



Testimony in SUPPORT of SB637

Higher Education - Undocumented Students - Out-of-State Tuition Exemption Eligibility

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

February 27, 2024

Dear Honorable Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

CASA strongly supports Senate Bill 637 - Higher Education - Undocumented Students - Out-of-State Tuition Exemption Eligibility. CASA is a national powerhouse organization building power and improving the quality of life in working-class: Black, Latino/a/e, Afro-descendent, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities.

With a membership of over 155,000 members, CASA creates change with its power-building model blending human services, community organizing, and advocacy to serve the full spectrum of the needs, dreams, and aspirations of members. For nearly forty years, CASA has employed grassroots community organizing to bring our communities closer together and fight for justice, while simultaneously providing much-needed services, helping to ensure that low-income immigrants can live rich and full lives.

Senate Bill 637 advocates for reducing the tax return requirement for in-state tuition eligibility from three years to one year. Undocumented CASA youth leaders played a pivotal role in advocating for the passage of the Maryland Dream Act, standing at the forefront of the movement. Their courageous activism and tireless efforts helped shed light on the importance of providing opportunities for undocumented students to pursue higher education. Currently, thousands have benefitted from this program. However, there is still much that can be done. SB 637 is crucial in our continued effort towards education equity in dismantling barriers to higher education, especially for students facing complex family dynamics, unaccompanied youth, and recent arrivals.

The current three-year tax return requirement poses a significant challenge for many families and students seeking higher education. This barrier has resulted in talented and motivated youth being denied in-state tuition, hindering their access to higher education and stifling their potential.

CASA operates robust youth education programs throughout our footprint actively engaging with first and second-generation immigrant youth through various programs designed to support their academic journeys, foster leadership skills, and provide a robust college and career readiness curriculum. Assisting students in applying to colleges, for financial aid, and developing

personalized plans to help them transition to their post-secondary endeavors. Annually, supporting hundreds of students in qualifying for the Maryland Dream Act and the state financial aid application, MHEC One-App (formerly MSFAA). Notably, the primary obstacle preventing many students from qualifying is the three-year tax requirement.

Reducing the tax return requirement to one year is a compassionate and practical solution, recognizing the unique challenges faced by families and students. This adjustment aligns with principles of fairness, inclusivity, and equal access to education, fostering a more just society. Maintaining the current tax requirements will continue to impede students' ability to pursue higher education, as failure to meet this criterion not only disqualifies students from in-state tuition but also renders them ineligible for state financial aid, further limiting their opportunities. This is a significant factor in an immigrant student's ability to pursue higher education. Currently, the University of Maryland's in-state tuition rate is \$11,233 contrasting starkly with the steep rate of \$39,469 demanded for out-of-state tuition. Although not as steep, community college tuition rates also vary depending on in-state or out-of-state designations. Immigrant Marylanders who have completed their K-12 education in our public school system and aspire to further their academic pursuits encounter a significant hurdle upon their high school graduation if their parents lack three years' worth of tax records.

Moreover, this change extends beyond individual students, positively impacting Maryland's workforce and economy. Nationally and here in Maryland, we are facing a worker shortage in all fields including healthcare and education. Data shows that in Maryland 23% of our nurses are immigrants.¹ An accessible higher education system leads to a more diverse and skilled workforce, contributing significantly to the overall growth and prosperity of our state.

CASA respectfully asks the committee to consider the numerous advantages of SB 637 and submit a favorable report.

¹ <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/state/maryland/>