

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

**James Peters
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Hello Council Member Alexander and other Committee members. My name is James Peters and I attend Columbia Heights Education Campus. I testified before you at the Department of Health Performance Oversight Hearing on March 11th this year. I am here as a youth health educator at the Young Women's Project (YWP) --a multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of DC youth so that they can shape policies and institutions to expand the rights and opportunities of DC youth. I work in the Peer Health and Sexuality Education campaign, a youth-adult partnership that works to improve DC teens' reproductive health by expanding comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring access to community based services, and engaging teen women and men as peer educators and decision-makers. As a peer educator, I am a leader in my school. I hold class/lunchroom presentations where I educate my peers about sexual health issues. I also train other youth health educators. The main part of my job is distributing condoms to the students at my school.

YWP's peer educator program is working in conjunction with the Wrap-MC program at HAHSTA (HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, STDs and Tuberculosis Administration) to implement the Wrap-MC youth program at six schools (Cardozo, Coolidge, Bell, Dunbar, Roosevelt, Wilson). We have 50 peer educators on the ground spreading the messages about safe sex and giving resources.

Last year, YWP testified before the Committee on Health about the need to create a fund for peer health educator stipends. With your support and help, Councilmember Alexander, DOH allocated \$100,000 for peer educator stipends. In December this money was made available through a contract from DOH. HAHSTA awarded this money to YWP. With this contract, YWP will pay the \$7.25/hour stipends of 200 youth health educators, who will be working in the DC Peer Educator Network (DC-PEN). Ninety percent of this money will go directly to youth through stipends. This contract has the option for extending the funding for 4 additional years, however, this money is not allocated, and so it is not guaranteed. I am here to ask that you included the \$157,000 necessary for an additional year of this program. By next year, the DC- PEN will employ 250 youth throughout the city, focusing on the most at-risk schools, which will be helping their communities and giving out valuable information and resources.

Youth have a special role to play in health education. There is a certain level of comfort between us and our peers. Youth are more hesitant to talk to adults. For example, I've been doing classroom presentations at CHEC and I bring condoms, but the teachers are there, so no one wants to take the condoms. At lunch, when everyone is finished eating, I ask people what they need. I pass out the most condoms in the hallways as of late. We have five minutes between classes, so I have about a good 3 minutes to pass out the condoms and get there information. This is why I try to get to know the peers that take condoms, so during the next transition period I can give them what they want and reach new youth. Everyone is starting to come to me when they need something, and they tell others and it just go from there. They might stop me anywhere to ask for condoms or to talk. This goes to show that without youth involvement – there would be no progress in youth health. Without our help, you will not be able to get help to teens who need it. I feel like we are helping to start the conversation in our schools with our work. If we continue we may be able to offer some solutions or new resources to those in need of it.

Youth need opportunities to prepare for having jobs. This job, as a peer educator, at YWP taught me how to be professional. This is my first job; I learned about keeping track of my hours, signing in and out, working with adults, how to write a professional email, how to keep a to-do list, how to interact with people, and more. We learn how to separate business from personal- this is important. We need to know how to get things done. **If I got a regular job, without this one first, I might not know everything that is needed. We need time to practice and learn how to be at work, and this job provides that. It teaches something that is not taught that often in school, or at all. I have gained so much work experience from this program and learned how to work hard and feel a sense of achievement after helping youth at two different schools protect themselves and learn.**

We need more peer educators. By establishing a fund for youth stipends, we could recruit youth from all schools and expand the number of peer educators at each school. More and more people ask me about our work every day, and they want to work with us. I believe that money is one thing that shows that we are equal to adults. We need money for different stuff, like savings, clothing, or helping our families. A lot of young people have to contribute to family expenses, something that I have had to do too. We also need more advertising. I feel like there aren't enough people that know about our work. If more teens knew about us they will use us as a resource for not just condoms but for knowledge to ask question they don't want to ask their friends, parents, teachers, or nurse. We provide them with a safe haven that is hard to find for youth. So the more students that knows the better.

Thank you for listening to my testimony I hope that you understand our points and take them into consideration and secure the money for this program that is enhancing the health and wellbeing of DC teens. Thank you.