

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

**James Peters
Wrap MC Peer Educator, Young Women's Project
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Hello Council Member Alexander and other Committee members. My name is James Peters and I attend Roosevelt High School. I would like to go to college to study law and then go on to law school and become a lawyer. I would like to travel and gain more experiences, write poetry, volunteer, and maybe open my own business. The Young Women's Project is a multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of young women so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

I am currently one of 36 Peer Educators at YWP and am also involved with condom distribution in my school. I talk to students about sex education such as proper condom use, STIs, STI prevention contraception and many more topics. YWP's peer educator program is working in conjunction with the Wrap-MC program being implemented by HAHSTA and DCPS. We are implementing the Youth Pilot program that – thanks to you Chairman Catania -- we helped pass two years ago. I want to thank Principal Mitchell, Ms. Eichelberger and Mr. Testa at Roosevelt for supporting my work.

I am here to testify about my work as a peer educator at the Young Women's Project (YWP) and the Wrap MC Program and why funding to youth educators should be increased.

Some of my friends...they call me the condom man and they tease me. I say...this is an important job. When I tell them about all I learned and then I start to educate them on how to put on a condom properly or female condoms, they start to understand and learn about sex education. Then they realize what YWP is all about and why it is so important that youth teach other youth about sexual health. I got involved in YWP in October when the program came to my school. They had a booth set up. I said to myself I should try something new. So I did and I read the application, filled it out, and got a call back the next week. I interviewed and got the job. I've been distributing condoms and doing peer education for the past two months.

This is a great job and I can actually help people, improve their lives and make a positive effect on myself, my community, and in my school. This program has helped me grow as a person. I learned how to be a leader

and to be out-spoken in my school. I learned that you should not judge a book by its cover or a whole group of people without knowing them or what they do. I also learned about how to prevent pregnancy and about how the human body works. This program has also allowed me to help my peers and their families by educating them about their health.

I also learned about how to prevent pregnancy, barrier methods, and how to talk to groups of people without being shy. One time we had a debate about of abortion sometimes pregnancy is not an option especially if people can't take care of the baby. I think there should be more emphasis on the human body. I did not know a lot of female anatomy before I started this job. Students need to know about their own bodies and how they work. I've been surprised that many students are open minded and open to receiving condoms and talking about sexual health issues. Youth are more suited to educate our peers because we actually know how to reach and relate to the students. We understand the position and how they feel.

One of the things I've noticed in doing this job is that there is a double standard. If a girl has sex she is called derogatory names. If a guy has sex he is more respected and gets a good reputation. I would like to see the stereotypes disappear. Men don't really think about this issue as something that affects them. So the YWP peer education program helps us reach out to men and get them to listen about this double standard. It's not easy to get them to listen. But there is a lot they don't know and need to know about sex and stereotypes.

Men were more open to taking condoms than women because of this double standard. However, men just want the condoms and that's it. They think they know everything already. Most men did not want to talk about sex. It's important for guys to be involved. The women shouldn't have to carry the load of sex education alone. Having male peer educators is important because we can relate to other guys. Girls might not understand the male point of view- we can help that.

I have a three recommendations about how to improve the Wrap MC program and improve sexual health for youth.

1. DC Public Schools should set aside money to pay for the stipends of peer educators like me who are doing the work of Wrap-MC and Health Education. The job we do is important and isn't easy. Right now YWP pays us \$7.25 an hour for two hours a week but we work more than that. YWP does not get any government funding for this work. We are working hard. We are learning. We are distributing condoms to youth who would

probably not seek out adults to get them. It's a good way to get youth off the streets and give them something positive to do while making money. It teaches something that is not taught that often in school or at all. Our suggestion is to put \$125,000 in the DOH budget to fund 125 peer educators to work 4 hours a week. Youth would have to be trained and have the kind of organizational support that YWP gives. We are asking that this money go directly to the youth educators in the form of stipends. Once they qualify, they could register with DOES (like the summer youth employment program) and then receive a monthly payment on their EBT card. \$125,000 is a small price to pay for preventing 100s of pregnancies and STIs. Keeping students healthy means they are able to stay in schools.

2. I would like to see us expand the Peer Educator program and reach out to more schools. At the school, I would like to see a weekly bulletin so students can look out for different WMCs. At Roosevelt, we only have 2 peer educators working. I would like to see more Wrap MCs -- 20 from each school. We could make posters that every can recognize as the Wrap MC brand in the school. When students walk by they can see and learn like in hallways of the school and in the Nurse office. I would like to see a bigger space, more work area, and get all the young people together to get trained.
3. We should have regular meetings with the principals or with all the WMCs and the teachers. We can all meet; know what we need to do, emphasize what needs to be done. That would make our jobs easier. The administration has been supportive but has not noticed how much we are doing. Regular meetings would give the peer educators more recognition and support. I talked with one of my teachers. He passes out condoms. He is proactive. If students are not being appropriate with the condoms he disciplines them and he is a teacher who is supportive.

Thank you for listening to my testimony I hope that you understand our points and take them into consideration and keep funding this wonderful program. Thank you.