



SENATE EDUCATION, HEALTH & ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Senate Bill 155 - Higher Education -
Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth -
Alterations and Reports
January 27, 2021
Information

Chair Pinsky, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the committee, the University System of Maryland (USM) offers the following letter of information regarding Senate Bill 155.

USM Institutions are keenly aware of the barriers that face homeless students in attending an institution of higher education and successfully completing a degree program. The USM shares the values, intentions, and motivations behind Senate Bill 155 and would like to support homeless students in the best ways possible. As written, USM institutions foresee challenges in the verification and appeals process and the unknown cost. If the state is going to establish a new definition of what qualifies students as homeless for purposes of tuition, it is our belief that the verification of that homelessness status should be affirmed by the state agency authorized to make such a determination. A student would be able to be verified once and go to any school or seamlessly transfer from one school to another, without having to go through the process multiple times. Under the current bill, each USM institution would have to set up its own verification and appeals process and dedicate staff to that process, which would be costly.

Senate Bill 155 uses the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition of homelessness, a definition that was created for students under the age of 21 in the K-12 public education system. Currently USM institutions do not collect data on how many students are homeless under the McKinney-Vento definition and without this data it is impossible to estimate the cost to institutions. USM institutions currently provide a tuition waiver to any student who qualifies as an unaccompanied homeless youth as defined on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but the McKinney-Vento definition is much broader and would qualify an unknown number of students for tuition waivers. This definition was meant to keep K-12 students in school when they may be experiencing turbulent and rapidly changing living situations and was not intended for higher education purposes.

The USM hopes the committee considers a narrower definition of homelessness than McKinney-Vento provides and that the verification and appeal processes would reside with the state agency empowered to grant that application.

Thank you for allowing the USM to share our thoughts regarding Senate Bill 155.