



HOWARD COUNTY
LIBRARY SYSTEM

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Testimony in support of HB 415: State Library Agency – Family Literacy Pilot Program - Establishment
Hearing before the House Ways and Means Committee
February 3, 2025
Submitted by Tonya Aikens, Howard County Library System President & CEO

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I am writing to express support for **HB 415: State Library Agency – Family Literacy Pilot Program - Establishment.**

This legislation creates a family literacy partnership between the Maryland State Library Agency (MSLA) and the Department of Labor (which oversees education programs in correctional facilities, including the state’s 12 prison librarians) to develop a 3-year pilot at four correctional facility sites situated throughout the state.

The pilot program will assist inmates in recording picture book stories for their children and grandchildren. Children and families will also benefit from increased engagement with the pilot library system. Wicomico County Public Library already partners with the Wicomico County Correctional Center, and their Storybook Program is a model for the rest of the state.

Using general funds and possible added state funding, MSLA will partner with pilot library sites to develop and implement the program and administer grants to fund operating costs.

Approximately 32,000 individuals are incarcerated in Maryland, with more than 2,000 at the two facilities in Howard County. Across the nation, nearly half of the people in state prisons are parents of minor children (about 1 in 5 of those children is age 4 or younger).

Family literacy programs also promote reading amongst inmates, where 70 percent are functionally illiterate, according to data from the National Adult Literacy Survey. Many incarcerated individuals share that they were never read to or had books in the home. In addition to helping develop family bonding and interest in reading for both the inmates and the children at home, family literacy programs build home libraries and print-rich environments, which leads to greater awareness of print and an interest in reading.

Children with a parent in prison may experience low self-esteem, depression, disturbed sleeping patterns, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress. In a North American study, separation from a parent through imprisonment was found to be more detrimental to a child’s well-being than divorce or the death of a parent. Family literacy programs provide an opportunity to connect children with an incarcerated parent in a positive way, fostering family engagement. These programs help keep families together and increase the chances of a parent remaining in the home and connected to family upon release from prison.

There is a strong correlation between literacy and long-term economic and social outcomes, including higher educational attainment and increased academic success, even when controlling for factors like parental education level and socioeconomic status.

This pilot program supports the Moore-Miller Administration's priorities to end childhood poverty by ending cycles and helping create sustained long-term wealth, setting Maryland's students up for success, creating an equitable, robust, and competitive economy, and creating safer communities.

Thank you for your support of all members of our community. We ask that you **favorably recommend HB 415** for passage.

Sincerely,

Tonya Aikens,
President & CEO