

## Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth Podcast Series

### **Episode: Holistic Health Education**

[John Bollenbacher:] Welcome to Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth, a podcast series by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. This series is produced by FYSB's Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, as part of The Exchange.

I'm John Bollenbacher, a producer for The Exchange. Here in the podcast we talk with people implementing programs that prevent teen pregnancy and help prepare teens for adulthood. While overall teen birth rates are decreasing, we're not done yet. Teen births remain high among vulnerable youth.

Today we're joined by Kevon Harris from DC PREP. She's a health analyst with that organization. We're excited to have her here to have a little conversation about the work she's doing, and Kevon, can you start off by telling us a little bit about your organization?

[Kevon Harris]: We fund four organizations to do PREP programming throughout the District either through community-based organizations or primarily our schools. And so a lot of our DC Prep grantees work with our DC public school system or they work with our DC public charter schools. And some of them also work with our housing developments within the District as well. For the most part, we oversee the administration of the grants, technical assistance for the grants, collaborative partnerships to ensure that our grantees are connecting with our schools and other CBOs and all the other requirements that are fulfilled throughout the grant. My role has a number of hats. Technical assistant, for example, one of our grantees facilitates a program called SIHLE, which is Sisters Informing Healing Living and Empowering. And it's an HIV prevention program that is considered an evidence-based program through the CDC and so I'm constantly training our grantee Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington to ensure that they are completely equipped to facilitate this program. We also work with Children's National Medical Center, which is one of our major hospitals, our only major children's hospital here in the District, and they also implement a promising program called Teen Life Clubs. And so they work with not only schools, but they've also partnered with our different housing facilities. Another organization that is funded is our Athletes United for Social Justice, also known as the Grassroots Project. They work with local athletes from Georgetown, the George Washington University, Howard University, and American University so they train athletes to actually facilitate HIV and physical activity education so it's called the Grassroots Project and it's very interactive, it's a lot of fun, and schools are very appreciative of it because it not only hits our HIV education but our physical activity component which OSSE is very strong about making sure that our young people are receiving the proper health education.

[John Bollenbacher]: There's a big diversity there between all the different programs you're working with. Can you talk about any common threads through all the work that you're doing in DC?

[Kevon Harris]: Peer or near-peer education. A lot of our programming definitely, we're very big on near-peers. And so near-peers, if someone may not be aware of it, that's having someone who is either in the age group of the demographic that you would like to work with or close to it so maybe a few years older. And a lot of times also it will include adults as well. But the young people are very receptive to other positive young people coming and sharing with them the facts about HIV/AIDs and teen pregnancy prevention. Every program also helps our young people look at what life could be like if you take preventative measures at such a young age.

[John Bollenbacher]: Many times when people think about FYSB they really just think about adolescent pregnancy prevention. But you really have a health focus. Can you talk a little bit about why it's so important to have that focus and especially work with youth and children while they're young around this subject?

[Kevon Harris]: Sex is just one part of life. We have to think about the whole child. The great thing about my team, we really try to do a holistic approach with our education. For us at OSSE, we really try hard to make sure that not only schools are well aware of the health education options that are out there with our organizations, but we also do a rigorous process of screening curriculum, health education curriculum, and that varies from not just HIV and pregnancy prevention, substance abuse, mental health, physical activity so our job is definitely holistic in that regard.

[John Bollenbacher]: Regardless of the research aspect, why do you think it's important to have this holistic approach?

[Kevon Harris]: You cannot reach a child if they have so many other things going on with their personal life, it's hard for them to even take the however many hours of the day to focus in on the academic perspective. And so for me I believe that schools have a very unique and honorable influence to help shape those experiences in the classrooms and help even parents who may not be able to enforce or to educate their children on what is needed, like to make sure nutrition is appropriate. At the end of the day, what you learn now would definitely influence how you respond later on in life. Positive subliminal messages integrated in different forms of education can really help make sure that once a young person graduates from high school and they go off into college, they can say, "okay, I know that drinking and driving isn't safe because I can put somebody else at risk," or dealing with dating violence, "if my significant other is saying negative words to me, it might not be a physical situation, but it could be a detriment to my mental health," so I believe that even with the way that health education is going today it's slowly being integrated into every educational topic. That's also something that's being tried out. It's definitely important to try to incorporate life skills as well as academic outcomes to make sure that a child is well ready to face the world.

[John Bollenbacher]: Do you have any specific examples around the life skills that you're teaching in programs to youth?

[Kevon Harris]: We have DC Public Schools, they have a program called New Heights. And New Heights is a teen parenting and expecting teen program to ensure that young people who fall in that situation stay in school, graduate, and also are well equipped to be parents past their high school experience. With adult preparation topics, a lot of it has to do with the communication, it has a lot to do with family planning, it has a lot to do with financial literacy, so Planned Parenthood comes in and tries to talk to the

young people about that. The great thing about our grantees is that they also partner with other organizations to do some of the adult preparation topics.

