



EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 27, 2022

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Mississippi governor to celebrate historic legislation that grants foster youth, ages 18-21, scholarships and the right to rent as adults

Foster youth successfully advocate for college funds, their right to sign leases

EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 27, 2022 – Jackson, MS – Thanks to successful advocacy on their own behalf, young adults aged 18-21 who have left the Mississippi foster care system will be eligible on July 1, 2022 to apply annually for \$1 million in state scholarships for public and private school fees. The bill also mandates they be considered adults who can legally sign their own rental agreements, leases and residential utility contracts to secure safe places to live.

As part of the 2022 legislative session, House Bill 1313 will provide free college and technical school tuition for Mississippi foster youth who were in the custody of the state's Department of Child Protective Services on or after their 13th birthday through the Kinkade Scholarship fund. The fund, named in honor of current state representative and former foster youth Bill Kinkade of Byhalia, will cover tuition, fees, and room and board expenses at any Mississippi state or private nonprofit university or community college.

“We are proud to be a partner in this legislation, but the real heroes are the young people who made this happen. It inspires a new path for our foster youth.” said Andrea Sanders, Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services Commissioner.

“It is the least we can do for these kids that have already been through so much,” said Mississippi Representative Richard Bennett of Long Beach, and Mississippi House Education Committee Chair.

The \$1M annual scholarship program will be administered by the state's Office of Financial Aid. Youth and young adults who are under age 25 will be eligible to apply in the 2023-2024 academic year. Once in the program, scholarship awardees will have a maximum of five years to attain up to a bachelor's degree. Additionally, the scholarship mandates that youth have safe places to live while in college (such

as dormitory rooms over breaks and holidays); assistance with navigating college planning and college life; and support services to help them complete desired degree or job certificate training programs.

“We’re excited to clear a pathway for Mississippi foster youth to attend the college of their choice in their state and to be able to access housing as eligible adults,” said First Place for Youth Chief Executive Officer Thomas G. Lee. First Place for Youth is an Oakland, California organization that helps foster youth ages 18-24 learn to support themselves, and reach their full potential in school, work, and life.

“The young adults in our Mississippi Youth Voice program made these issues legislative priorities this season and their will prevailed with nearly unanimous votes in the state capital,” said Thomas. “We are elated their advocacy moved systems and resources to work on behalf of all foster youth in Mississippi.”

Youth leaders of the Mississippi Youth Voice program partially funded by the Jim Casey Foundation, helped draft the language for the tuition waiver bill, participated in the House Education Committee hearings, and hosted an informational webinar on the need for the program. Youth leaders collaborated with leadership from the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services, the Jim Casey Foundation, the Community College Board, the Institute for Higher Learning (Mississippi’s governing board for higher education), and the Mississippi Association of Child Caring Agencies to build out the policy and gain support from stakeholders critical to the implementation of the scholarship program.

“As a 25-year Mississippi resident and former foster youth, I well understand the impact this historic legislation and the Kinkade Scholarships will have on foster youth,” said Samantha Kalahar, First Place for Youth Mississippi Site Director. “We believe this extra support will be a decisive factor in helping these young people enroll and persevere in higher education to access opportunities and achieve their hopes and dreams. Mississippi can be proud of how we have stepped up for foster children in our state.”

Housing options in college for Mississippi foster youth

Beyond the costs of attending a college or university, many foster youth face additional barriers to enrolling in and completing their college degrees. The inability to secure their own housing sets the youth up for failure. Included in the legislation establishing the Kinkade Scholarship, lawmakers authorized young adults leaving the Mississippi foster care system at ages 18-21 the right to sign their own leases and rental agreements. The state has been one of the last in the U.S. to designate adulthood at 18 years. Without access to biological family ties, youth leaving the foster care system often lack legal guardians to consent or co-sign for housing or utility hookups.

These limited options leave these young adults vulnerable to human trafficking, criminal activities, or untenable situations of domestic violence. Youth living in campus dormitories could become homeless over breaks, holidays and summers. And without their own leases, foster youth they often became

homeless, moved between the homes of friends and extended family or were beholden to adults who might not have been acting in the youths' best interest.

"I have been out of custody for over a year and have not been able to get my own place because of my age," said Janialia, a member of the Mississippi Youth Voice program who worked on the bill. "I am ready to get my own place and not rely on everyone else for a place to stay. I want to finish school and forget about foster care and just live my life."

Without family to return to during breaks, foster youth in college can become distracted and anxious during finals as they anticipate the possibility of homelessness during the dormitories' closure over breaks and holidays. Under the new bill, Kinkade Scholarship funds also will cover recipients' on-campus housing costs during school breaks and holidays.

ABOUT FIRST PLACE FOR YOUTH: Founded in 1998, First Place for Youth envisions a world where involvement in the foster care system does not limit a person's opportunity to thrive. Our mission is to empower foster youth to build the comprehensive skills needed to make a successful transition to self-sufficiency and responsible adulthood. Annually, First Place provides evidence-based, results-driven direct services to more than 1,500 foster youth across six California counties—Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Solano—and through our My First Place™ Network with partner providers in Boston, New York City, Cincinnati, and Mississippi. Visit firstplaceforyouth.org for additional information.

ABOUT MISSISSIPPI YOUTH VOICE: Mississippi Youth Voice is a group of former Mississippi foster youth working to break down barriers to improve outcomes for Mississippi foster youth. Operated by First Place for Youth with support from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative, we partner with the Mississippi Department of Child Protective Services (MDCPS) to elevate the voices of young adults who have been part of the Mississippi foster care system. We support foster youth's transition to adulthood by providing access to stable housing, independent living skills development, educational opportunities, and pathways to living-wage employment.

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