



**Testimony by William Norbert
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**

In Support of L.D. 1028

***An Act to Expand the Higher Education Tuition Waiver for Persons
Who Have Resided in Foster Care***

March 22, 2023

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I live in Brunswick and am here to testify in support of L.D. 1028, *An Act to Expand the Higher Education Tuition Waiver for Persons Who Have Resided in Foster Care*.

This bill would increase from thirty to fifty the number of tuition waivers for postsecondary education allowed to be granted each academic year to persons who, at the time of their graduation from high school or their successful completion of a general educational development (GED) examination, were in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services (the Department) and resided in foster care or subsidized adoptive care or were minor wards of a subsidized permanency guardian. The bill also makes changes to the provisions of the law regarding how the tuition waivers are apportioned to postsecondary educational institutions. Also, the additional twenty waivers must be funded with General Fund appropriations. This is a very important point and key to FAME's support: we and our partners involved in the program can administer this expanded program only with new funding. There is no funding currently attached to the bill, and that will be essential. The bill further provides that students who are eligible to enter into a voluntary extended care and support agreement (a V-9 waiver) with the Department must enter into such an agreement to be eligible for a tuition waiver.

FAME administers the tuition waiver program for persons who have resided in foster care in partnership with Maine's public higher educational institutions—the University of Maine System, the Maine Community College System, and Maine Maritime Academy; the Department; and JMG. Thirty new tuition waivers each year are available to students who were foster children under the custody of the Department and for adopted persons whose adoptive parent(s) received a subsidy from the Department

when they graduated from high school. Recipients must be Maine residents attending a school within the University of Maine System, the Maine Community College System, or Maine Maritime Academy. For those individuals not selected for the Foster Care Tuition Waiver Program, FAME and its partners have added additional assistance through outreach and individualized counseling regarding other financial aid options. I have provided a fact sheet on the program to provide additional information.

Each year the program averages approximately fifty-four eligible applicants for the thirty available program slots. Approximately twenty-four eligible applicants are thus placed on the program waitlist each year. Currently, participating higher educational institutions absorb the costs of the waivers as no state funding is or ever has been provided. For academic year 22-23, initial estimates peg that cost (including new waivers and renewals) at approximately \$150,242 at least. Increasing the number of waivers to fifty obviously would increase the costs. As far as utilization of the program, data from 2019-20 disclosed that, for initial & renewal applications, about 71% of the recipients received their waiver at a University of Maine System school, while 26% did so at a Maine Community College System school, and 3% at Maine Maritime Academy.

This committee, especially bill sponsor Representative Michael Brennan (who introduced the original bill creating the program in 1999), has thought about, studied, and amended this program at various times over the years. FAME has been pleased to have been involved with that work along with our partners mentioned above. The most recent consideration of a possible expansion of the program occurred during the 129th Maine Legislature. At that time, Senator Russell Black sponsored a bill, L.D. 1566, *An Act to Increase the Number of Recipients Under the Tuition Waiver Program for Participants in Foster Care*, which would have expanded the program from thirty to sixty waivers, but without any state funding. This committee subsequently amended the bill into a resolve directing the public higher educational institutions to study, in collaboration with FAME, the Department, and JMG, the matter further and report back with findings and recommendations.

The January 15, 2020 report by the Public Higher Education Systems Coordinating Committee provided a good history of the program, findings with respect to the need for and operation of the program, and offered suggestions as to how to improve it going forward. Among other things, the report noted that there were as of that time 2,356 Mainers of traditional college-going age (18-25 years) in foster care or adopted through the state's foster care system or in permanency guardianship. Only three percent of this population was able to benefit from the tuition waiver program, however, due to the statutory limit of thirty waivers per year. The report also found that demand for the program exceeds available statutory slots: approximately twenty to thirty individuals are placed on the program's wait list annually due to the annual statutory limit of thirty slots. The report further found that the waiver program is critical to increasing college aspirations and attainment among a vulnerable population that would otherwise be less likely to pursue postsecondary education. The report also recommended that, if the program were to be expanded in the future, state funding will be essential as the participating schools could no longer afford to simply absorb the costs. It also

recommended that if such state funding were to occur, that FAME's administrative costs (which have never been funded) be fairly covered. As a result of the report and discussions in this committee, FAME and its partners made changes to its administration of the program to better align with deadlines in the college admissions process and to ensure that applicants who do not receive the waiver are connected with other financial aid resources that improve their likelihood of postsecondary attendance.

