

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 1, 2025

Contact: Heather Tarczan

Illinois DCFS

Heather.Tarczan@illinois.gov

DCFS awards college scholarships to current and former youth in care

Luncheon celebrates 347 college-bound youth receiving state scholarship funds

CHICAGO — Today, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Heidi Mueller, legislators, DCFS staff, caregivers and students gathered to celebrate this year's scholarship recipients at the department's annual scholarship luncheon. This year, 347 current or former youth in care received scholarships provided by the Illinois DCFS Scholarship Program, including up to five consecutive years of tuition and mandatory fee waivers valid at Illinois public universities, community colleges and vocational schools. The program also provides student recipients with financial assistance for books and school supplies, a monthly grant payment to supplement other expenses and an Illinois Medicaid card.

"As governor, I am committed to uplifting the next generation of Illinoisans, particularly those young people who have faced great adversity with grace and grit," **said Governor JB Pritzker**. "From textbooks to tuition, students must be afforded every opportunity to learn, excel and grow. This year, the scholarships from the Department of Children and Family Services have made that possible for 347 bright minds."

"The resilience of our youth is nothing short of extraordinary. Despite facing obstacles that would overwhelm many adults, these students have shown courage, determination and hope," **said Illinois DCFS Director Heidi E. Mueller**. This scholarship is not just an investment in their education—it's a recognition of their strength and a message that we believe in their future. I'm grateful to Governor Pritzker for his continued support of our young people as they work toward the futures they envision for themselves."

In the last three years, and under the leadership of Governor Pritzker and the Illinois General Assembly, DCFS continues to prioritize education and career opportunities for current and former youth in care. This year's 347 scholarships follow 352 scholarships awarded in 2024 and 259 scholarships awarded in 2023.

"The instability I grew up with made school feel impossible. Teachers saw a statistic, not potential. I wasn't lazy or broken, I was just trying to survive. With the support of my wonderful foster parents, I began to heal and chase my dream of becoming a veterinarian, determined to provide affordable, compassionate care to those who needed it most," **said Elisia Chavez, event keynote speaker and 2017 scholarship recipient**. "The DCFS Scholarship made that dream real. It gave me more than financial help—it gave me validation. It told me I was worthy, that my past didn't define me. For that, I am incredibly grateful. And now, I use my degree to give back—to serve families, to care for animals and to be the support I once needed."

The DCFS Scholarship Program is available to youth who have an open DCFS case, whose cases were closed through adoption or guardianship or who aged out of care at 18 or older. DCFS Scholarship Program recipients are selected based on their scholastic record and aptitude, community and extracurricular activities, three letters of recommendation and a personal essay illustrating their purpose for higher education.

Scholarship recipients receive up to five consecutive years of tuition and academic fee waivers to be used at Illinois public colleges and universities, community colleges and trade schools; a monthly grant of \$1,577 to offset other expenses; a one-time start-up grant of \$236 to assist with their initial college living expenses; and a Medicaid card. Four awards are reserved for the children of veterans, and two awards are reserved for students pursuing degrees in social work in honor of Pamela Knight and Deidre Silas, two DCFS caseworkers who succumbed to injuries sustained in the line of duty.

"It's vital to provide the essential resources and support our youth in care need to succeed," **said State Senator Doris Turner (D-Springfield)**. "The Deidre Silas Memorial Award is near and dear to my heart, and I wish Mydia the best of luck in her future endeavors."

"It is such an honor to present the Pamela Knight Memorial Award once again this year," **said State Representative Bradley Fritts (R-Dixon)**. "Pamela Knight was a courageous woman who lived in my district but whose life was cut short in the line of duty. Her spirit lives on in this award, which uplifts exemplary young adults who overcame numerous challenges as youth in care. Thank you to the entire Illinois Department of Children and Family Services for honoring Pamela's legacy through this award."

###

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS): *Our vision is for every child and youth in Illinois to grow and thrive in a loving family. To achieve this goal, DCFS promotes the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families by responding to reports of suspected child abuse and neglect and providing family-centered care and connection to resources to strengthen families and keep children safely at home. Our values – family focused, integrity, respect, empathy and equity – are at the forefront of every decision we make to ensure children are safe and families have the resources they need to succeed. To make an anonymous report of suspected child abuse or neglect, visit childabuse.illinois.gov.*

About the DCFS Scholarship Program: *The DCFS Scholarship provides recipients up to five consecutive years of tuition and mandatory fee waivers valid at Illinois public universities and community colleges, a monthly grant payment to offset other expenses, financial assistance with books and supplies and an Illinois medical card. Youth who have an open DCFS case, whose cases were closed through adoption or guardianship or who aged out of care at 18 or older are eligible to apply for the Scholarship. Scholarship recipients are selected based on their scholastic record and aptitude, community and extracurricular activities, three letters of recommendation from non-relatives and a personal essay illustrating their purpose for higher education. Scholarships are awarded to students interested in pursuing education at Illinois trade schools, community colleges or traditional colleges or universities.*