

**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 members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Julia Barnett and I am 25 years of age. I graduated from Maya Angelou Public School and attended Westwood Community College for some time. I have a 4yr old daughter and she means the world to me.

Today, I want to talk about the importance of the Community Health Educators' Program, which was launched in January to provide sexual health information and condoms to young adults, and refer people to community based health clinics. The Young Women's Project started this program to reach older teens who were not in school and young adults in their early 20s.

I started working as an educator in February of this year. I heard about the YWP through the Rapid RE-Housing Program. My case manager and I were looking for a job that was similar to the field I was studying when I was in college in order to help motivate and get me back on track. Now that I am a community health educator, my job is to inform my peers about the importance of safe sex, encourage them to get tested, educate them about pregnancy options and overall conduct peer counseling when needed.

Our goal is to help prevent STIs and unplanned pregnancies and connect our peers to community clinics. People in my age group are usually responsible for themselves and don't have schools or other systems in place to guide and support them. A lot of my peers never had this support in the first place.

Since working with YWP, I think that the program is a great opportunity for us. Not only does it keep us occupied but more importantly we receive training once a week about subjects such as the male and female sexual reproductive system, communication skills and health equity just to name a few. There are so many things I thought I knew about the female and male body prior to becoming an educator but after receiving trainings, I found that I still had a lot to learn. Another benefit of being part of this program is being able to receive a small stipend. For me, it is a win-win situation. I am bringing awareness across the city while also getting paid.

What we do as community health educators is very significant. We are reaching young adults that are not connected to other programs and helping them get services. It's the kind of work that peers can do best. Therefore we deserve to be acknowledged and rewarded. I say this because it is very hard for teens and young adults to become employed in DC. Many people in our communities think of my generation, especially youth who look like me, as troublemakers and violent. Furthermore, many jobs want individuals who have experience and if you do have experience you are required to work a certain amount of hours. As a young black mother my choices are limited. Similarly, many of my peers have the same issues when searching for jobs. This is difficult for us because we need money for things like food, clothing, rent and other bills. Having a job gives us options. Knowing that I can provide for myself makes me feel independent and that I am in control of my life. It is a feeling that I want my daughter to have when she becomes a young adult.

As we continue to work as community health educators, here are some of the things we hope to accomplish:

- Dispel myths about sexual health through one-on-one interactions
- Increase the knowledge and use of Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives (LARCs) especially for young women
- Promote healthy attitudes about sex
- Promote a stronger sense of sexual agency
- Lowering the rates of sexual violence by educating peers about consent
- Transforming attitudes about sexuality and gender in order to create an accepting culture
- Create better relationships with health professionals through referrals

With the purpose of accomplishing our goals, we ask that funding is allocated in order to continue providing stipends for peer health educators.

Thank you for hearing my testimony and I look forward to any question(s) you may have.