

**Testimony to the Committee on Health
For the Performance Oversight Hearing on the Department of Health**

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Hello Council Member Alexander and other Committee members. My name is Dasia Kirkland, I'm 16 years old and I'm a junior at Coolidge SHS. I am the oldest of two children. I've been raised by a single mother and I live in Ward 5. I have a dream of one day becoming an anesthesiologist and studying at Harvard. Currently, I am a youth staff member at the Young Women's Project (YWP) where we learn and educate people about reproductive health. We teach people how to use the condom properly, how to prevent STIs and HIV, how to deal with an unplanned pregnancy, healthy relationships, and communication skills. I got involved because I think it's crucial for our youth to be informed about sex and its consequences.

One of the responsibilities I have at YWP is to be a peer educator at Coolidge. YWP has 36 staff and peer educators who are part of the Wrap-MC Youth Pilot program at HAHSTA. Thanks to your support, YWP youth staff helped to pass this program two years ago. HAHSTA supplies the condoms. YWP does all of the training and education and site management for Coolidge and five other DCPS high school sites. I want to thank Principal Lawrence and Ms. Rakavina at Coolidge for supporting this program.

I'm here to give you an update on what YWP has been able to do thank to HAHSTA's condom availability program and your support of this policy.

- We recruited 50 peer educators in the month of October. The training consisted of proper condom use, STIs and HIV, pregnancy, reproductive anatomy, contraception, healthy relationships, gender and sexuality, and peer education methods. I enjoyed learning about the body and how it functions. I learned how to use a condom properly, the many options of contraception, like the barrier methods. We talked about healthy relationships and not-so-healthy relationships. I think it is important for all youth to learn this information because it's life, and young people should be concerned about these issues. Sexual health directly affects them and the people around them.

- We all took and all passed the Department of Health's Wrap MC test in November.

- In December, after getting all the reproductive health and peer education training, we began distributing condoms and educating people in the six schools we work in, which are Cardozo, Bell, Wilson, Coolidge, Roosevelt and Dunbar.
- Since December, our peer educators have distributed 2740 external condoms, 800 internal condoms, 245 dental dams and 330 lubrication packets. 785 people have received condoms, and 575 people have received other safe sex materials.
- Currently, we are in the process of learning about group facilitation, group counseling, community resources, youth-adult partnerships and data collection methods. Soon, we will be starting classroom presentations, lunch tables, and group discussions.

On a day to day basis, I advocate for safe sex to teens and young adults. I love talking to my peers and educating them about safe sex. It amazes me how many people don't know how to use a condom properly. I enjoyed busting sexual health myths. Most people think women can't get pregnant while they're on their period. And a lot of people still use the pullout method as a form of contraception. For this reason it's important to go out and do the education that youth Wrap MCs do.

I would now like to share with you some of the trends that myself and other peer educators have been observing in our schools. One of the biggest issues we've had thus far has been trying promote the female condom. In my experience, when I give the condoms, the students throw the female condoms and lube away. They will come back but only want the male condoms. The Wrap MC Program can help by informing students about all the positives aspects of the female condom, lubrication and other safe sex materials. It is extremely important for youth to know about other options besides the male condom because it broadens their sexual health options. Through The Wrap MC Program peers bring this kind of information to peers in school and they can encourage the use of often overlooked tools that can help prevent diseases and teen pregnancy.

As a peer educator, I love to bust myths. For instance, although, boys come back every day to get condoms, they never ask questions related to sex. They say "I know how to have sex. I've been having sex since I was 12 years old." So, I ask the questions and when they respond, and I know it's not right, I correct them. I'll ask, "Can a girl can get pregnant from pre-ejaculate?" They'll reply with a "no," so I inform them

that actually this can happen. I also ask "what's the first thing you do when you're about to use a condom." Boys will reply, "I tear it open with my teeth, but try not to rip it." Myself and other peer educators have found that men believe they are so superior, especially when it comes to sex. They know everything and there's nothing for them to learn. Girls, on the other hand, are embarrassed to accept the condoms because they think others will think they are whores. By teaching girls that there's nothing to be embarrassed about, that it's something you should actually be proud about, that you're protecting yourself and that you care about your body, then I think they will be a lot safer when it comes to sex. I think the Wrap MC program allows peer educators to slowly break down negative outlooks, misinformation and myths. I think by actually showing them the facts, they will listen and at least think twice before they make their next decision.

I would like to talk now about some of the barriers my fellow peer educators and I have faced and the support that we need to reach even more youth.

- 1) We need to be seen as a part of the health program in schools. Even though I'm working towards helping our students' health with condoms and information, I don't feel like I am part of a team. I had to introduce myself as a peer educator because there is no formal role for us at the clinic. I feel peer education should be a part of the health program in school because it is better than just getting a condom from the nurse- it's more intimate. I recommend having a Council or Committee of adults and youth working on health issues that meets once a month to talk about problems and solutions and who is doing what. The nurse she just says "here take one" without knowing if you know how to use them properly. Schools should take us more seriously, because peer education is filling a gap in knowledge.
- 2) We need more money for peer education and to pay peer educators. We are doing all of this work with the private funds that the Young Women's Project raises. However, this limits the number of youth that can be trained and the hours they can work on the ground. The Department of Health should designate funding to cover the stipends of the youth Wrap MCs. This means that any youth-serving organization that wants to take on a Wrap MC peer education program will be able to give youth payments though the government.

In conclusion, I would like to once again thank you for supporting the Wrap Mc Program so we can continue making a difference in our community.