We are keenly aware of the great interest in and need for the program. Having administered this program since its creation in 1999 and participated in numerous conversations over the years with legislators and stakeholders, FAME has witnessed the positive impact the waiver has had on the lives of participants. It increases college attainment, workforce readiness, and self-sufficiency for those fortunate to benefit from it. Maine's Ten-Year Economic Plan among other things calls for increased strategies to increase the skills of our workforce, especially for those disengaged from school and work. Importantly, this bill proposes state funding that would be essential for the participating schools to accomplish the waiver expansion. We hope the Legislature decides to enact and fund this bill. We would be happy to administer an expanded waiver program.

Finally, we have a couple of suggestions for your consideration at the work session for possible improvement to the bill:

- (1) Section 1 should make clear that children who have been adopted out of foster care need not apply for or enter into a voluntary extended care and support agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services in order to remain eligible for a tuition waiver; and
- (2) FAME's reasonable costs and expenses of administering the program should finally be paid and this could come out of amounts appropriated to the program going forward.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments. I will be happy to answer any questions you have.



TUITION WAIVER PROGRAM AT STATE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR PERSONS WHO HAVE RESIDED IN FOSTER CARE

What is the program?

The Tuition Waiver (Foster Care) Program is governed by Maine law as set forth in 20-A M.R.S.A. §§12571 - 12573 and Chapter 608 of the Rules of the Finance Authority of Maine. Under the program, certain foster children and adopted children/wards under subsidy from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) may receive a tuition waiver to a participating Maine public college/university.

How does one apply for the waiver?

Individuals must complete the Tuition Waiver Program Application available on FAME's website and:

1. Provide proof of acceptance or enrollment in an undergraduate degree program by submitting one of the following:
 - A copy of the college admissions acceptance letter
 - A letter from the college registrar's office confirming one's degree program status
 - A current college transcript showing one's degree program status

2. File the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Although there is no deadline, an application is not considered complete until an individual has filed their FAFSA.

Who is eligible?

Eligible students must meet one of the following conditions at the time of graduation from high school or upon completion of HiSET/GED or equivalent:

- Be in Maine's foster care program
- Be adopted from Maine's foster care program and adoptive parent(s) receive a subsidy from Maine DHHS
- Be a minor ward of a permanency guardian and that guardian(s) receives a subsidy from Maine DHHS

FAME verifies an applicant's status with DHHS upon receipt of an application.

How are students selected?

FAME selects qualified students on a first-come, first-served basis. This is based on a completed application as set forth above. We also use a postmark date and do not allow online or in-person

delivery out of fairness to those without internet access or who may live far from our Augusta office.

What are the award amounts?

The award is the actual amount of tuition waived at the college/university that one attends.

Is the award renewable?

Yes. The award is renewable for up to five years of full-time enrollment or the equivalent, prior to receipt of a baccalaureate degree. Renewal applications are mailed to current recipients by the end of February. In addition to the application, one must complete the FAFSA and continue to be in good academic standing.

Which schools participate in this program?

- All of the University of Maine System schools
- All of the Maine Community College System schools
- Maine Maritime Academy

What help is provided to unsuccessful applicants?

For those individuals not selected for the Foster Care Tuition Waiver Program, FAME and its partners (UMS, MCCS, MMA, and JMG) have added additional assistance through outreach and individualized counseling regarding other financial aid options.