

SB0864_Higher_Education_Tuition_Exemption_for_Fost

Uploaded by: Cecilia Plante

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY FOR SB0864

Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility

Bill Sponsor: Senator Washington

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Organization Submitting: Maryland Legislative Coalition

Person Submitting: Cecilia Plante, co-chair

Position: FAVORABLE

I am submitting this testimony in favor of SB0864 on behalf of the Maryland Legislative Coalition. The Maryland Legislative Coalition is an association of activists - individuals and grassroots groups in every district in the state. We are unpaid citizen lobbyists and our Coalition supports well over 30,000 members.

It is important to a small, but very vulnerable population of Marylanders to get a chance for a college education. For foster-care youths, this is life changing. However, coming off of foster care, most of these youths do not have the means to afford such an education. In that case, waivers of tuition are critical, and qualifying for a waiver is a very big deal

This bill changes the qualifying age for anyone who was in foster care from age 13 to age 8.

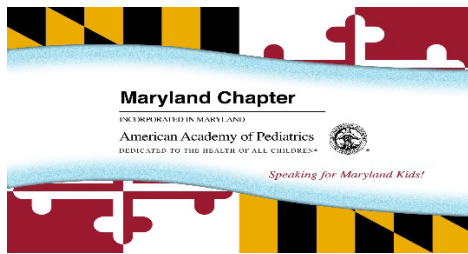
This would mean that more foster care youths can qualify and it is a giant step forward in terms of getting their lives on track. These youths are some of the most vulnerable residents in our state, and we must help them achieve their promise in any way we can.

We support this bill and recommend a **FAVORABLE** report in committee.

SB0864_FAV_MDAAP_Higher Ed. - Tuition Exemption Fo

Uploaded by: Christine Krone

Position: FAV



Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 11, 2026

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

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MDAAP) is a statewide association representing more than 1,100 pediatricians and allied pediatric and adolescent healthcare practitioners in the State and is a strong and established advocate promoting the health and safety of all the children we serve. On behalf of MDAAP, we submit this letter of **support** for Senate Bill 864.

Adolescents and young adults transitioning out of foster care are disproportionately at risk for poorer health outcomes, housing instability, and economic hardship. Access to affordable higher education is a proven strategy to improve life trajectory, reduce health disparities, and support overall well-being.

This bill recognizes the unique challenges faced by youth exiting foster care, including educational disruption, limited financial resources, and reduced social supports. By lowering the age threshold from 13 to 8 years old in the definition of “foster care recipient,” this bill helps ensure that more young people who have experienced foster care have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education without the burden of tuition costs. Extending access to tuition exemptions promotes educational attainment, long-term health, and economic stability.

Senate Bill 864 aligns with MDAAP’s mission to promote the health and developmental success of all children, including those who have spent time in foster care. For these reasons, MDAAP urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 864.

For more information call:

Christine K. Krone
J. Steven Wise
Danna L. Kauffman
Andrew G. Vetter
410-244-7000

SB0864 CPMC EEE FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Diana Philip

Position: FAV

THE COALITION TO PROTECT MARYLAND'S CHILDREN

Our Mission: To combine and amplify the power of organizations and citizens working together to keep children safe from abuse and neglect. We strive to secure budgetary and public policy resources to make meaningful and measurable improvements in safety, permanence, and wellbeing.



SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 11, 2026

Position: SUPPORT

The Coalition to Protect Maryland's Children is a consortium of organizations and individuals formed in 1992 who are concerned about the care of Maryland's most vulnerable children and work together to educate and promote meaningful child welfare reform. **CPMC urges a favorable report on SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility.**

Our coalition has always been supportive of the work of the Maryland General Assembly in passing laws making the costs of college education more feasible for children who have entered foster care in our state. SB0864 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. Providing educational supports regardless of the child's age at placement removes a disincentive for older children to permanency and reinforces the message that Maryland values early stability for children. 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.

