



HOMELESS PERSONS REPRESENTATION PROJECT, INC.

201 North Charles Street, Suite 1104 Baltimore, MD 21201

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS – 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 Ingrid Lofgren, Director of Homeless Youth Initiative

Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc. (HPRP) is a non-profit legal services organization that provides free legal representation to people who are homeless or at risk on issues that will lead to an end to their homelessness. HPRP's Homeless Youth Initiative serves youth and young adults under age 25 experiencing homelessness. HPRP strongly supports SB 155, which makes necessary changes to Maryland's existing tuition waiver law to ensure that it fulfills the legislature's intent to provide access to higher education for homeless youth. SB 155 is vital to ensuring that HPRP's clients and other unaccompanied youth are able to pursue their college dreams and transition to a stable, self-sufficient adulthood.

Many of us have been told that education is our right and that it is available for those who work hard. Unfortunately, this is more aspiration than reality. Particularly for youth experiencing homelessness, no amount of hard work can alter the reality that college is just too expensive and student debt too crushing for these youth to maintain stable housing, eat regular meals, and keep up with tuition and other school expenses. And with the unprecedented economic struggles during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more youth are making difficult choices about where to put their limited financial resources. As a nation and in Maryland, we have had a reckoning with the inequalities that are perpetuated by our systems, including inequitable access to higher education. By supporting youth experiencing homelessness -- who are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color -- this Committee has the opportunity to help right some of these historic wrongs.

Maryland's tuition exemption for homeless youth is out of step with other states and is failing our students, despite laudable legislative intent. Maryland's homeless youth tuition exemption is failing to achieve its purpose because:

- Only unaccompanied youth are currently eligible for the tuition exemption, but students experiencing homelessness with their family have the same need for assistance. MD is the only state that limits eligibility for its homeless youth tuition exemption to youth experiencing homelessness without a parent/guardian, rather than supporting all homeless students in accessing higher education.
- Requiring annual verification of homeless status to maintain tuition exemption eligibility has had the unintended and traumatic consequence of causing school dropout and returns to homelessness. Recipients of the homeless youth tuition exemption often use financial aid to secure housing, but once housed they are no longer considered homeless and accordingly lose the tuition exemption during the required process of annual verification of homelessness, must drop out of school, and often become homeless again. MD is the only state with a homeless youth tuition exemption that requires annual verification of homelessness.
- The tuition exemption is underutilized due to lack of awareness among students and inconsistent implementation by colleges and universities. Most 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.

SB 155 ensures the effectiveness of Maryland's homeless youth tuition exemption by:

- Supporting students experiencing homelessness with a parent/guardian by repealing the requirement that youth must be unaccompanied in order to access the tuition exemption;
- Repealing the requirement of annual verification of homelessness;
- Requiring that each public institution of higher education in the state must make a tuition exemption application available to students and establish an appeal process for denials;
- Granting priority for on-campus housing, if applicable, to tuition exemption recipients; and
- Amending reporting requirements to allow for high-level monitoring of eligibility determinations and appeals.

When youth experiencing homelessness persevere against all odds to make it to college, we must never allow tuition to prevent their educational success and stability.

Homeless Persons Representation Project urges the Committee to issue a Favorable with Amendments report on SB 155. If you have any questions, please contact Ingrid Lofgren at ilofgren@hprplaw.org or (443)286-1759.