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March 11, 2026

Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee

Senate Bill 864 — Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility

Position: SUPPORT

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Debbie B. Riley, LCMFT, Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), and I am writing to express strong support for Senate Bill 864. C.A.S.E. is a national organization that works across every level of the permanency ecosystem to ensure families stay together and thrive. In Maryland, C.A.S.E. offers adoption-competent therapy for families and children, both pre- and post-permanency, as well as case management services and child-focused recruitment services using the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) model to identify legal permanency for Maryland children in foster care. WWK is the signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Senate Bill 864 is an important policy change that supports permanency for children in foster care by expanding eligibility for Maryland's tuition waiver program to youth who entered out-of-home placement at a younger age. Under current law, children who achieve permanency before age 13 may lose eligibility for higher education benefits, creating an unintended barrier to early adoption or guardianship. Lowering the eligibility age to 8 years old helps ensure that children who find stable, permanent homes earlier in childhood are not disadvantaged.

Research consistently demonstrates that younger children are more likely to achieve permanent placements, while the likelihood of adoption decreases as children grow older. National data show that the majority of children adopted from foster care are under age 10, and older youth often wait significantly longer for permanency or age out of the system without a permanent family. ([National Council For Adoption](#))

Providing educational supports regardless of the child's age at placement removes a disincentive to permanency and reinforces the message that Maryland values early stability for children. The importance of permanency cannot be overstated. Children who grow up in stable family environments experience better educational, emotional, and long-term life outcomes than those who remain in foster care or age out without permanent connections. Each year, approximately 20,000 youth nationwide age out of foster care without permanent families, facing increased risks

of homelessness, unemployment, and poor educational attainment. (adoptuskids.org)

Policies that encourage earlier permanency help reduce these risks and improve outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood.


Educational support is also a powerful permanency tool. Many adoptive and guardianship families consider long-term financial stability when making decisions about permanency. Ensuring access to tuition assistance regardless of the child's age at placement helps families feel more confident in their ability to provide long-term support and stability.

Senate Bill 864 recognizes that permanency achieved earlier in childhood should be encouraged, not unintentionally penalized. By lowering the eligibility threshold, Maryland strengthens incentives for stable family placements while continuing to support youth as they transition to independence.

C.A.S.E. serves over 600 children both pre- and post-placement each year, and the issue of tuition exemption is one that poses a significant issue in helping to move children to permanency. In our WWK and pre-placement counseling services, C.A.S.E. has seen prospective adoptive placements choose to delay permanency to ensure that their adopted child will have access to tuition assistance. Sometimes, prospective adoptive parents reconsider whether they wish to move forward with permanency when they wait to adopt. Our WWK program currently has two children in this situation. Both have identified permanency resources, yet neither child is 13. In each case, the resource has indicated they would proceed immediately if tuition assistance were guaranteed. If the caregiver in either case chooses to delay permanency, it will create additional uncertainty, will potentially harm the child, and ultimately places the permanency opportunity at risk.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 864. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Debbie B. Riley, LCMFT
Chief Executive Officer
Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.)
3919 National Drive, Suite 200
Burtonsville, MD 20866
riley@adoptionssupport.org
301-476-8525