

SAVING D.C.'S YOUTH

How Grassroots Organizations Are Reviving the Future of Public Health



Executive director of Grassroots Health D.C. Jane Wallis and the nonprofit's logo, respectively

Washington, D.C. -- In the United States, public health and education are being scrutinized and weakened as new laws are being implemented and previously helpful initiatives defunded or overturned. As a response, hyperlocal nonprofits known as grassroots organizations are filling in the gaps; especially Grassroots Health D.C. and their determined executive director, Jane Wallis.

Grassroots Health D.C. is a community-oriented health organization dedicated to educating young people about their physical and mental health, while also providing resources and hosting events to support those in need. Since the start of the Trump Administration in 2017, many programs have been removed due to lack of funding or because they have been explicitly halted. These include the federal right to an abortion, CDC environmental

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health programs, HIV/AIDS prevention programs, and numerous other crucial developments.

"People want to vote on ideological values like abortion, when in reality I think if more people understood what comprehensive sexual health meant, they wouldn't be fighting it nearly as much," Wallis said in response to the current government actions. "The reality is, the majority of parents want their kids to be happy and healthy...by putting more political ideology on that, we're just taking away great things."

Wallis started her career as a public health advocate in 2010 when she became a volunteer for Grassroots Health, which was then called The Grassroots Project. As an undergraduate student majoring in biology, she picked up the volunteering as a pastime and fell in love with the field of public health.

"It's important to recognize that...we have to learn from those that have been here longer," Wallis told LMD Studios. She soon realized through her volunteering that the realm of public health needed more advocates, especially in D.C. She then went on to receive her bachelor's degree in public health, and a master's degree in global health from George Washington University.

Desiring real life experience as a public health advocate, Wallis served in the U.S. Peace Corps in Zambia for 27 months as a Community Health Extension Agent right after receiving her master's. She said that the experience allowed her "to live like other people did" and provided a first hand experience for the field she now pursues.

Upon her return to the US, she became a mayoral-appointed commissioner on the DC Mayor's Regional Commission on Health and HIV (COHAH) in 2018. She also rejoined Grassroots Health full time and became executive director in April 2024. Wallis' biggest focus is health education and HIV prevention.

Grassroots Health visits numerous schools in the different wards, collaborating with college student-athletes to deliver an interactive and effective curriculum to children in grades 6-8. Through a series of physical exercises, call-and-response lessons and fostering a safe and fun environment, Grassroots has been able to work with thousands of kids in the District, including the Washington School for Girls in Ward 8 for 15 years.

The methods of teaching that Grassroots Health use are admired and considered by the educators at the schools they visit. Mykal Longhorne, a health teacher at the Washington School for 11

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years, has personally admired their methods of teaching.

"[Grassroots Health has] really shown me how well students receive information through different forms of activities," Longhorne told LMD Studios. "Their key message is a good recall tool...if they're all saying the same thing over and over again with the excitement and enthusiasm, they're more likely to recall that key point."

Grassroots Health's partnership with college students has also been observed as effective, as Longhorne has noticed "how receptive students can be to college athletes, and how quickly they can build close bonds with them."

One of Wallis' motivations when it comes to health education and prevention was that "by providing health education to young people, we are changing their outcomes, and we're changing their ability to make decisions for themselves."

Government Co-Chair of the Washington, D.C. Regional Planning Commission on Health and HIV (COAH) Lamont Clark can attest to Wallis' commitment to the cause. "Through the years, Jane has always been committed to prevention...from day one." Although COAH was initially dedicated solely to HIV care, Wallis pushed for an inclusion on preventing the disease in general.

However, these organizations are now facing the ultimate challenge, which is a lack of funding. As the current government finds less and less priority in these initiatives, they find themselves frustrated.

"The money that surrounds HIV tends to ebb and flow," said Clark. "With our current administration...there is a push that seems to be anti-education and anti-health. So, all of the things that people have been doing over the last 30 to 40 years, it seems like they're trying to dismantle a lot of that."

According to Wallis, the reason for this administrative change is "a lack of education from the beginning." As a public health advocate and grassroots organizer, the government's approach to her field only encourages her to work harder.

"I think in some ways we think we've solved it...from a local setting in D.C., and I don't think we have." For Wallis, the response to the current political climate in terms of keeping our youth safe is "Prioritization of health education, and recognizing all of the secondary and tertiary benefits of a really health literate community."

For the residents of D.C. and the United States the administrative approach to education has left many in concerned and uncertain times. For people like Wallis, Longhorne, and Clark, the times call for more hands on deck than ever before.

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