

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0207

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

Eligibility Committee: Appropriations Committee

Date: January 21, 2025

Position: Support

Good afternoon Delegate Barnes and Delegates of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Chelsea Kearns, and I am a science teacher at the Academy for College and Career Exploration in Baltimore, Maryland. I would like to share why I **strongly support** House Bill 207 and increased access to the out-of-state tuition exemption eligibility for undocumented students.

I work in Baltimore City Schools, where we have a large population of undocumented students: students that have come to this country in search of more opportunities and a better life. However, after working hard for years in American schools, often after learning a second language to do so successfully, these students are met with few post-secondary opportunities.

Currently, the only viable options for undocumented students are to work at low-paying jobs or to go to college, as apprenticeships, the governor's service year, and the military are not options for them. College is the obvious choice, however, many of these students are unable to pursue a college degree because of the current requirements placed on them by the Dream Act. Students and or their parents need to have filed taxes for the three years preceding the student's high school graduation to be eligible for state financial aid and in-state tuition rates. Without three years of taxes, students are left with next to no options because any college will be cost prohibitive, and many private scholarships require a FAFSA or OneApp is filed to be eligible. It is honestly incomprehensible to me that we dangle this amazing opportunity in front of hardworking students, and then make it exceedingly difficult to access.

Take Luis, the valedictorian who witnessed the murders of both of his parents in his home country. Who went from speaking no English to earning 4s and 5s on AP exams in just three and a half years in this country. He has the most incredible mind of any student I have ever worked with and had dreams of becoming an environmental engineer. Instead of changing the world that is currently (literally) on fire, he is working at a gas station as he awaits his asylum approval. He could not file three years of taxes because he was not working as a 15-year-old, so there were no taxes to file.

Take Selena, whose mother could not afford to pay the accountant's fee for three years, only one, and she missed the MSFAA deadline. She works in a factory now, when she had plans to earn a degree in computer science.

Finally, take Esteban, who moved here from California. Esteban moved here ahead of his mother to live with his aunt so there would be no disruption to his high school career. His mom followed a few years later, and although Esteban lived in Maryland for four years, his mother was only here for one. His mom paid her Maryland taxes on time that year, but he still wasn't eligible for state aid or college. Esteban has DACA and works for a catering company now when he would have finished his nursing degree last May.

I understand the reasoning behind having families pay taxes to benefit from state programs, however, for citizens to qualify for the exact same benefits, they are only required to demonstrate that "for at least 12 consecutive months immediately prior to course registration that they had the

continuous intent to reside in Maryland” Why are we holding undocumented students to a higher standard? This is inequitable and is also crippling Maryland’s workforce for absolutely no reason. It is for these many reasons that I ask for a FAVORABLE REPORT on HB207.