We did have a suggestion that was shared with the bill sponsor about clarification over the eligibility start time, which we believe was shared with the bill's sponsor: *Resided in an out-of-home placement for at least 1 year, and was placed into guardianship, was adopted, or reunited with at least one of the individual's parents on or after the individual's 8th birthday* (p2, lines 4-6). It is for these reasons that the Coalition to Protect Maryland's Children **urges a favorable report on SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility.**¹

¹ Members of CPMC represented by this written testimony include the American Academy of Pediatrics - Maryland Chapter, Arrow Child & Family Ministries, Child Justice, Center for Hope, Citizens Review Board for Children, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA - Baltimore County), Citizens Review Board for Children, Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth (MARFY), Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, National Association of Social Workers – MD (NASW), and the State Council on Child Abuse & Neglect (SCCAN).

SB864- Maryland Legal Aid - FAV260311 Written Test

Uploaded by: Erica LeMon

Position: FAV



**SB0864 - Higher Education – Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility
March 11, 2026
Position: FAVORABLE**

Maryland Legal Aid submits written and oral testimony on SB0864 at the request of its sponsor, Senator _____.

Maryland Legal Aid asks that the Committee report **favorably** on SB0864, which allows more children who were in foster care to qualify for the foster youth tuition exemption by lowering the age of eligibility. Maryland Legal Aid serves residents in each of Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions, providing free legal services to the State’s low-income and vulnerable residents in a range of civil legal matters. Maryland Legal Aid is Maryland’s largest civil non-profit law firm, representing vulnerable young people in Child in Need of Assistance (CINA) matters across the State. This proposed legislation is an important measure to provide financial support for former foster children pursuing higher education.

Maryland Legal Aid’s staff represent thousands of children in CINA and Guardianship (“TPR”) proceedings throughout the state. Our attorneys represent children from infancy to young adulthood. As a result of our extensive work in the field, Maryland Legal Aid has expertise in matters concerning child welfare, children in foster care, and particularly, youth who are aging out of foster care.

Youth in foster care can qualify for a tuition exemption that they can apply towards their postsecondary education. Under current law, the tuition waiver reaches (among others) youth who remained in out-of-home placement through key milestones or who spent at least one year in foster care on or after age thirteen and subsequently achieved permanency through reunification, guardianship, or adoption.¹ SB864 recognizes that the academic harm from early childhood instability does not begin at age thirteen.

Findings from the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center show that foster youth face steep barriers to college access and completion, and that enrollment, when it occurs, overwhelmingly depends on layered financial aid. In Maryland, 58% of foster youth with a high school diploma never enroll in college, and just 12% complete a degree by age 25, underscoring the need for

¹ See Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 15 106.1 (defining eligibility, including the “on or after age 13” pathway); Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center (MLDSC), Foster Care and Higher Education Participation (2023), (describing waiver criteria and history).

https://mldscenter.maryland.gov/egov/publications/CenterReports/OutOfHomePlacementandHigherEducationParticipation/FosterCare_Report%202023_suppressed_final.pdf.

targeted supports.² Critically, among those who do enroll 86% receive some form of aid, including 81% federal aid and 51% state aid, with 35% utilizing the foster care tuition waiver; MLDS further notes patterns consistent with youth delaying initial enrollment until the waiver became available, indicating that the waiver is often the decisive factor enabling attendance.³ In short, because over 85% of enrolled foster youth attend Maryland community colleges, institutions where students typically stack federal and state aid, the waiver functions as a catalyst within a broader aid package, not a standalone subsidy displacing institutional revenue. The earlier age threshold will therefore reach youth whose educational gaps began in elementary school, enabling them to pursue postsecondary opportunities they might otherwise forgo due to cost.

Moreover, by improving the predictability that tuition costs will be covered, SB0864 also supports permanency decisions. Caregivers considering custody or guardianship may hesitate due to uncertainty about meeting a youth's future educational needs. Strengthening and clarifying waiver eligibility reduces that uncertainty and can encourage permanency options that serve a child's best interests.

Maryland is well-positioned to monitor the impacts of SB 864 through the MLDS, which is statutorily required to produce annual dashboards on foster youth participation in higher education, including enrollment, aid, and graduation outcomes.⁴ The 2023 MLDS report provides the baseline metrics cited above and can continue to inform the General Assembly's oversight as eligibility expands.

