

Dear Members of the Maryland Senate Budget and Taxation Committee:

I am writing in support of Senate Bill 603

University of Maryland, College Park Campus – TerpsEXCEED Program sponsored by Senators Zucker, Feldman, Guzzone, Rosapepe, and Waldstreicher

As your constituent living in Damascus, MD and working in Rockville, MD, I am writing today to ask you to support college students with disabilities in Maryland and across the country. Inclusive higher education support academic growth, social development, independent living, and career advancement for a population of students who have historically not had that opportunity. I am advocating for the Governor to include in the annual budget bill, beginning in fiscal year 2027, the University of Maryland, College Park Campus TerpsEXCEED (EXperiencing College through Education and Employment Discovery) Program to provide educational and employment opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities.

I am the Executive Director of Main Street Connect, a Rockville-based community that provides inclusive, affordable living and community engagement for people of all abilities. Main Street has more than 110 residents and 280 members. As a parent of a 19-year-old son on the autism spectrum, I understand the unique challenges faced by individuals who, like my son, struggle in social environments and face barriers in job training and employment opportunities. My son has shown incredible resilience and potential, despite the difficulties he faces in these areas. Watching him navigate a world that often doesn't fully understand his needs has only strengthened my commitment to advocating for better opportunities for all individuals with autism and other developmental differences.

My experience at Main Street Connect and as a parent has reinforced my belief that with the right support, inclusion, and opportunities, individuals like my son can thrive in their own way. It's about creating environments where everyone is encouraged to grow, contribute, and reach their fullest potential.

As a parent and professional in the disability field I see first-hand how inclusive higher education programs support students to postsecondary career outcomes.

TerpsEXCEED, University of Maryland's Inclusive Higher Education Program, offers students valuable learning opportunities, meaningful social engagements, and safe and inclusive environments. TerpsEXCEED also provides students with developing internships and job opportunities on and off campus, gathering supervision feedback,

and providing direct employment support. This includes goal setting and career planning for each student in the program, leading to outcomes of employment and financial success to continue after the student graduates. It also trains hundreds of peer mentors in kind problem-solving, relationship building and teamwork development, all skills that lead to outstanding future members of Maryland's workforce.

On behalf of Main Street Connect and as a parent, I urge you to work with your congressional colleagues on the Committee to provide institutional support for TerpsEXCEED, that also will support expansion of this programming across Maryland.

The future of our state and nation relies on an educated, skilled, and caring workforce. I am relying on you to do what is right for Maryland.

Sincerely,

Tara Owens  
Executive Director- Main Street Connect