



*STRENGTHENING SOCIETY*

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## **Testimony in Support of House Bill 818 and House Bill 982**

**To:** Members of the Appropriations Committee

**From:** Jay Unick, PhD

**Position:** Professor, University of Maryland School of Social Work

**Re:** Support for HB 818 (Higher Education - Tuition Exemption and Associated Benefits) and HB 982 (Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am a Professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, and since 2015, I have served as a lead researcher for the Youth Reach Maryland project. This state-funded initiative, conducted in partnership with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), provides a data-driven understanding of the needs and experiences of unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing housing instability across our state.

I am writing today to express my strong support for House Bill 818 and House Bill 982. These bills address critical gaps in our state's ability to support one of our most resilient yet vulnerable populations.

### **The Scope of the Problem: A Hidden Crisis**

While the 2022 Maryland Youth Count identified 2,789 unique unaccompanied youth, we know this is a conservative estimate. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) suggests a much broader crisis, estimating that approximately 83,000 or 4.23 percent of Maryland's youth population have experienced homeless or unstable housing in the 30 days prior to their taking the survey.

These youth are often invisible because they do not identify with the word "homeless." Instead, they describe themselves as "couch surfing" or staying temporarily with friends. This lack of a permanent address creates a state of perpetual motion; our research shows that 61 percent of surveyed youth lived in two or more different places in just a sixty-day period.

### **Resilience Amidst Instability**

Despite these harrowing circumstances, these young people demonstrate extraordinary tenacity. Almost 50 percent of this population successfully completes high school or

obtains a GED despite cycles of profound instability. They represent a highly motivated group with a clear interest in continuing their training at various educational institutions, including community colleges and four-year universities. However, the barriers to transitioning into higher education remain substantial.

- **Housing as the Primary Barrier to Education**

For these students, the challenge is not a lack of talent or ambition, but a lack of basic stability.

- **Survival over Schooling:** 58 percent of youth we surveyed identified long-term housing as their most critical need, yet only 22 percent were able to access it.
- **Navigational Hurdles:** 36 percent reported they do not know where to go for help, and 43 percent cited a lack of transportation as a major barrier to services.
- **Existing Engagement:** Currently, 55 percent of these youth are enrolled in some form of education, with 10 percent already in college and 11 percent having earned credits. They are attempting to navigate the rigors of academia while simultaneously solving the problem of where they will sleep tonight.

### **The Importance of HB 818 and HB 982**

These bills recognize that a tuition waiver alone is often a hollow promise if a student cannot afford a place to live or the books required for their courses.

- **HB 818** provides the necessary "safety net" by including room, board, and supplies. This ensures that Maryland's investment in tuition is not wasted when a student is forced to drop out due to hunger or housing loss.
- **HB 982** expands eligibility by lowering the age for foster care placement consideration to age 8. This ensures that youth whose instability began earlier in childhood are not excluded from these life-changing protections during their transition to adulthood.

### **Conclusion: Investing in Maryland's Human Resources**

By passing these bills, Maryland is choosing to invest in its full human resource capacity. These youth have already proven their grit by graduating high school while struggling to overcome the serious issues associated with housing instability. Providing them with the stability of room and board is the final bridge they need to move from a state of survival to one of self-sufficiency and professional contribution.

I urge a favorable report on House Bill 818 and House Bill 982.

Sincerely,



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