

**Testimony to the Committee on Health  
For the Public Oversight Roundtable on Youth Perspectives of District Health Programs**

**Geneva Batista  
Young Women's Project youth staff member  
October 27, 2011**

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. The topic I would like to address today is the need for peer educators. I feel that peer educators play a major role in educating people who do not have access comprehensive sex education and reproductive health in school.

During this past summer I had a great experience working at the Young Women's Project where I was a part of the PHASE team. I had the privilege of being a peer health educator for my community and youth in different wards. At YWP, I learned material that directly affected me and my well being and stuff that no one else taught me. I took pride in teaching other teens. The training I conducted focused on self advocacy skills like communication and conflict resolution and sexual health. We trained about 70 youth from five organizations during the summer. Many of the youth were uneducated about sexual health, and it was a wonderful opportunity to teach and show the youth things about sexual health that they did not know much about. I too learned more about sexual health and how important it is to youth in the District.

During the summer, when we were conducting the youth assessment most of the youth we talked with talked about was the importance of comprehensive sex education and the need for more of it in the schools and community. Right now, a lot of teens are not being properly informed about sex and it's a problem. Many schools do not require students to take a class in comprehensive sex education. Comprehensive sex education is important because it allows youth to learn and ask questions about sex education. 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 when we do not have proper information. There is no way teens can prevent an increase in STI contraction rates without proper sexual education. Teens are part of the community. Everything that impacts teens impacts the community. We need healthy, informed, and youth well educated in comprehensive sex education so that we have have health and informed communities.

Another issue that youth talked about during the community program assessment was the need to have more youth involved as peer educators and to have a city-wide network where youth can connect with other youth who are doing peer education. Peer educators can play an important role in educating youth about comprehensive sexual health education and should be part of classroom training, STI testing education, WRAP-MC education, and the

development of comprehensive sexual health curricula in DC public schools. Peer educators enhance comprehensive sex education by reaching out to the community donating the time and patience to teens. They do peer-to-peer education and outreach that adults can't do. A lack of education, sex or general education, can make youth feel alone and not knowing how to or where to get help can be stressful. Youth should have the right to receive help and attention from a peer educator and a person they can trust. My peers are willing to learn and teach me new things in ways that are non judgmental. I like having peers to help me stay truthful to myself. Teens relate to each other. Adults have a tendency to ask leading questions—questions that feel more intrusive and less supportive... When you want to learn something new about personal stuff who do you consult? Your peers! (Include stat on youth setting sexual health info from other youth) Having well informed peer educators increases the knowledge base of youth. Peer educators can also bring more youth into organizations like YWP or Planned Parenthood Metro TeenAIDS or any of the groups we assessed this summer.

### **Recommendations**

On behalf of the youth staff at YWP, I am recommending that the City Council create a city-wide Peer Health Education Network. This network should include dedicated and high-spirited youth and adults who are committed to changing the way sex education is taught. The network should be mostly led by teens that become properly educated and informed about sex and reproductive health.

The 2009 Youth Inspired Framework recommends establishing a District wide youth sexual health education program that includes peer educators – and paying those peer educators. We strongly agree with these recommendations. Youth deserve to be paid for their work – and we need the money. Many of us are contributing to our families and responsible for buying our own transportation, food, and other supplies. A paid peer educator program could create 100-150 positions for youth sexual health educators-advocates (men and women) who would work 10 hours a week during the school year and 30 hours a week during the summer, paid \$7.50 an hour (about \$300,000 a year total budget) and run through DOES sort of like the summer youth employment program but year round. CBOs, schools, and government departments working on sexual health issues would apply to receive peer educators (and have their youth staff apply to the DOES program). Organizations who received peer educators (like YWP!) would work together to organize a Training Institute that would provide training of trainers, reproductive health training, and other professional development to peer educators. The budget this program could be funded as part of HAHSTA's current youth health funding.

We hope will be willing to take the lead in moving this forward. Of course we are eager to work with you to make this happen. We also would like to invite you to come to our office so that you can meet all of the other women who are part of the PHASE project (there will be 21 of us in November). Thanks again for your support and for this opportunity to present our work.

