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# MARY FELZKOWSKI

STATE SENATOR • 12<sup>TH</sup> SENATE DISTRICT

## Testimony on SB 707

January 23, 2024

Senate Committee on Education

Chair Jagler and Members of the Senate Committee on Education:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 707, a bill that would help local non-profits create partnerships with Dolly Parton's 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, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has gifted nearly 227 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 be reimbursed up to \$10,000, for 50% of their expenditures required to participate in the program.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has almost 2.8 million kids registered in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Republic of Ireland, and we're very excited to expand the program throughout our Wisconsin communities.

As I close out my testimony, I will provide a final quote from Dolly Parton herself:

*"When I was growing up in the hills of East Tennessee, I knew my dreams would come true. I know there are children in your community with their own dreams. They dream of becoming a doctor or an inventor or a minister. Who knows, maybe there is a little girl whose dream is to be a writer and singer.*

*The seeds of these dreams are often found in books and the seeds you help plant in your community can grow across the world."*

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on SB 707.

Liz Gunderson  
Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services  
Testimony in Support of SB 707  
January 23, 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. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

As a cooperative, we're governed by seven cooperative principles. The seventh principle is Concern for Community. We work to help our communities thrive through initiatives like scholarships for high school seniors, grants to local non-profits, safety demonstrations, and so on. 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 because an affiliate must agree to cover every eligible child in their defined territory. 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. 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.

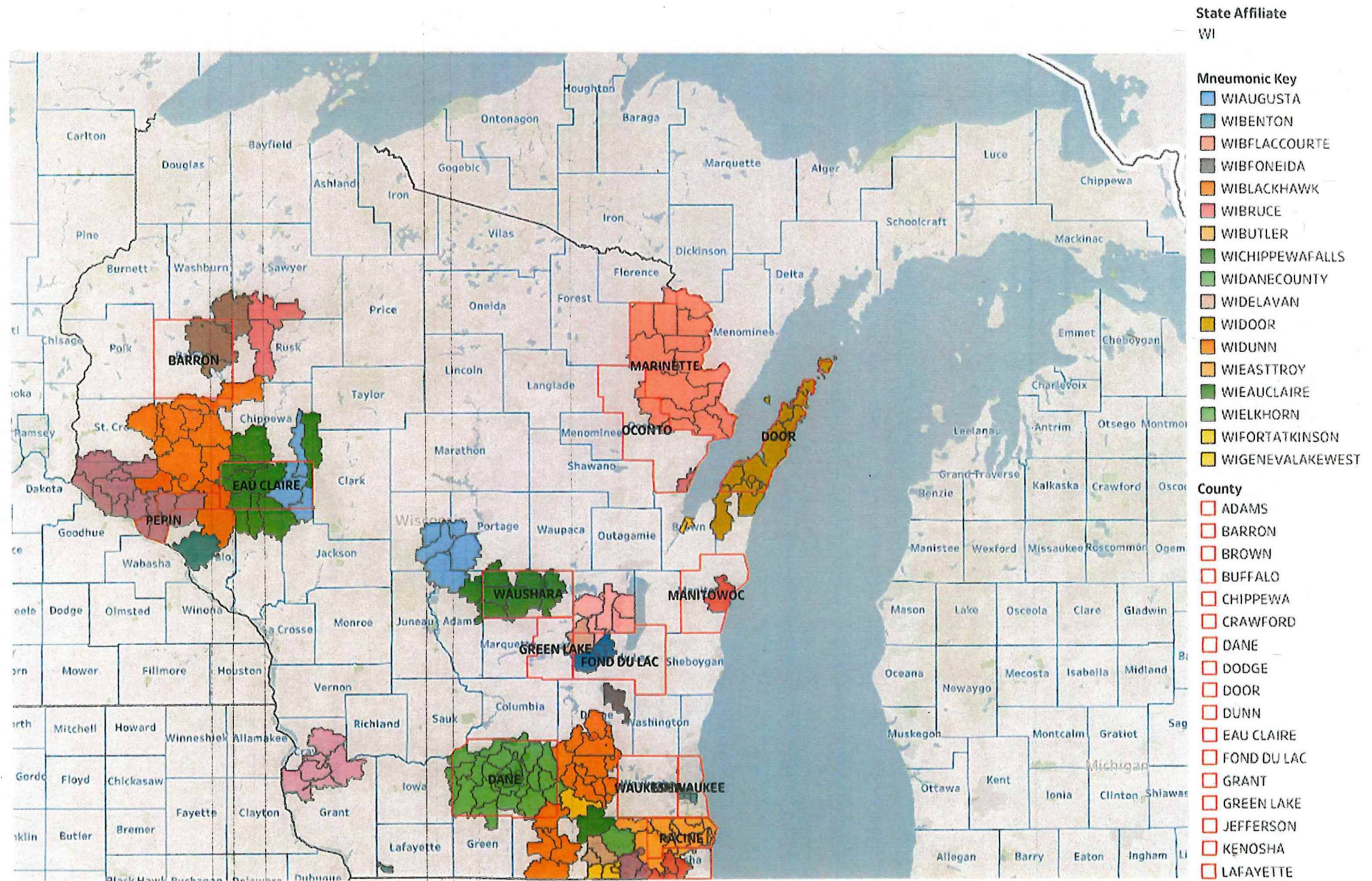
At every chance I get, I promote the program to other Wisconsin cooperatives, and a few of them, like Oakdale Electric Cooperative, are investigating becoming affiliates. I'm also working with the River Falls School District to find an affiliate that would cover children just over the county line in St. Croix County. I've included a map of Wisconsin in the packet I've provided to committee members that shows where the 54 program affiliates are located in the state. There are only 25,308 children currently enrolled in the program out of the 194,570 who are eligible.

