

To: Washington Legislature
From Jesse Becerra
Date:3.13.23
Subject: Foster Youth College Attainment

Introduction

The low rate of college degree attainment of foster youth in Washington state is a significant problem, that needs to be addressed. Foster youth are challenged with obstacles that prevent their success in college education. Being more vulnerable to homelessness and involvement in the justice system, degree attainment is an effective and equitable method of prevention.

Problem Analysis

Youth that have experienced foster care face many challenges that make it difficult to attain a degree. For context, 2% of graduating high schoolers that have experienced foster care obtain a 4-year degree in contrast to 24% of youth in the general population (Emerson, 2010, p.8). Higher education attainment produces outcomes including access to health care, retirement plans, and 61% higher median earnings than their high school counterparts (Ma et al, 2019, p. 8).

We know foster youth are at a disadvantage in life, thereby making them vulnerable to homelessness and incarceration. One study shows one-third of homeless youth were involved in the foster care system (Morton et al., 2017). On average, an individual experiencing homelessness costs the taxpayer \$35,000 annually (Dubois, 2022). Simultaneously, one-half of incarcerated youth have been involved in foster care (2017). These experiences have a detrimental impact on their economic outlook and can cost taxpayers.

Conclusion

A college degree for foster youth increases the likelihood of earning a higher income and decreases their risk of experiencing homelessness and incarceration. Addressing the problem of low college degree attainment of foster youth is paramount to the future of these individuals. Policymakers need to focus on a strategy that can deliver consistent mental health services, expansion of food access, and strengthen year-round housing on a state level rather than leave it up to individual colleges.

References

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