy. If I could I would do this experience all over again, and again, and again.

One of the organizations we focused on as part of our research was HAHSTA who operates the Wrap-MC and STI testing programs. HAHSTA provides free non-invasive testing for gonorrhea and Chlamydia in all DCPS and some charter school once a year. They offer an educational presentation prior to administering the tests. As youth, we are guaranteed free and confidential testing from HAHSTA. During fiscal year 2010, almost 5,000 youth were voluntarily taking advantage of this testing program, and there was a 99% treatment rate for those who tested positive. This shows that HAHSTA's program is effective in treating those young people who are diagnosed with STI's through their efforts.

However, I am here today testifying before you because of the issues that teens are having with STI's and testing. Recent research compiled by Advocates for Youth shows that the rates of STI for teens in DC are four times higher than the national average. An annual analysis performed by the Department of Health HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, STD, and TB Administration in 2009, painted a dismal public health picture about sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis: Nearly half of the Chlamydia and gonorrhea diagnoses were among District residents 15 to 19 years old, with two-thirds of all diagnoses among those under 24. There a many problems that we are facing today that keep youth from getting tested. One is that teens are afraid to get tested because the results are not confidential; many adults fail to realize that their child is or has been sexually active and don't want them to get tested. Another issue is that some youth do not know where they can locate a nearby, inexpensive or free clinic, and finally, some teens do not feel comfortable with informing their parents that they are sexually active, so they can go get tested.

Through my talks with friends, I have found out that teens are either afraid to get tested because of judgment from others if diagnosed with a STI or their parents don't feel the need for them to get tested or they have no clue where a clinic is and not having the right information. I am glad that school-based STI testing is available because it is free and easy to access. I believe that it is important to have STI testing in schools to prevent our STI rates from increasing and for the youth to have easy access to getting tested. I think that some youth do appreciate the fact that they can get tested at school because it is free and easily accessible. However, through my personal experience, I have found that the current STI testing program in DCPS can be improved because youth do not really understand how serious of a problem this is and how STI effect peoples everyday life. They also need the direct information on how STI's appear, what treats its and how to prevent them the correct way. Since confidentiality is a law I feel that teens should the upmost respect when dealing with STI results and it should be done in the correct way to prevent any hurt, harm, or danger involving the teens and others.

During my STI testing experience an organization came to my school to test the entire student body. Attending this session we were given a brief description about what STI's was and pictures of what it looked like. While going through these testing procedures we the student body were told "that if you didn't call for results two after the test was giving and was tested positive then they would call your name over the intercom at school" this doesn't abide by the confidentiality law which mean us teens aren't getting our rights. So something needs to be done for the safety of us teens.

Councilmember Catania, I come to you today because we have a program that has potential to keep youth healthy and aware of their status, but it is not meeting our needs as it is. I know that with your leadership, more youth in DC can be better educated about their health and protecting themselves. Here are some recommendations that I will like to give to make a change on the DC area youth and for their health and safety of them. First I will like to ask that when giving STI testing instead of scary pictures and the basics information that just says what happens we need more of the positive side and not always a scare. If we have more positive information then the teens will feed back positively. I also recommend that instead of calling teens over the intercom into a big group to let them know they all are positive they need to contact you personal. This will decrease the number of bullying over the internet because everyone in your knows your personal business. Here are some programs that are conducting STI testing and their set goals. First HASTA did not accomplish their goal of testing 10,000 young people. They decreased the number of youth being tested from 2009 to 2010. I recommend that HAHSTA to come up with a plan to work with school nurses and not just school based clinics to help provide STI testing and treatment; this would also make it easier to communicate with your school nurse if the teen doesn't have a school based clinic. I also believe by increasing the different the numbers that access the REAL TALK text campaign it would help out a lot of teens who is in need of the help on where clinics are located, I don't believe that it is fair that only teens with the (202) area code could get assistants, what about others that live in the DC area with different area codes, The real talk campaign also needs to send addresses of the clinics and not just the names of it.

In conclusion, I believe that to make a better STI testing procedure that the testers would need do more instead of photos, I believe that workshops with the students on not just the basic STIs that it should be all of the STI's and HIV, on how it spread, the cure, and the location on where you can receive treatment. Testers also need to emphasize on what the confidentiality law is, and how to make sure that the testers are obeying this law; I believe this will make the teens feel comfortable about getting tested and not worrying on if their parents or friends will find out about their business. Councilmember Catania I would like for you to make a commitment on asking the Department of Health staff to take into consideration the input of us youth when making decisions dealing with us involving STI testing and information among it. I feel that with this commitment and can make a huge difference when coming to different schools for testing and giving the result of their testing.