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Legislative District 14
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Ways and Means Committee

Chair

Child Care Subcommittee

Early Childhood and
Special Education Subcommittee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 982: Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster
Care Recipients - Eligibility**
March 3rd, 2026

Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Kaiser, and esteemed members of the House Appropriations Committee, I come before you to offer testimony in support of **House Bill 982: Higher Education - Tuition Exemption for Foster Care Recipients - Eligibility**.

House Bill 982 makes a narrow but important adjustment to Maryland's existing Tuition Waiver for Foster Care Recipients. Under current law, a young person who is adopted or placed in guardianship only qualifies for the tuition waiver if they were in foster care on or after their 13th birthday. House Bill 982 lowers that age threshold to 8. In doing so, the bill corrects a gap in current law so that children who achieve permanency earlier in life are not excluded from support later on.

From a fiscal perspective, this bill is about policy alignment and long-term return on investment.

First, this bill removes an unintended disincentive. We know from data highlighted by the National Adoption Council that younger children are far more likely to be adopted, and adoption becomes less likely as children age. At the same time, federal data from the Children's Bureau show that roughly 20,000 youth age out of foster care nationally each year without permanent families. Youth who age out experience significantly higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, and housing instability.

Maryland policy should encourage permanency earlier, not create technical rules that may complicate family decisions. Lowering the age to 8 aligns the tuition waiver with the reality that

many children achieve permanency in their elementary school years. It ensures our education policy does not work against our child welfare goals.

Second, education outcomes for foster youth demonstrate why this investment matters. Research from the American Youth Policy Forum and the National Foster Youth Institute shows that only about 55% of foster youth graduate high school by age 19, and only about 3% earn a bachelor's degree, far below the general population. Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of lifetime earnings, workforce participation, and economic stability.

Here in Maryland, data from the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center show that approximately 58% of foster youth enroll in college at some point, and about 35% utilize the tuition waiver. These numbers tell us two important things: foster youth are seeking postsecondary education, and the waiver is a meaningful tool in helping them persist.

But beyond the data and fiscal notes, this bill is about expanding accessibility to a truly transformative program for foster youth.

It is about the child who enters foster care after experiencing instability and trauma, who is adopted at age twelve into a permanent, loving home. That child does everything we hope for, they stabilize, they grow, and against all odds graduate from high school, and then, at 18, they discover they do not qualify for the same tuition support as a peer who remained in care until 13. Not because they needed less help. Not because their trauma was less significant. But because they found permanency sooner.

From a human standpoint, that is difficult to explain. We should not be in the position of telling a young person, "You found a family too early to qualify."

For many adoptive and guardianship families, particularly those adopting older elementary-age children, long-term educational costs are a real concern. The tuition waiver is one of the few concrete, long-term supports available. Aligning eligibility with typical permanency timelines reassures families that choosing adoption earlier will not reduce future opportunity for the child.

And for the young person, this is about more than tuition. It is about knowing that the State of Maryland continues to stand behind them as they transition into adulthood.

There is also an equity dimension that intersects with fiscal responsibility. Children in foster care are disproportionately from low-income families and communities of color. Ensuring equal access to education support, regardless of the age at which permanency occurs, promotes opportunity and strengthens Maryland's future workforce.

House Bill 982 is a targeted correction. It aligns education policy with child welfare best practice. It protects the integrity of an existing program without significantly expanding its scope. It supports long-term economic stability. And at a very basic level, it ensures that we do not unintentionally penalize children for achieving the very outcome we hope for: permanency. For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 982.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernice Mireku-North". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Honorable Bernice Mireku-North, Esq.
Delegate. Maryland Legislative District 14
Maryland House of Delegates