

Pennsylvania House
House Democratic Policy Committee
The State of Foster Care

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Testimony submitted by:

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Thank you to Representative Kristine Howard and members of the Committee for hosting this hearing. My name is Sarah Wasch, and I am the Program Manager at the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice and Research at the University of Pennsylvania, where I received my Masters of Social Work degree over a decade ago. I have held caseworker and supervisor roles in Philadelphia’s foster care system, and I am currently a licensed foster parent of an older youth.

At the Field Center, one of my roles is to coordinate the “Foster Care to College” initiative which aims to increase access to and success in higher education for foster youth. We have convened a workgroup comprising over 50 stakeholders across public and private systems to address gaps and opportunities, and we proudly count among our successes the establishment of new campus-based support programs for students who have experienced foster care and the recent passage of legislation to provide tuition waivers for foster youth in Pennsylvania.

Children who are placed in foster care, and particularly young adults who age out of foster care, often face a future fraught with poor outcomes. These young people are less likely to graduate high school on time, or at all. They are more likely to experience homelessness, mental health challenges, decreased job security, substance abuse, and criminal justice involvement.¹

Higher education is an investment that yields a net positive return for both the individual and society. People who attend or complete college have higher incomes – and thus contribute more in taxes. The University of Chicago’s Chapin Hall found that, with a 4-year college degree, foster youth could expect to earn an average of \$481,000 more over the course of their lifetime than if they only obtained a high school diploma, and that any college attendance would increase their lifetime wages by an average of \$129,000.² Higher education reduces one’s likelihood of being unemployed. Adults with a college education engage in healthier behaviors and are less likely to rely on public assistance.³

For foster youth in particular, higher education offers an opportunity to circumvent the poor life outcomes often experienced by young people who were in out-of-home care. Not surprisingly, foster youth who have completed a post-secondary degree display greater gains in adult life circumstances than the general foster care population.⁴

Historically, foster youth are often not viewed as college material. Frequent placement moves and school changes, a history of trauma, and disproportionate absences result in lower graduation rates and fewer foster youth being offered college preparatory courses.⁵ Despite this, research tells us that approximately 70% of foster youth desire to attend college, yet they attend at less than half the rate of their peers. For those who do attend, the majority do not make it past their

¹ Courtney, M. E., & Heuring, D. H. (2005). The transition to adulthood for youth “aging out” of the foster care system. *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations*, 27-67.

² Peters, C., Dworsky, A., Courtney, M., & Pollack, H. (2009). Extending Foster Care to Age 21: Weighing the Costs to Government against the Benefits to Youth. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

³ Gross, J. P. (2019). *Former Foster Youth in Postsecondary Education: Reaching Higher*. Springer.

⁴ Salazar, A. M. (2013). The value of a college degree for foster care alumni: Comparisons with general population samples. *Social work*, 58(2), 139-150.

⁵ Dworsky, A., & Perez, A. (2010). Helping former foster youth graduate from college through campus support programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(2), 255-263.

freshman year.⁶ In Pennsylvania, nearly three-quarters of first year Chafee grant recipients do not return, and national studies reveal that less than 10% of foster care alumni ever obtain a Bachelor's degree.

Children enter foster care through no fault of their own. Once they are removed from their families of origin, they become the responsibility of the agency charged with their care. As a society, these are our children. And yet, for every metric you can imagine, including higher education which is the focus of my testimony today, foster youth fare worse than their peers.⁷ We are failing them. Caseworkers, foster parents, schools, and other key individuals in the lives of youth hold great potential to shift the dominant culture of thinking around foster care. We need to ensure that young people in the system are provided with the support, tools, curriculum, and resources to prepare them to view college as an option.

Luckily, there are interventions available that can positively impact the educational trajectory for foster youth. One approach that is gaining popularity across the nation is the development of campus-based support programs for foster youth. By providing concrete services on campus that can include a single point of contact, mentorship, designated financial aid support, housing during breaks, scholarships, and social and academic supports, foster youth can receive the assistance they need to stay in school and graduate.

