Good afternoon. I am Julienne Verdi, Director of Government Relations at Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC). I am pleased to be here today to provide testimony in support of Proposed Int. #517, the New York City Campus Safety Act. Planned Parenthood of New York City thanks the Chair of the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education, the Honorable Council Member Inez Barron, for her leadership in convening this hearing. We’d also like to thank Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, Public Advocate Letitia James, the Committee on Higher Education and the entire City Council for their dedication to these issues, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss ways we can improve sexual assault services for all college students in New York City.

As a sexual and reproductive health care provider, we see 50,000 patients annually in our four health centers located throughout New York City. We are also proud to announce that a new health care center in Queens is under construction and is due to open in May of 2015. PPNYC provides sexual and reproductive health services including birth control; emergency contraception; gynecological care (including cervical and breast cancer screenings); colposcopy; male reproductive health exams; testing, counseling, and treatment for sexually transmitted infections; the HPV vaccine; HIV testing and counseling; pregnancy testing, options counseling (including adoption) and abortion. PPNYC works to meet the needs of survivors in all of our clinical services as well as education and advocacy work. Our medical history forms include nonjudgmental screening questions for intimate partner violence and sexual and reproductive wellbeing. All of our services take this screening into account, and we provide onsite social workers, as well as referrals to nearby family justice centers or additional care as needed. Our staff assesses for level of danger and immediacy of support needed and offers care accordingly. In addition to our clinical services, PPNYC has a robust education department, providing both youth and adult education programs to more than 25,000 young people, adults and professionals across New York City annually. Our programs aim to provide tools to help our participants lead sexually healthy, safe and responsible lives. All of our health curricula include a healthy relationship and consent component and seek to create an affirming space for all members of our community to thrive.

PPNYC has been proud to stand with the student activists leading this historic work and to offer our support as a leading reproductive healthcare provider. For us, the intersections of gender-based violence and reproductive health are clear. Sexual assault is a matter of public health and safety. Survivors of assault frequently face physical and/or mental trauma and can be put at risk of sexually transmitted infections or forced pregnancy. College survivors also suffer high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and drug or alcohol abuse. On October 29, 2014, we joined with student activists at the “Carry that Weight Day of Action,” showing support for student survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Also, this past year, PPNYC launched a local chapter of Planned Parenthood Generation Action, a network of young organizers and activists across the country who are organizing within their communities to mobilize advocates for reproductive freedom. PP Generation Action students across New York City campuses have been joining the movement against sexual assault, fighting to make their campus communities safer for all people.

PPNYC strongly supports measures to combat sexual assault and gender based violence at New York City colleges. An estimated one in four women and 3% of men will experience an attempted and/or completed rape while at college. That means a woman has roughly the same likelihood of contracting the flu in an average year as experiencing sexual assault while at college. And yet, we know that only an extremely small percentage of assaults, less than 5%, are reported to authorities. Even fewer assaults ever face conviction. There is a significant gap between the epidemic we know is happening nationwide and the institutional response that is sorely needed. When sexualized violence becomes so normalized that a survivor doesn’t feel safe to go to their school administrators, a larger cultural change is needed. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, most survivors know their attackers and most people who commit acts of sexual assault are repeat offenders. There must be stronger support mechanisms in place so that survivors feel safe reporting an assault, and so that once a report is filed, survivors are made confident in the measures of accountability.

The need for action on sexual assault in our educational system is urgent. New York State currently has more colleges under federal investigation for Title IX violations and sexual violence case mishandling than any other state. With approximately 110 colleges and universities located in New York City alone, the New York City Campus Safety Act would go far in meeting the need for stronger campus resources and student supportive services. The Act would put in place meaningful changes to ensure resources are made more easily available to those who need them and tackle a larger culture that allows rape to be too easily dismissed.

PPNYC applauds the New York City Campus Safety Act’s measures to enhance services and information available to sexual assault survivors across New York City colleges. These steps include a web-based app to identify sexual assault locations, a list of all hospitals with sexual assault forensic examiner programs, an assault helpline, and connecting students to a list of all community-based rape crisis centers.

PPNYC is especially pleased that the NYC Campus Safety Act includes an education component whereby the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence, along with local rape crisis centers, would together establish an education program for students, faculty, campus safety officers and administrators of New York City’s colleges and universities. The programming would include “affirmative consent education, bystander intervention, disclosure training, offender education, and material to educate individuals adjudicating or otherwise making determinations of internal college or university proceedings to address claims of sexual assault.” Bystander intervention teaches awareness tools to identify, assess and take action in cases of assault or sexual violence. In other words, students and administrators would learn elements of positive and healthy relationships, as well as receive a skills-building component to develop confidence and communication in order to manage sensitive situations. It is clear that such resources are crucial for students to better identify sexual assault and intimate partner violence and feel equipped to support others who have faced or continue to face such abuse. 58% of college students say they don’t know what to do to help someone who is a victim of dating abuse.\(^3\)

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In order to best meet the needs of campus communities, PPNYC recommends all educational resources be culturally competent and LGBTQ inclusive with materials that cover the full range of sexual and reproductive health services. No one, regardless of gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, or sexual identification should be made to feel unsafe or uncomfortable in seeking out the support they need. Gender-based violence and bullying of LGBTQ students are inherently linked, and we cannot address sexual assault without also pushing for greater tolerance of all identities.

All students must be taught about consent and what a healthy relationship looks like, and must be given adequate resources to prevent and respond to gender-based assault. Unfortunately, students are currently often taught that sexual responsibility lies on the shoulders of only one gender. As a result, sexual violence is rampant. We understand that these conversations can’t start early enough, which is why PPNYC firmly believes that the fight to end sexual assault and intimate partner violence must include efforts to improve sexual health education, starting many years before students even think about going to college or entering into intimate relationships.

Our experience as a sexual health education and service provider shows us firsthand the gaps that remain in New York City’s sexual health education, which has a significant impact on young people’s health, well-being, and future sexual relationships. As the largest metropolitan area in the United States, New York City has an opportunity to become a leader in comprehensive sexual education. Comprehensive sexual education must teach not just the basic prevention lessons, but also provide students the skills to build healthy relationships and caring communities, and empower students to make the best decisions that are right for them. Our education programs teach young people about the importance of communication and respect of one another through consent. Too often we provide young people with sexual health facts and figures without contextual tools to meaningfully apply this information to their everyday lives. Comprehensive sexual education in every school, for every student K-12, could help decrease incidents of assault and abuse in the long run.

The Campus Safety Act will connect campus community members to resources to better address the needs of survivors. Providing greater educational materials for students and administrators adjudicating assault claims could mean the difference of a survivor no longer having to face their attacker in the dormitory halls every day. We applaud the City Council’s commitment to increasing access to sexual assault services in colleges and universities across New York City and urge the Council to pass Proposed Int. No 517-A. In addition, we urge the New York City Department of Education to ensure comprehensive, medically accurate sexual health education is provided to every student each year from grades K-12.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue and I would be happy to take any questions or provide additional information.

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Since 1916, Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC) has been an advocate for and provider of reproductive health services and education for New Yorkers. Through a threefold mission of clinical services, education, and advocacy, PPNYC is bringing better health and more fulfilling lives to each new generation of New Yorkers. As a voice for sexual and reproductive health equity, PPNYC supports legislation and policies to ensure that all New Yorkers—and, in fact, people around the world—will have access to the full range of reproductive health care services and information.