



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 Pam Hoehler, and I am writing to express strong support for House Bill 982. I am the Director of Adoption and Permanency Services with Paths for Families, formerly Adoptions Together. For over 35 years, my agency has worked to prepare families to adopt children from hard places, such as U.S. foster care.

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](#))

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**Adoptions Together, Inc. D/B/A Paths for Families**

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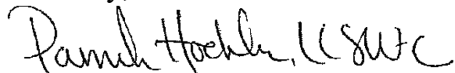
Policies that encourage earlier permanency help reduce these risks and improve outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood.

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. House Bill 982 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.

A local family recently fostered a child in their home for many years. When the child's biological parent's parental rights were terminated, the family intended to adopt the child and formally provide a permanent home for her. When they learned that the child was not yet eligible for college tuition as she was only nine years old, the family chose to put off legal adoption for a few years so she could access this benefit. As with most children, this child experienced behavioral and mental health challenges in adolescence. A primary concern for this child was that her foster family "did not want her," and behaviorally acted out as a result. Her thought was that if they truly wanted her as their daughter, they would formally adopt her. It was hard for her young mind to fully comprehend the complexity of her foster parents' decision to postpone finalization of the adoption. Thankfully, they moved to adoption once she turned 13 years old; however, there were several years of emotional hardship, which included therapy and residential treatment, all at the expense of the State. Moving the of eligibility to eight years old could have alleviated much of this emotional and financial expense.

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

Sincerely,



Pam Hoehler, LCSW-C

Director of Adoption and Permanency Services

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