

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 9, 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 today regarding the Department of Education's (the Department) ongoing implementation of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Each year, about 17 million students fill out the FAFSA form as a first step to accessing critical financial aid to help cover the skyrocketing costs of higher education.

In 2020, Congress passed the bipartisan *FAFSA Simplification Act* to make the federal student financial aid process more efficient and straightforward. The *FAFSA Simplification Act* directed the Department to streamline the application form and make long overdue updates to the formulas that assess a student's financial need. According to the Department, as a result of this law, the 2024-2025 FAFSA form will ensure 610,000 more students from low-income backgrounds will be eligible to receive a federal Pell Grant, and 1.5 million more students will be eligible to receive a maximum Pell award.

Implementation of these changes was a significant undertaking, one that the Department has had to do with less funding than it anticipated would be needed to complete the job correctly and on time. The Department released the new FAFSA form to the public, incrementally, beginning December 30th, 2023, nearly three months later than usual. But, in a sign of how pivotal the FAFSA is, to date, an estimated 3.6 million FAFSA forms have already been successfully submitted. Even though the newly released FAFSA form did not initially include legally mandated adjustments to the Income Protection Allowance (IPA), the Department's recent corrective action to implement those adjustments will result in \$1.8 billion in additional financial aid for students. We are supportive of the Department's decision to make these adjustments in the updated form, but were disappointed to hear these adjustments would lead to even further delays in this year's FAFSA processing.

Any delays in financial aid processing will most impact the students that need aid most, including many students of color, students from mixed status families, students from rural backgrounds, students experiencing homelessness or in foster care, first-generation students, and students from underserved communities. For institutions to support students' ability to make informed decisions about their future, they need clear guidance and resources from the Department immediately on any and all next steps.

We were pleased to see the recent announcement of the Department's plans to provide additional resources and supports for under-resourced high schools and colleges to assist their students with the FAFSA form, and to deploy federal staff to support aid efforts. We urge the Department to distribute these resources and tools to schools and institutions of higher education as quickly as possible, and to clearly communicate with stakeholders about the ways to access these resources and how these new resources will support students, families, and student aid administrators in submitting and processing the FAFSA form.

We write today to ask for more clarity on how the Department plans to communicate any further delays in FAFSA processing, and how the Department intends to minimize the potential impact on students and families so they can make the most informed decision possible about their futures, including through providing prompt, clear timelines.

We kindly request that the Department provide responses to the following set of questions:

1. The Department has indicated it will send IPA-adjusted and finalized FAFSA data in early March, it is imperative that this data is sent to institutions as early in March as possible. On what date in March does the Department intend to send finalized information to relevant stakeholders? When will the Department disperse its test data to institutions of higher education so that they can test their infrastructure and best prepare to create financial aid packages for students? How and when will the Department communicate with relevant stakeholders if this intended plan changes?
2. How is the Department communicating with relevant stakeholders, such as students, families, and college financial aid professionals, in a timely and culturally responsive manner about the ongoing FAFSA delay and ongoing issues for some students, including students from mixed status families, in submitting the form? How often will any supportive materials be updated to reflect the most up to date information, and how can stakeholders access this information?
3. In light of the repeated delays in institutions receiving relevant aid information, as well as ongoing issues for some students in submitting the form, will the Department consider reducing the rate of students selected for additional verification to ensure students do not face further barriers to receiving the aid they are due?
4. How is the Department working to ensure all under resourced high schools and colleges that need assistance in FAFSA processing are aware of and have access to the resources offered by the Department to assist them?
5. Is the Department working with state aid agencies and other relevant stakeholders to ensure timely processing and delivery of other forms of financial aid such as scholarship or state aid for students?
6. Will the Department ask states, and colleges and universities to relax any admissions or scholarship deadlines to ensure students have ample time to apply for additional aid and make informed decisions about their futures?
7. Are any of the implementation challenges caused by the lack of resources? Detail whether there are specific requests that Congress can respond to in order to help address related issues moving forward.