[John Bollenbacher]: Can you talk a little more in-depth about how you encourage grantees to find partners to do this kind of work?

[Kevon Harris]: Well, the great thing about our team is the fact that we have a coordinated health education team, and within that we have two different advisory boards. And with our advisory boards, we invite partnering organizations like the Department of Health. The great thing about it is we publicize our grantees everywhere we go. So even though we are funded to do PREP work, we're also funded with the CDC to do our sexual health so our HIV prevention work. So what we usually do is, when it's time to let schools know that you all need to fulfill your sexual health education stuff like we're funding you to do it, then we'll say, "Hey, but we have DC PREP grantees that can come and help you do that," so that's like a big collaboratory success that has worked in the classroom for PREP and for CDC. Besides our in-house working groups, we sit on a number of advisory boards like Allies in Health Working Group that is filled with pediatricians and family nurse practitioners. We sit on those working groups. We sit on bullying prevention working groups and task force so within those different settings we're constantly pubbing about what we do and then also some of our organizations will actually invite our, like our partners will invite our grantees to come and to work with them. That's our opportunity for our grantees to connect with partners as well. We're really good on capacity building in that regard.

[John Bollenbacher]: What do you think the key is to all this success? Is it publicity or is it just being very involved in all these meetings, I mean how do you think that you attract all these partners?

[Kevon Harris]: We understand that working for the government you can become so far removed from the community, but we want to stay very connected to the community so we have a Youth Advisory Committee. Young people come in once a week and two of my colleagues build these young people in becoming leaders in every capacity. The primary focus, yes, is sexual health, but they talk about a range of things. I led an anti-tobacco youth coalition for two and a half year,s so even though, like the cliché, "government does not want to stay within the community," we're the total opposite. We're always out there in some capacity. We still have a youthfulness to us, and so young people come to us, and they ask us questions, or they want to work with us. We stay very humble because, you know, we had different opportunities to come our way, so we're always opening it up. I work with a public charter school that needs students to come and do fellowships so I'm like, "Yes, send me a kid," like all the time. And then we work with the George Washington University where a number of us received our Masters so we're like, "Send us interns, send us 20," you know, whatever, but not really 20 because we don't have that capacity. But, you know, we try to stay connected in that capacity too.

[John Bollenbacher]: You just spoke a little bit about how important it is to stay engaged in communities and I was wondering if you could expand a little bit and talk about why you think it's so important for communities to take on this kind of work.

[Kevon Harris]: Because sex is never going out of style. The more that we can be honest about the needs of what young people are articulating and maybe not articulating, the more that we have to be receptive to it. And so that goes to not just the community itself, but I believe that strong parenting engagement is very important, and you know, schools and CBOs can only go so far, but it takes whatever positive reinforcement that our parents and caregivers or whomever can help to set the standard. And

still, of course, a young person will have to gauge it for themselves, but if you have just some type of base standard, that young person will be well aware and well informed on how they can make the best decision. The great thing about our programs is that they hit on just about every demographic that PREP is asking for. So we work with the young men of color, we work with LGBT youth, we work with parenting teens, we work with non-parenting teens, we do all of that, so that's really out of the gratitude and blessings of the organizations that are thirsty to actually get the little bit of money that they get to do the big range of work that they do.

[John Bollenbacher]: Is there anything about the work that you're doing in DC that I haven't asked you that you think is important to talk about in this podcast?

[Kevon Harris]: DC is small and big at the same time, and I think that something that I will love to see blossom is more, I guess, more working with not just our local organizations but also our national organizations that are right here. And I just can't believe it. Sometimes when I'm walking down the street, and I see Embassies, all that other stuff, and I'm like, "wow, how can we continue to use the national resources on a local level?" So I think that would be great. We work hard. I don't even know how to describe it. I wish that the tape recording could see this smile on my face because we love our youth. We have such a hope in what our youth can bring if we just continue to invest in them. Not so much invest in our agencies, but make the investment with our youth because I believe that the more that we invest in our youth, the more that they will invest in us later on.

[John Bollenbacher]: Well I want to thank you, Kevon, for taking the time to talk to us, and I want to thank our audience for listening to this Family and Youth Services broadcast. Please check out all of our other videos and podcasts on our website.

Thank you for tuning in. As you heard, our work isn't done, and it will take more leaders like Kevon Harris to prep teens for the future.

Be encouraged, and get connected, at The Exchange. Go to [teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov](https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov).

This podcast series is produced by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. FYSB is committed to a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals, and families can live healthy, productive, and violence-free lives.