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Senator Brian Feldman
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland State Legislature
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Subject: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 0420/House Bill 006 – Maryland Higher Education Commission – Demographic Data Collection – Parental Status

Dear Senator Brian Feldman and Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

As a current professional working at an institution of higher education, a former Sr. Higher Ed Impact Manager at Generation Hope (a non-profit dedicated to supporting parenting students in college), the former director of the Women's Center at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), and as someone who is from Baltimore, Maryland, I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 0420/House Bill 006. This bill builds on the progress made by House Bill 0840, the Pregnant and Parenting Student Support Act, by strengthening implementation and accountability across Maryland's public higher education system.

Nationwide, 1 in 5 undergraduate students and 1 in 3 graduate students are parenting while in college. This number is even higher in community colleges which is why it's so critical that this bill includes them. Better data collection is an essential first step to improving college completion rates for student parents. Without comprehensive data collection on this vital student population, policymakers and institutional leaders struggle to truly understand student parents' experiences and dismantle the barriers impeding their academic and professional success.

Supporting student parents is a matter of racial and social justice. And, in the current political reality of our country, supporting parenting students is a way to move the needle forward in supporting racial justice even if we can't say race or racism. Student parents are

more likely to be students of color and live at or below the poverty line than their non-parenting peers. The unique challenges faced by student parents are not only due to their parental status, but also due to the many intersecting identities that impact their journeys to and through higher education. Supporting student parent success will help the state of Maryland reach its goals in regards to retention and graduation rates for Pell-eligible students and students of color. A report released by Maryland Higher Education Commission in September 2023 indicates that not many colleges are collecting this data and those that are, do not have a comprehensive picture. The commission recommends that better data collection is needed to understand the full needs of this unique, and overlooked, population.

I share this background as greater context to my own professional story. As mentioned, I served as the director of the Women's Center at UMBC for eleven years between 2011 and 2022. Among my diverse portfolio and responsibilities, an important part of my work was supporting parenting members of UMBC community members to include students, staff, and faculty. I share this background as greater context to my own professional story. During my very busy days, I would often give up my office space for a busy student parent needing to pump when the Center's lactation room was occupied. The Center tracked the number of community members using the lactation room and it was only because we had the data that I could advocate for additional lactation rooms to be added to campus renovation projects such as incorporating a lactation room into the updated recreation center. Without these numbers, no one else on campus would know how many students, faculty, and staff needed these essential spaces and services. Yet, this data was kept only in the Women's Center, reported out in our yearly annual report, or shared as needed. It was not systematically collected nor was it systematically collected. How many other nursing students are not being counted. How many other pregnant, nursing, and parenting students are not getting their needs met because they are otherwise invisible on campus?

Additionally, I oversaw a scholarship program for adult learners. Of the approximately 25 students the Center served each year, at least half of these students were parenting students. As part of the application process, the Center was able to collect data on these students to include how many children they had and their children's ages. Through my semesterly check-ins with them, through the events they attended, and how they used the Center space, I learned deeply about the way being a parent shaped and impacted their experience as a UMBC student. The Women's Center adjusted our services and supports to accommodate them and when possible, I would use these experiences to inform other faculty and staff to encourage similar kinds of accommodations and supports.

The Foundation that provided the scholarship funds would ask us to compare the scholarship recipients to other similar non-scholarship recipient students at UMBC. Most often, scholarship recipients had better GPAs and were retained at higher rates from

semester to semester than those who were not receiving scholarships. We used age as a comparison, but were unable to compare by parenting status because UMBC did not collect that data. Considering some of the other statistics on parenting students that include the fact that they often have better GPAs than their non-parenting peers yet are more likely to drop out and not complete college, I do not doubt that the parenting students who were not connected to the Women's Center via our scholarship most likely were struggling academically and personally. Yet, there was no way the Women's Center, nor UMBC, could reach out to them, assess their needs, and create additional resources and support to meet their unique needs as parents.

This is a failure of our institutions and we must do better. I would like to think that schools like UMBC would be motivated to collect this data, but I also acknowledge that staff in positions to make this happen are charged with competing priorities and often are operating with limited staff. I witnessed this in my former role as a Sr. Higher Ed Impact Manager at Generation Hope. There, I worked with institutions who committed to a 2-year program called FamilyU to enable their schools to better support student parents and still moving the needle on student parent data collection is always challenging. I coached a community college in Texas and it wasn't until passage of legislation that created new protections for pregnant and parenting students in Texas, specifically Texas Ed. Code. § 51.9 (SB597/HB13610,) that enabled the team to make progress in creating systemic student parent data collection. They have since been able to begin systematically collecting data about their student parents. In turn, they have been able to identify these students to follow up with additional support and resources. This would have not been possible without the passage of this legislation.

This proposed legislation will allow State and institutional policymakers and leaders to access data that more accurately captures the number of parenting students in Maryland than ever before. Based on national data, it can be assumed that more than 70,000 Marylanders are parenting while attending college part- or full-time. This information will increase awareness of student parents and the unique barriers that they face and empower policymakers at every level to make informed decisions and provide targeted support for this often-overlooked population. Student parents deserve to be recognized and supported so that they can succeed in higher education and beyond.

I urge the Appropriations Committee to support Senate Bill 0420/House Bill 006 so that Maryland can continue to be an inclusive leader in higher education. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jess Myers