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Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs Pick Up the Pieces After Defunding Scare

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A bowl of colorful Lifestyle condoms sat on a table in the corner of a room filled with teens in the Bronx. Jason Valencia, 18, stood in front of the group, with his colleague James.

Valencia is a Just Ask Me (JAM) peer leader. He and more than 10 other teens host presentations about sex education for other teens in the community. They teach their peers about healthy relationships, puberty and contraceptives, while dispelling myths about sex.

“Does anyone know how much sperm a man produces when he ejaculates?” said Valencia, who graduated from East Bronx Academy for the Future last year. After getting a variety of incorrect answers from the crowd, his colleague delivered the answer.

“About 300 million,” said James. “Only one made it and that was you.” He pointed to the crowd and the teens laughed.

JAM peer leaders, including Valencia, are paid every two weeks and can continue working one year after they graduate from high school, thanks to a federal grant. But last year their jobs were threatened. In 2017, the Trump administration announced it would cut 81 Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) sex education programs across the country, two years before the expected end of their five years of funding. The programs work with teenagers across the country to prevent unwanted pregnancies by using an evidence-based curriculum. The news of the cuts sent many programs into a panic.

After months of fighting, federal judges ruled that cutting the grants early would be unlawful and forced the Department of Health and Human Services to restore its promise. Though many programs across the U.S. were able to continue their work teaching sex ed, the scare left some grantees scrambling to survive.

The Cuyahoga County Board of Health’s Teen Pregnancy Program (CHUH) in Ohio was one of those faced with challenges. Brandy Eaton runs the program, which works with four school districts in the county that have extremely high teen birth rates.

“It feels a gap in this county and it’s needed,” said Eaton. “Ohio is one of the states that doesn’t have requirements for sex ed, which is why it’s not in most schools in the area.”

The program employs contracted teachers to go into classrooms and teach middle and high school students about sex. But once talks of defunding started to surface, the community agency that employed those workers had to let them go.

“They were part-time. We became aware that some of them left, but we still had school days scheduled,” said Eaton. “It was hard to explain to schools and it was difficult getting through it, but we made it work.”

Eaton said CHUH lost members of its community advisory group. The group was made up of mostly professionals and was tasked with coming up with creative ways to evolve the curriculum and keep students engaged.

“Now we have to figure out how to re-engage people that we lost,” said Eaton.

The Trump administration's attack on these TPP programs may seem random, but took lots of premeditated planning. Back in 2010, the Obama administration created the programs to help end the high rates of teen pregnancies in certain communities. Congress collectively agreed to fund these programs, but were not aware that the Trump administration quietly sent letters to grantees alerting them of their early termination.

HHS did not respond to requests for comment.

“They just sent a letter, no explanation, no nothing,” said Pascale Saintonge, who runs the Family Planning and Pregnancy Prevention Programs at Children’s Aid in the Bronx.

Children’s houses the JAM program. The non-profit was getting \$750,000 dollars from the Department of Health and Human Services and Saintonge said they considered looking for an outside grant to help with costs once they learned the funding would stop.

The Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy also had to close its doors back in May due to lack of funds. The statewide coalition was the only program in the state that made sure policies and local programs effectively addressed issues associated with teen pregnancy. According to Jen Meyers, who was chair over the program, the group is currently in the process of taking legal action against HHS over the closing of the 39 year organization.

Not only did HHS shorten programs across the country, but they also introduced a Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) in April. That agenda offered new grants to programs that emphasized an abstinence based curriculum. They also wanted those programs to teach lessons that warned teens that having sex was a risk.

But professionals all agree that only teaching kids about abstinence is not realistic as many kids are already having sex or having conversations about sex at a young age. Planned Parenthood, along with eight other organizations decided it would fight back and filed a lawsuit against the

Trump administration, claiming that FOIA pushed an unlawful criteria.

“Once again, the Trump-Pence administration tried to impose their abstinence-only agenda on young people across the country at the expense of young people’s health and they failed,” said Dawn Laguens, the executive vice President, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, in a statement. “Young people deserve to have full, accurate information, and to learn the skills they need for their lives, their health, and their futures.”

Valencia, the JAM peer leader, said a lot of his peers are in the dark about sex education and that the school does not do an adequate job at informing students. He said at his school, students take sex education one semester during their freshman year.

“They never talked about healthy relationships, consent or puberty,” said Valencia. “Sex ed is more than just sexual intercourse. I’ve heard guys tell me a no is yes. We gotta put knowledge into young men about consent.”

Zahiry Tiburcio, 17, is also a JAM peer leader and said that everyone in her school is having sex, but being a Just Ask Me peer mentor allows her to educate her friends on making better choices.

“You hear everyone talking about sex,” said Tiburcio, a senior at Fordham High School for the Arts. “One person says one thing and the other person says another, so I wanted to give people the facts on what they need to know.”

Tiburico said she would not have been able to help her peers learn about sex without the training from JAM.

“A few of my friends came up to me and said you really saved me bro,” she said. “The teens need this at the end of the day, imagine if we don’t have this, we’ll have nothing.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percent of teen birth has gone down but the U.S. still has a higher rate than most other developed countries. It also found that roughly one in four women becomes pregnant before the age of 20.

Racial and ethnic and geographic disparities in teen birth rates still persist, especially in the Bronx. Last year, Comptroller Scott Stringer rated the borough as having the highest teen pregnancy rates in the city.

“That’s why what we do here in the Bronx is so necessary, without that funding we would not have been able to continue paying our peer leaders, host as many workshops or recruit new leaders,” said Saintonge.

In September, Congress approved and the president signed the fiscal year 2019 appropriations bill, which could fund the fifth year of TPP projects. Now that these programs are guaranteed their funding for two years and the FOA programs are no more, many organizations are picking up where they left off. But some are doing so with trepidation.

“I am cautiously optimistic,” said Eaton, the woman who runs the Cuyahoga County Board of Health’s Teen Pregnancy Program in Ohio. “I’m hoping we can continue the program until June 2020, but I would be lying if I didn’t say I think the administration would find their way around that.”