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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Testimony in Support of HB1245 - Guaranteed Access Grant and Next Generation Scholars of Maryland – Alterations

HB1245 permanently extends the \$5 million appropriation for the Next Generation Scholars program and expands the opportunity for more students to receive assistance in obtaining access to higher education.

The Guaranteed Access (GA) Grant provides core funding that allows youth from low income families to compete with their more affluent peers in securing a postsecondary degree. Too often, students and those providing college access services are unaware of this opportunity. This has resulted in underutilization of the grant with one of two direct consequences:

1. Students who might otherwise be eligible to enroll in an institution of higher education do not see this as an option due to lack of financial resources; or
2. Students incur significant levels of loan debt that either prevents completion of a higher education degree or creates an unbearable burden as they begin their career.

To help address these issues, I led the creation of the Next Generation Scholars (NGS) program back in 2016 to test strategies to increase usage of GA grants, as well as move low income students to matriculate to and graduate from college on time with little or no debt. Over the past several years, we have found that NGS has been helpful in identifying students for the GA grant, but more tools are needed to make this program even more successful.

To help expand this pipeline, HB1245 (as amended) proposes some simple fixes to the NGS program to maximize usage and identify students who can benefit from the GA grant. This bill sets as a minimum qualification for participation in NGS: eligibility for Free and Reduced Meals (FARM), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or HUD assistance. Additionally, this bill permanently extends the \$5 million appropriation for the NGS program to continue these services in future years.

Current law includes language that simply pre-qualifies students for the GA Grant. Because eligibility for a GA Grant cannot be officially determined until a student's senior year, pre-qualification sets an expectation of receipt of financial aid that may not be possible. Using FARMs and other indicators of eligibility as a predictor of qualification provides more latitude with respect to program services and financial aid counseling. HB1245 more comprehensively utilizes these indicators to get more students who need resources into the pipeline.

For these reasons, I ask for a favorable report on HB1245.