Maryland Legal Aid urges the Committee to issue a FAVORABLE report on Senate Bill 864 and urge its ultimate passage. If you have any questions, please contact: Erica I. LeMon, Advocacy Director for Children's Rights at elemon@mdlabor.org (410) 951-7648 or (410) 935-0937.

² Foster Care and Higher Education Participation (FCHEP) (2023), (Enrollment rate (58%) & college-type distribution (≥85% community college): at 3–4 (Tables 1–2).

https://mldscenter.maryland.gov/egov/publications/CenterReports/OutOfHomePlacementandHigherEducationParticipation/FosterCare_Report%202023_suppressed_final.pdf.

(FCHEP 2023) Degree completion by age 25 (12%): at 6–7 (Table 5).

³ (FCHEP 2023) Aid reliance (86% any aid; 81% federal; 51% state; 35% waiver) & note on delayed enrollment until waiver availability: at 5–6 (Table 4 and accompanying text).

⁴ See Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 24 703.1(c) (dashboard requirements).

3.11_SB864_Tuition Exemption Foster Care Recipien

Uploaded by: Gail Sunderman

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

SB864 Higher Education –Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients – Eligibility

POSITION: FAVORABLE

By: Linda T. Kohn, President

Date: March 11, 2026

The League of Women Voters of Maryland (LWVMD), a nonpartisan organization, supports policies that provide an equitable and quality education for all children and young people. Accordingly, the League supports SB864, which extends educational opportunity to foster care recipients.

SB864, cross-filed with HB982, makes an adjustment to Maryland’s existing Tuition Waiver for Foster Care Recipients. The bill’s purpose is to expand eligibility for the tuition benefit at Maryland’s public higher education institutions to children who have been in foster care from a younger age. Under the current regulation, a young person who has been adopted or placed in guardianship qualifies for the tuition waiver only if they were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday. SB864 bill lowers the threshold to 8 years, expanding age eligibility. In doing so, the bill ensures that children who may have found home permanency earlier in their lives are not excluded from this tuition benefit.

SB862 continues to specify the eligibility requirements for the tuition waiver. The recipient must enroll at a Maryland postsecondary institution – for a vocational certificate, associate or bachelor’s degree – prior to the student’s 25th birthday. The applicant must file for federal and state financial aid, and scholarships or grants earned by a recipient may not be applied to tuition. Foster care recipients will remain eligible until 10 years after enrolling, or by the date when a bachelor’s degree is awarded.

Those who have been in foster care experience special challenges when seeking postsecondary education. These can include finding related financial and housing support as well as family and personal issues.¹ SB864 helps to ensure that these

¹ National Foster Youth Institute, Social and Economic Mobility. <https://nfyi.org/social-economic-mobility/>
121 Cathedral Street, Suite 2B, Annapolis, MD 21401
410-269-0232 * info@lwvmd.org * www.lwvmd.org

vulnerable young people are not excluded from support because they were adopted at an earlier age. The bill ensures Maryland's education policy works in tandem with the state's child welfare goals, which encourages home permanency.

For many adoptive and guardianship families, long-term educational costs are a major concern. Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of lifetime earnings, workforce participation, and economic stability. For foster care recipients, the tuition waiver is an important benefit. Expanding the age of eligibility will increase educational opportunity for young people at an earlier age.

For these reasons, the LWVMD recommends a **FAVORABLE** report of SB864.

SB0864_DHS_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Gloria Brown-Burnett

Position: FAV



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Wes Moore, Governor · Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor · Gloria Brown Burnett, Interim Secretary

March 11, 2026

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: TESTIMONY ON SB 864 - HIGHER EDUCATION - TUITION EXEMPTION FOR FOSTER CARE RECIPIENTS - ELIGIBILITY - POSITION: FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee:

The Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS) thanks the Committee for its consideration and respectfully requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 864 (SB 864).

With offices in every one of Maryland's jurisdictions, DHS provides preventive and supportive services, economic assistance, and meaningful connections to employment development and career opportunities to help Marylanders reach their full potential. Our Social Services Administration implements the Out-of-Home Care (OOH) program, which is affected by SB 864. Under current law, if a foster youth were to be in care at least one year, if they exit the care of the Department through guardianship, adoption, or reunification with their parent(s) after turning 13 years old, they retain eligibility for the tuition waiver, which applies to all Maryland public institutions of higher education. SB 864 proposes lowering the qualifying age to 8 years old, while keeping the other requirements in place. This would promote permanency by encouraging adoptions and guardianships for younger children in the care and custody of the Department.

