

**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 Aree Quarles, I am in the 9th grade at Roosevelt High School, and I live in ward 4. I recently became a Peer Educator at The Young Women's Project (YWP) and am still in training. I became a Peer Educator because I would like my peers and I to be educated about sex, STI's and pregnancy.

Before YWP, I knew very little about STI's, sex, and the causes of pregnancy. I knew that if you had unprotected sex you would get STI's and you could get pregnant, but besides that my knowledge was very limited. At YWP, we learned how to put on male and female condoms on the correct way. We also learned female and male reproductive anatomy, different types of STI's, and which ones can and can't be cured. I also learned how a woman gets pregnant and how to bust myths for certain statements we've heard about sex and STI's.

This training helped me be more informed and aware, so if my friends or peers at school have questions they can come and ask me. Now, I can properly distribute information and I'd be able to give my peers a straightforward answer, and back it up with facts as well as answer any back up questions they might have. The training that I have received from the YWP will help me educate my friends about safe sex so that they won't get pregnant before they are ready or contract an STI. Also, because I am educated now, I can keep myself safe from STI's and pregnancy before I am ready.

It's important to pay youth for their work so that they can have money to be more independent. Because I have a job now, I won't have to ask my mom for money when I want to go to the movies or the store.

In order to improve sexual health work in schools, it would be good to create a safe space where students can disclose information. Health classes should be more inclusive so LGBTQ+ students can feel comfortable. Students should not feel like others will start rumors or jump to conclusions just because they have questions. Also, teachers should be straightforward and not beat around the bush, especially with 9th graders because they think we don't know a lot and they want to "save our innocence." This is why people get pregnant or get an STI at my age. For example: some teens may not use a condom because they

thought their “pullout game was too strong” to need one and were not aware that pre-cum can get a woman pregnant because it contains sperm. Now I am prepared to teach people that this is wrong, and on top of that, I get to practice being a little financially independent. For these reasons, I think that it is important that the Department of Health set aside money just for peer educator stipends.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.