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.



# Wisconsin DPIL Programs





## State Overview

**13%**

% OF 0-5 CHILDREN  
ENROLLED IN  
STATE

**25,308**

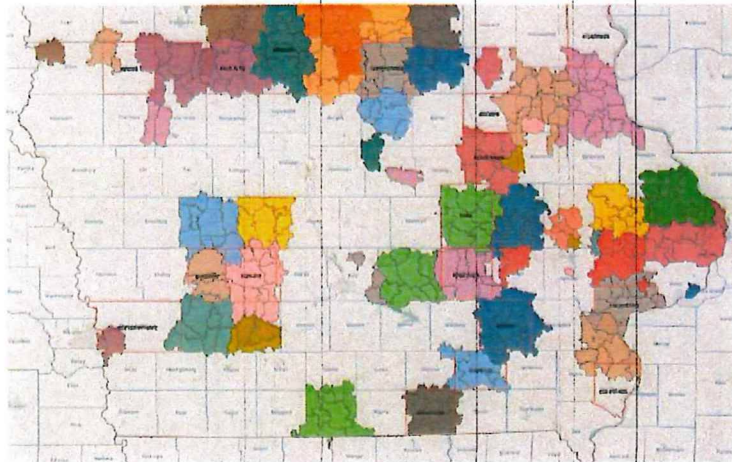
NUMBER OF STATE  
CHILDREN ENROLLED

**194,570**

TOTAL ELIGIBLE  
NUMBER OF  
CHILDREN IN STATE

**54**

NUMBER OF  
PROGRAMS IN THE  
STATE



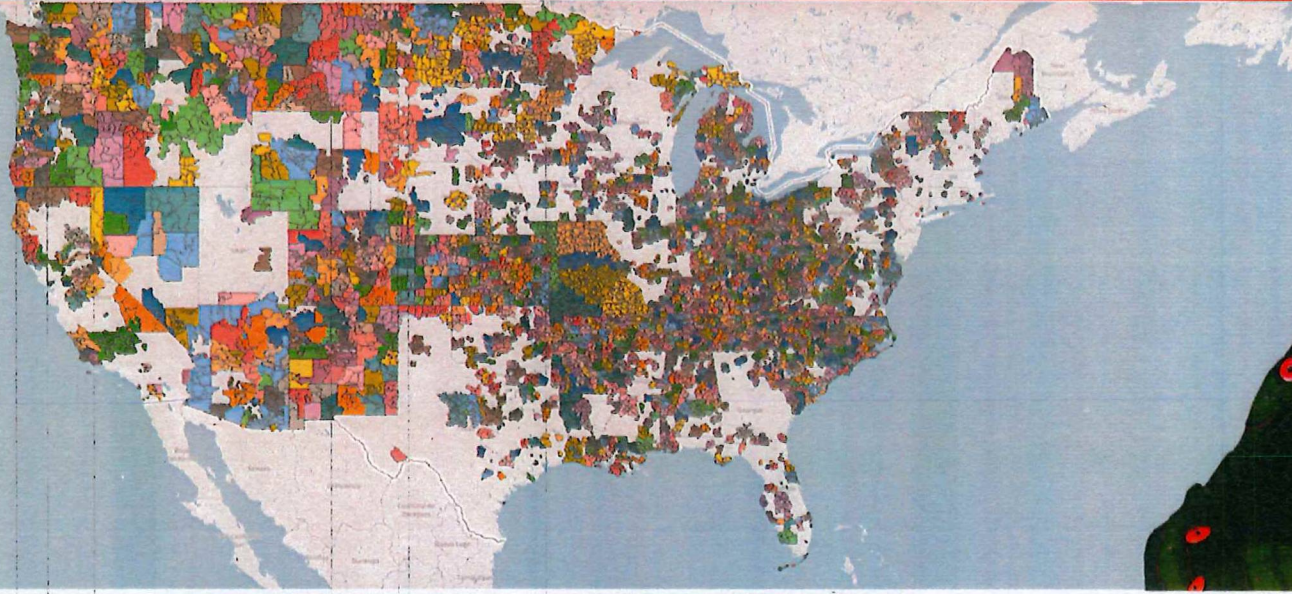
**\$2.10**

COST OF THE  
PROGRAM PER  
CHILD PER MONTH





# Dolly Parton's Imagination Library US Overview



**14%**

CHILDREN ENROLLED  
IN U.S.

**2,271**

NUMBER OF LOCAL  
COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

**2,770,751**

NUMBER OF  
CHILDREN ENROLLED  
IN THE U.S.

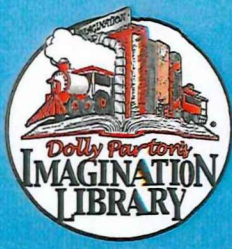
**221,854,799**

TOTAL NUMBER OF  
BOOKS MAILED TO U.S.  
CHILDREN

**19,423,121**

TOTAL ELIGIBLE  
NUMBER OF CHILDREN  
IN U.S.





# 2023

# ANNUAL REPORT

- A total of over 226,964,860 Million books have been gifted since inception.
- The number of books gifted in 2023 was 29,504,545. This was an overall 19.4% increase over 2022 and equals 4,796,537 additional books gifted. (This equates to a book mailed every 1.07 seconds)



**UNITED STATES**  
27,889,777 Books  
19.4% Growth  
4,526,831 Additional Books



**CANADA**  
576,908 Books  
24.5% Growth  
113,718 Additional Books



**UNITED KINGDOM**  
647,258 Books  
6.9% Growth  
42,295 Additional Books



**AUSTRALIA**  
317,312 Books  
55.4% Growth  
113,313 Additional Books



**REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**  
73,290 Books  
0.5% Growth  
380 Additional Books



**OVER 29 MILLION**  
Total Books Gifted in 2023  
A 19.4% increase over 2021  
(Equates to 1 book mailed every 1.07 seconds)

## JANUARY

Dolly receives the **Martin Luther King Center's Christine King Farris Legacy Service in Education Award**



