



February 2, 2022

**RE: House Bill 383 Young Readers Program-Expansion Act**

Dear Members of the House Ways & Means Committee,

I am writing to voice support for House Bill 383, the Young Readers Program Expansion Act. United Way of the Lower Eastern Shore (UWLES) has served as an affiliate of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library® since 2012 in Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties. Since launching the program locally, UWLES has served over 11,000 children on the Lower Eastern Shore, delivering over 314,000 high-quality, age-appropriate books to date.

Each month, approximately 4,500 children on Maryland's Lower Shore receive a free book through our Imagination Library. The program has proven to be a key resource for kindergarten readiness as demonstrated by the annual Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) administered by the Maryland State Board of Education. The KRA measures the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that children should have mastered prior to entering kindergarten. Lower Shore children enrolled in the program score higher across testing categories compared to non-participants. Our most recent data shows that of enrolled students on the Lower Shore, 59% are demonstrating overall kindergarten readiness versus 46% of non-enrolled peers. The KRA was not administered in 2020 due to the pandemic, but we are looking forward to receiving data for 2021. Additional feedback from parents, teachers and caregivers remains very positive about the program's impact on overall development, behaviors, and how building a love for books and reading promotes quality family engagement. During the pandemic, the program's model of home delivery of each book proved even more important as access to local school or public libraries was reduced due to quarantine or shutdowns.

New enrollment requests are received daily and the demand for the program remains high. While the program is open to all children, UWLES' outreach targets at-risk and lower-income populations through collaboration with nonprofit and social service agencies, Head Start/Early Learning centers, public libraries, pediatricians, all four county school systems, and participation in community outreach events. With over 46% of Lower Shore households struggling financially to make ends meet each month as indicated by the 2020 Maryland ALICE® Report, there remains a significant need to help more local families who may lack the resources needed to support early learning.

As we celebrate our first 10 years of the program locally this year, two initiatives are currently underway to expand Imagination Library outreach in our area. The Dorchester County Grade Level Reading initiative has identified increasing Imagination Library enrollment as a key action step for improving school readiness and ultimately raising the percentage of students reading at grade level by third grade. A partnership with the regional healthcare system, TidalHealth, is being planned through which babies born at TidalHealth facilities will be enrolled in the program before leaving the hospital. Both efforts will increase participation, and therefore program costs. Funds available through the Young Readers Program Expansion Act as a match for local funding would greatly support this increase and empower UWLES to bring the benefits of Imagination Library to all children and families in our four Lower Shore counties.

We have had a very positive relationship with the Dollywood Foundation and our neighboring affiliates and are in support of any opportunity to expand the program throughout Maryland. Imagination Library is a proven success driver for early learning and development. I welcome the opportunity to answer questions or discuss further. Thank you for your consideration of House Bill 383 and this important initiative to support Maryland families.

Sincerely,



Pam Gregory  
President/CEO



United Way of the  
Lower Eastern Shore



Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Analysis for 2019-2020 School Year

<b>Dorchester County</b>			
	<b>Dorchester Imagination Library</b>	<b>Dorchester non-Imagination Library</b>	<b>All Dorchester</b>
Total Students evaluated	101	239	340
% Students CEP Direct Certified *	Not available	Not available	47%
Composite (Demonstrating readiness)	55%	40%	44%

<b>Wicomico County</b>			
	<b>Wicomico Imagination Library</b>	<b>Wicomico non-Imagination Library</b>	<b>All Wicomico</b>
Total Students evaluated	272	902	1,174
% Students FARM	53%	65%	62%
Composite (Demonstrating readiness)	54%	39%	43%

<b>Somerset County</b>			
	<b>Somerset Imagination Library</b>	<b>Somerset non-Imagination Library</b>	<b>All Somerset</b>
Total Students evaluated	57	157	214
% Students FARM	61%	84%	78%
Composite (Demonstrating readiness)	67%	61%	63%

<b>Worcester County</b>			
	<b>Worcester Imagination Library</b>	<b>Worcester non-Imagination Library</b>	<b>All Worcester</b>
Total Students evaluated	110	350	460
% Students FARM	31%	46%	42%
Composite (Demonstrating readiness)	72%	61%	64%

<b>Lower Shore Totals</b>			
	<b>Imagination Library</b>	<b>non-Imagination Library</b>	<b>All</b>
Composite (Demonstrating readiness)	<b>319 of 540</b> 59%	<b>757 of 1,648</b> 46%	2,188

**Note:** The four domains assessed are language/literacy, math, social foundations, and physical & motor development. The Maryland State Average for Demonstrating Readiness in Composite is 47%. The KRA was not administered for the 2020-21 school year due to the pandemic. 2021-22 testing data is pending.

FARM: Students enrolled in free and reduced meal program, an indicator of low income households.

\* Dorchester County provides meals to all students as a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) district based on the socio-economic status of the county. Low-income students are direct certified (at a lower poverty rate than FARM). Data for direct certified students are only available at the county level.