

Supporting Higher Education Success for Youth With Experience in Foster Care and Homelessness: A Congressional Briefing on Four Legislative Proposals that Can Make A Difference

A virtual Congressional briefing organized by [SchoolHouse Connection](#), [John Burton Advocates for Youth](#), and the [Youth Law Center](#) was held on May 11th, 2022, in collaboration with the Offices of Representative Danny Davis and Senator Bob Casey. Senator Patty Murray was an honorary co-host.

Removing barriers to higher education access and success for youth with experience in foster care and homelessness has never been more urgent. Lawmakers have responded by introducing several exciting bills that can have a significant and positive impact on the lives and futures of young people.

OVERVIEW

Public schools identified nearly 1.3 million children and youth experiencing homelessness in the 2019-2020 school year, which we know is an undercount, particularly given the challenges of identifying students during virtual learning in the pandemic. Nearly one in ten young adults 18-24 are estimated to experience homelessness on their own, referred to as Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. These numbers are now likely much higher as a result of the pandemic and related economic and family stress. In the US, there are also nearly 424,000 children and youth in foster care and every year, roughly 18,000 of these youth age out of the foster care system.

Some form of postsecondary attainment is increasingly necessary to move out of poverty and homelessness, and live a healthy, productive life. Yet youth experiencing homelessness and foster care face barriers in transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education, as well as barriers to financial aid, college retention, and college completion. Today, we would like to discuss four bills that would have a direct impact on access to higher education for homeless and foster youth, and two programs that need additional support and revisions.

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 - (S 3616/HR 6666) (Murray, Portman, Clark, Young)
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 - (HR 6669/S3605) (Davis, Krishnamoorthi, Casey, Brown, Smith)
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Introductions



Jordyn Roark, MSW, SchoolHouse Connection, Briefing Moderator

Jordyn Roark is the Director of Youth Leadership and Scholarships with SchoolHouse Connection. In this role, she supports students nationally that are experiencing homelessness in accessing higher education. Using her own story of youth homelessness, Jordyn provides training to young people, organizations, and professionals on the barriers that students experiencing homelessness face and tips for increasing their access to higher education. She is thankful for all that are taking the time to learn from our student experts.



Anthony O'Leary, California, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar

Anthony O'Leary is a 21 year old junior at the University of California, Los Angeles studying sociology. He is a 2019 SchoolHouse Connection Scholar and a SchoolHouse Connection State Policy Fellow working on state advocacy in California. Since the age of 14, Anthony has had a passion for advocating for homeless and foster youth. Using his own story of both foster care and homelessness, he educates and inspires audiences around the country.



Elizabeth Clews, California, John Burton Advocates for Youth Advocate

Elizabeth Clews is a 27 year old student and professional from California who is about to begin pursuing a degree in history/education at Humboldt University. She is a Youth Advocate through John Burton Advocates for Youth and a certified educational rights holder for at-risk youth in the community. She is the single parent to two young children and an orange tabby. Elizabeth is a former foster youth who is dedicated to advocating for policies that will improve the lives of current and former foster youth.



Jayson Szot, North Carolina, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar

Jayson Szot is a 20 year old junior at UNC Charlotte pursuing a finance degree. He is a 2019 Schoolhouse Connection Scholar and a state policy fellow in North Carolina through SchoolHouse Connection advocating on behalf of homeless and foster youth in pursuit of higher education. Through his own experience of youth homelessness, he gives a voice to others in similar situations. He has identified the barriers he faced in pursuing higher education and hopes to help make the path for other homeless youth and foster kids smoother.

The Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act (S 3616/HR 6666) (Murray, Portman/Clark, Young)

→ [Additional Information](#)

HEASHFY seeks to remove barriers for homeless and foster youth in higher education. It covers more areas than we will go over in this document, but we would like to highlight three elements that we think are critical.

HEASHFY would provide access to and prioritization for on-campus housing and support for housing during winter and summer breaks.



"There is a program at my school that provides me with housing during winter break. This has been incredibly helpful for me. Without this program, I would have not had anywhere to go during the month of December and may have found myself in unsafe environments. When campuses do not provide housing year round for students, it creates a critical barrier for the students that do not have outside resources." -Anthony



"On-campus housing for me is critical and made more challenging by the fact that I have children. I cannot afford off campus housing in my area while navigating school and I'm finding that housing options, especially for families, are very limited for me. Housing prioritization and support would be super helpful and housing is currently causing me and my family a lot of stress." -Elizabeth



"When you attend schools away from your support system, it can make housing very difficult. Having to stay temporarily with others often leaves you feeling like a burden. In many of these temporary situations the environment is unsafe and unstable, making it harder to focus on school. Having guaranteed housing during breaks will help eliminate these problems and create an environment where the student can succeed. " -Jayson

HEASHFY would provide a Liaison on campus who would support homeless and foster youth.