Since 2016, the Field Center has helped launch programs on 17 different college campuses across Pennsylvania to support students with experience in foster care. Our approach is unique in our desire to provide foster youth with a diverse set of higher education options. Like any young person, foster youth should have the opportunity to attend a school that is the best fit for them; this increases their chances for success. Our campus partners represent community colleges, public four-year institutions, and private colleges and universities. It is our hope that professionals working across our state's child welfare system encourage their clients in foster care to consider and explore college, and take advantage of the diversity of campus programs that can support them.

Providing on-campus support will only be an effective tool if foster youth possess the financial means to enroll in and attend college in the first place. Lack of access to funds, lack of support from family to pay for school, and minimal awareness of financial aid options impacts these students' ability to matriculate and complete school.⁸ Foster youth often need to work to support themselves financially and cannot meet the academic requirements to qualify for financial aid.

Tuition waivers are a legislative intervention that can drastically impact a foster youth's ability to afford higher education. A 2017 review by Education Commission of the States reported that 28 states offer some form of state-level tuition waivers or scholarships for foster youth.⁹ The Field Center, alongside various partners, worked on drafting tuition waiver legislation for

⁶ Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. April 2018.

⁷ Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A. L., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26.

⁸ Gross, J. P. (2019). *Former Foster Youth in Postsecondary Education: Reaching Higher*. Springer.

⁹ Parker, E. & Sarubbi, M. 50 State Review: Tuition Assistance Programs for Foster Youth Pursuing Postsecondary Education. Education Commission of the States, 2017.

Pennsylvania, which was recently enacted as part of the School Code in the budget that was passed in June. This important legislation, the Fostering Independence Through Education Act, positions Pennsylvania ahead of many other states with its innovation to include private institutions as well as public schools. This reinforces our belief that foster youth, like all students, can succeed best when they are provided a diversity of opportunities and choices.

Beginning in the Fall of 2020, anyone who was in foster care in Pennsylvania after the age of 16 will be able to attend college in Pennsylvania tuition-free. The legislation also requires that every institution in the state designate a Point of Contact for foster youth, to help them identify and apply for financial aid and scholarships, gather verification documents, and access campus and community resources and services. Finally, the legislation requires both institutions and government agencies to collect and analyze data on the utilization of tuition waivers, to improve retention and student success.¹⁰ These components are essential to maximize impact and to ensure that the legislation is producing the intended result.

Although this is a wonderful example of how the legislature can make a difference in contributing to improved outcomes, a notable shortfall of the legislation is that it focuses on tuition only. The waiver kicks in after all other grants and scholarships have been applied to the school's tuition, leaving students without financial support for room and board, a crucial component of postsecondary success and often a significant barrier to perseverance for foster youth. The tuition waiver legislation in Connecticut, for example, provides eligible students from foster care with a full cost of attendance waiver, making it possible for them to attend college without worrying about food or housing.

We are thrilled that Pennsylvania has taken the first step in addressing the financial needs for foster youth, but we have an opportunity to pass more comprehensive legislation to address some of the gaps that often contribute to a failure to complete college. Specifically, if the Fostering Independence Through Education Act provided a waiver of the full cost of attendance at eligible institutions, which would include tuition, room and board, and other costs of attendance, a major barrier to college access and success for foster youth would be removed. Additionally, as the eligibility criteria for the tuition waiver is tied to the eligibility for the Chafee Education and Training Grant, a new opportunity to examine expanding the age of Chafee eligibility as provided by Federal Law presents itself.

As a professional community we have an obligation to ensure that young people in foster care have access to higher education, the tools and resources to succeed in college, and a system that believes they are worth it. The legislature has an opportunity to invest in improving outcomes for foster youth – an investment that benefits all of us.

¹⁰ The General Assembly of Pennsylvania, House Bill No. 1615, Session of 2019.