

# Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders Today: Community Sexual Health Program Cultivates Leadership Skills in Youth

STD Prevention  
**SUCCESS  
STORIES**

**B**rittany Griffin's life reflects that age-old proverb: *Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*

An accomplished sexual health educator in her early twenties, Griffin has come a long way. Growing up in urban Baltimore, Maryland, where household budgets and community resources can be tight, she remembers having only limited access to sexual health education. Today, she works in community outreach in the Center for Child and Community Health Research (CCHR) at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. There she provides training on healthy relationships, sexual orientation, and consent to youth who live in some of the same neighborhoods she grew up in. How did she go from being potentially at risk herself, to becoming an influential community leader for youth with similar backgrounds to hers? It turns out, she had a helping hand...

As a teenager, Griffin joined the Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) Youth Advisory Council, or YAC, which would later work with partners as part of the

CDC's Community Approaches to Reducing Sexually Transmitted Diseases ([CARS](#)). CARS was an outreach initiative offered through the [BCHD Bureau of HIV/STD Services](#) in partnership with CCHR at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

"I always saw myself as a person who liked to help others, but I didn't really see myself in a leadership role until I stepped into it with my work in the CARS Program," said Griffin. She credits the coaching methods with helping her learn how to interact with other people – especially those in her own age group – to make change happen. "It taught me how to become a leader – someone that my peers can look to as a mentor to help them take charge of their own sexual health choices."

In fact, that's one of the main concepts, and a major strength, of BCHD's CARS Program – recruiting responsible youth onto its YAC to provide meaningful, engaging outreach to their peers to help lower rates of [chlamydia](#) and [gonorrhea](#).



**Between June 2016–  
March 2018,  
the BCHD/CARS  
program provided:**

**663**

tests for chlamydia,  
gonorrhea, syphilis,  
and HIV

**25**

outreach trainings  
for Baltimore  
communities

**6800+**

young adults  
with outreach via  
CARS educational  
events



Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
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Viral Hepatitis, STD, and  
TB Prevention

“We allow youth to be the decision-making body and support them with appropriate trainings on sexual health, social determinants of health, advocacy, team building, decision-making, and other outreach activities,” said Norman Hayes, in the CDC STD Program’s Office of Health Equity. In just a few short years, the BCHD/CARS Program has become a visible source of change in some of urban Baltimore’s most underserved neighborhoods by:

- funding training sessions for YAC members;
- sponsoring a number of outreach events such as information sessions on teen pregnancy; and
- conducting condom demonstrations and providing handouts at community health fairs and citywide health expos.

The program also supported a collaborative project between the BCHD and CCHR at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. This project is developing guidelines for chlamydia and gonorrhea testing among youth during routine BCHD outreach activities with the hopes of making these tests easier and more accessible. YAC members have played active roles in all of these efforts.

“By recruiting youth into these community outreach activities, we are shaping future leaders through unique leadership opportunities,” said Hayes. “Through participation in the YAC, many members have gained skills related to identifying community needs as well as enhanced awareness of the importance of structural level change. These future leaders are also learning valuable lessons in teamwork and how to be active advocates and agents of change. These are skills that will have lifelong value.”

Griffin’s successful transition into a leadership role helping inner-city youth become stewards of their own sexual health confirms the power of this strategy. She worked her way up through the ranks as a YAC member, later earned a spot as a City of Baltimore Mayoral Youth Fellow thanks to her outstanding work in the community, and now mentors her peers full-time with relevant, age-centric sexual health education. She has truly created her own unique career path.

“It all started with the opportunity to be a youth advisor on the YAC,” said Griffin. “I learned such valuable leadership skills. I can see myself growing beyond the work that I do now to go on and make even more far-reaching impacts with other organizations.” Thanks to the foundation the BCHD/CARS Program provided, she’s off to a great start.

## Community Approaches to Reducing Sexually Transmitted Diseases (CARS): Using Teamwork and Community Connections to Promote STD Prevention

At the core of CDC’s CARS Program is the principle of collaboration – between providers and the communities they serve – to promote health equity and community wellness. These collaborations are carried out through community advisory boards that leverage provider and community resources and expertise. Since 2011, the [CARS Program](#) has provided funding for organizations throughout the U.S. that emphasize community engagement in the outreach initiatives they use to positively influence the personal health choices of underserved or at-risk groups. Currently in its third cycle of funding, the CARS Program continues to support strategies and activities that address both individual and structural elements to improve community health outcomes.



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