
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 864
Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
March 11, 2026

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports SB 864, which will expand eligibility for Maryland’s tuition waiver program for youth who have experienced foster care to children who achieve permanency before age 8 instead of the current law, which is age 13. This important age expansion ensures that foster youth are not excluded from educational benefits simply because they achieved permanency earlier in childhood.

Research consistently demonstrates that younger children are more likely to achieve permanent placements, while the rates of adoption decrease as youth grow older. National data shows that the majority of children adopted from foster care are under the age of ten, thus making many former foster youth not eligible for the tuition exemption under current law.¹ Current law also requires that youth remain in out-of-home placement for at least one year to qualify, as if the conditions of instability that led to placement and the disruption experienced during that time simply disappear once they leave the system.

Youth in foster care experience high levels of disruption and barriers to stability: increasing access to higher education through SB 864 would be a meaningful opportunity for change. An evaluation found that youth in Maryland’s foster care program experienced an average of nine placements during their time in care, and frequent placement changes often require children to switch schools and adjust to new support systems.² Research consistently shows that school mobility and instability are associated with lower academic achievement and reduced likelihood of college completion.³ Many youth entering foster care have already experienced significant instability prior to placement, often involving documented Child Protective Services investigations or interventions. The experience of living in an out-of-home placement can have lasting impacts on a child’s development, regardless of the duration.

Expanding tuition exemption eligibility empowers a larger number of students to view higher education as a viable pathway and something worth dedicating time and effort toward. While Maryland has expressed a commitment to supporting educational opportunity for youth, staffing shortages and organizations flooded with referrals cause many children in foster care to lack consistent mentorship or guidance as they navigate school and begin planning for adulthood. Policies like SB 864 provide an additional avenue of support for youth who may not have had the stability or resources needed to prepare for higher education.

SB 864 reinforces Maryland’s message that we value early establishment of stability for children. Providing educational supports regardless of the child’s age at placement removes a disincentive to permanency. Many adoptive and guardianship families consider long-term financial stability when making decisions about permanency. Ensuring access to tuition assistance helps families feel confident in their ability to provide long-term support and stability.

SB 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.

SWASC strongly urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 864.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

¹ Davi, N. (Sept 30, 2025). Foster care and adoption statistics – AFCARS 2025 Update. Retrieved from <https://adoptioncouncil.org/article/foster-care-and-adoption-statistics/>.

² Department of Legislative Services. January 2026. *Scoping Evaluation of the Social Services Administration*. <https://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/ProgEval/ScopingEvaluationofSSA.pdf>

³ Maryland Department of Legislative Services – Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability. (January 2026). *Scoping evaluation of the Social Services Administration*. Retrieved from <https://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/ProgEval/ScopingEvaluationofSSA.pdf>.