



February 10, 2022

House Ways & Means Committee

RE: HB 383—Young Readers Program Expansion Act: Favorable

Together, with the passage of HB 383 Young Readers Programs, we can partner to build stronger communities and strengthen the social fabric of our communities. Literacy is directly linked with healthier families and increased community involvement. Long-term benefits include increased graduation rates, educated workforce, increased individual contribution to society, reduction in people living in poverty, and less people relying on social assistance or being involved with the justice system and reliant on substance abuse.

Reading is the key for lifelong learning and the single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in school, work, and life in general. Research supports that early literacy efforts enhance the brain's foundation for future learning at a critical time in children's development. The Reading Network in children's brains doesn't naturally exist; it must be built. By supporting Dolly Parton's Imagination Libraries across the state, all children can have access to book and build this network.

Imagination Library of Talbot County (ILTC) was established in 2013 and our mission is to address the very important need to expose children birth to age 5 to a literature and vocabulary rich environment by mailing high quality, age-appropriate books directly to their homes each month at no cost to their families.

Currently, there are 1,300+ children enrolled in ILTC with another 1,700 children who have turned 5 and "graduated" from our program. Since 2013, Imagination Library of Talbot County has mailed over 100,000 books to local families. To increase our impact in the community, we have partnered with over 25 organizations such as: the Obstetrics unit of UM Shore Regional Health, Talbot Country Free Library, the Talbot County Judy Center Partnership, Healthy Families, the Department of Social Services, WIC, Chesapeake Multicultural Center, CASA, Shore Up! Inc. Head Start, Talbot County Early Head Start, St. Vincent DePaul, Critchlow Adkins Children's Centers, the YMCA, Talbot County Public Schools and area churches and daycares.

Affiliates of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library are established by local organizations or, in our case, volunteers. These affiliates work in conjunction with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library but *do not* receive direct funding from The Dollywood Foundation, which is why your support is crucial. The money we raise cover overhead costs associated with making the program available in local communities. With these contributions, we are responsible for reduced book and mailing expenses for children registered in our coverage area. Imagination Library of Talbot County is funded through grants

and the generous donations of individuals in the community. As volunteers who both run the program and raise funds, financial support from HB 383 will allow us to continue to enroll families in the Imagination Library program.

From birth to age 5, a child's brain develops more than at any other time in life, and early brain development has a lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and to succeed in school and in life. Studies confirm that reading to children during their preschool years provides a lifetime of benefits and is one of the most important things parents can do to prepare children for success in school. Since ninety percent of a child's brain development occurs by the age of 5, we cannot wait until children go to kindergarten to expose them to books and learning. Equally important, sitting in a loved one's lap and reading together creates a close bond between a child and a caregiver and ultimately teaches children to associate reading with love.

There is a great need in Talbot County for a continued Imagination Library. Approximately 47% of the children in Talbot County come from low-income families, meaning our program is crucial in helping prepare children for kindergarten and beyond. Statistically, in low-income homes there is only one book per 300 children, while in middle- to high-income homes, there are 30 books per child. We could use your support to get more books into the hands of more children in our community!

On numerous occasions, families have shared the importance of what this program means to their families. One young mother, who clearly had very little, walked up to me at a sign up event and explained that the book her daughter receives each month is the only new thing she ever receives. The entire family anxiously waits for its arrival, then immediately sits down to read it together. Another mother shared that her apartment had been damaged in a fire the previous week. She wanted to give me her address because, like the mother before her, her family didn't have much and she wanted to make sure her children wouldn't miss a book. Reading the stories to her children makes them feel safe even though they are facing so many challenges.

Imagination Library doesn't just prepare children for kindergarten. It brings families closer and creates special bonds. Through the telling of beautiful stories, children learn about empathy, kindness, and compassion.

The members of the Imagination Library of Talbot County fully encourage and support the passage of HB 383. Children in Maryland should have the opportunity to experience the magic of reading.

Kind regards,
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Director

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