



HOMELESS PERSONS REPRESENTATION PROJECT, INC.

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HB 216 – FAVORABLE Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth – Alterations and Reports

House Appropriations Committee – February 3, 2021
Testimony of Ingrid Lofgren, Director of Homeless Youth Initiative,
Homeless Persons Representation Project

Homeless Persons Representation Project, Inc. (HPRP) is a non-profit legal services organization that provides free legal representation to people who are homeless or at risk on issues that will lead to an end to their homelessness. HPRP's Homeless Youth Initiative serves youth and young adults under age 25 who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness. HPRP strongly supports HB 216, which makes necessary changes to Maryland's existing tuition waiver law to ensure that it fulfills the legislature's intent to provide access to higher education for homeless youth. HB 216 will ensure that tuition is not a barrier to college for HPRP's clients and other youth experiencing homelessness who overcome significant challenges in order to enroll.

Many of us have been told that education is our right and that it is available for those who work hard. Unfortunately, this is more aspiration than reality. Particularly for youth experiencing homelessness, no amount of hard work can alter the reality that college is just too expensive and student debt too crushing for them to maintain stable housing, eat regular meals, and keep up with tuition and other school expenses. And with the unprecedented economic struggles during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more youth are making difficult choices about where to put their limited financial resources. As a nation and in Maryland, we have had a reckoning with the inequalities that are perpetuated by our systems, including inequitable access to higher education. By supporting youth experiencing homelessness -- who are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color -- this Committee has the opportunity to help right some of these historic wrongs.

HB 216 makes several important changes to Maryland's current tuition waiver law. These changes respond to implementation challenges in Maryland and incorporate best practices from other states. HB 216 and amendments offered by the bill sponsor, Delegate Geraldine Valentino-Smith, ensures the effectiveness of Maryland's homeless youth tuition exemption by:

- Repealing the eligibility requirement that youth must be unaccompanied in order to access the tuition exemption;
- Repealing the requirement of annual verification of homelessness;
- Requiring that each public institution of higher education in the state must make an application for the tuition waiver for homeless youth and foster care recipients available to students and establish an appeals process for denials;
- Clarifying that "tuition" includes tuition for fall, winter, spring, and summer terms;
- Granting priority for on-campus housing, if applicable, to tuition exemption recipients;
- Amending reporting requirements to promote transparency and equity; and

- Requiring public institutions of higher education to identify a liaison for waiver recipients within the financial aid office or other relevant department.

The changes in HB 216 will improve college access for youth experiencing homelessness and bring Maryland in line with other states without causing an unmanageable increase in cost to public institutions of higher education. First, only *unaccompanied* youth are currently eligible for the tuition exemption, but students experiencing homelessness with a parent or guardian have the same need for assistance. MD is the only state that limits eligibility for its homeless youth tuition exemption to youth experiencing homelessness without a parent/guardian, rather than supporting all homeless students in accessing higher education. Second, requiring annual verification of homeless status to maintain tuition exemption eligibility has had the unintended and traumatic consequence of causing school dropout and returns to homelessness. Recipients of the homeless youth tuition exemption often use financial aid to secure housing, but once housed they are no longer considered homeless and accordingly lose the tuition exemption during the required process of annual verification of homelessness, must drop out of school, and often become homeless again. MD is the only state with a homeless youth tuition exemption that requires annual verification of homelessness. In addition, the tuition exemption is underutilized due to lack of awareness among students and inconsistent implementation by colleges and universities. Most Maryland colleges and universities do not have an effective mechanism for identifying students experiencing homelessness and helping them access financial aid, and lack any process for students to challenge improper application of the homeless youth tuition exemption law. Requiring an application, appeals process, and liaison will address this problem. Finally, requiring higher education institutions to prioritize waiver recipients for on-campus housing will promote housing stability and academic success.

Each of these changes are key to bringing the promise of higher education to more students and will not add unmanageable costs for universities. A majority of homeless youth unfortunately are not able to enroll in college for various reasons, and so the number of youth receiving the waiver will remain relatively low. In addition, the amount of aid given per student annually is quite modest. It represents only tuition and mandatory fees, not room and board or other costs, and depends on how many credits the student is taking and the tuition at their school. The number of waiver recipients has increased only slightly each year. We can expect that as the first cohorts of youth complete their education and graduate, and as there some inevitable attrition, the incremental increase in waiver recipients will even out. Further, as the Fiscal Note indicates, we know that colleges and universities are able to adjust their enrollment mix in order to accommodate lost revenue due to tuition waivers. Finally, an increase in the number of students using this waiver is something we should celebrate. Higher education interrupts inter-generational cycles of poverty. Those who attend college are less likely to use public benefits and less likely to be incarcerated. Supporting these hardworking youth in achieving college degrees will save our State money in the long run.

Homeless Persons Representation Project urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 216. If you have any questions, please contact Ingrid Lofgren at ilofgren@hprplaw.org or (443)286-1759.