

CHESAPEAKE PARTNERS

2800 Quarry Lake Drive, Suite 300
Baltimore, MD 21209
(410) 602-0195
Fax: (410) 602-0391

January 19, 2021

The Ways & Means Committee
Room 131, House Office Building
7 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chair Kaiser, Vice Chair Washington, & Members of the Ways & Means Committee,

I would like to begin my remarks with a heartfelt expression of appreciation to Delegate Solomon and Delegate Rosenberg not only for the bill being discussed today but also for your ceaseless endeavors to enhance the quality of life and provision of opportunities for the young people of Baltimore and Maryland. Too often I see people who cower from the challenges facing our youth and communities, seeing them as being so formidable as to cause them to abandon hope and effort. You two, and many of your colleagues, demonstrate a clear appreciation that giant leaps are comprised of small steps that can be, in the aggregate, truly transformational. HB96 The College Aid Equity Act is such an example. With this Bill, you have presented the General Assembly with the ability to fundamentally change the opportunity set for countless Maryland students now and for many years to come.

The majority of my time is spent on activities related to my service as Chair of the Board of Directors of Baltimore's Promise. A brief introduction will explain how my work relates to HB96,

WHAT IS BALTIMORE'S PROMISE?

The mission of Baltimore's Promise is to coordinate strategy, identify quality programs, support alignment activities, establish shared measures for meaningful results, build public will, and advance policy on behalf of Baltimore City's youth. Today, hundreds of stakeholders – including the school district, higher education institutions, foundations, businesses, nonprofits, community leaders, adult residents, and youth and young adults – are engaged to build a broad basis of support for our commitment to work together to benefit our children. This ongoing engagement is critical to the work of Baltimore's Promise, a collaborative dedicated to improving outcomes for the City's youth.

OUR GOALS

Baltimore's Promise has five ambitious goals for the City's youth as they progress from childhood to adulthood:

- Babies are born healthy.
- Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school.
- Children and youth achieve at grade level in school.
- Youth graduate high school prepared for the next step without remediation.
- Youth earn quality post-secondary credential or receive training and are career ready.

If you consider our objectives, you will immediately see that the range of issues we are trying to address truly spans cradle-to-career and post-secondary education. It is why a global approach to re-engineering how we educate our children, such as the Kirwan recommendations, is essential to giving our young people the chance they need to live healthy and productive lives, thereby making Maryland a showcase state.

To appreciate the significance of The College Aid Equity Act, one must first consider that the vast majority of young people graduating from Baltimore City Schools are the first in their respective families to have the hope of attending college. This means that there is likely no one in the students' homes with any helpful experience in traversing the college application process. That takes us to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This was established to create a pathway for graduating seniors to more easily access tuition scholarship funds, thereby making college matriculation possible.

Unfortunately, the complications associated with the sheer number of students needing help, the inadequate number of guidance/college counselors available to help these applicants, and the excessively bureaucratic process of gathering and submitting documentation means that many students who should be eligible to receive \$19,500 in assistance per year for Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC)'s Guaranteed Access Grant (GAG) end up receiving nothing, and those funds remain unspent, a sad reminder of lives that could have been transformed. It is noteworthy that the GAG is reserved for graduating seniors with a 2.5 GPA and a very high poverty threshold of 130% of the poverty level of \$32,000 for a family of 4. Most students who fill out the FAFSA only get the Federal Pell Grant (maximum \$6,495) and MHEC's Educational Assistance Grant (maximum \$3,000). That is still close to \$10,000 total, covering almost half of in-state cost of attendance at a Maryland public university. In summation, there is every incentive for a student to fill out a FAFSA and the promised hope of this legislation will only increase benefits to our graduating seniors.

HB96 addresses exigencies associated with family-related and other challenges.

Moreover, this Bill brings together knowledgeable professionals engaged in this process to assess its success and recommend ongoing opportunities to improve it. Assembling a panel of high school and college educators, counsellors, and representatives of City and State officials will allow this program to perform much more optimally. One other matter of significance specifically requires the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and MHEC to be involved in ongoing efforts to be a part of the implementation and review efforts. There is no question that MHEC, coordinating its efforts with others associate with the work of FAFSA could make this a much more effective undertaking.

I would also like to address the ongoing and significant role of the non-profit/philanthropic community in the work being addressed in this Bill. Much of what we have learned about how to best manage these college admission-related processes is a testament to ongoing commitments by these individuals and organizations. However, in the context of such large endeavors, private sector funding can, at best, serve as “research and development” investments. To effectively scale this work to achieve broad success requires the kind of government support, financial and operational, that you and your colleagues can provide.

Lastly, I would like to ask you, the members of the Ways and Means Committee to consider the extraordinary return on investment realized in helping students afford and access college and other post-secondary opportunities created by HB96 The College Aid Equity Act. You have the opportunity to send many of our most promising young students on a path that has already been funded and will reflect success on each of them with concomitant benefits to the State of Maryland. Thank you for considering my request of your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark D. Lerner', with a stylized, overlapping loop structure.

Mark D. Lerner

MDL/lom