



February 21, 2025

## **Senate Bill 755 - Higher Education - Student Financial Assistance - Students in Informal Kinship Care Relationships**

### **Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee**

#### **Position: FAVORABLE**

The Maryland Association of Resources for Families and Youth (MARFY) writes in support of *Senate bill 755 – Higher Education - Student Financial Assistance - Students in Informal Kinship Care Relationships*. We are an association of private child caring organizations providing foster care, group homes, and other services through more than 200 programs across Maryland. MARFY aims to support Maryland's most vulnerable children who are in out of home placements due to abuse, neglect or severe mental health, and medical needs. We operate group homes, foster care programs, and independent living programs, for children under a wide variety of living and legal guardian arrangements.

MARFY strongly supports Senate Bill 755, which seeks to consider children under ‘informal kinship relationships’ as legally independent, for college financial aid qualification purposes. This bill addresses a lack of inclusion of children who fall under this guardianship category to receive the college education they deserve, where children under foster care placements are currently classified as independent and are therefore eligible for these grants.

Maryland’s children living with a non-parental family member as an ‘Informal Kinship Relationship’ are currently ineligible for various scholarships including the Guaranteed Access Grant state-funded child care grant, which creates two primary issues:

1. **Disparity in Students Able to Attend College:** Many Informal Kinship guardians are unable to provide financial support to send a student to college, due to an often unexpected and unplanned commitment. Students in these relationships are still not considered legally ‘looked after’ children, and the family members are not guaranteed financial assistance to help support the child during adolescence. The guardian may also decline to use household income towards the child’s education, and the child therefore may not receive financial assistance for college even if the household earns enough income to not require financial aid. This means that without assistance, the child has a disproportionately lower chance of being able to attend college.
2. **Threatens the Student’s ability to be Further Supported:** Financial assistance is not typically given to informal kinship guardians, and these guardians have a higher likelihood of struggling to juggle employment and childcare. If a child is unable to attend college after adolescence, the family member must financially care for the child for a longer period of time, giving way to more potential for inadequate care. Providing access

1



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to financial assistance to these students would help alleviate this stressor and prioritize the child's quality of care. It would also help students gain high-earning degrees and enter the workforce, potentially reducing adolescent poverty rates.

Expanding the qualifications for a student to be classified as independent would:

- **Ensure equity in higher education access** by helping children in unique living arrangements receive financial aid
- **Improve students' ability to qualify for the Guaranteed Access Grant Program** by classifying them as independent
- **Reduce unnecessary strain on kinship relationships** by helping students become independent members of society, and earn a high-earning degree
- **Reduce adolescent poverty** by helping independent students earn high paying jobs and financial independence
- **Help students qualify for other scholarships** by changing their status as independent according to state financial aid purposes.

This bill may increase State general fund expenditures if the eligibility addition causes an increase in the number of grants awarded. This will allow a greater number of students within foster care and home placement programs to receive financial assistance and be able to attend college. Estimates suggest that funding requirements for the Guaranteed Access Program would only require \$11,000 additional per student awarded, whereas the grant program as of 2025 has already spent over \$100 million for these grants.

In conclusion, Senate Bill 755 represents a critical step toward improving Maryland's higher education grant programs by ensuring that students under Informal Kinship Relationships may qualify for Guaranteed Access Grants. This inclusion will diminish inequity in which students in home placement systems are able to attend college and become financially independent and successful adults.

On behalf of MARFY and the children and families we serve, we respectfully ask the members of this committee to vote in favor of Senate Bill 755.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**For more information call or email:**

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