

DATE: March 3, 2026

BILL NO.: House Bill 818

TITLE: Higher Education - Foster Care Recipients and Homeless Youth - Tuition Exemption and Associated Benefits

COMMITTEE: House Appropriations Committee

Letter of Information

Description of Bill:

House Bill 818 would expand the state tuition waiver for higher education for foster care and homeless youth to include additional assistance and benefits. The current tuition waiver exempts certain foster care recipients and homeless youth from paying tuition at institutions of higher education, including vocational programs. This bill would expand benefits under the tuition waiver to include on-campus room and board or the institution's estimated cost of room and board for living off campus, as well as required books, course materials, supplies, and equipment.

Background and Analysis:

The Homeless and Foster Youth Tuition Waiver has been a critical tool for young adults to make postsecondary education more affordable and accessible. However, homeless and foster youth must still identify other funding such as grants, loans, scholarships, or employment to cover the cost of their housing, meals, books, supplies, equipment, and fees required by postsecondary institutions. For a Maryland 4-year public college, these costs are not covered by the tuition waiver amount to approximately \$20,000 a year, over 63% of the total cost of attendance. For unaccompanied homeless youth in particular, who by definition do not have stable housing and economic support from their family, these costs are simply prohibitive, and college is out of reach.

As a result, homeless and foster youth continue to face significant barriers and disparities in postsecondary enrollment, retention, and graduation rates compared to the general Maryland high school graduate population¹. Homeless and foster youth are:

- Less likely to enroll in postsecondary education by age 25 (52% and 56% respectively, compared to 77% of all students)
- Less likely to attend a four-year institution if they do enroll in postsecondary education (14% and 16% respectively, compared to 61% of all students)
- Less likely to earn a degree by 25 (21% for both homeless and foster youth, compared to 52% of all students)

¹ Data Sources: Maryland Longitudinal Data Center. Dashboards on Public High School Graduates, Homeless, and Foster Youth Higher Education Participation. <https://mldscenter.maryland.gov/Dashboards.html>

Since the creation of the tuition waiver in 2014, less than 5% of eligible homeless youth² and 13% of eligible foster youth³ who graduate high school have enrolled in postsecondary education and received the state’s tuition waiver in their first year of enrollment. While there are many factors that influence these rates, the most limiting factor is access to financial aid that can pay for non-tuition expenses. Federal Pell grants can be used for housing, food, and other living expenses. However, universities typically apply Pell grants first to tuition costs and the funds are quickly exhausted. Because the Maryland tuition waiver can only currently be used for tuition, it cannot be strategically leveraged with other federal, state, and private financial aid students may receive to cover the total cost of attendance.

In FY25, over 1,400 unaccompanied youth between ages 18 and 25 experienced homelessness and were living in an emergency shelter, transitional housing, or in an unsheltered setting. They were homeless by themselves – with no support from family or friends. Thousands more youth are experiencing homelessness through “couch surfing”, motel/hotel stays, or unstable housing setting as well.

² Total homeless high school graduates since tuition waiver inception: 17,780. Total homeless high school graduates that received tuition waiver: 535. Source: MLDC Dashboards (see footnote 1).

³ Total foster youth high school graduates since tuition waiver inception: 5,978. Total foster youth high school graduates that received tuition waiver: 789. Source: MLDC Dashboards (see footnote 1).



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