

Pennsylvania House

Education Committee

Informational Hearing on House Bill 1745:

Fostering Independence Through Education Act

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Testimony submitted by:

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I am pleased to submit the following testimony in support of House Bill 1745, the Fostering Independence Through Education Act, establishing a tuition and fee waiver program for youth who are or have been in substitute care.

I am the Executive Director of the Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research, an interdisciplinary center at the University of Pennsylvania dedicated to improving the systemic response to victims of child abuse and neglect and those involved in the child welfare system, and a professional in the child welfare field with over 35 years of experience across the country. The collective concerns of our faculty, fellow and staff child welfare experts regarding poor outcomes for youth being discharged from care called for action and, in 2013, the Field Center established a robust *Foster Care to College* initiative that seeks to improve outcomes for youth who are placed in the foster care system by applying what we have learned best improves their chances to achieve success in adulthood.

When children are abused or neglected and can no longer safely remain in their homes, the courts intervene and they are placed in substitute care, typically with kin or in a licensed foster home. Sadly, many children are taken from very troubling situations only to face an even more dismal future once they leave the foster care system. When children are removed from their families of origin, they come into the care and custody of the government's child welfare system. They become our responsibility. We have an obligation to offer them, the Commonwealth's children, the best chance for success.

Education makes a difference. It is one of the best remediators of a history of trauma, with every additional year of education reducing the likelihood that foster youth will become involved in the criminal justice system, abuse drugs and/or alcohol, or become parents prematurely. Recent national research conducted by the Field Center on *Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth* found that youth in foster care are at high risk of victimization, 41% of child sex trafficking victims in the study identifying that they were in at least one out-of-home placement. That same study identified that education, in the form of graduating from high school, frequently differentiated those youth who were sex trafficked and those who were not. Education increases one's ability to become self-sufficient and independent, and better able to take control of one's life. Accordingly, HB 1745 is called the *Fostering Independence Through Education Act*.

Research tells us that 70% of foster youth aspire to go to college, yet they attend at less than half the rate of their peers. Very few who do enroll ever earn a college degree, and most drop out within or after their first year of college. For those who do graduate, it can take six or more years to finish.

The primary reason that former foster youth drop out of college is financial. Many of these students have to work full-time while simultaneously maintaining a full-time course load in good standing. They truly struggle to make ends meet. And they must do so without any of the supports that most other students have. Without parents to guide them, youth who enter college from the foster care system have no physical or emotional safety net. They have no one to turn

to when they need advice, guidance, or support. They have no one to help them plan or understand how to navigate this new world. They are susceptible to unethical practices and can find themselves in debt that they have no hope of repaying. Many arrive at college with not much more than the clothes on their backs, ill-prepared to begin college and successfully overcome all of the challenges that it brings. Lacking the supports available to most other students and under financial pressure, it is no wonder that they feel they cannot succeed and give up.

The Field Center believes that, collectively, we are responsible for supporting the Commonwealth's children in fulfilling their dreams and offering them hope for a future very different than their past. This is in all of our best interests. To that end, we realized that this lofty goal could not be accomplished by one agency or one approach alone. We identified and convened a group of stakeholders from across Pennsylvania who collectively share a similar view, including community-based agencies that work with older and independent youth, legal and education experts, secondary school programs, former foster youth, state agencies, foster parents, researchers, advocates, and public and private community and four-year colleges. With over 50 agencies, programs and schools represented, our *Foster Care to College Work Group* is striving to proactively address barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education for youth who have experienced foster care: the Commonwealth's children. For example, we have trained college financial aid officers on how they can better support foster youth. We have developed youth-friendly educational materials to teach foster youth about college selection and financing a college education, while providing foster youth and professionals who work with them tools to help youth make good choices. We have helped launch the first campus-based support programs for foster youth in Pennsylvania, each providing a single point of contact and access to services and supports across their campuses. We are in the process of launching additional programs so that colleges statewide are better prepared to provide the support that foster youth need to be successful once they arrive on campus.

While we have begun to address some of the many challenges faced by foster youth, dedicated financial assistance in the form of tuition and fee waivers would allow foster youth to both enroll and remain in college. It would prevent many youth from taking on insurmountable debt, something that follows them long after they leave college and can result in life-altering financial problems. It would allow many others to actually see themselves, for the first time, enrolling and earning a degree. Young people who, through no fault of their own, are living in foster homes will have the opportunity for the first time to envision a future filled with hope rather than a promise of uncertainty. College isn't for everyone; there are numerous paths to successful adulthood and many foster youth will be better served with a different career path. Those who aspire to and have the potential to earn a college degree should have that opportunity. We shouldn't punish young people who had the misfortune to be born into families that caused them harm and trauma. Instead, we should provide them the chance to create productive and healthy lives.

However, if we don't support the success of foster youth once they enroll in college, we are setting them up for failure and additional stress and disappointment. Retention is just as important as recruitment. Our efforts to establish campus-based support programs for foster

youth as a means to improve retention rates are echoed in HB 1745 which requires colleges to maintain a “single point of contact” for enrolled foster youth who are supported under this legislation. This critical role at covered institutions provides information and connects eligible students with both on-campus and off-campus support services including admissions assistance, on and off-campus housing, financial aid, health care, mental health services, tutoring, and career and academic advising. Grounded in research published on campus-based support programs for foster youth in other states, we anticipate that this core component of the Fostering Independence Through Education Act will support students to stay in school and complete their college degrees.

With passage of HB 1745, Pennsylvania would join the other 28 states that have already acknowledged the responsibility and wisdom of offering college tuition assistance for foster youth through passing similar legislation. The Field Center is in full support of HB 1745, the Fostering Independence Through Education Act, to provide foster youth, the Commonwealth’s children, with the opportunity to transcend their history of trauma and have the chance to become productive and successful adults with the opportunity to attend and succeed in college.