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**THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

HB 1129 – Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program – Funding

**Testimony of Amma Felix
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And Secretary of the Maryland Alliance for College Access and Affordability

Good afternoon, Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair and Delegate Mark S. Chang, Vice Chair. I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak here today about HB 1129 – Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program (MD-HEOCAP) – Funding sponsored by Delegate Samuel I. Rosenberg.

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 one of the recipients of the MD-HEOCAP pilot grants back in 2016 and in past written testimony I shared our results which all exceeded goal. For today, I want to share with you why **removing the match requirement** from this proposed increased funding under HB 1129 is **essential** for the future of Maryland's workforce.

We are testifying in support of HB 1129 with an amendment—removal of the match requirement.

Why Funding is Needed

The purpose of the funding in HB 1129 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 \$2M appropriation to be included in the annual budget will allow for the stability nonprofits need 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.

Why Removal of the Match is Necessary

Educational nonprofits provide essential services that neither local school districts nor state/local governments are not able to do. We work intensely one-on-one with students and families **to complete** complex and administratively burdensome college admissions and state and federal financial aid applications. Low-income students have special circumstances and are disproportionately flagged for verification which requires another layer of technical support to overcome the additional administrative burdens required to secure the financial support for which they are eligible. **In order to achieve these results, you need skilled and up-to-date trained professionals to provide guidance at every step of the way.** This is a requirement if we want to ensure college graduation.

You need strong organizations that have the *infrastructure* to provide these highly specialized services to Marylanders. By the state's own evaluation, the organizations that have received funding under the Maryland Higher Education Outreach and College Access Program in the past achieved intended results and are worthy of continued investment. Many of these providers are unduly challenged by raising the revenue needed to *properly* support their operations. A **shrinking funding environment for this work** includes donors with geographic limitations; changing institutional priorities away from college access and completion; recent negative economic shortfalls including a decrease in institutional philanthropic endowments for smaller foundations, to name a few. **Having a match requirement can put the funds in this bill out of reach for most of the intended nonprofits it is designed to support.** Established educational nonprofits, outlined in this bill, that have a documented mission targeted to supporting low-income Marylanders and have a long track record of results are in dire need of increased state support to continue to achieve their past exceptional outcomes long into the future.

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 AND removal of the match**, is an important lever in supporting college attainment among low-income students and other populations. We ask that you support the bill with an amendment to remove the match requirement.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. 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.