

Testimony of Melissa Hackett

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

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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Melissa Hackett, and I am offering testimony in support of LD 1028 on behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance. Our organization is a public policy, nonprofit advocating for sound public policies and best practices that improve the lives of all Maine children, youth, and families.

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is difficult for most young people, as they begin to take on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities in this new phase of their lives. For many, this transitional period includes new employment or educational opportunities. During this time, it is critical that youth have strong relationships with parents or other adults who can provide ongoing support or guidance to young people navigating this transition, as well as access to resources to provide for their needs and to support them in achieving their goals.

For youth who have experienced the foster care system, the needs are just what all young people need to be successful, yet the significance of having those supports is much greater. For children who exit the state's custody upon reaching the age of 18 or at the end of an extended care agreement, there may not be that permanent connection to another adult who can provide a consistent, supportive role in their lives. For many young people, biological parents play this lifelong role – helping complete a FAFSA, finding safe and affordable housing, or filling out a resume or preparing for an interview.

It is a missed opportunity for our state to not wrap around these young people and ensure they have what they need to be successful. This includes ensuring youth have the opportunity to engage in higher education. For most, a lifelong parent is available to help a young person navigate the financial aspects of attending college – including providing financial assistance. For many young people in foster care considering college, this may not be an option available to them. Given that the state has assumed the role of custody for these young people, we have a responsibility to ensure they have the same opportunities we would want any young person to have. This includes the opportunity to attend college without incurring substantial, personal financial debt.

This legislation would importantly increase this opportunity for young people in foster care, by expanding the number of tuition waivers from 30 to 50. We encourage the committee to support this, and to additionally consider what adult supports should be provided to young people in engaging in this application process. We are also aware from previous legislation considered on this topic, that the online process for applying and receiving one of these waivers

has been first-come, first-served. We would encourage the committee to discuss with stakeholders how a more equitable process might be implemented to consider all applicants and need in determining the allocation of these waivers.

We all benefit when every young person in Maine is prepared for success. As they enter adulthood, young people become Maine's workforce, future leaders, and parents. We should make our best effort, then, to ensure young people have access to educational opportunities that will lead to employment that supports their success into adulthood. We urge the committee to support this legislation, and ensure more young people who have experienced the foster care system have greater access and support to achieve their educational goals.

Thank you.