

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 Steven Acerno, and I serve as the Director of Clinical Services at The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region. I am writing today in strong support of Senate Bill 864, a critical and commonsense improvement to Maryland’s tuition exemption program for youth impacted by the foster care system.

Every day, my team works directly with children, teens, and young adults who have experienced trauma, instability, disrupted attachments, and significant educational barriers. The disparities they face do not disappear when they leave foster care or achieve permanency, in fact, those transitional years can be some of the most precarious. SB 864 provides a targeted and meaningful solution that removes unnecessary barriers and expands opportunity for youth who need it most.

Why SB 864 Matters

Under current law, children who exit foster care into adoption, guardianship, or reunification before age 13 lose eligibility for Maryland’s tuition exemption. This creates an unintended disincentive for early permanency — a time when children would benefit most from a stable, nurturing family. SB 864 corrects this by lowering the eligibility cutoff from age 13 to age 8.

This single change ensures that:

- Children who are adopted or placed into guardianship at younger ages retain access to essential higher education support.
- Families who wish to adopt or pursue guardianship are not discouraged by the loss of future tuition benefits.

Maryland's policies align more closely with what research and practice show that early permanency leads to better long-term emotional, educational, and life outcomes.

In my work with Treatment Foster Care, I routinely see families making decisions about permanency that factor in long-term affordability and stability. The difference between receiving or losing tuition support can determine whether a caregiver feels able to adopt or commit long-term to a youth.

Real-World Impact

The youth we support often face steep challenges as they move into adulthood — including higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, and disrupted educational pathways. Even the most resilient young people need stable support systems to succeed.

For many of our families, especially those caring for children with behavioral health needs or developmental disabilities, the security of knowing that tuition support will be available provides reassurance that the child will have access to opportunities later in life. This bill expands that reassurance to a broader group of youth, including those who found permanency earlier due to successful intervention.

For these reasons, and on behalf of the youth and families we serve at The Arc NCR, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a Favorable Report on Senate Bill 864. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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