The recent announcements from the Department were a welcome first step in addressing the many challenges students, counselors, aid administrators, and relevant stakeholders are facing in accessing, submitting, and processing the new FAFSA form. But now, it is imperative that we all work together to ensure no student falls through the cracks or faces unnecessary challenges in accessing the aid they are due.

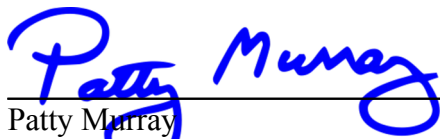
Sincerely,



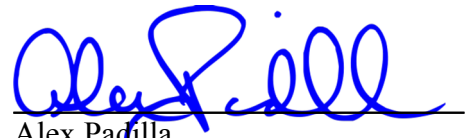
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator
Chairman, Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions



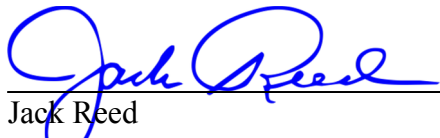
Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on
Education and the Workforce



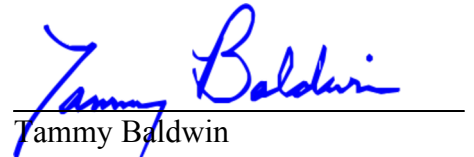
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



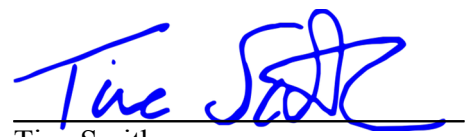
Jack Reed
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



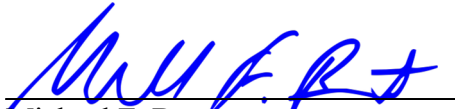
Tina Smith
United States Senator



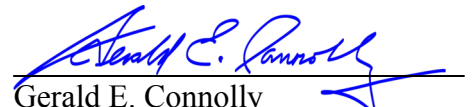
Eric Swalwell
Member of Congress



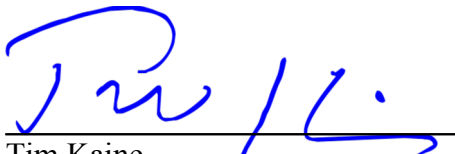
Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



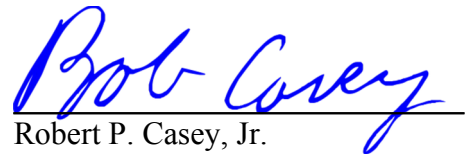
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



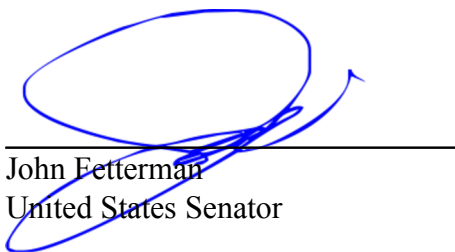
Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress




Tim Kaine
United States Senator




Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator




John Fetterman
United States Senator



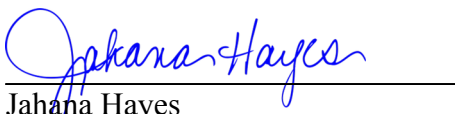
Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



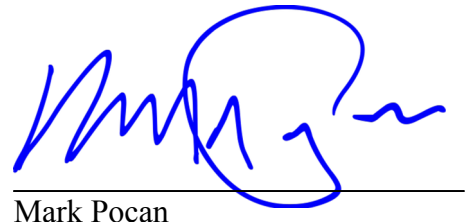
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



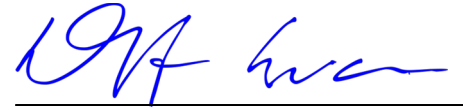
Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress



Dwight Evans
Member of Congress



Sherfa Jackson Lee
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



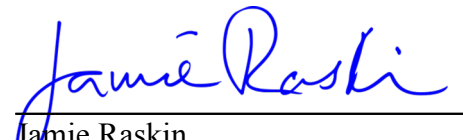
Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
Member of Congress



Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



Bennie G. Thompson
Member of Congress



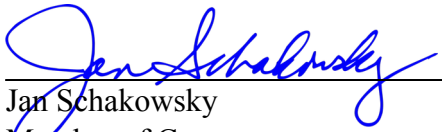
Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

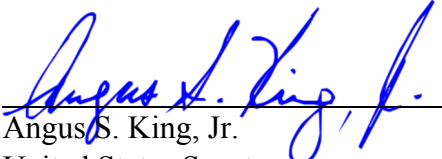


Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator





Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

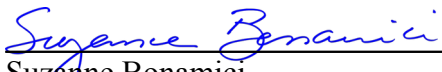

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator


Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress


Kathy Castor
Member of Congress


Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

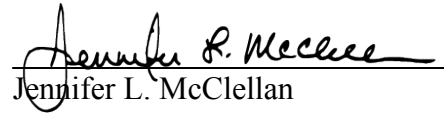

MARK TAKANO
Member of Congress


Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Subcommittee
on Higher Education and
Workforce Development

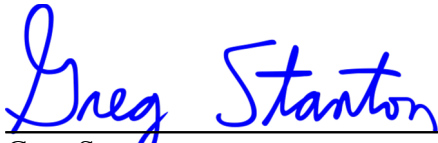

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



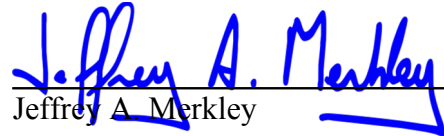
Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress



Jennifer L. McClellan
Member of Congress



Greg Stanton
Member of Congress



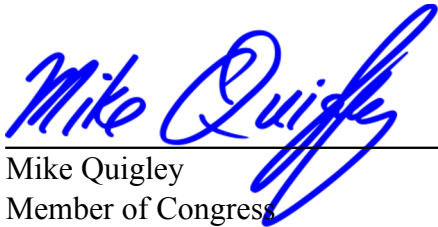
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Nikema Williams
Member of Congress



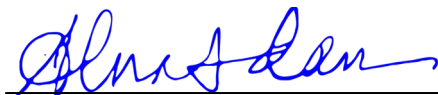
Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



Mike Quigley
Member of Congress



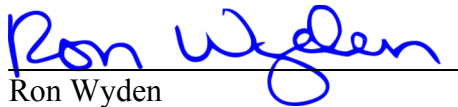
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator




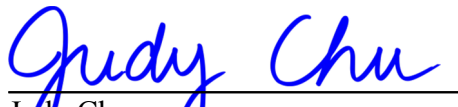
Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.
Member of Congress





Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator


Sean Casten
Member of Congress



Judy Chu
Member of Congress

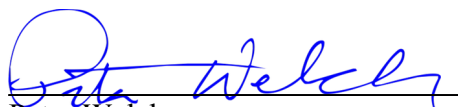

Susan Wild
Member of Congress

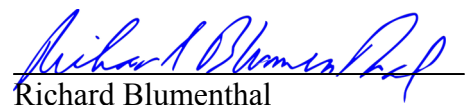

Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress


Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress


Joe Courtney
Member of Congress


Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress


Peter Welch
United States Senator

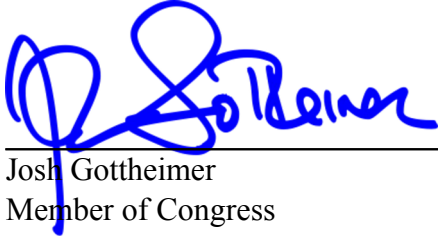

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



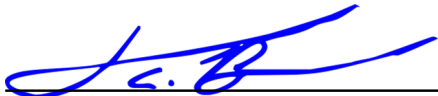
Delia C. Ramirez
Member of Congress



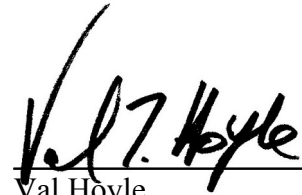
Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



