



February 13, 2024

The Honorable Marvin Abney, Chair
Finance Committee
House of Representatives
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: House Bill 7225, Article 3,
Section 28

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the Committee:

I am writing this letter regarding the Higher Education Incentive Grant program. This DCYF program has been funded by state dollars for more than twenty years. During this time, the funding amount has not changed, despite costs associated with higher education increasing dramatically. Additionally, the eligibility for this program has also not been updated. While foster youth graduation rates remain dismal and unacceptable, the DCYF has not consistently spent down this fund each year. Evaluating the program and its impact has been a focus of this writer and many members of the child welfare advocacy community. One thing is clear, we need to ensure that investments in foster youth higher education are tailored to meet their needs, and that we must help improve outcomes in this population. The good news is that there have been numerous meetings, led by Representative Casimiro, with the President of Rhode Island College, the Governor's office, and advocates to discuss amending our approach to addressing the disparities experienced by foster youth in this state.

Adoption Rhode Island is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating safety, permanency, and a sense of belonging in foster and adopted children, vulnerable youth, and families through compassionate services, education, and advocacy. We have long been concerned about the educational needs of Rhode Island's foster youth and have been engaged in direct services, research, and advocacy to address the disparities these children face. We witness the impact of years of struggle for so many former foster youths who are interested in fulfilling their educational dreams, but due to other life circumstances may fall through eligibility cracks and lack the resources needed on their own

In the coming weeks, a piece of legislation will be submitted to the House and Senate to create a pilot project at Rhode Island College. This proposed pilot project will utilize both state and federal dollars to support tuition, room and board, fees, and other expenses, and will provide supportive services to a cohort of approximately 10 current and former foster youth. This initiative will require amended language to the Higher Education Grant program and an additional \$200,000 dollars. This pilot is based on the successful tuition waiver programs in states like Texas, Maryland, and other locations across the country.

According to RI KidsCount, over the next 5-10 years, Rhode Island jobs requiring a post-secondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. Students who complete college are more likely to be employed and have higher incomes. According to the New England Secondary School Consortium, Rhode Island has a 60% completion rate. It is the lowest in New England. Unfortunately, Rhode Island's former foster youth do not come near this completion rate. According to recent research published by URI and Data Spark, **approximately 1 % of former foster youth complete a college degree**. This disparity has devastating long term consequences for this population.

Foster youth are significantly disadvantaged in Rhode Island. After exiting foster care, it is critical they have the support and resources needed to become self-sustaining and successful in adulthood. Amending this funding source to create a customized approach to increasing the number of foster youths who successfully graduate from college is a prudent investment in their futures as well as our state's economic future.

Thank you for allowing me to submit this letter. I look forward to testifying on the tuition waiver bill once it is filed and scheduled for hearing. I look forward to updating this section of our statute to better meet the higher education needs of foster youth in 2024 and beyond. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached at 401—524-3456 or dallen@adoptionri.org.

Respectfully submitted,



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