

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 6, 2024

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We write to express our gratitude for the Department of Education's (the Department) commitment to correct errors in the newly released Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). However, we remain concerned about the Department's plan to address the ongoing error that does not allow for contributors without a Social Security Number (SSN) to complete the FAFSA application, the impact of this error, and how any remedies will be communicated in a culturally relevant manner to impacted students, institutions of higher education, and other student financial aid stakeholders.

Each year, students fill out the FAFSA form hoping to secure federal funding for their post-secondary plans. With the passage of the bipartisan *FAFSA Simplification Act* and the *FUTURE Act*, the new FAFSA application was supposed to become more efficient and simpler for students to fill out. However, there were multiple errors in the release of the new form, including not allowing students with contributors without SSNs to be able to complete their application.

The students impacted by this error are entitled to apply for federal financial aid, yet through no fault of their own, they are currently being locked out from taking advantage of this opportunity in a timely manner. Across the nation, students, parents, financial aid officers, and advocates are expressing frustration and anger as they attempt to gauge how best to proceed in this unique, complicated situation. However, they are often met with an alarming rate of misinformation, long call center wait times, and excessive barriers to access. **We are concerned that without clear direction from the Department, these students will miss out on opportunities and not be able to finance their higher education.**

While we were pleased to hear the Department's announcement that there will finally be a permanent fix to this error by mid-March, and that there is a small-scale temporary option for these students in certain circumstances, we continue to be very concerned. There remains widespread misinformation, a lack of clear communication with students and stakeholders, and no plan to address the long-term impact that this error may have on the educational prospects for some of our most vulnerable students.

We request that the Department respond to the following set of questions by March 12th:

1. On what date does the Department expect to make the announcement about a permanent solution for students with contributors without a SSN?

2. How is the Department addressing misinformation, especially if it leads students and contributors to input incorrect information on their FAFSA forms? How will students be notified if they need to correct their form?
3. How does the Department plan to communicate the finalized fixes to all impacted stakeholders and students, especially those in underserved areas and rural communities who may not have broadband access or direct connection to advocacy organizations that can share these updates?
4. Once the error is fixed, how is the Department planning to craft communications for stakeholders, with the clear steps that need to be taken, to disseminate to impacted applicants? Can the Department provide additional information on how institutions of higher education can request onsite federal assistance?
5. On February 5th, the Department announced it would provide additional federal personnel and expertise to help colleges prepare and process financial aid forms. Will these resources be deployed and available to stakeholders who need additional support to address this error?

We urge the Department to assure students in any notices or outreach that their information and that of their contributor(s) shall be used only for the purposes of determining eligibility or administering aid. We also urge the Department to provide a comprehensive, easy-to-find Frequently Asked Questions website link and document that is timely, easily understood, and culturally relevant to provide much-needed clarity on what students with contributors who do not have a SSN can expect and how they can navigate making updates to their applications.

We thank the Department for its efforts and commitment to addressing our concerns, and we look forward to continuing to work together.

Sincerely,



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Eaphonza Butler
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



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United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



John Fetterman
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



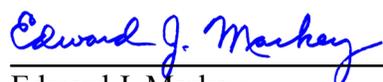
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



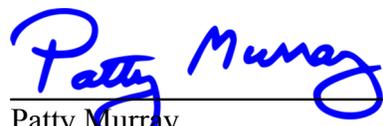
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United States Senator



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United States Senator



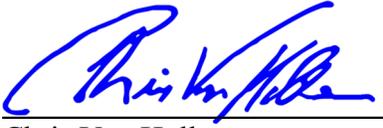
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United States Senator



Jack Reed
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Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



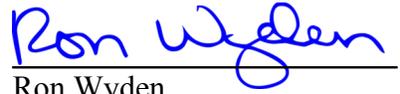
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United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
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Peter Welch
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator