

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

**Heyab Asegahegne
Peer Educator, Young Women's Project**

February 19, 2016

Good morning Councilmember Alexander and other committee members. My name is Heyab Asegahegne. I am a 12th grader at Columbia Heights Educational Campus, also known as Bell Multicultural. After I graduate I would like to attend VSU to study Sociology. I have been working with the Young Women's Project for three years. I am here to testify about teen pregnancy and pregnancy prevention options.

I feel like teens aren't educated enough to make decisions about their sexual health, and they don't know how to prevent pregnancy. I wish that some of my friends would have known about birth control before they started having sex. I feel like girls who are not using birth control become powerless. They often think that the male should be in control. The males get to make the decisions about condom usage. They just let the males decide whether or not to use contraception and I feel like they think that that is the only option that they have. One of my friends was a senior last year and her boyfriend didn't want to use a condom and she felt like he loved her so she trusted him. A couple of weeks later she told him she was pregnant. He did not talk to her for a month after that. He asked her to abort the baby and she decided to keep it. He said the baby wasn't his. She has been raising the child by herself. The child is now one year old. She was also unable to graduate. Though she plans on going to a night school she doesn't have anyone to watch her child which is a huge barrier. She is trying to find a daycare but she has not been able to find one.

My school helps because they have a daycare at Bell. You can visit your child and it's convenient for students who have children. My friend was not able to put her child in Bell's daycare because she was not a Bell student. When it comes to preventing pregnancy, my school has a few programs in place. One is the Wrap MC program. This program is important because it gives adults and youth the ability to distribute condoms in school. Through this program, the Young Women's Project hires students, like me, at 11 DCPS schools and trains them to distribute condoms and educate their peers. We refer students to clinics where they can get STI tests, pregnancy tests, contraception and other services. We also do lunchroom and classroom presentations to educate teens about different topics like contraception, condoms, STIs, healthy relationships and more. Through doing this work, we are also paid stipends and given workforce development trainings and opportunities to do advocacy on behalf of our peers. I would like to thank

Councilmember Alexander and HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, STDs, and TB Administration (HAHSTA) for their support in this work.

We also have a pregnancy prevention program at our school. While this program exists, there isn't enough visibility. Ms. Constance Hanlon has been working with us to change that. This program should not just pass out condoms but it should also tell students why it is important to use condoms. The pregnancy prevention office is not even in a central location. It is on the Lincoln side which is a middle school. The issue with this is that the high school students don't get to see it and they do not know that it exists. Also, there are no condoms in the nurse's office. There is one female condom, one male condom, and one dental dam sitting at the front desk. It seems like now you have to ask for condoms but I don't think that that should be the case. Students should feel comfortable to just go and get their condoms without having to ask.

The biggest resource for reproductive services for students at my school comes from the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC). Even though they are a community organization, they come to our school and tell us what they provide and the different programs that they have. I think that their presentations are helpful and students actually do take advantage of it. To get service from LAYC you don't need an ID, money, or insurance you simply walk in and tell them what you want and they will assist you. They are also very teen friendly and do not make you feel judged or uncomfortable. I believe more clinics should be like LAYC because the fear of being judged can keep teens from getting the help they need.

Even though health class would be a great place to talk about our sexual health and the options for preventing pregnancy and STIs, my health class was not helpful. We did not do anything. We just read a book which was mostly about drugs and nutrition. I feel like teachers are uncomfortable talking to teenagers about stuff like this. They also don't teach useful information, when you talk about STIs in school, we usually talk about symptoms as opposed to saying most of the times there are no symptoms when it comes to STIs. I believe health teachers should be trained to feel comfortable talking to students about sexual health because some students are afraid to ask for help and count on their health class to provide them with the information they need to get help.

To conclude, I have a few recommendations:

1. Support peer education so we can keep educating our peers about sexual health and getting the opportunity to work and make a difference in our schools. This is why it is important to continue to the funding for youth stipends in the HAHSTA budget so that this work can continue.
2. Increase the visibility of all pregnancy prevention and sexual health work that is going on in the school- like my work as a peer educator. Schools could do a better job about letting students know that there is a pregnancy prevention office and there are people who can help them. They could also be more creative with events outside of STI testing such as workshops afterschool or incentives for participation similar to LAYC's test week where they give out Chipotle gift cards.
3. I think the nurse should be allowed to do pregnancy tests and STI testing. Teenagers can be careless. If they don't think they are pregnant and do not have easy access to a clinic they may not make the extra effort to get tested. Since we are in school almost every day it would be easier to take advantage of services like this if they were in our schools.
4. We should do more training with teachers so that they can feel comfortable interacting with their students. I think adult Wrap-MCs should be friendly and make themselves visible and known for what they do. Adults should present themselves as being open. I believe that these trainings should involve peer educators who know what is happening in student's lives and can speak about their own experiences.
5. Ensure that all students who take health class are getting adequate teaching because some of my peers say they've had good teachers and others say the opposite. Teachers focus more on drugs and physical health instead of sexual health and all these categories of health are important.