
THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.



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**TESTIMONY OF JOANN CASADO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.
City Council Public Hearing on
Availability of Suicide Prevention Services for Adolescent Latinas
April 4, 2011**

The Bronx Health Link, Inc. is a health education and policy organization for Bronx consumers and health and human service providers. Thank you for holding this hearing and providing an opportunity to submit testimony on this vital issue.

As the Council is aware, suicides among adolescent Latinas constitute a serious and growing problem, paralleling dramatic increases in depression rates in that community. A 2008 report by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene found that in the preceding year 46% of Latina teens had experienced persistent sadness, a sign of depression, versus 37% of Black girls and 31% of Asian and white girls. Even more alarmingly, a 2009 CDC survey of high school students found that 14.7% of Latina teens in New York City attempted suicide that year – again, much higher rates than among African American and white girls. In the Bronx, which has the highest percentage (51) of Latinos/Latinas and the lowest median age (32) of any borough, the attempted suicide rate among Latinas was 15.3% and, because of the demographics, affects far more young women.

According to the same CDC survey, Latino/a teens of both genders were significantly less likely than white youth to use mental health services in the year of their suicidal thoughts or attempts. This suggests that it is critical to assure adequate funds for both culturally competent mental health services and outreach and education efforts toward this community.

One particular group that faces especially high rates of attempted and accomplished suicide is LGBT adolescents. Although there is not particular data about Latinas within this population, the NYC DOHMH reported in 2008 that the 2005 New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 31% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning teens had attempted suicide in the preceding year, compared to 8% of their heterosexual peers. In particular, studies show that 62% of homeless LGBT youth – the vast majority of whom are African American or Latino/a -- consider or attempt suicide each year. Clearly, there is a need for increased specialized services for LGBT youth, yet Governor Cuomo's budget ended New York State support for youth homeless shelters, several of which serve LGBT youth in New York City. The Ali Forney Center, the nation's largest and most comprehensive organization dedicated to homeless LGBT youth, recently published an open letter to the Governor urging him to reverse this cut.

New York State Psychiatric Institute's Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence recently recommended, "Latina adolescents should be assessed for suicidal ideation and behavior and at-risk youth linked to mental health services. It is important that suicide prevention and intervention programs involve the girls together with their families and target communication and conflict resolution within the family. Emotional regulation and impulsivity should be addressed and healthy coping skills taught and reinforced to handle intense emotions and distress." The Center particularly cited the *Life Is Precious* program of the social service agency Comunilife. *Life Is Precious*, which began in the South Bronx and expanded in January to Bushwick in Brooklyn, is a family-focused, culturally competent mental health and youth development program that works to reduce suicide risk in Latina adolescents. After teens receive adequate treatment, they also receive academic support in order to eliminate feelings of inferiority or depression related to school. But their small size – they expect to treat over 45 Latina adolescents this year and serve 150 family and community members – illustrates the vast unmet need for such services.

Experts have noted that the much higher suicide and depression rates among Latinas in this country than in Latin American nations are a direct function of the conditions faced by Latinas in U.S. society. Dr. Rosa M. Gil, CEO of Comunilife, has written, "The lives of suicidal Hispanic adolescent girls are marked by a deep sense of despair and hopelessness given the socio-economic and physical world that they live in. They have limited access to opportunities that would otherwise set them on the track to a better life. Most troubling of all is the imaginary life of affluence portrayed in television which creates a rift between reality and fiction. The walls of poverty and discrimination separate these girls from the imaginary, so that they live in two worlds with limited options and which undermine their self-esteem and sense of competence. This results in a path of futility, disparage, depression and marginal existence at best or of self-destruction at worst."

Dr. Luis Zayas, a psychologist at Washington University in St. Louis who recently completed a five-year study of more than 200 Latina teenagers in NYC, says the typical Latina teen who attempts suicide is 14 or 15, the daughter of immigrant parents, in a low-income family, and has clashes with her mother based on "very different models about what girls should do, can do and are permitted to do." Thus, any effective program to reduce Latina teen suicide will need to address family dynamics as well as the teens themselves.

Clearly, funding is urgently needed for culturally competent, bilingual mental health services – both prevention and treatment -- that specialize in the needs of young Latinas and their families, include a component addressing issues of homophobia, and have sufficient funds for community outreach. In addition, the City should allocate funds to restore the cuts made in the state budget for homeless youth shelters and supportive services. For the Bronx in particular, with its large Latino/a population, these are pressing priorities. We urge the Council to take action to fund such services. Even in a time of tight budgets, we have a moral responsibility to protect the lives of all of our young people from preventable causes of death.

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