As youth age in the foster care system, their likelihood of finding permanency decreases significantly. [Child Trends](#) analysis of data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) found that only 62% of older youth ages 14-21 in the United States exited foster care to legal permanency in 2023, whereas the comparable figure for children ages 13 and under was 98 percent. Ages 8 - 12 are critical developmental years in a child's life where self-identity begins to form. Achieving legal permanency during this window, supported by the promise of future educational funding, increases the likelihood of positive outcomes as an adult,

including mental health, academic achievement, economic stability, and career success.

For many prospective adoptive parents and kin guardians who often live on fixed or modest incomes, the decision to add a new permanent member to their family is a personal choice, but it is often constrained by the reality of the financial cost associated with raising a child. The support given to a family once they are the adoptive parents or legal guardians of a child is reduced from when they were foster parents, and higher education can be a significant unplanned financial burden for these parents and legal guardians.

SB 864 is a direct investment in the Moore-Miller Administration's goal of ending childhood poverty, as education is the most effective ladder for economic mobility. Lowering the eligible age from 13 to 8 years old provides a powerful economic stabilization tool for families. For parents working toward reunification, the tuition waiver has the potential to break the cycle of generational poverty. It ensures that even if a family has struggled with poverty or instability in the past, the state's early intervention protects their child's path to a degree.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide favorable testimony to the Committee for consideration during your deliberations. If you require additional information, please contact Justin Hayes, Acting Director of Government Affairs, at justin.hayes1@maryland.gov.

In service,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gloria Brown Burnett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G".

Gloria Brown Burnett
Interim Secretary

SB 864 Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Lien Hoang

Position: FAV

ALONZO T. WASHINGTON
Legislative District 22
Prince George's County

Finance Committee



James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 314
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3155 · 301-858-3155
800-492-7122 Ext. 3155
Fax 410-841-3699 · 301-858-3699
Alonzo.Washington@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 11, 2026

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland State Senate
Annapolis, Maryland

RE: SB 864—Higher Education—Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients
Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

Maryland's tuition exemption for foster youth is one of the most important tools we have to support young people who have experienced instability. But today, an outdated provision in the law unintentionally excludes the very children our system is designed to protect. Under the current statute, a young person who was adopted, reunified, or placed in guardianship must have been in foster care on or after their 13th birthday to qualify for the tuition exemption. That threshold does not reflect how permanency actually works in Maryland, and it creates a barrier for children who achieve stability earlier in life.

Senate Bill 864 corrects this misalignment by lowering the qualifying age from 13 to 8. This is a narrow, targeted update, but it addresses a very real problem. Permanency overwhelmingly occurs before age 10. As the white paper notes, "permanency is most likely to occur before age 10," and adoption likelihood "declines sharply as children age." Families often consider long-term educational support when deciding whether to adopt or accept guardianship. When eligibility is tied to age 13, we risk sending the wrong message: achieving permanency too early may cost a child access to higher education support.

The evidence is clear that instability in early childhood, well before age 13, has lasting effects on learning, school engagement, and postsecondary enrollment. The Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center reports that only 58% of youth with foster care experience enroll in college after high school, and about half rely on state financial aid, including the tuition waiver. These barriers are already present long before adolescence. SB 864 simply ensures that children who spent at

least one year in out-of-home placement after age 8 are not penalized for achieving permanency sooner.

This bill does not create a new program, expand benefits, or impose new costs on local governments. Institutions already verify foster care history through existing Department of Human Services documentation, so implementation requires no new systems.

