

Testimony in Support of HB 216
Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth
House Appropriations Committee
February 3, 2021

Chair McIntosh and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to give my testimony in support of House Bill 216, which will improve Maryland’s tuition waiver for youth experiencing homelessness.

I serve as the founder and chair of the Fostering Terp Success program at the University of Maryland, College Park. We created the Fostering Terp Success program two years ago to provide support to and eliminate barriers for students who have experienced foster care, are homelessness or are at-risk of homelessness, and those who have no network of family support. I work closely with each of these students and understand the challenges they face. I also know their amazing strength and resilience in the midst of immense trauma.

While the State of Maryland should take great pride in the fact that we have tuition waivers for foster care and unaccompanied homeless youth—and for being one of the first States to do so in 2014—the legislation also has created what I believe to be unintended, negative consequences, and results in inequities for those who need it most. I want to provide two examples:

The first example is about a student who is in his sophomore year at UMD. Throughout high school, he and his mother lived in their car in Anne Arundel County. Mom didn’t work, so he worked part-time at an ice cream shop. When he saved up enough money, he rented a hotel room for the night so they could shower and sleep in a bed. When he came to the University of Maryland, he had nothing. We provided him with bedding, clothing, a laptop, books and academic supplies, and we worked to get him eligible for the tuition waiver. This seemed like a no-brainer; however, he was determined to be ineligible. Since he is considered a dependent, he does not meet the definition of “unaccompanied.” While the spirit of the current legislation is to help youth experiencing homelessness, the requirement that someone be “unaccompanied” is a barrier. HB 216 will remedy this issue.

My second example is about a student who transferred to the university from Prince George’s Community College. Fall 2020 was his first semester at the University of Maryland. After his mom died tragically when he was 16 years old, he lived out of a car during high school as well as in transitional housing here in Prince George’s County. He qualified for the waiver at Prince George’s Community College but he is having trouble qualifying for the waiver at UMD. This speaks to the lack of consistency from institution to institution. Due to several delays processing forms and acquiring the proof needed for eligibility, the student has \$5,000 in unpaid tuition for last semester—an unpaid balance that resulted in a financial block preventing him from registering for spring semester. I got the block removed from his account so he was finally able to register. With changes to the legislation reflected in HB 216, when a student is determined eligible for the waiver by one institution, the student retains that eligibility at any other public institution in which the student enrolls. This is so important.

My intent in sharing these stories is not to demean or diminish the important work of our financial aid administrators. They are my colleagues and friends, and they are doing their jobs. They are following policies and protocols. They are following the legislation. Unfortunately, those things do not always place students in the center. Instead, these policies prioritize paperwork, checkboxes, and restrictive terms and criteria over the traumas and truths of students. To our students, the perception is that our institutions are looking for a way out rather than a way in.

Homelessness is homelessness. Unaccompanied by definition or not, there is shared trauma and experience of poverty. Homelessness is not their only challenge; the overlapping challenges they face are immense.

We also cannot ignore the fact that the youth most impacted by foster care and homelessness are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as well as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. We also know that the degree completion rate for foster care youth is significantly lower than that of all other students: only 2% of those who enter higher education earn a degree. And the data for homeless youth is elusive; the national data does not yet exist.

In addition to providing tuition support, this bill also ensures that each institution have a liaison, like me, who can help connect students to critical resources. The bill also establishes an application and appeal process, which will help standardize the eligibility process across institutions, create consistency, and reduce the confusion experienced by students. An application is not a burden to an institution—it's what we know how to do.

That a student who is homeless makes it this far should be celebrated, and we should do all we can to ensure their success. I ask you today to please support HB 216 and provide even better legislation that opens the doors for youth experiencing homelessness, reduces the immense burden of debt, and provides a fighting chance to escape poverty.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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