"At my previous community college, I received support through the Extended Opportunity Program and Services office. They helped with book vouchers, purchasing a cap and gown, and overall support. It was nice to have a place to go if I had questions, but it wasn't targeted support for foster youth, so there were some things they didn't understand and resources I still needed. Having a targeted support program for foster youth could have helped me identify the resources I needed and prevented me from dropping out of college." - Elizabeth

HEASHFY would provide in-state tuition even if a student's residency is unstable.



"For students experiencing homelessness, it can be incredibly challenging to prove your residency. When you're moving frequently, it is difficult to find the documentation necessary to prove you've resided in the state. The difference in in-state and out of state tuition can be the determining factor on whether a student can afford to attend the school. For me, without in-state tuition I could not attend UCLA. I'm thankful that I was able to get my residency figured out, but for many students, they struggle for weeks to prove something that for their housed peers is a seamless process." - Anthony



"In conclusion, HEASHFY addresses barriers that have impacted homeless and foster students for far too long. We have seen our peers have to drop out, re-enter homelessness, and we have struggled educationally, emotionally, and physically as a result of these barriers. HEASHFY is a sign of hope for me. It shows me that I'm seen and that one day I will have equitable access to the same educational opportunities as my peers who have not experienced either homelessness or foster care." - Anthony

The Helping Foster and Homeless Youth Achieve Act (S 3350) (Portman, Rosen)

→ [Additional Information](#)

Homeless and foster youth often are struggling financially at the time they would be applying for college. Something even as small as a \$30 application fee could cause them to not be able to apply and attend. Waiving a \$30 application fee for this small demographic of students would have relatively no impact on the colleges, but would open up significant opportunities for students.

The Helping Foster and Homeless Youth Achieve Act waives application fees to institutions of higher education for homeless and foster youth.



"At my previous community college, the Extended Opportunity Program and Services office provided 8 application waivers when I was applying for four year schools. Had I not had these waivers, I would have likely only been able to apply to one school, which would have drastically limited my opportunities. For me, having as many options as possible is critical, because I need to find a school that can offer the adequate support I need." - Elizabeth

The Fostering Success in Higher Education Act
(HR 6669/S3605) (Davis, Krishnamoorthi/Casey, Brown, Smith)

→ [Additional Information](#)

This bill would invest \$150 million a year to support foster and homeless youth in enrolling in and graduating from higher education.

This funding would provide grants to states to support foster and homeless youth and the majority of these funds would go towards developing “Institutions of Excellence.” Institutions of Excellence would serve foster and homeless youth and would provide support services and financial assistance. This would include covering the remaining cost of attendance after federal and state grants, comprehensive wraparound and case management services, and student health and mental health services.



“My second year of college, I had to move off campus, because I could not afford a meal plan and residence hall. If I had financial assistance that would have covered my remaining costs along with case management services, I might have been able to remain an on-campus student. I’ve managed to find safe off-campus housing and have a reliable source of transportation, but for many other students in my situation, moving to off-campus housing due to a lack of financial aid could cause them to drop out.” - Jayson



“Wrap-around case management is incredibly helpful. I have SchoolHouse Connection as well as a program at my school that provides targeted support to homeless and foster students and it is invaluable to have a safe space where my situation is understood and where I can ask questions and be connected to resources.” - Anthony

The Fostering Postsecondary Success for Foster and Homeless Youth Act
(HR 2028) (Kildee, Bacon)

→ [Additional Information](#)

This bill creates a recognition program through the U.S. Department of Education where colleges and universities that have services specifically for homeless and foster youth can be designated as “Foster and Homeless Youth Friendly.”

These schools would be highlighted on the U.S. Department of Education’s website and be recognized for their commitment to supporting students. It would also create a national center that would provide technical assistance to higher education institutions as they create these

programs. Our hope is that this recognition would encourage more conversation nationally about the need for support and encourage universities to create their own programs.

Chafee Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)

→ [Additional Information](#)

Provides grants of up to \$5,000 per year to students with experience in foster care to help pay for the costs of attending college.