UK Celebrates **15th Year Anniversary** and **5 Millionth Book Gifted Milestone!**

## FEBRUARY

The Imagination Library Reaches its

# 200 MILLIONTH BOOK MILESTONE



DWF welcomes 4 new Regional Directors: **Rachel King, Lauren Wirt, Michelle Anthony** and **Kahla Williams**

## APRIL

DWF welcomes **Justin Young** as new Marketing Manager, **Danielle Velez** as new Senior Customer Support Manager, and **Brooke Davis** as new Training Support Manager



## JUNE

Montana launches Statewide Expansion



California launches Statewide Expansion with new **Bilingual Book Program!**

**Parliamentary Reception**, Houses of Parliament, UK



## JULY

Canada reaches **3 Millionth Book Gifted Milestone!**



**200 Million Reasons to Celebrate** Milestone Campaign launches!

## AUGUST

**Alabama & Indiana** launch Statewide Expansions



**Washington & Kansas** celebrate Statewide Coverage



**50,000 Children** Enrolled Milestone in Canada!

## SEPTEMBER

**Louisiana** launches Statewide Expansion



## OCTOBER



Canada's Northwest Territories Reaches Full Coverage

## NOVEMBER



**Missouri** launches Statewide Expansion

Dolly is honored with **American Public Health (APHA) Presidential Citation**



Welcomes **Misty Leatherwood** as new Finance Manager



## DECEMBER



**Illinois & Maine** launch Statewide Expansions

Welcomes **Melinda Brown** as new IN State Director and **Katie Mullins** as new IN Community Engagement Coordinator



Welcomes **JC Morgan** as new KY State Director and **Libby Suttles** as new KY Community Engagement Director



## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Brooke Overland <brooke.a.overland@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, December 13, 2023 12:24 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** Imagination Library Support

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi there!

I cannot express enough how much we love the imagination library program! Our daughter is so excited when a new book comes and loves showing the new book to all of our family and friends when they visit. She is pursuing the 1000 Books before kindergarten and this program makes that easy and accessible with new content. I really appreciate the diversity of books too! She has enjoyed learning about new things whenever a new book arrives.

## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Laura Rosenberg <lauraerosenberg@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, December 13, 2023 12:56 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** Dolly parton's imagination library

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

My children absolutely love receiving their book from dolly's library every month! Even the older kids love snuggling up and reading it as a family as soon as it arrives! The dual language books are pretty cool, because then we read it twice in a row, once in English and once in Spanish, even though none of us are fluent in Spanish. It's a great way to introduce a second language. We usually pick a couple Spanish words to focus on and practice for the next couple weeks also. Regardless of the book and whether it is or isn't dual language, we love reading and rereading our dolly book until the new one comes along the next month! (And even after the new one comes!)

Thank you for providing this wonderful service for our children!  
Laura

## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Andrea French <andreakfrench85@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, December 13, 2023 2:44 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

The kids benefit greatly from each and every book that is mailed monthly to the house. What a treat to be able to read a new book every now and then that we possibly would not have ever been able to enjoy otherwise. It's fun to see the new selection monthly. The program has helped make reading an enjoyable thing for the kids! Our society needs this now more than ever - to get kids reading instead of browsing social media garbage. Thank you. We hope the program continues.



## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Tara McNiff <tara.mcniff13@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Thursday, December 14, 2023 8:26 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Good morning,  
Dolly Parton's imagination library has been such a blessing in my children's lives.  
I have 1 son still enrolled and the way his eyes light up when he receives his book each month is absolutely amazing.  
Growing our children's libraries while instilling such a love for books, reading, and learning is something that is so important to me as a parent.

I am forever grateful to be apart of this program.

