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**THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

HB648 – Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program – Funding

**Testimony of Amma Felix
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Also speaking on behalf of the Maryland Alliance for College Access and Affordability

Good afternoon, Delegate Maggie McIntosh, Chair and Delegate Mark S. Chang, Vice Chair. I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak here today about House Bill 648, the Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program (MD-HEOCAP) – Funding introduced by Delegate Alonzo T. Washington.

My name is Amma Felix, president & CEO of Collegiate Directions, Inc. (CDI), a comprehensive nonprofit organization that focuses on college access and completion for low-income, first-generation-to-college high school students in Montgomery County. We were a recipient of one of the grants in the MD-HEOCAP pilot program for the period October 2016 to October 2018 and in past written testimony I shared our results which all exceeded goal. For today, I want to share with you why **increased funding** under House Bill 648 for this program is **essential** for the future of Maryland's workforce.

Why Funding is Needed

The purpose of the funding in HB648 is to support nonprofit organizations that are **already established** in communities to provide targeted outreach to **increase the number** of low-income students **attending and completing** college. To do so funding is required for staff to work one-on-one with students and families all throughout the admissions and financial aid processes which have undergone a range of changes over the last two years and whose horizon also includes change.

In 2021, as reported in a recent National College Attainment Network (NCAN) analysis, Maryland had \$58.3M in unclaimed FAFSA funds!

This means that students who were eligible for those funds are not accessing them and need the right supports to do so. Research shows that students who don't enroll in college immediately following high school are less likely ever get a college degree.

The State's Department of Legislative Services (January 2022) reported that total undergraduate enrollment at the State's public institutions decreased across all segments by 5.8% in Fall 2021, nationally the number is 3.1% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, January 2022). The Center also reports that students from low-income families are disproportionately affected. It is clear that more public resources are needed to stem the tide.

In its effort to reach its 55% college achievement goal by 2025, the State will benefit by partnering with **already established** nonprofits whose staff have a successful track record working with this vulnerable population. Our students need to work with staff who are skilled and have the technical expertise to understand *both* admissions *and* financial aid. Currently the State does not have the person-power, nor do local high school counseling offices, to give the amount of time that is required to ensure that students complete FAFSA forms accurately and on-time. **In Maryland, the ratio of students to one counselor is 369:1!** There is no way that all students are getting the type of support that is required to navigate through the college admissions *and* completion processes. We want to make sure in the admissions portion of the equation we include what it takes to complete college, we want students

to attain a degree. Trained nonprofit staff have years of experience counseling students through the byzantine process to complete FAFSA and state financial aid processes including verification which is a particularly cumbersome process that the majority of low-income students get flagged for and can result in them NOT getting funding if there are missteps. There are too many barriers that prevent low-income students to access and complete college. Students need deeper support to help them complete the requisite steps to get a degree. The State needs nonprofit providers to help it achieve its goal to ensure that 55% of college-aged adults secure one credential by 2025, right now we are NOT on track and we need to press all the levers at our disposal to get us there.

A \$7M appropriation to be included in the annual budget will allow for the stability nonprofits needs to be able to provide consistent high quality support to increase the number of low-income students completing college. This support includes working closely with students and families with their personal and highly sensitive financial information which requires consistent follow-up along with both trust and skill to ensure the required information is presented accurately and on time. College access and completion nonprofits are the right partners for this work.

We must do all that we can to ensure that all students regardless of family income status, race or ethnicity graduate from college. To do so will be a transformative experience for them as individuals, for the future trajectory of their families and for the long-term viability and relevance of our nation. The Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program, **with sufficient funding**, is an important lever in supporting college attainment among low-income students and other populations.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the work of Collegiate Directions and that of the Maryland Alliance for College Access and Affordability. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with you on increasing the opportunity for college degree attainment for Marylanders across the state.

CDI's Expertise in Reaching Low-Income Students

CDI began in 2005, and largely operates in Montgomery County. The number of low-income high school students in the County rose 43% from 2008 to 2013. Unfortunately, 40% of low-income students in the County are less likely to attend college, and only 40% of those that do enroll in college will actually graduate (MCPS Office of Shared Accountability, 2014).

The average CDI Scholar begins our program with a minimum 2.6 GPA and SAT scores in the bottom 25% nationwide. 87% of our High School Scholars qualify for free and reduced meals and 82% of our College Scholars are Pell eligible. In other words, our Scholars are among the most at-risk for either missing out on college or dropping out partway, as more than 65% of similar students in Montgomery County fail to complete a college degree.

Through their participation in our program, Scholars raise their SAT scores by at least 225 points, earn an average of \$36,000 in renewable grants and scholarships (versus the national average of \$14,800), and are admitted to an average of four selective four-year colleges each. 100% of our Scholars graduate from high school and 100% are admitted to four-year colleges, and a remarkable 97% of our Scholars have successfully completed their degree (compared to the 16% national average for the same population). CDI Scholars not only graduate college, more than 90% graduate with at least a 3.0 GPA and more than 80% graduate with concrete plans for graduate school or a career.

We are able to achieve these type of results based on our tutoring and test preparation support, intensive one-on-one counseling, and intentional family engagement strategy. Our culturally competent, full-time college counseling staff are trained in a methodology that provides social capital, mentoring, academic support, financial aid/literacy advising and the ongoing structure required to help students stay on track. We assist our Scholars for six years to ensure their progress from high school through to **college COMPLETION** on an array of hurdles they face on their journey to and through college.

Every day we are achieving what's possible with our Scholars, far surpassing their own expectations and that of their families. These results are possible for more students which is why sufficient investment in the Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program (MD-HEOCAP) is vital to the State being able to achieve its college attainment goal for all students.