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Appropriations Committee

Subcommittees

Capital Budget

Chair, Transportation and the  
Environment

Oversight Committee on Personnel



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
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Young Readers Program Expansion Act (HB 383)  
Testimony of Delegate Marc Korman—Favorable with Amendments

Thank you Madam Chair, Mr. Vice Chair, and members of the Ways and Means committee. I come before you today to discuss the Young Readers Program Expansion Act (HB 383). The bill would increase support for Imagination Libraries in Maryland. Dolly Parton established the Imagination Library in 1995 and the organization has since delivered over 172 million books to children under the age of five. The Maryland affiliates provide quality books to children from low-income zip codes throughout the state. The Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services has supported the Baltimore City's Young Readers Program since 2016, however that support has not been codified. The Young Readers Program Expansion Act would lock in the existing Baltimore City program and expand the state's support to more affiliates in Maryland through a matching grant program.

The Young Readers Program Expansion Act will provide a \$500,000 fund from which affiliated Imagination Libraries in Maryland can apply for matching funds. The increased funding represents a critical safety net for the local programs so that they are not reliant entirely on private funding which is unpredictable from year to year. The fund incentivizes prioritizing children in zip codes with a disproportionate amount of low income residents and obtaining local government support as well.

The increased financial support through the matching grant program will allow for the Imagination Library program to expand their service to more eligible children. Although there are 364,488 children in Maryland that are eligible for the program, only 33,917 (9 percent) are currently enrolled. Expanding the Young Readers Program would help increase the number of children enrolled because of the funding it would provide the 18 sites located throughout Maryland.

Providing children with quality books at no cost to the family will equip children with an age appropriate education at no cost to the family. The number of books in the home correlates significantly with higher reading scores for children. The success of the Baltimore City Imagination Library Program demonstrates how critical state support is to the operation of the library and provides a roadmap for how we can support other programs throughout the state.

Under the bill as currently written, counties would have to apply for the matching grants on behalf of the affiliate located in the county. We will be submitting an amendment to allow the affiliates to apply directly.

The Imagination Library is backed by years of data and supporting evidence. Some of the measurable impacts include a 29 percent increase in children ready for kindergarten, significantly higher reading skills, and higher scores on reading achievement tests. Now it is up to us to ensure every child in Maryland has access to quality books regardless of their economic status. Supporting Imagination Library programs throughout the state will promote early childhood literacy and help instill a lifelong love of reading. I urge a favorable report.