

January 26, 2026

Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senator Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair
Education, Energy, and Environment Committee, Maryland General Assembly
11 Bladen St.
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: SB212 - Higher Education - Nonresident Tuition - Exemption for Dependents of State or Local Public Safety Employees (Maryland Fallen Heroes Tuition Benefits Act)

Dear Senator Feldman and Senator Kagan,

My husband, Battalion Chief Josh Laird, served the citizens of Frederick County, Maryland, for 21 years. He was killed in the line of duty on August 11, 2021, while fighting a house fire in Ijamsville, Maryland.

In the days and weeks following his death, I met with representatives from Frederick County Government, the Frederick County Department of Fire and Rescue Services, IAFF Local 3666, and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation to discuss survivor benefits. During those conversations, I was informed that my children would be eligible to attend any Maryland public institution of higher education tuition-free.

At that time, college tuition was not an immediate concern. My oldest daughter had just begun high school, and I had been employed at Mount Saint Mary's University for 18 years. As a result, I was at the top of the seniority list for the tuition exchange program, and as an employee, my children were also eligible to attend Mount Saint Mary's University at no cost. However, a few months after returning to my role as Chief Technology Officer, I was forced to make the difficult decision to step down from my full-time position. As a grieving widow and single mother raising two grieving children, I could no longer maintain the demands of that role. I remained employed part-time for the next fourteen months, after which I was laid off.

Several months later, I began researching the Maryland Line of Duty Death tuition benefit and learned that the program is formally known as the Edward T. Conroy Memorial Scholarship, administered by the Maryland Higher Education Commission. Based on my review of the eligibility criteria, I believed my children qualified, and I felt reassured that their college education was secure.

Some time later, I spoke with Jessica Portz, the widow of Officer Thomas Portz Jr., who was killed in the line of duty while serving with the Baltimore City Police Department in 2010. Jessica and I share another important commonality: we were both residents of Pennsylvania at the time of our husbands' deaths.

Jessica had the same understanding that I did—that her children would receive free tuition at Maryland public institutions of higher education. However, in early 2020, after her oldest daughter was accepted to Towson University, she was informed that her daughter was ineligible for the Conroy Scholarship due to out-of-state residency. In response, the Fraternal Order of Police acted quickly, and on March 18, 2020, House Bill 596 was passed, expanding eligibility to include surviving spouses and children of Maryland public safety employees killed in the line of duty or rendered 100 percent disabled, regardless of residency.

Unfortunately, eligibility alone does not resolve the issue. The Conroy Scholarship includes limitations on the maximum award amount and its allowable use. As a result, the scholarship is effectively unusable for many out-of-state families. For the 2025–2026 academic year, in-state tuition at the University of Maryland is \$12,008, while out-of-state tuition is \$41,974. This leaves an out-of-pocket tuition gap of \$29,966, in addition to approximately \$16,476 for room and board. Furthermore, the Conroy Scholarship is reduced if a student receives other tuition-based scholarships, further limiting its effectiveness.

Because of these constraints, Jessica was forced to seek alternative funding sources for her daughter's education. This past August, my oldest daughter began her freshman year of college and is receiving the Conroy Scholarship; however, we continue to face a substantial funding gap. Passage of SB212 would have a meaningful impact on my younger daughter and on Jessica's son, and it would prevent future surviving families from encountering this same barrier.

While line-of-duty deaths among public safety employees are thankfully rare, many Maryland public safety professionals reside in neighboring states due to the high cost of living. For example, 34 percent of firefighters employed by the Frederick County Department of Fire and Rescue Services live out of state. Pennsylvania offers a comparable benefit that covers 100 percent of tuition, room, and board at state institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, my children are not eligible for that program because Pennsylvania does not recognize my husband's death, as he died while working for a Maryland department.

I believe this coverage gap was unintentional and represents an unfortunate oversight. Thank you for your time and consideration. I respectfully request a favorable report from the Environment and Transportation Committee on SB212.

Sincerely,

Sara Laird

Sara Laird
Widow of Battalion Chief Joshua Laird