



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

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February 16, 2012


Hello Chairman Catania and council members. My name is Elisha Williams. I am 16 and a sophomore at Banneker High School. I am also a staff member at the Young Women's Project (YWP) working on the Peer Health and Sexuality Education Program (PHASE). Today I would like address the need for peer educators.

Before I became a peer educator I did not know anything about peer health and sexuality education. I did have sex ed in school -- two lessons on STIs, HIV and pregnancy -- but not much information and no discussion of real life issues. For me, sex education is a life or death issue. And peer educators can make the difference between life or death for some teens.

Every time you turn around, someone is dying because of STIs. I have two friends who found out they had STIs. The whole school also found out. They started feel bad about themselves to the point where they feel they are not welcome. One tried to commit suicide. People are ruined because everyone knows their business. That's the dangerous side of peer pressure. Some people start picking on you because you've had an experience and someone is going to use it against you you have to be able to trust one person. The peer educator can be that person.

I have a friend whose mother has HIV. She is trying to take care of her mother and her younger siblings. She is stressed and she does not have the support and resources that she needs to help herself and her family. When you are sick, you need someone to help you --- it's going to be your eldest child.

Peer education is important because it can create a positive pressure that will help go against all the negative peer pressure around us. Peer educators are there to support other teens and not judge them. They give encouraging words and accurate information and provide tools such as leadership roles and educating their peers, needed to advocate for themselves in order to live safe, and healthy lives. Here are some reasons why peer education is important and effective:

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- 1) **Teens actually do feel comfortable with talking to someone their age and they will understand how serious the issue really is.** They talk to someone their own age you feel open, it's like some teens will not judge you. Peer educators engage in real talk. Real talk is a heart-to-heart with teens.
 - 2) **Research show that peer education produces good results.** According to Advocates for Youth, a DC based organization, overwhelming amounts of evidence vouch for the positive effects of peer education. Peer education helps youth prosper and not be held down by the problems of today such as teen age pregnancy.
 - 3) **Adults can be judgmental.** My friend went to CVS and asked for some condoms. They made assumptions that she was 15 and they said that she didn't need any condoms. She was offended because they said to her that she shouldn't be having sex and that she should be talking to her mother. They were intruding in on her personal life when they should have been giving her condoms. I've had adults judge me because I've asked the question. I grew up in a church household so the subject rarely comes up. Some people discourage youth from asking questions.
 - 4) **Youth need to take responsibility for their peers.** We are the resources for each other. Even though you might not like the person, you need to do your job.

I would like to create a peer educator network that includes peer educators from organizations across the city -- YWP, Plan Parenthood, LAYC, Sasha Bruce and Metro Teen Aids. The network should be mostly led by teens that become properly educated and informed about sex and reproductive health who are paid as part of a DOES program for their work. We would like to see 100 positions. These youth educators would have four main roles:

- As trainers, they could provide information and training for sex education classes in school and provide workshops after school. We could also help educate youth at STI testing and during lunch.
- As Counselors, we could organize an after school program that gives resources and information to youth who need it. It's also someone to talk to who you can trust.
- As event planners, we could organize different events like pregnancy and STI/STD testing every month, then has STI/STD and pregnancy prevention classes every week.
- As outreach workers, we can pass out condoms and information.

I hope you will support a bigger role for peer educators. We need their help! Thank you for listening.