Most importantly, SB 864 supports what our child welfare system strives for: stable, permanent families as early as possible. Children in foster care are disproportionately children of color, youth from low-income families, and youth with trauma histories. Removing barriers tied to the age at which permanency occurs ensures that every child who has experienced instability has a fair chance at opportunity and a pathway to higher education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alonzo T. Washington". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Alonzo T. Washington
Maryland State Senate

SB864 MALMB Testimony.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Lisa Kovacs

Position: FAV



**Local power, collective voice
for Maryland's children, youth and families**

March 11, 2026

SUPPORT – SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility

Dear Senators:

On behalf of the Maryland Association of Local Management Boards, I am writing in support of **SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility** to lower the age of the definition of a foster care recipient from 13 to 8 years old. This will expand access to higher education to more foster youth.

Local Management Boards in each county and jurisdiction in the State of Maryland work in low income neighborhoods to address the needs of children and families in their respective jurisdiction. We regularly work with foster youth in our programs and see the barriers foster youth experience accessing higher education. Lowering the age from 13 to 8 years for the definition of a foster care recipient will allow for more youth to be eligible for higher education which increases their opportunities for a successful future life.

We urge you to support SUPPORT – SB0864 - Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility to expand the definition of foster care recipients for more of them to access tuition exemption.

Sincerely,

Pamela M. Brown, PhD
Chair

SB864__PATHS FOR FAMILIES.3.11.26.pdf

Uploaded by: Pam Hoehler

Position: FAV



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](#))

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

Offices located in MD, VA, and DC.

Corporate HQ: 6411 Ivy Lane, Suite 700, Greenbelt, MD 20770

P: 301-439-2900 • F: 301-937-2147 • www.pathsforfamilies.org

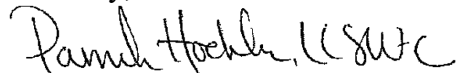
Policies that encourage earlier permanency help reduce these risks and improve outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood.

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. 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

Adoptions Together, a program of Paths for Families

Greenbelt office: 6411 Ivy Lane, Suite 700, Greenbelt, Maryland 20770,

22nd Legislative District

Catonsville office: 22 Bloomsbury Avenue, Suite 300, Catonsville, MD 21228,

44B Legislative District

SB864 FAV CASE 3.9.2026.pdf

Uploaded by: Rachel Wegner

Position: FAV



nurture.
inspire.
empower.

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

HigherEducationTestimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Steven Acerno

Position: FAV

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,

Steven Acerno, LCSW-C
Director of Clinical Services
The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region
(443) 412-5466
sacerno@arcncr.org



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The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region
4513 Philadelphia Road, Aberdeen, MD 21001
Phone: 410-836-7177 | Fax: 410-893-3909

SB864_MARFY_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Therese Hessler

Position: FAV



March 11, 2026

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

Senate Education, Energy, & Environment Committee

Position: Support

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

On behalf of the Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth (MARFY), we respectfully submit this testimony in support of Senate Bill 864.

MARFY represents licensed child placement agencies and community-based providers across Maryland that serve children and families through foster care, adoption, kinship support, residential services, and permanency programs. Our members work every day to help children achieve safe, stable, and permanent family environments. Senate Bill 864 supports these goals by strengthening access to higher education opportunities for youth who have experienced foster care while also promoting earlier permanency outcomes.

Maryland's Tuition Waiver for Foster Care Recipients is a critical support that helps youth pursue postsecondary education and workforce training by covering tuition and mandatory fees at Maryland public institutions. [Currently, eligibility for youth who achieve permanency through adoption, guardianship, or reunification may depend on whether they were in out-of-home placement on or after their 13th birthday.](#) Senate Bill 864 appropriately lowers this threshold to ensure that children who achieve permanency earlier in childhood are not unintentionally excluded from educational support.

From a child welfare perspective, this change is significant. [Research](#) consistently demonstrates that permanency achieved earlier in childhood leads to better long-term outcomes, including improved emotional well-being, educational stability, and adult self-sufficiency. Policies that support permanency at younger ages help reduce the likelihood that youth will remain in foster care for extended periods or age out without permanent family connections.

Importantly, the likelihood of adoption and other permanent placements declines as children grow older. Younger children are significantly more likely to achieve permanency, while older youth often remain in care longer and face greater barriers to stable family placement. Providing consistent educational supports regardless of age at permanency removes a potential disincentive and reinforces Maryland's commitment to placing children into permanent homes as early as possible.



