

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 1482

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Hearing Date: April 29, 2021 8:00 AM

Gabriella McDonald

Texas Appleseed

Austin, TX

Texas Appleseed supports HB 1482. We became interested in systemic problems that fuel youth homelessness as a result of its work on other child- and youth-focused projects. We frequently saw children and young people whose juvenile justice involvement or problems at school were the result of homelessness or housing instability. We met former foster youth who reported that they were inadequately prepared for adulthood when they aged out and, consequently, ended up on the streets for some period of time. And our fair housing work revealed to us the difficulties that communities and families across the state struggle with caused by the lack of affordable and safe housing.

What resulted in November 2017, was a report produced in partnership with TNOYS that explored (1) what it was like to be young and homeless in the State of Texas and (2) policy recommendations and solutions that addressed the systemic issues that homeless youth face in their everyday lives. This report is available at https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/YoungAloneHomeless_FullReport_fin.pdf.

One important policy solution was that “Texas should create incentives for youth to stay in school and work toward higher education goals, and find ways to eliminate barriers to higher education for youth experiencing homelessness.” Specifically, “Texas should designate homeless liaisons at all public colleges and universities. The needs of youth experiencing homelessness evolve as they enter higher education. A college homeless liaison would create a much-needed support system for these high-risk students.”

Currently, under the McKinney-Vento Act, every school district in the country is required to have a homeless liaison. Under Texas law, foster care liaisons are also required K-12 & in college. These liaisons are a necessity because these students have special needs to ensure their success. These liaisons ensure, among other things, that these students are properly enrolled, have access to food, shelter, and health care, and are generally provided the resources they need to graduate. HB 1482 logically extends those benefits to homeless college students.

One other problem that our research revealed was that a “[l]ack of year-round housing near a college campus is a major barrier for youth who wish to pursue higher education” and local universities should be educated “about students experiencing homelessness or exiting foster care and work with them to implement year-round dorm programs.” HB 1482 also addresses this issue by ensuring that students experiencing homelessness are guaranteed priority access to on-campus housing, when available. It further ensures housing is provided in-between terms.

State legislatures across the country have been supporting homeless college students over the past few years by with homeless liaisons on campuses, housing support programs, tuition and/or fee waivers, etc. Texas should help lead the way by passing HB 1482.

Amanda List

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Texas Appleseed supports this bill. We appreciate Representative Jarvis for filing this legislation.

Kelyn Wardlaw

Voices for Children CASA of Brazos Valley

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As a staff member working closely with long-term and aging out foster youth, it is not difficult to observe the immense challenges these youth face as they prepare to exit the system and enter adulthood. We know that these youth are at a significantly higher risk of homelessness, incarceration, and death after aging out of the system at 18 years old. Statistics say that our youth are, on average, approached by traffickers within 72 hours of living on the streets. In addition to the immediate dangers facing these youth, their educational outcomes are much lower than average graduating youth nationwide. On average, less than half of the nation's foster youth graduate with a high school diploma, and of those, less than 3% graduate from college. These youth who do attend school face immense barriers with no real source of support to succeed. Many institutions of higher education have no dedicated individual on their staff responsible for helping foster youth navigate the world of higher education, and beyond that, there is little to no support for learning the basics of adulthood. When school breaks come, these youth face a large decision - their dorms or housing programs may not extend during short breaks and summer. They then have to choose - homelessness or returning to limited support systems that are unlikely to be supportive of their pursuit of higher education. This creates yet another barrier for return to education and increases an already astronomical dropout rate. HB 1482 will be transformative for these youth who are defying all odds to create a new future for themselves. Providing stability and a constant, dedicated staff adult to work to support their success will be vital in reducing higher education dropout rates. Extending services and housing to all youth facing homelessness will allow for greater success rates in education and yet another opportunity to break the cycle. For the youth I serve, this would be an absolutely life-changing opportunity and I emphatically ask that this be seriously considered and passed.