

Erin Smiley
Dayton, Ohio

Testimony to the State of Ohio House Committee on Community and Family Advancement
November 4, 2015

Chairman Derickson, Vice Chair Ginter, Ranking member Howse, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on House Bill 294.

My name is Erin Smiley. I have a Master in Public Health and I've been a sexual health educator since the 3rd grade. Yes you heard me correctly. When I was in 3rd grade my mom asked my sister and I to come in her room so we could talk. Her voice, ever so slightly trembled, out of nervousness or fear for what she was about to tell us. Usually, she always spoke with great skill and confidence, so I thought I must have done something seriously wrong. For the next hour or so, my mom talked to us about how our bodies were going to change, how pregnancy occurred, what vaginal sex was, and that our bodies were our own. Little did I know, what we talked about would be a moment that I would cherish as the point I became a sexual health advocate and educator.

The next day I couldn't wait to get to school and share all the new knowledge I had just been given with my fellow peers. Looking back, I like to think that by sharing this information with my fellow 3rd graders, I sparked conversations between them and their parents or guardians. I share this story with you because I was fortunate enough to have an adult in my life that could have multiple conversations with me about healthy relationships, birth control, sexually transmitted infections and along with any other sexuality and reproductive questions. Youth in foster care and juvenile justice don't have the same opportunities, but Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) and Planned Parenthood changed that.

When I first started working with PREP and Planned Parenthood nearly 4 years ago, I was amazed at the number of myths and inaccuracies the adults working with or educating youth had about sexual health. If they talked about sexual health at all, they used shame and guilt-driven scare tactics to try and tell them not to do it. Sexual health is a central part of being human. When we don't talk to youth about it, they get the message that it's "dirty" or "vulgar."

We must acknowledge the reality that youth in the juvenile justice systems are more likely to have higher rates of sexual activity, lower rates of condom and contraceptive use, more lifetime sexual partners, higher pregnancy rates, and are among the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections. Almost half of young women in foster care are pregnant by age 19, almost 2.5 times higher than their non-foster care peers. By the age of 21, 50% of young men aging out of foster care have impregnated someone versus 19% of their peers not in foster care.

Here are a few comments from people that participated in our training, "Very educational. I thought I knew all the facts about sex, these last two days I've learned a lot. Wonderful training."

"I thought this training was very informative and enjoyable. It included key components to effectively teach while incorporating lessons and information necessary to speak with credibility."

Source: Fostering Connections: Improving Access to Sexual Health Education.

“I learned a lot of things that I never knew before, for example: the use of IUD’s for teens. I thought a person needed to have a child before being able to get one.”

Planned Parenthood places sexual health experts directly into the field, to say that another group or agency can just take over is simply false. We were selected to deliver this grant because we are the best. As of September 30, 2015 the PPSWO PREP regions have trained 248 adult instructors, 848 juvenile justice youth, and 309 foster care youth.