Thank you,  
Tara McNiff

## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** brittany.dondlinger <brittany.dondlinger@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Friday, December 15, 2023 10:56 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPLI  
**Attachments:** 20231214\_191554.jpg

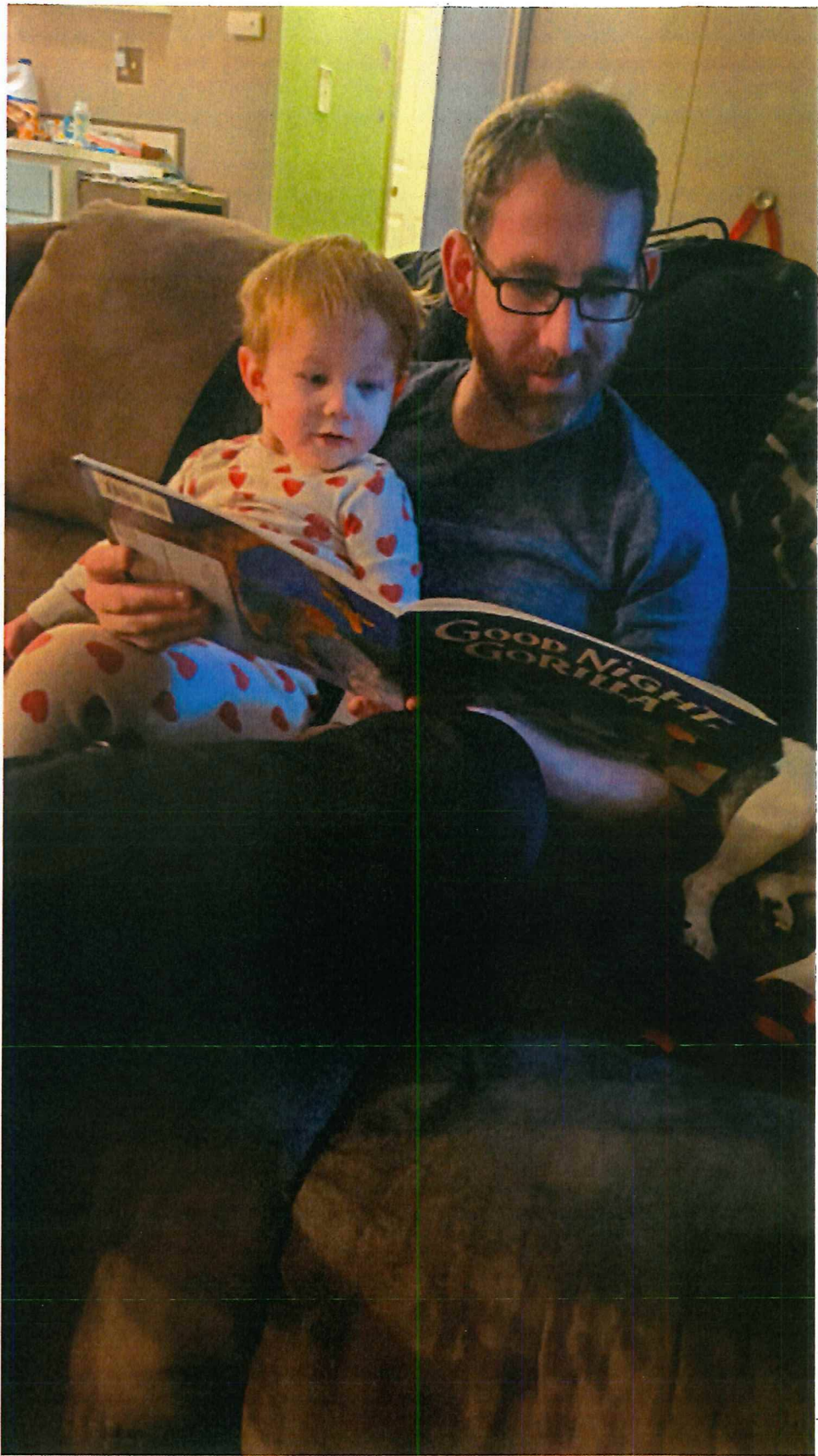
CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Good morning,

I wanted to reach out to share my support for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program. I signed my son up when he was just a couple of months old so have now received probably over a dozen books. He is of an age now where he enjoys being read to, looking at the pictures, and pointing out what he sees. It has been really special to see him develop a love of books like I do. I've included a picture of him with his most recently received book, "Goodnight, Gorilla". He loves saying "keys" and "nana" when he sees them in the book and roars when the lion makes his appearance.

