

**SUPPORT – SB 155**  
**Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth -**  
**Alterations and Reports**  
**Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee**  
**January 27, 2021**  
**Testimony of Maryland youth leaders**

Dear Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Committee members,

We are writing as youth leaders with personal experience of homelessness to ask for your strong support for Senate Bill 155, which improves Maryland's tuition waiver for homeless youth. There are so many talented, intelligent youth struggling with homelessness, and we shouldn't have to give up on our dreams or on becoming the people we want to be just because we can't afford to go to college. It's a missed opportunity for us and for society when we can't go to college – if we had this opportunity, we would solve problems and really make such a huge difference in the world.

Youth struggling with homelessness have hopes of going to college, but it's hard to focus on going to school and how to pay for college when you have to focus on surviving. We are homeless not by choice, but by force. It is very hard out here when you don't have your parents or immediate family, or the backing of any support system. Some people's parents didn't want them because they are gay, or just don't care about them, or they grow up in foster care and then get kicked out and become homeless. It's just hard trying to find somewhere to lay your head and get your life together – it's just really hard. For youth trying to make it day-by-day, immediate financial needs like paying for housing, transportation, food, and childcare can take precedence – the possible long-term financial benefit of a degree doesn't matter if I don't have a safe place to sleep tonight. You can have a plan to follow your ambitions and stick to it to a tee, but tomorrow you could be on the streets and your plan has to change.

Finances are the biggest barrier to college, aside from maybe self-doubt, but that's actually tied back to finances too. It's hard to find out about opportunities like the tuition waiver or other financial assistance. Youth struggling with homelessness aren't aware that there are these avenues available until someone tells them about it. It's almost like you have to just get lucky with who you are talking to or your connections. There is a lot of anxiety that comes along with thinking about taking out loans for college, and this creates a general fear of moving forward. If we had some financial support to fall back on, then it wouldn't be such a big deal to put ourselves out there and try. It would make it possible to stop wishful thinking and pipe dreams and be able to put real effort into it and turn it into reality. Youth would have something positive and engaging that could let us contribute to our communities and make major societal change. A lot of things would be so different – and for the better.

We understand that the waiver means colleges are missing out on money – but why would you let something so temporary trump the value of a lifelong education and the opportunity to contribute to society? It's a disappointment to us to hear that we can't go for our dreams

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because it costs too much. Going to college is no walk in the park for anyone. To have the opportunity to have some help even getting to the point where we can work really hard for our goals would be so important.

Coming from the communities we come from, decisions are usually just made for us without us really being part of it. We want our voices to be heard. People with power sometimes turn their heads away from the harsh reality we face. Everything may be okay in their small world, but outside of that there are people who go without, who have a lack of, who are hurting. Yet the people who have the most power to help or foster some solution turn their eyes away. They need empathy to understand that there are people who are worse off than them. The people are asking for these things because it's what they need. The opportunity to go to college tuition-free is life changing for youth struggling with homelessness. The fact that you are considering this bill is amazing – this is powerful. We ask you to please vote in favor of SB 155.

Thank you,

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