

AB217 Testimony: Lived Experience Perspective

Assembly Education Committee, March 21, 2023 Testimony of Theresa Butler, Homeless Youth Advocate

Thank you for allowing me to speak today. Chair, and members of the committee, my name is Theresa Butler, a homeless youth advocate, an UNLV Hope Scholar Alum, and a former unaccompanied homeless youth and I am here to testify in favor of AB217. AB217 is a law that will give youth experiencing homelessness a tuition and fee waiver to pursue higher education. Today I am advocating for youth experiencing homelessness to receive the same tuition and fee waiver foster youth have received since 2019.

Before experiencing homelessness, I knew higher education was in my path. From the beginning of high school, I dedicated myself to Upward Bound's college readiness program, participated in anything that would look good on my resume, and kept As and Bs in my classes. So, during junior year, when I started to be the first one on campus and one of the last to leave, I was praised for my dedication not knowing I was in the middle of my homeless journey. As you can imagine, homelessness takes its toll. And despite my best efforts, by the end of junior year, I stopped seeing a future for myself.

It was the day of the ACTs when I realized I had no other choice but to ask for help. When I should've been focusing on the test, I was too busy hoping no one noticed I was wearing the same outfit from the day before and was contemplating excuses just in case someone did. I thought asking for help would be the beginning of the end, but watching the counselor x-out all but one of the shelters I couldn't go to because I've been couch surfing, I started to believe homelessness was the beginning of the rest of life. I'm not sure how youth get into foster care, but when I never got the call back from child services, I knew that was not going to be an option for me. To be fair, I am not sure if getting that call back would automatically lead me to foster care, but I know I was left with no resources and the heavy burden of feeling forgotten.

After a summer of being forgotten and alone, school proved to be my safe place, and validated I needed to pursue higher education. When I expressed my aspirations to my counselor, I was shut down instantly; being told incorrectly, that college wouldn't be an option for me since a parent or guardian is needed to fill out FAFSA. When Federal aid was deemed not an option, I pursued scholarships, committing to doing at least one every week until graduation. While searching for a way into college, the opportunity came from the McKinney Vento Title 1 Hope office in the form of a homeless verification letter and a partnership between Title 1 Hope, NPHY, and UNLV. Thanks to the creation of the UNLV Hope Scholarship, a scholarship to secure housing for unaccompanied youth only on UNLV's campus, and my immense determination, I was able to walk across the stage at high school graduation knowing I had a future ahead of me.

I wish I could say life before college was the hard part, but truthfully, when you rely on scholarships so heavily the fear of losing one is comparable to the fear of not knowing where you will be sleeping for the night. Even though housing was paid for through Hope Scholars, not having enough funds for tuition was the reason I've watched many peers give up on their dreams and settle for survival. Despite my roommate being naturally gifted, I watched her stop going to class mid semester after finding out her financial aid was coming up short for the upcoming academic year. If it wasn't for NPHY being able to pay my remaining balance the last

semester of undergrad, I am not confident I would have the privilege to call myself an alum, let alone a former homeless youth.

Despite being in a similar, if not the same situation as foster youth, resources are scarce, even more so for those who are actively looking for a way out. The only reason I stand before you today as a former homeless youth is because of the opportunity to pursue higher education. Youth who sought out higher education to escape homelessness deserve the privilege to call themselves former homeless youth, yes to AB217 will be the first step in securing that possibility for youth. Today I ask for you to vote yes on AB217 so youth experiencing homelessness can pursue higher education and have a clear pathway out of homelessness and into self-sufficiency.