Thank you again for implementing this program and I hope it can continue to provide books to children throughout region.

Brittany Dondlinger





## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Emily Bottemiller <eabottemiller@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Sunday, December 17, 2023 6:31 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is one of our families favorites. We used to live in River Falls, WI until two years ago and always knew about this program but we're not eligible for it until we moved to our new home in Spring Valley, WI. We were overjoyed to find that out upon moving!

Books have always been a part of our lives and kiddos routine. We have two children, ages 4 & 3 and they both look forward to new books every month! It gives us new books monthly for us to sit down and connect with our kids along with other positives such as listening skills, what the stories message is as well as learning. Very grateful we have this program in our lives!

Emily Bottemiller  
eabottemiller@gmail.com

## Liz Gunderson

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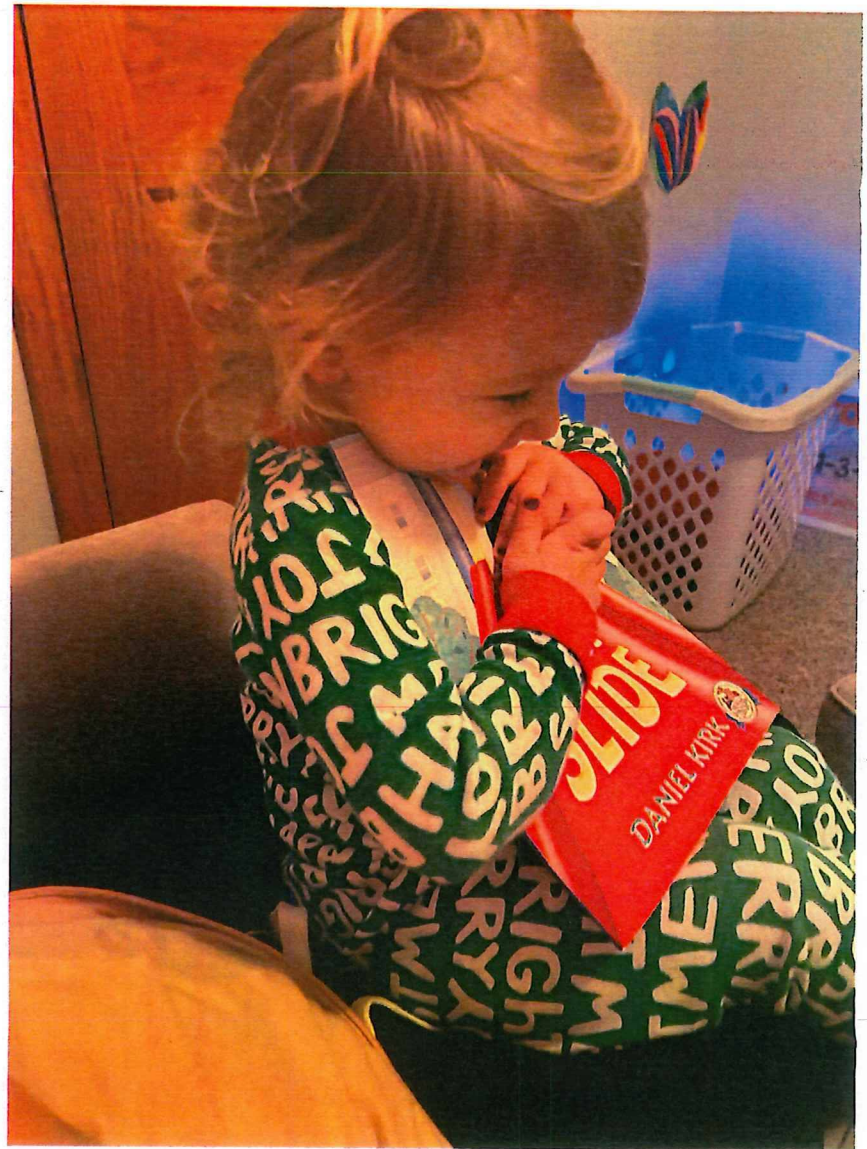
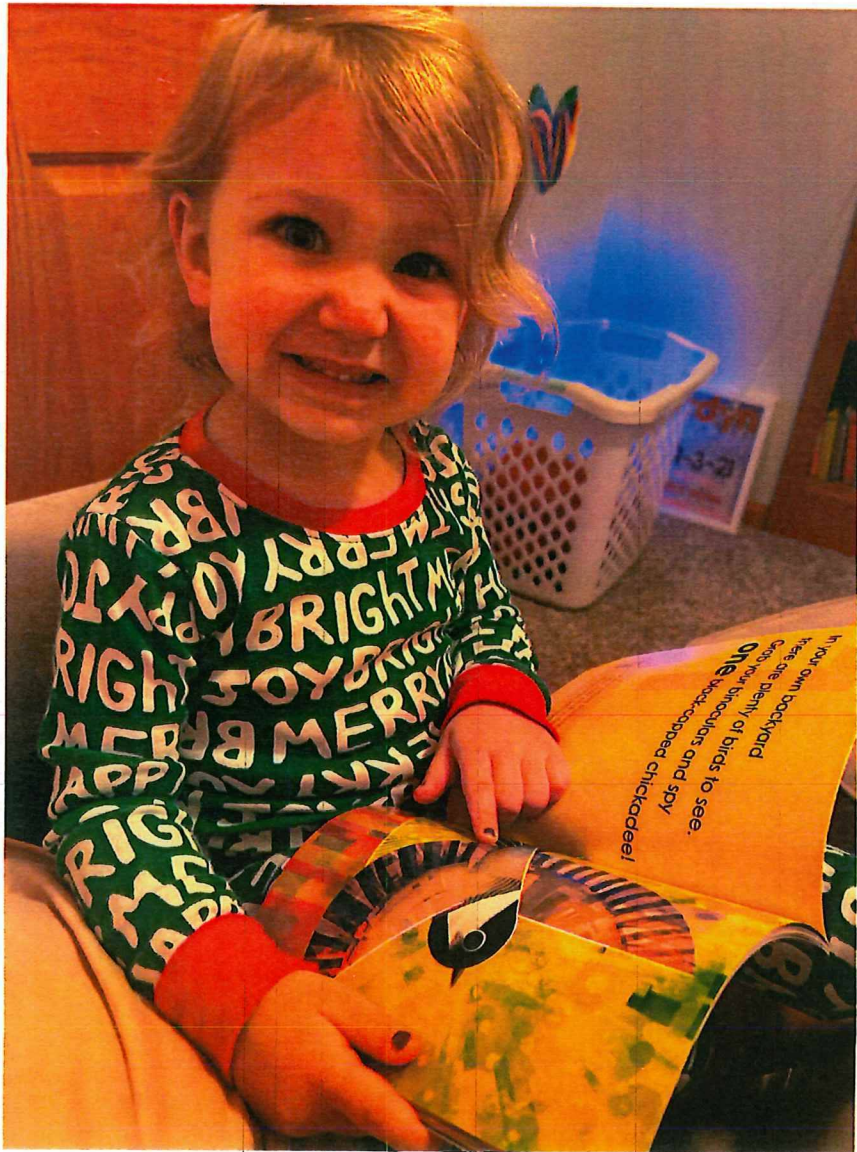
**From:** Rachel Connolly <connollyrachelann@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Sunday, December 17, 2023 6:50 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

We have enjoyed reading the books with all three of our children and it is so special to them to get a surprise in the mail.

