

Good evening representatives Nolan and Formica, and the Members of the Appropriations Committee,

I would like to start by taking a moment to thank you for taking the time to listen to our stories about how we got here, and why being able to continue this path of higher education is so important to us.

My name is Tesche Gray and I am a junior at Charter Oak State College. I can say that with such a sense of pride, because the road that it took to get here was difficult. To have the opportunity to speak in front of you today is a privilege.

When I dropped out of high school at the age of 16 and got pregnant shortly after, I became another unfortunate statistic. Although I had dreams of going to college someday, I knew that the odds were stacked against me. My life had gone in a direction that I hadn't intended for it to go, and before I knew it, years passed by and I had two more children and still no college degree. It was something that always bothered me, because regardless of my actions, I do place a huge value on education. I was ashamed, and disappointed in myself.

In my late 20s, I developed a problem with drinking. By my 30s, I was a full-blown addict. I threw away everything important in my life, including my hopes and dreams of finishing college. Statistics say that people like me end up in jails, institutions, or cemeteries. Certainly not college graduates. By 2016, my entire life had fallen apart. I couldn't continue living the way I was, but I couldn't see a way out. I made the decision to ask for help.

Over time and with hard work, my life started improving. I mended broken relationships and began to become a responsible and productive member of society again. Even though I was making progress, I always felt like something was missing. I needed to finish my education. I enrolled at Three Rivers Community College.

Last December, I graduated with honors in the same week that I celebrated 4 years of recovery. I knew that I wanted to continue on to earn my bachelors, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to afford it. Because of choices that I made, I struggle financially to take care of my responsibilities. My advisor informed me of Charter Oak's affordable tuition and told me that I would be eligible for their community college price match scholarship. This made it possible for me to enroll and begin classes this semester. Because all of Charter Oak's classes are online, I am able to complete my schoolwork around my own schedule. I, like many other non-traditional students, have obligations that must be met. Charter Oak allows me to fulfill these responsibilities while also getting a quality education.

By continuing to fund this school, it allows more people who have struggled like me to obtain an affordable degree. It affords us the opportunity to change the narrative and create a positive future for ourselves and our families. It enables us to demonstrate to our children the value of education and hard work. It teaches us the skills that we need to have successful careers when

we graduate. It gives us a chance to reach our potential and live a life that we can be proud of.  
Thank you.

Tesche Gray