

AB217 – Strengthening Support for Students Experiencing Homelessness in Higher Education

Assembly Education Committee, March 21, 2023

Testimony of Arash Ghafouri, CEO, Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY)

Why Access to Higher Education Is Necessary

- Postsecondary education is increasingly necessary to move out of poverty and homelessness
- According to Georgetown University, “Bachelor’s degree holders earn 31 percent more than those with an Associate’s degree and 84 percent more than those with just a high school diploma” (The College Payoff, 2011)
 - *In fact, “A Bachelor’s degree is worth \$2.8 million on average over a lifetime” (The College Payoff, 2011)*
- This earnings potential is especially critical for young people experiencing homelessness
 - According to Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, education is the largest protective factor against homelessness for young people – that is, increasing young people’s access to education/supporting their educational success is the best chance we have for young people to exit homelessness for good
 - *“There is a reciprocal relationship between reduced educational attainment and experiences of homelessness: reduced educational attainment increases the likelihood of homelessness, and experiences of homelessness reduce the likelihood of school completion.” - Chapin Hall, 2019*
 - This impacts not just individual young people, but our entire community
 - According to a 2018 study by the UNLV Greenspun College of Urban Affairs on the economic cost of youth homelessness in Southern Nevada, young people experiencing homelessness in Southern Nevada earn significantly less than other youth in the region – from 2016 – 2018 the Southern Nevada community lost between \$23.5 million and \$35.8 million each year in unattained economic impact and uncollected tax revenue due to homeless youths’ lower incomes and lower rates of participation in the workforce
 - Strengthening young people experiencing homelessness’ access to higher education is the key to solving this issue both for young people and for our entire community and state, as higher education is the clearest pathway to higher earnings potential and positive economic impact
 - Additionally, this same study found that transition-age youth experiencing homelessness in Southern Nevada had significantly lower rates of participation in post-secondary education than their peers: only 6% - 8% of homeless youth ages 19-24 in Southern Nevada reported any post-

secondary education experience, compared to over 50% for all youth and 38% - 42% for youth in poverty. This is a huge disparity and illustrates the dire need for lowering barriers to higher education specifically for young people experiencing homelessness in our community, as their participation in higher education lags significantly behind not just all youth, but even other youth in poverty

It's Time for Equity

- In 2018, the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) created the Fostering Success Initiative, which waived tuition and fees for youth who have been in the foster care system, along with establishing a foster youth liaison to help these youth navigate higher education
- In 2019, the Nevada Legislature also passed AB461 to allow and encourage NSHE to create a similar waiver and liaison for young people who have experienced homelessness, but NSHE has yet to act
- We're here today because it's time to act – our state's young people experiencing homelessness cannot afford to wait any longer
- Foster youth and unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness are overlapping populations, experiencing many of the same challenges and barriers – in fact, roughly 1/3 of youth experiencing homelessness nationwide have been in foster care
 - For both populations, lack of family support, coupled with histories of neglect, abuse, trauma, mobility, and deep poverty, create roadblocks to their path to and through postsecondary education
 - *Many unaccompanied youth who have experienced homelessness were eligible for foster care, but simply fell through the cracks of our overburdened system*
 - *Additionally, former foster youth are eligible for financial benefits that young people experiencing homelessness don't have access to, including financial assistance and monthly stipends given to Nevada youth who have aged out of foster care, making the tuition and fee waivers that would be guaranteed by the passing of AB217 even more impactful, as homeless youth lack this additional monthly financial support that former foster youth can depend on*
- Youth who have experienced foster care who have taken advantage of the Foster Youth Fee Waiver report that the fee waiver is the only reason they were able to pursue a college education, has made it possible for them to focus on their schoolwork, *and allows them to utilize other forms of financial aid, scholarships, and employment income to support their living expenses, making it possible for them to stay in school*
 - According to the 2021 NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver Program Status Report, “The NSHE Foster Youth Fee Waiver changed the landscape of postsecondary education opportunities for current and prospective NSHE students who have experienced foster care. Without it, many students conveyed that they would not have been in a position to pursue a college degree at all.”
- It's time to extend this waiver to the overlapping population of young people experiencing homelessness, *an equally vulnerable population who already receives fewer benefits from the state* – they too deserve this incredible pathway to accomplishing their dreams

Why This Bill Is Necessary

- And that is why AB217 is so necessary – to give young people experiencing homelessness a fighting chance at a brighter future, a future that is currently so much more accessible to many of their peers
 - *According to a 2019 national study by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, “Young adults who experienced homelessness were less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year college as stably housed peers”*
- Young people often experience homelessness due to severe family breakdown, including abuse, neglect, and abandonment, along with socioeconomic and cultural factors out of their control that affect their families and communities
- Many young people experiencing homelessness want to pursue higher education, but they lack the support, resources, and guidance to do so
 - “Despite facing many challenges resulting from deep poverty, abandonment, and abuse and neglect, many youth who experience homelessness wish to pursue careers that require some form of postsecondary education. A California Homeless Youth Project study found that more than 90 percent of youth interviewed specified a career goal that required education beyond high school. Yet only 16 percent said they believed they would be able to attend or graduate college within the next five years” (taken from SchoolHouse Connection, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/youth-homelessness-and-higher-education-an-overview/>)
- Through no fault of their own, young people experiencing homelessness face an uphill battle when it comes to pursuing higher education – they are often disconnected from their families, lacking the support system many youth have to help them navigate the complicated college admissions, enrollment, and financial aid process; have no financial support from their families; and often must juggle the financial burden of trying to obtain and maintain stable housing and meet their own basic needs with trying to pay for their college education
 - *Additionally, unaccompanied young people experiencing homelessness often don’t have co-signers for student loans, reducing the types of students loans they’re eligible for and further limiting their financial options for paying for school*
- In my 12 years at Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY), I’ve seen so many young people experiencing homelessness who have dreamed of pursuing higher education and who, despite doing everything right, were unable to make it work
 - I’ve seen so many students who, through incredible hard work and determination, found a way to college while experiencing homelessness, but had to drop out, who couldn’t enroll for their next semester, because of financial hardship, issues with student loans, questions on proving their homeless or unaccompanied status to university administrators and others, not getting support while navigating the complexities of higher education, etc.
 - I’ve seen so many young people work so hard to overcome the abuse, neglect, and trauma they’ve experienced prior to and during their homelessness, go on to finish high school while navigating unstable housing and homelessness, and get into one of NSHE’s fine institutions knowing it’s their way to a brighter future, only to

have one thing happen – a scholarship unexpectedly falls through, they get fewer hours at their job, their younger sibling who they’re responsible for gets sick or loses their childcare – and all of a sudden they can no longer afford to stay in school, despite doing everything they can to make it work

- I’ve seen so many young people disappointed and discouraged after being so brave for so long because the barriers to higher education are just too high
- I’ve also seen so many brave, smart, hard-working young people who haven’t thought they could pursue their dreams, who are working low-earning, non-career-oriented jobs or have had to resort to or been forced into illicit means of earning income because they never imagined they could go to college because they didn’t think there was any chance they could afford it and they didn’t see other youth like them in college
- AB217 would change all of this, guaranteeing that young people experiencing homelessness could afford to pursue higher education in Nevada through tuition and fee waivers, while supporting them to navigate complex higher education processes via a homeless student liaison and priority class enrollment

Overview of Bill/Conclusion

- By passing AB217, Nevada would join six other states, including California, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, and Oregon, in providing tuition or fee waivers or grants to students experiencing homelessness to empower them to pursue higher education
- We would also be joining additional states, including Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, and Tennessee, by assuring we have an accessible homeless liaison on college campuses to support youth in navigating this fee waiver and the unique complexities of pursuing higher education as a student who has experienced homelessness
- Lastly, we would join California in providing priority enrollment to both students experiencing homelessness and former foster youth, making sure that these youth, who are often working full-time jobs to survive while in school, can get into the classes they need and graduate on time and affordably, encouraging degree completion and increasing the efficiency and efficacy of our state’s investment into tuition and fee waivers for these overlapping populations
- Additionally, this bill aligns processes and definitions with the federal definitions and policies the federal government and the FAFSA already uses to identify homeless and unaccompanied students: aligning Nevada’s policies with federal law will avoid creating confusing, conflicting systems for institutions to manage and will encourage educational continuity for students
- Thank you for your time today and for your thoughtful consideration around AB217. We’re asking for your support to ensure no young person who has faced the hardships and challenges of homelessness continues to feel forgotten, brushed aside, or discouraged from chasing their dreams. Let’s show them that Nevada sees them, cares about them, and together let’s choose to invest in a brighter future for them and for our entire state.