Maryland Association of
Resources for Families & Youth

Educational support also plays a meaningful role in permanency decision-making. Families considering adoption or guardianship frequently evaluate long-term financial responsibilities, including education. Ensuring that children remain eligible for tuition assistance regardless of whether permanency occurs before or after age 13 helps families feel more confident in their ability to provide stable, lifelong support. Senate Bill 864 therefore functions not only as an education policy, but also as a permanency-support policy.

Youth who experience foster care face substantial barriers to higher education and economic stability. [National research](#) shows that only a small percentage of former foster youth complete postsecondary degrees compared to the general population, and many lack family financial resources to support educational attainment.

Tuition waiver programs are widely recognized as critical tools to improve outcomes for this population. In fact, [more than half of U.S. states offer tuition waivers or similar financial assistance programs](#) for students with foster care experience, demonstrating broad recognition of the importance of these supports.

Senate Bill 864 aligns education policy with the State's broader permanency goals. By lowering the eligibility age threshold, the bill removes unintended barriers, encourages earlier stable placements, and strengthens long-term outcomes for youth served by Maryland's child welfare system.

For these reasons, MARFY respectfully urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 864.

For more information call or email:

Therese M. Hessler | 301-503-2576 | therese@ashlargr.com

SB864 Written Testimony - Building Families for Ch

Uploaded by: Tricia Sakles

Position: FAV



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 Tricia Sakles and I am writing to express strong support for House Bill 982. I am the Executive Director of Building Families for Children, a child-placement agency contracted to provide treatment foster care in the state of Maryland. I believe that 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.

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

Sincerely,

Tricia Sakles, CPC

Tricia Sakles, Executive Director
Building Families for Children
tricia@buildingfamiliesforchildren.org
410-872-1050 ext 1120

SWASC_SB864_Foster Tuition Exemption FAV.pdf

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Position: FAV

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>.

SB864 Support.pdf

Uploaded by: Zach Levin

Position: FAV

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, Julienne. When Julienne 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 Julienne turned 16, Genevieve became her legal guardian.

Since then, Genevieve and I have worked tirelessly to give Julienne the stability, community, and sense of normalcy every young person deserves. Julienne 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, Julienne 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 Julienne 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 Julienne 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 Julienne 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.

HB 982_ SB 864.pdf

Uploaded by: Meghan Music

Position: INFO



March 11, 2026,

The Honorable Brian Feldman, Chair,
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,

The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) respectfully submits this Letter of Information for SB 864. SB 864 extends the eligibility criteria for a tuition exemption for individuals who were a foster care recipient. Currently, law indicates eligibility for individuals in the foster care system after their 13th birthday; the proposed amendment would change that to an individual's 8th birthday.

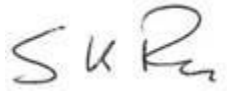
MHEC strongly supports efforts to remove barriers to postsecondary access and completion for vulnerable student populations. Foster youth face significant structural and financial challenges in pursuing higher education, and policies that expand stability and support can meaningfully improve persistence and degree attainment outcomes.

While MHEC's initial assessment indicated that the agency's operational or fiscal impact could be accommodated within existing resources, the Commission notes that significantly broadening the eligible population presents administrative challenges similar to other expansions of this benefit. Verification of eligibility for foster care status is complex, highly sensitive, and requires coordination across multiple agencies and institutions. Because this population requires high-touch, individualized support to ensure proper coordination of benefits, processing a larger volume of eligible applicants will place additional responsibilities on existing personnel within the Office of Student Financial Assistance.

MHEC further notes that the most significant fiscal impact of this legislation will be borne by public institutions of higher education. The expanded eligibility criteria will naturally increase the number of students utilizing the tuition exemption, resulting in an increase in foregone tuition revenue. Specifically, this would impact community colleges. For Maryland's community colleges, which rely heavily on local county appropriations, these mandates may create additional fiscal pressures at the local government level.

MHEC appreciates the Committee's consideration and remains available to provide additional information as needed.

Yours in Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'S', 'K', and 'R' in a stylized, cursive font.

Secretary Sanjay Rai
Maryland Higher Education Commission