



THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY GOVERNMENT

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

BILL: Senate Bill 155 – Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth – Alterations and Reports

SPONSOR: Senator Washington

HEARING DATE: January 27, 2021

COMMITTEE: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

CONTACT: Intergovernmental Affairs Office, 301-780-8411

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Office of the Prince George's County Executive **SUPPORTS Senate Bill 155**, which provides technical corrections to the tuition waiver legislation passed in Maryland in 2014. The proposed legislation removes the unintended barriers to implementation and student access, clarifies eligibility, adds prioritizations for access to housing, and provides notification and appeal rights for students. These proposed improvements are in alignment with the best practice and will ensure that Maryland continues its strong commitment to provide viable educational pathways out of poverty and homelessness for youth who have disproportionately struggled in achieving college readiness.

Prince George's County has been serving unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) since 2013. As a result of our innovative work in this space, the County has had the privilege of serving as a member of the Maryland SB 764/HB 823 statewide task force to study housing and supportive services for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. Maryland's Interagency Council on Homelessness was selected as a national *Way Home America 100 Day Challenge* site focused on the intersection of homelessness and secondary education, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Youth Homeless Demonstration Program site, and in partnership with innovative and dedicated youth serving agencies and youth leaders with lived experience across the State, have worked collaboratively to help craft the critical **Senate Bill 155** language before you today.

While the existing State law was groundbreaking, lessons learned from the field since its passing have revealed certain limitations and constraints that impede full realization of the intent of the unanimously supported bipartisan legislation. One

such limitation is the current requirement for homeless students to annually recertify their homeless status to maintain tuition exemption eligibility. Stable housing increases the likelihood of educational attainment. To achieve that stability, recipients of the homeless youth tuition exemption often use financial aid to secure housing, but once housed – under the current law - they are no longer considered homeless and lose the tuition exemption along with the financial aid. This has the unintended consequence of forcing youth to drop out and return to homelessness. **Maryland is the only state with a homeless youth tuition exemption that requires annual verification of homelessness.**

Another concern has been the underutilization of the waiver due to lack of awareness among students and the inconsistent implementation of waiver eligibility policy by colleges and universities. Many Maryland colleges and Universities do not have an effective mechanism for identifying students experiencing homelessness and helping them access financial aid and lack any process for students to challenge improper application of the homeless youth tuition exemption law. In 2019, as part of Prince George's County's 100 Day Challenge work in partnership with the University of Maryland, College Park, Bowie State University and Prince George's Community College, the County piloted the use of housing stability questions during student registration of incoming freshman for the fall of 2019-2020. 200 students were identified as homeless or significantly housing unstable. Without this intentional effort to identify youth in need of support and connecting them to tuition assistance, financial aid and campus and community support, these students would have remained in the shadows, struggling to succeed, and many would have seen their educational aspirations end.

Senate Bill 155 seeks to remedy this and other shortfalls in the current law by repealing the requirement of annual verification of homelessness; requiring each public institution of higher education in the state to make a tuition exemption application available to students and establish an appeal process for denials; granting priority for on-campus housing where applicable to tuition exemption recipients; and amending reporting requirements to allow for monitoring of eligibility determinations and appeals.

Annually, the County's UHY system serves an average of 115 youth, less than 10% of which, present as college ready. These youth have overcome significant trauma in their pursuit of their education. In addition to their schooling, they worry about how they will feed themselves, pay for necessities, obtain transportation and most importantly, where they will sleep. We must ensure that tuition is not the final insurmountable barrier to their educational success.

For the reasons stated above, the Office of the Prince George's County Executive **SUPPORTS Senate Bill 155** and asks for a **FAVORABLE** report.