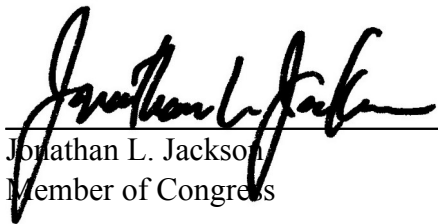
Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



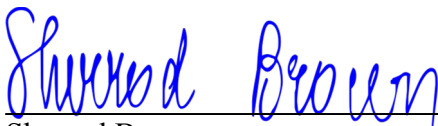
Val Hoyle
Member of Congress



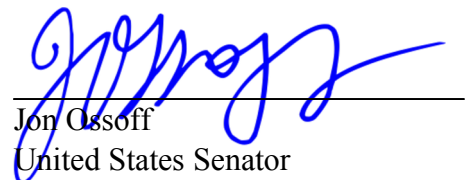
Jonathan L. Jackson
Member of Congress



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress




Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



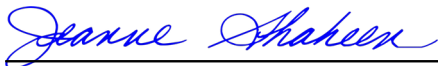
Jon Ossoff
United States Senator



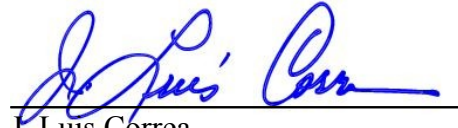
Dina Titus
Member of Congress



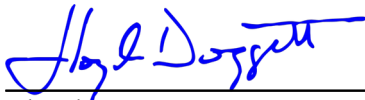
Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



J. Luis Correa
Member of Congress



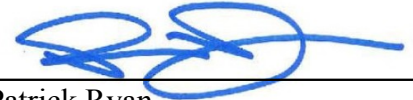
Lloyd Doggett
Member of Congress



Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress



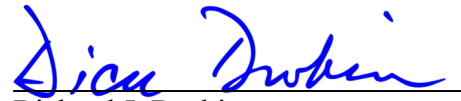
Susie Lee
Member of Congress



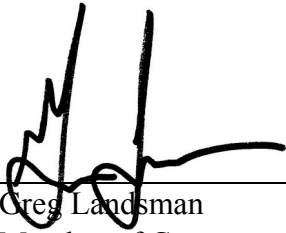
Patrick Ryan
Member of Congress



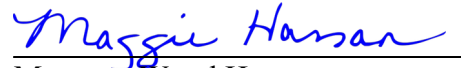
Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Greg Landsman
Member of Congress



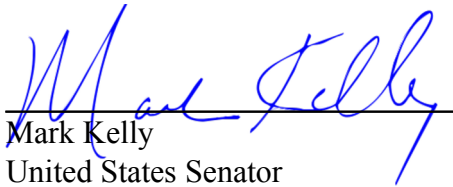
Maggie Hassan
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



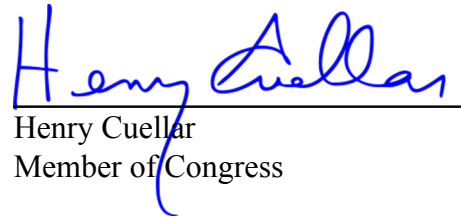
Colin Z. Allred
Member of Congress



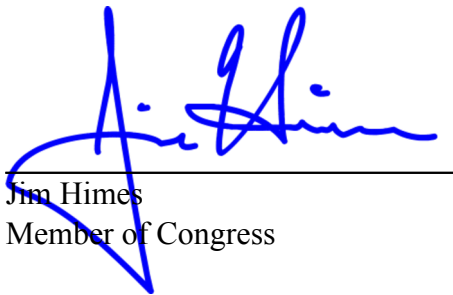
Rick Larsen
Member of Congress



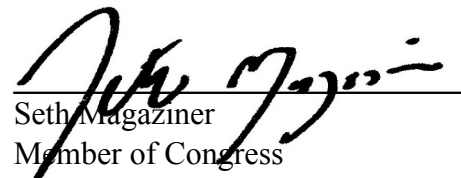
Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Henry Cuellar
Member of Congress



