



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

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Hello, my name is Avery Ross and I am 16 years old. I am a junior at Calvin Coolidge Senior High School. I am involved in the Young Women's Project (YWP) under the PHASE (Peer Health and Sexual Education) Campaign. Thank you for granting me this opportunity.

As a researcher at YWP, I have done interesting work, and it has been a wonderful experience. It has been a privilege to be involved with such an organization that cares about teen's reproductive health. One thing that really stuck with me is how my opinion was valued through majority decision making. I was for once not only seen, but heard.

However, I am here today testifying before you because of the issues that teens are having with STI's and testing. Recent research compiled by Advocates for Youth shows that the rates of STI for teens in DC are four times higher than the national average. HAHSTA reports rates on average of 10 percent among DC high school students with some age groups as high as 17 percent. In the District overall, nearly half of the Chlamydia and gonorrhea diagnoses were among District residents 15 to 19 years old, with two-thirds of all diagnoses among those under 24. HAHSTA has responded to this situation with school-based STI testing in all DCPS High Schools. I think this work is important. But I also think it can be improved by involving teens and upholding confidentiality guidelines.

There are many problems that we are facing today that keep youth from getting tested. One is that teens are afraid to get tested because the results are not confidential. Another issue is that some youth do not know where they can go to get tested or treated and how much that treatment is going to cost. Some teens do not feel comfortable with informing their parents that they are sexually active, so they can go get tested.

I am glad that school-based STI testing is available because it is free and easy to access. I believe that it is important to have STI testing in schools to prevent our STI rates from increasing and for the youth to have easy access to getting tested. However, through my personal experience, I have found that the current STI testing program in DCPS can be improved. First, youth do not really understand STIs and how serious of a



problem this is or how STIs affect people's everyday life. They also need the direct information on how STI's appear, what treats its and how to prevent them the correct way.

Since confidentiality is a law, I feel that teens should the up most respect when dealing with STI results and it should be done in the correct way to prevent any hurt, harm, or danger involving the teens and others. During my STI testing experience this fall, an organization came to my school to test the entire student body. All of us who attended this session were given a brief description about STI's and shown pictures of what they looked like. While going through these testing procedures, we the student body were told "that if you didn't call for your results two weeks after the test was given and was tested positive then they would call your name over the intercom at school." This doesn't abide by the confidentiality law which mean us teens aren't getting our rights. It also discourages people from getting tested. Some of my friends decided not to get tested that day because they were afraid that their names would be read over the loud speaker and they weren't the only ones. This may be one of the reasons that most students decide not to get tested.

HAHSTA's testing goal for this year is 5000 students – which is less than half of the 12,000 students enrolled in DCPS high schools. Something needs to be done to protect the confidentiality and safety of us teens Councilmember Catania, I come to you today because we have a program that has potential to keep youth healthy and aware of their status, but it is not meeting our needs as it is. I know that with your leadership, more youth in DC can be better educated about their health and protecting themselves. Here are some recommendations that I will like to give to make a change on the DC area youth and for the health and safety of them.

First I will like to ask that when giving STI testing instead of scary pictures and the basics information that just says what happens we need more of the positive side and not always a scare. If we have more positive information then the teens will feed back positively.

Second, I recommend that instead of calling teens over the intercom into a big group to let them know they all are positive they need to be contacted personally. Do not ever call names over the loud speaker.

Third, I recommend that HAHSTA to come up with a plan to work with school nurses and not just school based clinics to help provide STI testing and treatment. This would also make it easier to communicate with your school nurse if the teen doesn't have a school based clinic.



Fourth, expand REAL TALK to include the addresses and phone numbers of clinics that provide STI testing for free (right now it just includes the names). This would help out a lot of teens who is in need of help on where clinics are located. I don't believe that it is fair that only teens with the (202) area codes could get assistants. What about others that live in the DC area with different area codes?

Fifth, use the STI testing as an opportunity to do more education with your about sexual health and how STIs can impact their lives. Instead of a power point, have small break-out sessions where youth get to share stories and receive information. This is also an opportunity to address questions and concerns youth have about getting tested. No one wants to ask questions in a big group.

Finally, we need better STI testing procedures. Testers also need to emphasize on what the confidentiality law is, and how to make sure that they are obeying this law. I believe this will make the teens feel comfortable about getting tested and not worrying on if their parents or friends will find out about their business.

Councilmember Catania I would like for you to make a commitment on asking the Department of Health staff to take into consideration the input of us youth when making decisions dealing with us involving STI testing and information among it. I feel that with this commitment and can make a huge difference when coming to different schools for testing and giving the result of their testing.

Thank you for your support and consideration.