

March 7, 2025

Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senator Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee Maryland General Assembly
11 Bladen St.
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: SB1024 - Higher Education - Nonresident Tuition - Exemption for Dependents of State or Local Public Safety Employees (Maryland Fallen Heroes Tuition Benefits Act)

Dear Senator Feldman and Senator Kagan,

My husband, Battalion Chief Josh Laird, served Frederick County, Maryland's citizens for 21 years. He was killed in the line of duty on August 11, 2021, while fighting a house fire in Ijamsville, Maryland. In the days and weeks after his death, I met with representatives from the Frederick County Government, the Frederick County Department of Fire and Rescue Services, IAFF Local 3666, and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation regarding various benefits. During these conversations, I was told that my children could attend any Maryland State school of higher education, and their tuition would be free.

At the time, college tuition was not at the top of my list of concerns. My oldest daughter had just started high school, and I had been employed at Mount Saint Mary's University for 18 years, which meant I would be at the top of the seniority list for the tuition exchange program. Additionally, as a Mount Saint Mary's University employee, my children could attend the Mount at no cost. Unfortunately, a few months after returning to my role as the Chief Technology Officer, I had to make the tough decision to step down from my full-time position. I realized that my new reality was that of a grieving widow and single mother trying to care for two grieving children. I remained at the Mount in a part-time capacity for the next fourteen months, at which time I was laid off.

A few months after this, I began seeking information regarding the Maryland Line of Duty Death tuition program. I discovered this benefit is called the Conroy Scholarship and is administered by the Maryland Department of Higher Education. The following is what I found regarding eligibility for the Conroy Scholarship.

Eligibility Requirements:

You must be:

- A Maryland resident, and if a dependent, your parents must also be Maryland residents.
NOTE: The following persons are not required to be a resident of Maryland at the time of application or at the time of the disabling or fatal event: public safety employees; or spouses and children of public safety employees who were killed in the line of duty or who sustains an injury, in the line of duty that rendered the public safety employee 100 percent disabled.

Based on this information, I was relieved and felt my children's college education was secure. However, some months later, I spoke with Jessica Portz, widow of Officer Thomas Portz Jr, who was killed in the line of duty while working for the Baltimore City Police Department in 2010. Jessica and I also have another commonality beyond losing our husbands in the line of duty. We are both residents of the State of Pennsylvania and were so at the time of our husband's deaths.

Jessica had the same understanding as I did that her children would receive free tuition at any Maryland state institution of higher education. In early 2020, Jessica's oldest daughter was accepted at Towson University. She was then informed that her daughter was not eligible for the Conroy Scholarship because they lived in Pennsylvania. The FOP worked very quickly, and on March 18, 2020, HB0596 was passed, which changed the eligibility to allow for out-of-state residency for surviving children and spouses of Maryland public safety employees killed in the line of duty or who were 100% disabled.

Unfortunately, eligibility is only half of the problem. The Conroy Scholarship also has restrictions for the maximum award and use, which are as follows.

Use and Amount of Scholarship Award:

- The scholarship awarded may be used for the tuition and mandatory fees at any eligible institution; and may not
- Exceed the equivalent annual tuition and mandatory fees of a resident undergraduate at a 4-year public institution of higher education within the University System of Maryland, other than the University of Maryland University College and the University of Maryland, Baltimore, with the highest annual expenses for a full-time resident undergraduate.
- as determined by your school's financial aid office; and
- Be less than the lesser of \$3,000, or
- The equivalent annual tuition and mandatory fees of a resident of the institution attended by the recipient of the scholarship.

This makes the Conroy Scholarship unusable for anyone who lives out of state. For the 2024-2025 academic year, the in-state tuition at the University of Maryland is \$10,087.00, while the out-of-state tuition at the University of Maryland is \$39,464.00. This means the expected out-of-pocket after the Conroy Scholarship would be \$29,377 plus room and board. Additionally, the Conroy Scholarship has a restriction that means if a student receives additional tuition scholarships, the amount awarded by the Conroy Scholarship will be reduced.

Ultimately, Jessica had to seek alternative funding sources for her daughter's college education. However, if SB1024 passes this year, my oldest daughter will be able to receive the benefits as intended. As will my younger daughter and Jessica's son. It will also prevent future surviving families from navigating this barrier. Thankfully, public safety employee line-of-duty deaths occur rarely. However, many Maryland public safety employees live in a bordering state, often due to the cost of living. Thirty-four percent of the firefighters who work for Frederick County Department of Fire and Rescue Services live out of state.

I believe this coverage gap was not intentional but an unfortunate oversight. My daughter is less than two months from the deadline to commit to college. Even with her father dying two weeks before she started high school, she has managed to excel, maintaining a GPA above 3.8 and

participating in sports, music, theater, and the National Honor Society. Please correct this oversight and help her pursue her college education.

Thank you for considering this legislation. I respectfully ask the Environment and Transportation Committee for a favorable report on SB1024.

Sincerely,

Sara Laird

Sara Laird

Widow of Battalion Chief Joshua Laird