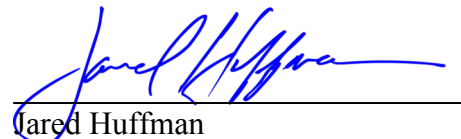
Jim Himes
Member of Congress



Seth Magaziner
Member of Congress



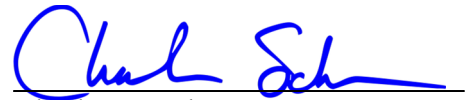
Tony Cardenas
Member of Congress



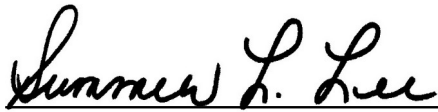
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



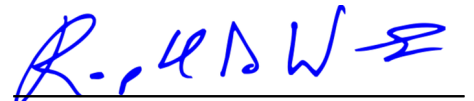
Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



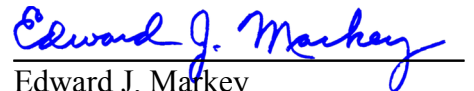
Summer Lee
Member of Congress



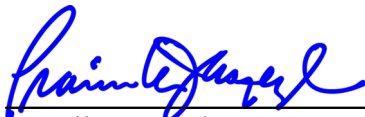
Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress




Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



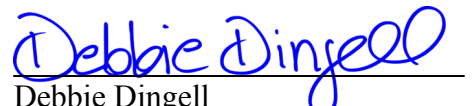
Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



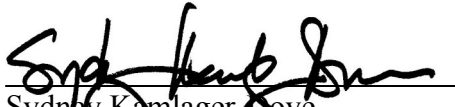
Derek Kilmer
Member of Congress

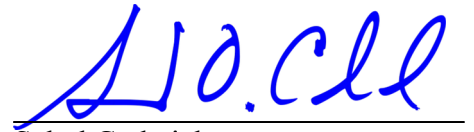


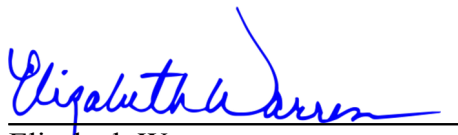
Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senator

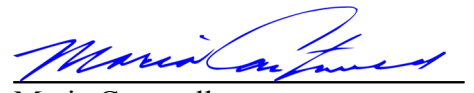


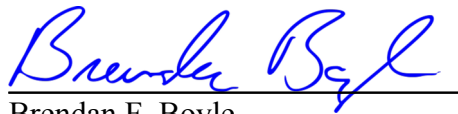
Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress

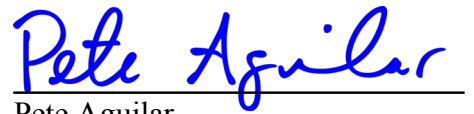

Sydney Kamlager-Dove
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress

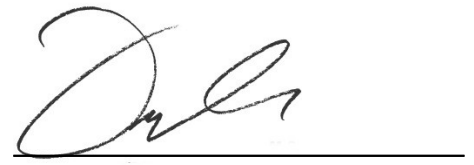

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

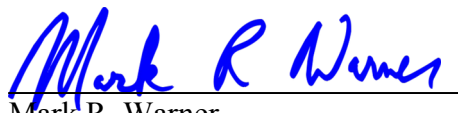

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator


Brendan F. Boyle
Member of Congress


Pete Aguilar
Member of Congress


Bill Foster
Member of Congress


Troy A. Carter, Sr.
Member of Congress


Mark R. Warner
United States Senator