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Testimony of Representative Michael Brennan Introducing

LD 1028, An Act to Expand the Higher Education Tuition Waiver for Persons Who Have Resided in Foster Care

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good morning Senator Rafferty and fellow distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Representative Michael Brennan, and I represent District 115, which includes part of the City of Portland. I come before you to introduce **LD 1028, An Act to Expand the Higher Education Tuition Waiver for Persons Who Have Resided in Foster Care**.

This bill increases the amount of postsecondary tuition waivers awarded each year from 30 to 50 to students who were in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services and resided in foster care or subsidized adoptive care or were minor wards of a subsidized permanency guardian.

This bill is a long time in the making—something that stemmed from legislation I introduced to this very committee in 1999 that proposed providing tuition waivers to attend Maine’s public postsecondary institutions to any person 17 or 18 years of age who resided in a foster family home for at least one year. While this program has improved over the years, there is still much more work to be done.

As of 2020, there were 2,356 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who were part of Maine’s foster care system or have been adopted through the foster care system or were in permanency guardianships.

Under current State statute, only 30 new tuition waivers are granted each year, which is not nearly enough to meet the needs of those students who want to obtain a postsecondary education, but simply do not have the funds to do so.

The Public Higher Education Systems Coordinating Committee is in agreement, which was published in a report generated in response to legislation sponsored by Sen. Russell Black in the 129th Legislature (LD 1566, An Act To Increase the Number of Recipients Under the Tuition Waiver Program for Participants in Foster Care), stating:

“...the current number of waivers is increasingly not meeting demand, especially as the number of youth in State care climbs and more Mainers understand the importance of obtaining a postsecondary degree or credential to getting a good-paying job that allows them to be financially independent. Beyond needed State investment to expand the waiver program to increase college attainment, workforce readiness and self sufficiency for these underserved students, investments in targeted services and supports are also needed to foster improved outcomes”

While there is no application deadline, FAME, which administers the program, has noted that they have received an average of 62 applications over the past few years within the first three days of the application's yearly launch. This is indication enough that we are not meeting current needs.

This bill has two new provisions for the program:

First, state general funds would be utilized to fund the additional tuition waivers. Currently, the first 30 waivers are absorbed by both the University and Community College Systems. Second, where appropriate, potential students who are still in state custody would be asked to apply for the child welfare V-9 program to ensure continued health care and job assistance opportunities.

Finally, as you know, with the creation of the free tuition program at the Community Colleges and the potential for a similar tuition program at the University of Maine System, this program may need to be adjusted and remain flexible.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.