

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

**Acree Strong
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Hello Chairwoman Alexander and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Acree Strong and I am a 20-year old community activist. I graduated from Warwick Senior High School, and some of the things I enjoy doing are reading about different cultures, making and listening to music, and actively creating change for my community. I currently live in Ward 6 and I have been a Community Health Educator at the Young Women's Project since February of this year.

I heard about the Community Health Educators' program through networking and soon after I received an email about the job and was immediately interested. As a community health educator my job is to educate my peers and my community about reproductive and sexual health, distribute contraceptives and also refer them to various resources across the city that they may need.

This is why it is very important that we continue receiving an hourly stipend as Community Health Educators. Not only are we making a positive impact in the city but we are also able to support ourselves as young adults. Working in our communities is a key part of changing the culture, mindset and practices of young people. The work we do is very serious. It takes diligent, patient, respectful, and innovative people to be successful in many jobs and if other people receive pay for these qualities, we also deserve pay.

Another issue to consider is the lack of job opportunities for youth in the city. It is very hard for youth to become employed in DC. I have interviewed and applied to countless jobs before getting hired. I currently also work for Department of Behavioral Health where I am developing the first youth peer work curriculum that will get youth and young adults certified to work as peer mental health and substance use specialists.

If we are not employed as young adults, it can become very hard to survive. We need money for obvious necessities such as food, clothes, transportation and for many, a place to stay. Having money also gives us a sense of security and motivation to strive to become better.

A big issue in today's youth culture, especially in the District of Columbia, is unplanned and teen pregnancy. One way to change this problem is to educate our peers and give them options because everyone is not aware of the choices they have. Overall, being employed makes me feel like I am accomplishing something. It shows me that I have better options to live a successful life.

As a community activist, I want there to be an opportunity for young adults like me. Our city should be interested in engaging young adults in sexual education in creative ways. Just to name a few: social media, music and fashion are some platforms that would be great to use. We should engage our youth by having events year round that will inspire them to become educators and the next leaders in their communities. We should meet them across a wide range of platforms whether it be visiting community basketball games or attending a school sponsored event, in order to be able to raise awareness, educate each other and have fun.

It is clear that this program is not only valuable for me but also for our community. Therefore, we ask that you allocate the appropriate funding for peer health educator stipends in order to accomplish our goals.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.