

## Senate Bill 755

Hello my name is Adama Kone and I am here in support of SB 755.

When I was five years old, my mother passed away, and I was placed in the custody of my biological uncle and his wife. I spent most of my childhood in Stafford, Virginia, living with my uncle's wife's parents. However, before the pandemic, during my eighth-grade year, we moved to Prince George's County, near College Park, and I began attending Greenbelt Middle School. I struggled with this transition, as it meant leaving my grandparents' home—the only life I had ever known.

The summer before ninth grade, I learned that my grandfather had filed for custody, seeking to remove me from my uncle and his wife's guardianship. This legal battle lasted through most of my high school years while I attended High Point High School. The summer before my junior year, the court ultimately denied my grandfather's request for custody but granted him visitation rights, reasoning that I was only a few years away from adulthood and independence. I accepted this ruling with a heavy heart and focused on making the best of my remaining years in high school.

During my senior year, I discovered FGCB through my girlfriend's connection with Mr. Melgar from the FGCB College Access program. FGCB became the most impactful part of my final year in high school. With the guidance of Mr. Fisher, Mr. Melgar, and Ms. Cobbs, I found the financial assistance I needed for college. Since FAFSA typically requires financial information from birth parents, my situation made it challenging to navigate the financial aid process. With their support, I realized my potential and felt empowered to pursue my dreams.

I was especially inspired to choose the University of Maryland, one of the nation's top research institutions. In February, I was thrilled to receive my admission decision, though I was accepted under conditional acceptance. I was placed in the Academic Achievement Program (AAP), designed for low-income, first-generation students to help them succeed despite the university's rigorous curriculum. As part of this program, I was required to complete the Summer Transitional Program (STP), a six-week session of university-accredited classes that would determine my full admission. While this program came with a cost, it was fully covered by financial aid as a FAFSA recipient.

During my third week in STP, I was informed by the university that I needed to provide independent status verification to have my Pell Grant and GA Grant funds released. I immediately reached out to FGCB, and they helped me gather the necessary documentation for submission. However, I waited nearly a month for a response, only to learn that my uncle's proof of guardianship from the court was not sufficient to prove my independent status. As a result, the university was unable to disburse my funds, and my bill began accumulating interest for nearly three months due to charges from STP and my fall semester enrollment.

Once again, I turned to Mr. Melgar for guidance, and he assisted me in filing an unusual circumstance appeal required by the university. This process involved gathering letters and testimonies to support my case. I also sought help from Dr. Lewis, the director of AAP, who became aware of my situation and

contacted his liaison within the financial aid department. Meanwhile, FGCB also reached out to their contacts within the university.

After months of back-and-forth communication and uncertainty, my funds were finally released. However, I then had to request that the university retroactively remove the interest charges that had accumulated on my bill. This entire ordeal was the most stressful part of my college experience, as I constantly feared losing my GA Grant and Pell Grant. I also worried about whether I would have the financial means to continue attending in the spring semester, as my charges remained unpaid. This is why I am in support of this bill so that students like me will not have to fear the loss of financial aid like the GA grant.