The program has been very successful. Research has shown that students who receive this grant are more than twice as likely to graduate as students who don't. The way the program is implemented, however, varies by state and some of the current rules make it hard for students to get the maximum benefit from this program. Two proposed changes that we think would improve the program are:

- **Increase the allocation amount.** Current funding allows for roughly 10-20 percent of eligible youth to receive an award. An increase from the current \$43 million to \$200 million would ensure that all eligible students have access to this valuable resource.
- **Remove barriers to access.** Currently, some states impose requirements beyond those imposed for other types of financial aid, like requiring written proof of every expense that a student uses the money for in order to get funding. This can make it hard for students to get the funding when they most need it.



"I received Chafee funds when I first began college about 7 years ago. This was the largest grant I received and I got the funds sent directly to me through a check. This meant that I could use these funds to fill in any gaps I had in attending college, which was really helpful. The other scholarships and grants I received were sent directly to my school and there were restrictions around how I could use the funds. I needed to provide burdensome proof of receipts and it was overwhelming. Chafee funds being flexible and sent to the student fills in critical gaps that students in foster care need." - Elizabeth

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)

→ [Additional Information](#)

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requires that students meet minimum GPA and course completion requirements to maintain access to federal financial aid. Students who fail to meet these standards for two consecutive terms lose eligibility for aid unless they successfully appeal.

Roughly 1 in 4 students do not meet their college's SAP standard in their first year and rates of SAP failure for Black students are more than twice that of white students. Over a third of students with experience in foster care failed to make SAP in their first year and just 13 percent of students who fail SAP remain enrolled and continue to receive a Pell Grant by the start of their second year of college.

When it comes to the standards that govern maintaining financial aid, little consideration is made for the additional challenges faced by homeless and foster students. As a result, these students, who are also disproportionately students of color, are further hindered by SAP requirements in their ability to succeed in college. Two proposed improvements to the program are:

- **Expand how long students can continue receiving aid while working through SAP appeals.** For many students who are new to college, do not receive proper advising, arrive with academic deficiencies, or who are balancing a lot of different life obligations, additional time should be offered before financial aid is cut off.
- **Broaden the criteria for appeal.** Many of the circumstances that get in the way of student success, such as work or childcare obligations, food or housing insecurity, or academic challenges are not considered grounds for an appeal of the loss of financial aid. The criteria should be broadened to take into consideration the realities of today's students.



"I struggled with SAP when I first began college. I didn't have a good support system at the time and SAP was foreign to me. No one at my school was reaching out to explain the process and I was left alone to figure it out myself. I ended up dropping out of college as a result. A few years later I attempted to re-enroll, but I was asked to complete an appeal and on the initial form it asked what my extenuating circumstances were that led to a drop in my GPA. I found that none of the circumstances listed matched what my experience was. I

assumed that I could not receive aid and therefore didn't apply or re-start college. A few years later, I found myself wanting a college degree, so I gave it another shot. I was again forced to appeal SAP and again none of the extenuating circumstances matched my experience. This time, however, I reached out to financial aid to ask what I should do and was ultimately assisted, though the process was burdensome and time consuming. For the first year and a half of returning to college I did not receive aid and had to pay out of pocket which was barely doable. With all of that said, a lack of support seven years ago almost caused me to not ever receive a college degree in the long run and SAP needs to be changed to better support students." - Elizabeth

Closing Thoughts



Higher Education is a primary path towards self-sustainability for homeless and foster youth and for me, a college education was my ticket out of homelessness. If we can provide homeless and foster youth with targeted support and remove barriers surrounding enrollment, financial aid, and housing, we will see these students walk across the stage at graduation exiting a childhood of injustice and entering an adulthood of opportunity and self-sustainability. -Jordyn



Although this conversation is a powerful start, we are just three students out of many. It is critical to continue listening to the expertise of students with homeless and foster care experience. There are so many young people that do not have this platform or opportunity to share their voice and we would all benefit from increased opportunities to partner with and learn from them. -Anthony



Foster and homeless youth want to attend college and what we're seeing is that they are struggling. Housing and basic needs are critical to succeed in the classroom. Higher education should be accessible to all and right now, it feels like a privilege only afforded to those with the resources necessary to navigate it. -Elizabeth



It is life changing for individuals that have experienced homelessness and foster care to receive a college degree and as they graduate, society as a whole continues to advance. Many individuals who have faced homelessness don't think college is an option for them because they are focused on meeting their basic needs. We need to continue to remove barriers and increase opportunities for homeless and foster youth in higher education so that these individuals have a higher chance of success and so our society continues to prosper. -Jayson



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