



February 21, 2025

Good Afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee.

My name is Joseph Fisher. I am the Founder and CEO of First Generation College Bound. I also serve as the Chair of the Maryland Alliance for College Affordability and Equity. The Maryland Alliance is a coalition of non-profit organizations throughout Maryland that assist students from low-income-first generation and marginalized families pursuing higher education.

I am pleased to testify on behalf of the Maryland Alliance for College Affordability and Equity to support of **SB755 Higher Education – Student Financial Assistance - Students in Informal Kinship Care Relationships**. The purpose of this bill is for the Maryland Higher Education Commission to consider students who are in informal kinship care relationships eligible for Maryland State Financial Aid.

I am not only testifying for the Maryland Alliance on this legislation, but it is also personal for me. My experience with Kinship Care personally contributed to me creating First Generation College Bound in 1990. This is when I learned from Janice Doyle, the former retired Director of Financial Aid at the Maryland Higher Education Commission that students from low-income families, especially independent students, who were eligible for the Guaranteed Access, were not applying for financial aid. Gaining this information reinforced and supported my vision and mission not just for FGCB but for me as well. This is due to my wife Pat and I providing Kinship Care to my niece and nephews. Providing Kinship Care was due to their parents extenuating circumstances not being able to care for them. Rather than placing them in Foster Care, we accepted the responsibility to raise them. This was not our life as planned, but it happened. As a result of my MHEC Financial Aid knowledge, they were able to attend an affordable college and graduate. While having challenges and success, providing Kinship Care to our niece and nephews worked as they are experiencing a quality of life today.

The Maryland Alliance for College Affordability and Equity is a coalition of nonprofit organizations providing student assistance to 85,000 families throughout every county in the state of Maryland.

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However, during my years leading FGCB to provide college bound support to low-income families to attend college and graduate, we have students in Kinship care, many with grandparents not aware they are eligible for financial aid, and the Guaranteed Access Grant to attend college. It is important to note many individuals, especially grandparents prefer to raise their grandchildren rather than place them in foster care, providing them a more stable environment. However, due to many not having Kinship documents from the Department of Social Services, school system and guardian, MHEC is unable to approve them as an independent student for the Guaranteed Access Grant. The student is required to have the college they have been accepted to review documents for a dependency override. However, once the student is approved, which is usually late, especially for the Guaranteed Access Grant, they miss important commitment deadlines. The students also have to apply for the dependence override annually causing student frustration as many college financial aid offices are overwhelmed delaying the process. Due to these challenges, the Maryland Alliance is requesting that Kinship documentation from the School System and Department of Social Services confirms the Kinship Care arrangement and independent status for the MHEC Office of Financial Aid to approve and award a Guaranteed Access Grant. Approval will be of great benefit to the those providing Kinship Care of the student, not to be in foster care.

On the behalf of Maryland Alliance and those providing Kinship Care, especially grandparents, we support SB 755 for the students to be approved for the Guaranteed Access Grant, providing the approved documents stated.

Joseph Fisher

Chair

Maryland Alliance for College Affordability and Equity.

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