

## **Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 864: Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility**

**March 11, 2026**

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and esteemed members of the Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment. My name is Zach Levin, and I serve as Chief of Staff for Delegate Bernice Mireku-North, but today I'm here to share my personal story and offer strong support for Senate Bill 864 – Higher Education: Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility.

My partner, Genevieve, is the legal guardian of her now 18-year-old sister, Julianne. When Julianne was 14, her world turned upside down. Her parents were deemed unfit to care for her, and she entered Maryland's foster care system where she suffered bullying and financial abuse. Genevieve, just 23 years old, stepped up to take responsibility, and by the time Julianne turned 16, Genevieve became her legal guardian.

Since then, Genevieve and I have worked tirelessly to give Julianne the stability, community, and sense of normalcy every young person deserves. Julianne loves dinosaurs and it was her passion for the field and dreams of one day becoming a paleontologist that sustained her through those tough years in foster care. But when it came to college, our combined salaries simply weren't enough to cover tuition for a young person without a financial safety net. That's when we learned about the Foster Care Tuition Waiver. Through this program, Julianne has been able to learn, grow, and follow her dreams without the crushing weight of debt or financial uncertainty holding her back.

From a human standpoint, it's difficult to explain why Julianne should have access to such an amazing program, but someone who exited foster care younger than 13 should not. We should not be telling that foster youth "You found a family too early to qualify."

Senate Bill 864 makes a narrow but important adjustment to Maryland's existing Tuition Waiver for Foster Care Recipients. Under current law, a young person who is adopted or placed in guardianship only qualifies for the tuition waiver if they were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday. Senate Bill 864 lowers that age threshold to 8. In doing so, the bill corrects a gap in current law so that children who achieve permanency earlier in life are not excluded from support later on.

From a fiscal perspective, this bill is about policy alignment and long-term return on investment.

First, college is expensive. For many families who step forward to adopt or assume guardianship of a child from foster care, finances are already tight. Under current law, if a child exits foster care before age 13, they lose access to the tuition waiver. That means a family considering

adoption or guardianship when a child is 8-12 must weigh the financial burdens of supporting that child's higher education. In other words, the structure of the waiver can unintentionally create a financial disincentive for early placement.

Maryland policy should encourage permanency earlier, not create technical rules that may complicate family decisions. Lowering the age to 8 aligns the tuition waiver with the reality that many children achieve permanency in their elementary school years.

Second, education outcomes for foster youth demonstrate why this investment matters. Data from the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center show that approximately 58% of foster youth enroll in college at some point, and about 35% utilize the tuition waiver. Data from DHS shows that in fiscal year 2025, there were 185 foster youth that exited the program in that 8 to 12 age range. Of those 185, it is likely that 40 to 50 will go to a Maryland college and make use of the tuition waiver. These 40 to 50 students will be distributed across Maryland's colleges and universities.

But beyond the data and fiscal notes, this bill is about expanding accessibility to a truly transformative program for foster youth.

It is about the child who enters foster care after experiencing instability and trauma, who is adopted at age twelve into a permanent, loving home. That child does everything we hope for, they stabilize, they grow, and against all odds graduate from high school, and then, at 18, they discover they do not qualify for the same tuition support as a peer who remained in care until 13. Not because they needed less help. Not because their trauma was less significant. But because they found permanency sooner.

I'm proud to share that Julianne has been accepted into the University of Maryland, including its First-Year Innovation and Research Experience (FIRE) program, one of the university's most prestigious undergraduate research initiatives. She's thriving, and Genevieve and I are so proud of her and so grateful for the foster care tuition waiver for making her dreams possible.

But for every Julianne who benefits, there are many children and families who cannot access this support. Senate Bill 864 fixes that, ensuring that children who find permanency early are not penalized later. For all these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 864.