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To Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

H.B. No. 5299

March 8, 2022

My name is Dr. Nathanael Okpych and I am an Assistant Professor in the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work. I have over 10 years of experience researching factors that influence college access and completion for youth in foster care.

I SUPPORT HB 5299, a bill that would increase the age limit for the Postsecondary Education Funding Program offered by the Department of Children and Families.

To provide some context, from the best estimates that we have from research, over 80% of adolescents in foster care aspire to go to college, however, half or less will set foot in a college classroom, and just 8% will complete a 2-year or 4-year college degree by their mid-20s. [1] This graduation rate of 8% is about five time lower than the national graduation rate for young people in the U.S. Thus, like most of their peers, young people in foster care have dreams of finishing college but are far less likely to do so.

In its current form, the Postsecondary Education (PSE) Fund provides financial resources and support to help foster students pay for college and their daily living necessities. Studies have reported high rates of homelessness, food insecurity, and economic hardships, particularly in the years after they lose support from the foster care system.[2,3] Thus, the support provided by the PSE Fund is critical, because studies have found that economic hardships and needing to work long hours increase the likelihood that foster students will drop out of college before graduating graduation.[4] In fact, when foster youth are surveyed about reasons they dropped out of college, the two most frequently given reasons are not being able to afford college and needing to work.[5,6]

Another important piece of information that research tells us is that foster youth require more time than their peers to finish college. Their experiences in foster care – being removed from their family, frequent placement changes and school transfer – mean that they take longer to finish high school and enroll in college.[7] One large study in three Midwestern States found that the average age that foster youth first enrolled in college was age 21, a couple years later than

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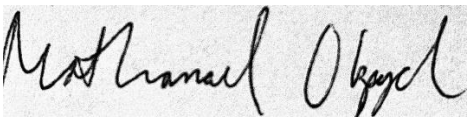
their non-foster peers.[8] After foster youth enter college, they take longer than their peers to finish.[9] There are many reasons for this. These young people have to manage school, work, home responsibilities, and the curveballs of life without necessarily having a family to fall back on. [10] Because of the academic disruptions in foster care, about 8 in 10 foster youth who enter community college will need to take remedial courses in Math or English, which do not count toward graduation but do add time to the clock of when they complete their degree.[11]

Thus, extending the limit of the PSE Funding program to age 30 makes a lot of sense. It will give foster students a reasonable and realistic amount of time to finish college, and it will provide sorely needed support to help them to pay for school, meet their basic needs, and ultimately increase their chances of graduating.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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