

SHANEKA HENSON
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Anne Arundel County

Ways and Means Committee

Joint Committee on
Children, Youth, and Families



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 539

Public Institutions of Higher Education - Student Withdrawal Policy - Reimbursement of Tuition and Fees (Cameron Carden Act of 2024)

Chair Ben Barnes
Vice Chair Mark Chang
Room 121
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for considering HB539 “University System of Maryland – Student Withdrawal – Reimbursement of Tuition and Fees (The Cameron Carden Act of 2024)”. This bill will allow students to safely and efficiently withdraw from universities within Maryland’s educational system under certain, extenuating circumstances that pose a threat to the student’s physical or mental well-being.

Currently, the state of Maryland has no requirement of reimbursement to be made for students needing to withdraw based upon health restrictions. Each institution is free to construct its own policies on the matter, and many have in place allowances to be made for those withdrawing because of physical injury, illness, or hospitalization. While we commend individual institutions for making these policies, it is time this became standardized across our state university system. However, standardization will not go far enough, if we don’t also take into account our students’ mental health and wellness as well. HB539 would do just that.

With all that is going on in our world today, we must do more to care for the mental and emotional health of young Marylanders, and do all we can to remove barriers from their accessing the care they need. No student should have to decide between receiving the care they need, and losing thousands of dollars. This was the decision faced by Cameron Carden, for whom this bill is named. Because of racially charged events on campus generally,

and personally being a target of racism, Cameron's mental health began to suffer.

However, not wanting to lose his tuition money, Cameron attempted to persevere in his classes. His family began to notice changes in his behavior and demeanor, and upon the encouragement from his concerned parents and in light of his deteriorating mental wellbeing, he chose to withdraw. Despite these circumstances, Cameron received no reimbursements for the semester due to his inability to meet the time constraints the university had imposed.

Unfortunately, this is true for many students, the full number we cannot know. How many students across our state are silently suffering because of the financial consequences of caring for their own mental health? Unfortunately, our health and wellbeing do not often align with nicely written timelines in University policy books. A favorable report on HB539 is important because mental and physical health and wellbeing must take precedence over financial concerns. Even outside of the discussion of timelines, withdrawal terms relative to mental health are incredibly discretionary, with each university individually deeming what is fit enough to constitute a withdrawal, many choosing to not ever recognize mental health as a reasonable cause of withdrawal.

The goal of this bill is to help students, like Cameron, who encounter these sorts of circumstances, to seek reimbursement from their university. Hospitalizations, physical injuries, and mental illness are almost never expected. Students do not foresee such things happening during their semesters. This bill allows already suffering students to not be forced to make such a decision between health and finances. For this reason, I urge a favorable report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SHH', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Hon. Delegate Shaneka Henson

District 30A- Anne Arundel County