

**Testimony to the Committee on Health and Human Services  
For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the Department of Health**

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Hello Chairwoman Alexander and other Committee members. My name is Ella Feldman, I am in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Wilson High School, and I live in ward 1. I am a Peer Trainer at The Young Women's Project (YWP). I write for my school paper, The Beacon and I am interested in pursuing journalism in college and further.

Even though distributing condoms is a major part of our program, we also help our peers solve problems. Together, YWP peer educators have conducted 21,356 one-on-one education sessions this school year. I've personally taught people things they didn't know before, such as that STIs can be transmitted through oral sex, or that before using a condom you have to check the expiration date. One of the most common questions I encounter is "Do they make condoms for females?" Knowing that female condoms exist is so important, because if a situation arises where one partner doesn't want to wear a condom, it's valuable to know that there is more than one way to have safe sex. The most significant experience I've had was when a close friend told me that her friend had been a victim of rape. I immediately asked if she had gotten tested for pregnancy and STIs, and it turned out it hadn't even occurred to her. Because of my work here, I was able to refer her to places that offer those services.

We have referred 927 youth to different community resources this school year. I have referred students to places like LAYC, Planned Parenthood, and Metro Teen Aids for free birth control and STI testing. I've referred people to all kinds of birth control, including the pill, the implant, the depo shot, and the IUD, both copper and hormonal. I've also helped peers decide which birth control is best for them. What's so special about having teenage educators is that I don't have to reach back a lot of years to remember what it's like to be a teenager, or how I handled the situations that my peers find themselves in.

My work at YWP has prepared me to handle situations proactively, and help my peers make safe, healthy, and informed decisions. All teenagers have questions about sex, questions that will go unanswered if they don't have a comfortable place to ask. However, it can be extremely intimidating to approach a nurse or teacher about sex. It's much more comfortable to approach someone your age with questions, and as peer educators we are prepared with answers.

Peer education is the most accessible resource to students, and an incredibly effective way to stream information into a school. Students are always talking to one another, and there's a level of comfort between us that can't be recreated. Accessibility and comfort are necessary for students to come forward with their questions and concerns. Every time we answer one of these questions, we're preventing a potential pregnancy.

One of my biggest complaints about sexual health at my school is that youth aren't taught about consent. Consent comes before sex, and it's vital for teenagers to understand that both parties need to be fully on board, and know what that means. We're taught about the dangers of drinking and driving, but we never talk about the dangers of non-consensual sex under the influence. We need to abolish the stigma that sex is for adults, and therefore kids shouldn't talk about it. Teens need to have a space where they can be comfortable asking their questions and voicing their concerns.

Until health class standards are reformed and enforced, programs like the Young Women's Project provide this space. This is why we would like for DOH to continue to allocate funds for peer educator stipends.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.