

The Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization

YALE LAW SCHOOL

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Amit Jain
Law Student Intern
The Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization
Yale Law School

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

Re: Senate Bill 147

Sen. Bartolomeo, Rep. Willis, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify. For the record, my name is Amit Jain, and I am a law student intern with the Worker and Immigrant Rights Advocacy Clinic at Yale Law School. The clinic represents Connecticut Students for a Dream, or C4D, which has worked tirelessly since 2011 to ensure that students across Connecticut have equal access to higher education, regardless of their immigration status.

As a first-generation American and the child of immigrants myself, I urge you to support the passage of Senate Bill 147, which would open up access to institutional financial aid to in-state undocumented students. This bill is an important step towards ending unequal access to higher education in Connecticut. Undocumented students pay into the pool of funds used for institutional aid, but they're blocked from receiving any benefits. The current system is patently unfair, and only the General Assembly can act to fix it. Doing so is common sense – it's good for Connecticut's economy and it's the right thing to do.

The most important thing to understand about S.B. 147 is that it helps these students, but doesn't give anyone special treatment. It does the opposite – it fixes an incredibly unfair system. As you may know, institutional aid isn't funded by tax dollars – instead, state institutions of higher education set aside a portion of tuition revenue for need-based aid for students. That means that under current law, every undocumented student at a Connecticut college or university is paying into the pool of aid, but blocked from receiving benefits. Rep. Willis, you recently said that undocumented students are “entitled to a piece of the pie they helped bake.” I couldn't have said it better myself.

If they're paying into the system, why can't undocumented students get aid? Because a 20-year-old federal law requires all states to “affirmatively provide[]” for undocumented peoples' eligibility for any federal benefits.¹ If it weren't for this federal law, there wouldn't be a problem. The statute reflects an outdated way of thinking about undocumented immigrants. And it just doesn't reflect our Connecticut values. In this state, we recognize that undocumented people are an integral part of our communities. So do many other states, which is why places as diverse as Texas, California, Minnesota, and Washington have opened institutional aid to undocumented students.

Senate Bill 147 addresses this federal barrier. The first section of the bill “affirmatively provides” that all in-state students are eligible for financial aid, regardless of immigration status, and cites to the appropriate section of the United States Code so there is no ambiguity.

¹ 8 U.S.C. 1621(d).

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Because it is tuition dollars, not state appropriations, that fund institutional financial aid, this bill does not impact the state budget. And the long-term benefits are substantial. Studies find significant economic growth resulting from increased access to higher education, and specifically from increasing access for undocumented students. Because when more students can afford to attend college, they can get better jobs, enter the middle class, and contribute to the economy.

Ultimately, this bill is a matter of common sense. Connecticut has already invested in these students' education through its public elementary and secondary schools. And just last year, thanks to the leadership of many of you all, a nearly identical bill passed the Senate. This year, it's time to finish the job. It's up to the General Assembly to fix this unfair aid system that is hurting Connecticut's students and its economy.

We strongly endorse S.B. 147. This bill is a common-sense reform that's good for Connecticut's economy, and it's the right thing to do for our students.