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DEPUTY MAJORITY WHIP

Ways and Means Committee

Chair, Early Childhood Subcommittee

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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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**Testimony in Support of HB 415
State Library Agency - Family Literacy Pilot Program - Establishment**

This legislation would establish a pilot program in our state prisons to promote stronger family connections and improve family literacy. Under the program, incarcerated parents would be able to record themselves reading an age-appropriate book to their child or grandchild. Their child or grandchild would then receive a copy of the recording and a copy of the book free of charge.

Literacy rates among the incarcerated population have lagged behind those of the general public – it has been estimated that as many as 70% of inmates are functionally illiterate. Meanwhile, nearly half of prisoners are parents of minor children.¹ In Maryland, approximately 82,000 children have a parent who is incarcerated. Children who lose one or both parents to the prison system are more likely to struggle with grades and school in general, creating less opportunity for learning.²

Twenty states have a similar reading program for inmates and their children,³ and Maryland once had its own program.⁴ A study conducted on Pennsylvania's program reported positive impacts on inmates and their families.⁵ More generally, research has linked early parent-child book reading with literacy success later in life.⁶

¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics Data Dashboard. <https://spi-data.bjs.ojp.gov/dashboard>

² U.S. Department of Justice: "Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children".

³ Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

⁴ American Correctional Association: "Reading Unites Families: An Interactive Literacy Program for Incarcerated Fathers and Their Children". March 2015.

⁵ "The video is an upgrade from them all": how incarcerated fathers view the affordances of video in a family literacy programme," *Learning, Media and Technology*, 46(2), 2021.

⁶ "Parents' early book reading to children: Relation to children's later language and literacy outcomes controlling for other parent language input," *Developmental Science*, 2018.

What This Bill Does:

The central aims of this program are to improve the literacy of both inmates and their children, while strengthening family bonds.

The bill:

- Establishes a pilot program run to provide children's books in state prison libraries so that parents who are incarcerated can record themselves reading to their child or grandchild.
- The program will be run by the Maryland State Library Agency, in collaboration with the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services and the Correctional Education program within the Department of Labor.
- Prison librarians would assist inmates in selecting an age-appropriate book, recording themselves reading the book, and distributing a copy of the book and the recording to the inmate's child or grandchild.
- The program would require written permission of the custodial parent/guardian for their child to participate.
- The Maryland State Library Agency will select children's books to be included in the program, including some bilingual books and/or books in languages other than English.
- The pilot program will be limited to four prison libraries, serving at least one library in each region (Western, Central, Eastern) and would include at least one institution serving male inmates and at least one institution serving female inmates.