

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

**Geneva Batista  
Young Women's Project Youth Staff Member  
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Hello Committee and David Catania. My name is Geneva Batista. I am 18 and a senior attending Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy and a staff member at the Young Women's Project working on the PHASE reproductive health project. In October 2011, I testified before you about my experience working as a peer educator on sexual health issues. I trained dozens of youth in the past year and in the process – learned a lot about how important sexual health is and how many youth don't have the right information. Geneva – can you say more about how the peer education work benefited you – what kind of skills, attitudes, knowledge and life change happened?

Many members of the PHASE team have testified for the need for increasing sex education, condom distribution, and STI testing. We are very encouraged to see that HAHSTA's budget for community outreach and youth condom distribution has increased by \$5 million. Dwanna – can you add more context here...

As part of the 2013 DOH Budget, we are asking you to set dedicate \$180,000 to establishing a city-wide Peer Educator Network (DC-PEN) which would hire 100 youth from 43 DCPS and charter high schools who would work 5 hours a week to provide sexual health education and outreach for condom distribution, STI testing and other services. In October I came to you with this idea and asked for \$300,000. You said this was too expensive. We cut program costs by 30 percent and we expanded our program.

**The Need for Sexual Health Education & Outreach**

Many DC high school students do not have the information they need. Many students do not take sex education in school and do not know about WRAP-MC (Shana – can you add some survey data here) and other ways to get contraception. When teens don't have proper information, they don't make good decisions about sex. There is no way teens can combat rising pregnancy rates or STIs, HIV, and pregnancy without proper information.

**Peer education is the most effective way to reach teens. I know this from my own experience.** My peers are willing to learn and teach me knew things in ways that are non judgmental. I like having peers to help me stay truthful to myself. As my colleague Elisha Williams testified in February, 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 sand not judge them. They give encouraging words and accurate information and provide tools...Peer educators engage in real talk. Real talk is a heart-to-heart with teens. "Youth are most likely to get information from other youth. And they are most likely to act in ways that their peers act.

**The research we've done shows the same thing.** Youth educators are more effective than adults and have made significant changes in the lives of their peers.

- Studies show that adolescents are more than twice as likely to use condoms when they believe their peers are using them.[ DiClemente RJ. Predictors of HIV-preventive sexual behavior in a high-risk adolescent population: the influence of perceived peer norms and sexual communication on incarcerated adolescents' consistent use of condoms. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1991; 12:385-390]



- A US based peer education program targeting African American teen women showed a significant increase in condom use: before the program, 44 percent of sexually active participants reported not using condoms compared to 33 percent after the intervention..[ Slap GB *et al.* A human immunodeficiency virus peer education program for adolescent females. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1991; 12:434-442]
- A study comparing peer-led versus adult-led education programs found that youth trained by peer counselors showed a greater perception of personal risk of HIV infection compared to those trained by adult educators..[ Rickert VI *et al.* Effects of a peer-counseled AIDS education program on knowledge, attitudes, and satisfaction of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 1991; 12:38-43]
- A number of studies demonstrate that peer educators themselves benefit greatly from the work – showing increased sexual health knowledge, more positive attitudes, and fewer risk behaviors.[ O'Hara P *et al.* A peer-led AIDS prevention program for students in an alternative school. *Journal of School Health* 1996; 66:176-182.]

**How the Peer Educator Network Would Work**

The most effective way to ensure education and condom distribution is through a student-led, school-based network of peer educators: DC-PEN would do four things:

- 1) Provide part-time jobs to 100 youth who will get work experience, save money, and contribute to their families
- 2) Establish a youth leadership framework within the schools. During the first year, this framework will focus on sexual health but it can be expanded or refocused to address other critical youth issues
- 3) Engage youth directly as leaders and actors in the fight against the spread of STIs and HIV and the prevention of unplanned pregnancies. This is a fight to save our own lives.
- 4) It increases student education and outreach by 100s of students each week.

DC-PEN would hire 102 students – 3 in each DCPS high school and 2 in each charter school. Youth would be paid \$8.25 for 5 hours a week to take on three main roles:

- Educate youth – through after school workshops, lunch room tables materials, and social networking
- Serve as training-education resources to the nurses, WRAP-MC condom distributors, health educators, STI testers, and others working on these issues in the schools
- Collect data about youth education and outreach

The DC Peer Educator Network (PEN) would work like this 102 youth would be hired to represent 22 DCPS and 21 charter high schools. DCPS schools would be covered by three PEN members, charter schools by two. Youth would be paid \$8.25 for 5 hours a week (including 2 hours of prep and 3 school-based hours). Community based organizations (including many of the partners HAHSTA is already working closely with) would sponsor PEN members from specific schools and would agree to train and manage youth and oversee their school-based work. PEN organizations would cover the costs of youth training and management and work together on a PEN Coordinating Committee that would meet monthly to develop annual goals and targets, identify and share training resources, CBOs would donate time and expertise as part of the coordinating committee

