



MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony on AB 741

January 10, 2024

Assembly Committee on Children and Families

Chair Snyder and Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on Assembly Bill 741, a bill that would help local non-profits create public-private partnerships with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library – ensuring Wisconsin children under the age of five have every opportunity to start reading at an early age.

Since its inception in 1995, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library has mailed over 150 million books to children under the age of five, at no cost to the family. With this heavy lift, local non-profits in Wisconsin, who are interested in signing families up, are required to share a portion of the cost. To offset this cost, we invested \$500,000 in the budget, on an annual basis. This investment will allow these non-profit groups to get reimbursed up to \$10,000 or 50% of their expenditures required to participate in the program.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on AB 741.



TO: Chair Snyder, Vice-Chair Goeben, and Honorable Members of the Assembly
Committee on Children and Families

FROM: Ragen Shapiro, Legislative Advisor

DATE: January 10, 2024

SUBJECT: 2023 Assembly Bill 741

DCF is submitting this memo for information only on AB 741. This bill supports the implementation of a National Reading Program in Wisconsin, namely the Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

The Department of Children and Families appreciates efforts to increase access to age-appropriate books for young children and their families. Dolly Parton Imagination Library is a strategy for distributing books and literacy resources, and is implemented in several states, including Indiana, Maine, and California. While the Department supports the bill, a few changes or clarifications may improve the success of the proposed grant program. First, all the states mentioned require a match for participating entities seeking reimbursement. However, research into these state programs indicates that they do not have a \$10,000 cap, nor do they limit reimbursement to the cost of books. Starting a program like Imagination Library requires administrative functions, including staffing. Rural and underserved communities cannot absorb these costs without some funding, so the Department recommends allowing non-profits to claim 50% of their administrative expenses, in addition to the actual cost of books.

Additionally, the Department suggests removing or raising the \$10,000 cap, as this will leave funding gaps for many communities, which may deter participation. For example, the Family Resource Center in Eau Claire incurs annual costs significantly above \$20,000 to implement Dolly Parton Imagination Library locally.

Finally, the Department suggests allowing public libraries to serve as eligible entities for grant funding. Libraries are a trusted public resource used by young families across the state and can serve as a lead in areas where non-profit entities may lack the infrastructure to do so.

Liz Gunderson
Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services
Testimony in Support of AB 741
January 10, 2024

Good morning. My name is Liz Gunderson, and I am the Communications Coordinator for Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services, an electric distribution cooperative in Ellsworth, Wisconsin. I am also the coordinator for our Imagination Library program. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

In 2020, I participated in a webinar through Touchstone Energy Cooperatives that introduced Dolly Parton's Imagination Library as a program cooperatives could implement as part of their commitment to community. Our board approved adopting the program in the fall of 2020.

Although some of our members live in parts of Buffalo and St. Croix Counties, we limited our program territory to Pierce and Pepin Counties. We estimated that we could potentially serve as many as 3,000 children (approximately 2,500 in Pierce and 500 in Pepin). In May 2021, Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services became the local affiliate of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library for those two counties.

We officially launched the program in August 2021. We worked with our local librarians, postmasters, childcare centers, and birth-to-three programs at the county level. We hosted launch parties and had registrations available at our booth at the local fair. Our first book order in October 2021 had just over 360 children enrolled in the program. With our January 2024 mailing, 948 children received books and 317 children have graduated from the program. Our cooperative has provided over \$42,000 in book postage expenses to date.

We are proud to be part of this legacy of fostering a love of reading in preschool children. From their first book, *The Little Engine That Could*, to their graduation book, *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come*, children receive engaging, colorful, entertaining books that teach some important life lessons. For example, there's a Silly Goose that learns not to be so selfish and a bunny that learns he needs to budget his carrots to buy a special toy. At least twice a year, children receive bi-lingual (Spanish/English) books, so they are exposed to familiar words in a new language. For parents, Imagination Library includes suggestions on the inside cover for reading the book with their child to make the experience more meaningful and educational.

One of our parents recently wrote to us about their experience with Imagination Library:

"Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has been a wonderful resource for our little ones. They really look forward to getting their own book each month, and they ask almost daily if there is a book for them in the mail. Elair said getting the books makes him feel really special. The program has given us an opportunity to have some books we may not have ventured to purchase ourselves, and some have turned out to be regularly picked by the kids to read often. We greatly appreciate this program and hope it continues for us and other families."

The Dollywood Foundation provides excellent resources to assist local coordinators in running their programs. Their book ordering system allows coordinators to easily approve registrations, update addresses, or transfer children to programs if they've moved to an area outside our territory (if one is available). The hardest part of my job in coordinating the program is having to deny a child who lives outside our territory. This happens frequently to families living in the River Falls School District but in St. Croix County. It happened for families in Elmwood living in Dunn County, too, until an affiliate program started about a year ago covering Dunn and Eau Claire Counties.

At every chance I get, I promote the program to other Wisconsin cooperatives, and a few of them, like Oakdale Electric Cooperative, are investigating becoming affiliates. I'm also working with the River Falls School District to find an affiliate that would cover children just over the county line in St. Croix County.

