Public Hearing Testimony Speaker: Leif Mitchell

Committee on
Testimony on Raise
Leif Mitchell, GLSEN Co
February 2

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My name is Leif Mitchell and I'm testifying as Co-chair of the Connecticut Chapter of GLSEN - the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. GLSEN is an education organization creating safer schools for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN Connecticut is also a member of the Healthy Teens Coalition.

Thank you for raising Bill No. 5591, *An Act Concerning Healthy Teens,* however the language of this bill is too general. **The goal of the Healthy Teens Coalition is to ensure that Connecticut's youth have access to medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education** providing them with the necessary skills to make safe and responsible choices surrounding their sexual health. Although there are many other health issues that are pertinent for teenagers, the focus of the Healthy Teens Coalition and this bill should be sex education, especially considering these facts:

Few Connecticut students get comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate information about sexual health before they become sexually active.[i] This lack of information results in high rates of sexually transmitted infections and high percentages of births to teens.

- 70% (7,665) of reported Chlamydia cases in CT in 2006 were among young people aged 10-24. 55% (1,463) of reported Gonorrhea cases in CT in 2006 were among young people aged 10-24.[ii]
- The Department of Public Health reported the percentage of births to teens was 6.9% in 2004.
- Teens and young adults under the age of 25 continue to be at risk for HIV and most young people are infected through unprotected sex[iii]. African Americans are disproportionately affected by HIV infection, accounting for 55% of all HIV infections reported among persons aged 13–24[iv].

Many parents don't talk with their children about sex, because they are uncomfortable, don't know what to say, and mistakenly think that schools are doing the job[v]. However, Connecticut has no designated funding stream for comprehensive sexuality education in schools.

- Over $1 million of federal funded Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) comes into CT each year via two Community Based Organizations.
- However, a recent study of four abstinence education programs found that the programs had no effect on the sexual abstinence of youth.[vi] Studies have also determined that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs actually increase risks of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections by discouraging contraceptive use and exclude lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth.

Research has shown that comprehensive sexuality education programs result in consistent condom use among teenagers who are sexually active.[vii,viii,ix] This is particularly important considering 64% of sexually active teenagers in CT didn't use condoms the last time they had sex.[6]

The Department of Education already has health education guidelines that include comprehensive sex education. However, they are not mandated and when schools are forced to "teach to the test" sex education is one area that is deemphasized or not included at all. Appropriating one million dollars to the Department of Education to establish a program in which local and regional boards of education could apply for a grant to implement comprehensive sex education is not only good for teens, but it's good for the state.

Homophobia and heterosexism undermine a healthy school climate. Comprehensive sexuality education teaches respect for different sexual orientations and gender identities. Currently 84% of LGBT students report being verbally, physically or sexual harassed at school because of their sexual orientation.

In closing, **I urge you to change the language of this bill so that it focuses on medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education.** The state could save thousands of dollars that go into treating sexually transmitted infections among youth, caring for pregnant teens, and lawsuits brought by LGBT youth who are harassed in schools.

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. 203-258-3718, LeifMitchell@hotmail.com

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[i] APCO Insight & Advocates for Youth. Connecticut Sexuality Education Survey: Survey among Connecticut Residents. Washington, DC: Authors, January, 2004.

[ii] State of Connecticut, Department of Public Health, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, 2006

[iii] Slide Set: HIV/AIDS Surveillance in Adolescents and Young Adults (through 2005).

[iv] CDC. HIV Prevention in the Third Decade. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, CDC; 2005.

[v] National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents, 2003

[vi] "Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs," by Christopher Trenholm, Barbara Devaney, Ken Forston, Lisa Quay, Justin Wheeler, and Melissa Clark

[vii] Starkman N, Rajani N. The case for comprehensive sex education. AIDS Patient Care and STDs. 2002;16(7):313-318.

[viii] Kirby D. What does the research say about sexuality education? Education Leadership. 2000;58(2):72-76.

[ix] Jemmott J, Jemmott L, Fong G. Abstinence and Safer Sex HIV Risk-Reduction Interventions for African American Adolescents: A Randomized Controlled Trial. JAMA. 1998;279(19):1529-1536.