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## Foster students could get help

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PHOENIX - Foster care students could soon get assistance from campus counselors who would help them succeed in the university system.

A bill in the state House would appoint case managers that would offer help with registering, applying for financial aid, housing, finding a student job and finding mental and medical health services.

Heavily backed by foster care advocates, HB 2266, which was introduced by Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Gilbert, passed the House Higher Education committee unanimously yesterday.

The bill would allocate \$100,000 to the Commission for Postsecondary Education, which would appoint the case managers.

The bill also was supported by Tucson Democrat Rep. David Bradley, who last year passed legislation that established counselors to assist foster care students in graduating from high school, passing tests and aspiring to a college education. The current bill would continue to guide students as they go on to college, Bradley said.

"I'm very pleased that we got this far," he said. "It's the second step of getting resources to kids. The state is obligated, in my mind, to help."

It's hard for foster care students to go to a university and, on their own, figure out how to get admitted, find housing or stay on course academically, said Christa Drake, a UA graduate who grew up in foster care.

She is now the executive director of In My Shoes, a Tucson-based nonprofit organization that assists youth in foster care make the transition to a life on their own.

"I can remember my first year at the University of Arizona and I remember calling my counselor and I was crying because I didn't have the support that I needed," Drake said at the hearing. "I think this bill is extraordinarily important. I believe that someone who is knowledgeable with the struggles in foster care would be a huge, huge help to the young adults who are continuing their education."

Many foster care students don't succeed in college because they face special challenges, including mental health issues, and it is difficult to find someone who can help or guide them, said Tamera Shanker, the scholarship chairwoman for the Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation, and an attorney who has represented foster care children in Arizona for several years.

"This bill will provide them with this one person that can make a difference between graduating and not, between succeeding and not," Shanker told the committee. "The state is the parent for these children. They have a responsibility that does not end with the attainment of a GED or a high school diploma."

The \$100,000 the bill would provide is much less than what the state has to pay when the children are left without help, don't graduate from college and enter society as "dysfunctional adults," she said.

Lupe Tovar was told she would become such an adult after over 20 years in foster care and attending five high schools in two states.

"I was told that I wouldn't make it into any of the universities," she explained to the committee members. "I was alone in that struggle."

She asked several counselors for help, but none could specifically address her concerns related to foster care. The bill could prevent this from happening again and provide an easier path to a college degree for foster children, she said.

"I think only by collaborating can we make sure that they'll know that they can do it," Tovar said.



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