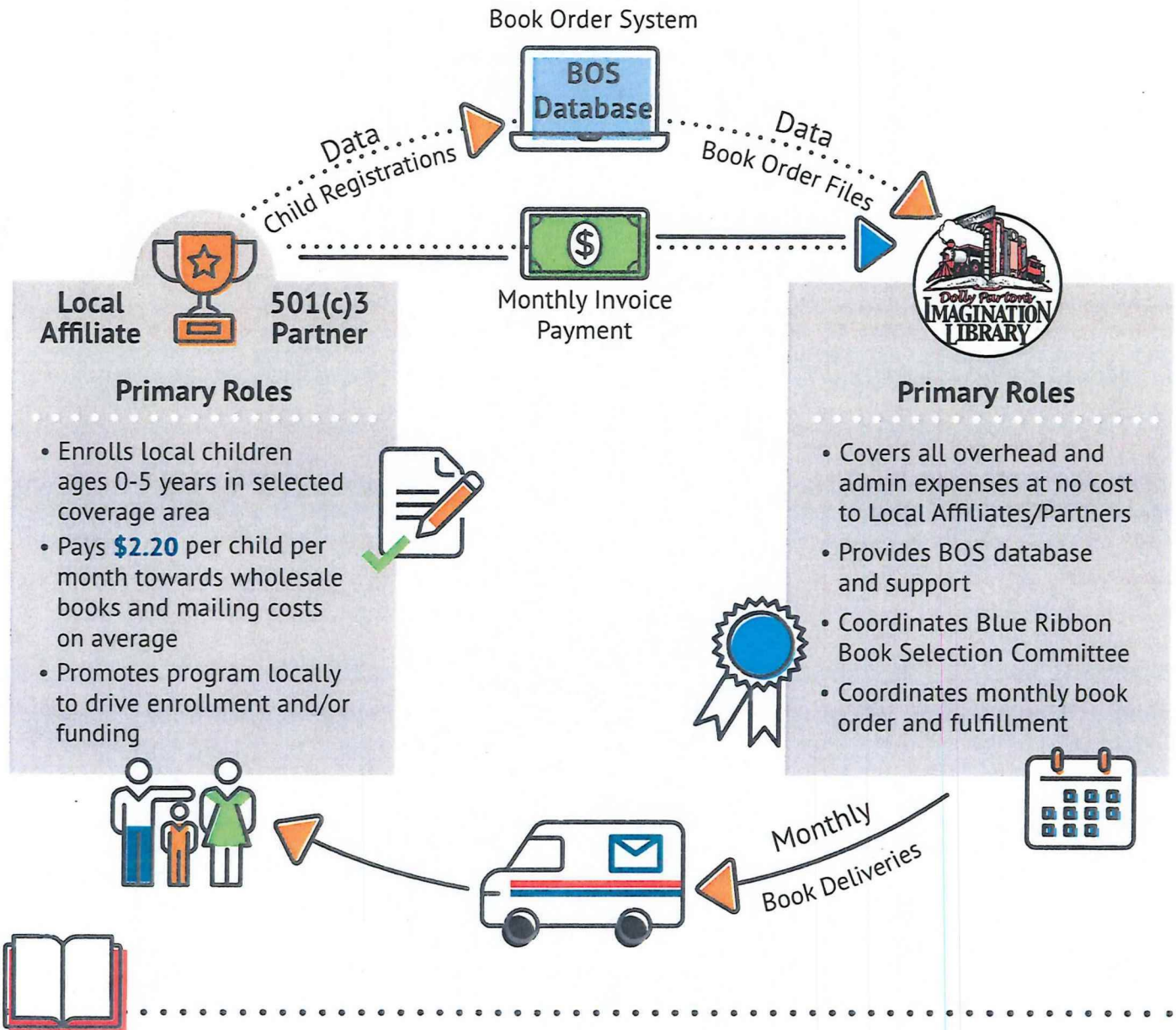
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is an excellent program that promotes school readiness and a lifetime love of reading. We're committed to running the program for a minimum of five years. The financial assistance provided in this bill will help ensure that our program can extend well beyond five years. I believe it will also help encourage other non-profits and cooperatives to step up and launch programs in their own communities.

Thank you.



How It Works

In the United States



Local Affiliate  **501(c)3 Partner**

Primary Roles

- Enrolls local children ages 0-5 years in selected coverage area
- Pays **\$2.20** per child per month towards wholesale books and mailing costs on average
- Promotes program locally to drive enrollment and/or funding



Primary Roles

- Covers all overhead and admin expenses at no cost to Local Affiliates/Partners
- Provides BOS database and support
- Coordinates Blue Ribbon Book Selection Committee
- Coordinates monthly book order and fulfillment



Monthly Book Deliveries



- ▶ Local Affiliate may be a business, school district, solo, etc. Need 501(c)3 non-profit partner to get non-profit mailing rates
- ▶ Books arrive at child's home with name on the mailing label
- ▶ At no cost to the family, books are delivered monthly to children from birth to age 5 in a designated coverage area

