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Illinois DCFS awards college scholarships to current and former youth in care

Luncheon celebrates 317 college-bound youth receiving state scholarship funds

CHICAGO — Today, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Heidi E. Mueller, legislators, DCFS staff, caregivers and students gathered to celebrate this year's scholarship recipients at the department's annual scholarship luncheon at the Crowne Plaza O'Hare in Rosemont. This year, 317 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.

"Today we celebrate over 300 recipients of the 2026 DCFS Youth in Scholarship Program," **said Governor JB Pritzker**. "This program is a lifeline for many who seek to become the first in their family to receive a post-secondary education. Their path has not always been easy, but they represent the bright future of our great state. Director Mueller and I remain their committed advocates, and we cannot wait to see what they achieve."

"These scholarships do so much more than just pay for school. They embody one of our key goals – ensuring that our children and youth transition out of care successfully – and demonstrate our collective commitment by showing our young adults that we believe in their potential and dreams of creating an incredible future for themselves," **said Illinois DCFS Director Heidi E. Mueller**. "I remain grateful to Governor Pritzker and the General Assembly for their continued support and for championing opportunities that help the children and youth thrive as they prepare for adulthood."

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 317 scholarships follow 347 scholarships awarded in 2025 and 352 scholarships awarded in 2024.

"The DCFS Youth in Scholarship Program did more than help pay for my education – it gave me the confidence to believe that my goals were attainable. As a former recipient, the scholarship helped open doors that led me from the South Side of Chicago to the University of Illinois and ultimately to completing law school. More importantly, it showed me that there were people willing to invest in my future. That support made a lasting impact on my life, and now, as my career as a lawyer has begun, I am honored to return and encourage the next generation of scholars to dream big and take advantage of every opportunity placed before them," said **Chantz Henry, J.D., event keynote speaker and 2017 scholarship recipient**. "You

have everything you need to be successful. Continue to be where you need to be, when you need to be there, and how you need to be there. Doing your best with the opportunities in front of you today may very well change your life tomorrow."

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.

In remembrance of Pamela Knight and Deidre Silas, two Illinois DCFS caseworkers who lost their lives in the line of duty, the department will again present two special awards to student leaders who intend to pursue careers in social work, in honor of Pamela's and Deidre's sacrifice and commitment to children.

"Pam Knight spent her life loving and serving others, and her compassion, generosity and commitment to others continues to inspire through this scholarship," said **House Minority Leader Tony McCombie.** To this year's recipient, and to every student pursuing their dreams: from this day forward, you have the opportunity to write your own story, regardless of the challenges you've faced. Stay strong, work hard and trust that your determination will open doors to a bright future."

"Removing barriers to higher education, especially for current and former youth in care, is essential to supporting the next generation of leaders," said **State Senator Doris Turner (D-Springfield)**. "I am incredibly proud of each of these students who have worked tirelessly to continue their education and build promising futures."

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 also reserved for the children of veterans.

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.*

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