Attached are a couple pictures of our 2 YO reading some of her favorites. She also makes sure to "thank Dolly" to her picture in the books when we are done reading. :)

Thanks!  
The Connollys





## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** yde.linda <yde.linda@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, December 19, 2023 4:38 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL  
**Attachments:** 20231219\_104610.jpg

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi Liz,

I am happy to provide a letter of support for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. What a wonderful service to those of us who have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who receive the books.

My great-grandchild, Walker (2), is lucky enough to have FOURTEEN great grandparents, but he knows that I am the Nana who reads to him. When I arrive at his home, he takes my finger, leads me into his bedroom and picks out books from DPIL for me to read to him. Is there any gift that is better to give a child than the ability to read? No, there isn't. Picture attached.

I'm also proud to be a River Falls Rotary Reader. Our Rotarians volunteer at all four public elementary schools in River Falls by reading 1:1 to students who might need additional help.

Linda Yde  
River Falls Rotary President and proud great-grandmother

Sent from my Galaxy





**Liz Gunderson**

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**From:** Samantha Hilsgen <samanthajo1105@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, December 20, 2023 2:31 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Our kids have always loved their books from Imagination Library. Reading them, of course, but they feel so important and special getting something in the mail each month!

Thank you!  
Samantha H.  
Plum City, WI

## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Kelsey Most <kelsey.most@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Saturday, December 23, 2023 7:52 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello,

I have three young children, one who has graduated from the DPL books and two who are still participating! We love the monthly surprise book and I often find my children choosing those books for me to read at bedtime to them. They books have been a wonderful addition to our collection and are so supportive of early literacy skills. As an educator I appreciate the different levels of books at the different ages, it supports the child with a book that is developmentally appropriate and they are able to engage with it. We love and appreciate all the wonderful books and fun story times this program has brought into our home!

The kids were getting ready for bed and I was running around cleaning something up and I walked into a bedroom to find them all reading a book that my youngest had just gotten in the mail! They were helping her read it and talking about the different vocabulary on each page.

Thanks so much for doing supporting this program for kids and families in Pierce County, it is so powerful!

Kelsey Most







**Liz Gunderson**

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**From:** Ali Herpst <alimmeyer12@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Saturday, December 30, 2023 9:02 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

My daughter, Evelyn, receives a book from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library every month and we as a whole family love it! She loved reading (and at this stage, chewing on) her new books. We're working towards "1000 books before kindergarten" and it's a helping us reach that goal. We look forward to getting a new book each month!



## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Jeni Medlang-Ruelle <jrb\_123@hotmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 3, 2024 9:26 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello,

We are writing to say that the 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 it getting the books makes him feel really special. This 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.

~Jennifer, Christopher, Elair, and Sage

## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Kelly Banks <kelly.banks24@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 3, 2024 11:58 AM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi Liz,

I wanted to take a moment to express my gratitude for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program. My son Charlie, who is three and a half now, has been receiving his books for several years now and gets so excited each month when a new book arrives. It has enriched our home library with new and different books, as well as classic family favorites. Charlie's favorite book is "Goodnight Gorilla"!

Thank you for supporting this program in the Pierce and Pepin Counties. It has truly been a joy to be a part of!

Kelly Banks and family

**Liz Gunderson**

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**From:** Megan Hagar <megan.hagar16@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, January 8, 2024 2:48 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** Re: Imagination Library

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

DPL has given my kids access to books that I would not have known about otherwise. The range of topics and artistry is something my kids really enjoy as well. It's very important for our kids to be exposed to different cultures, ideas and skills and having access DPL has given them the opportunity to be exposed to these ideas and concepts through books. We are forever grateful for PPCS sponsoring the DPL!





## Liz Gunderson

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**From:** Theresa Fusilier <jtfusilier@att.net>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 17, 2024 6:54 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** DPIL

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Dear Liz,

Thank you for providing DPIL! I receive the books for my 2 foster grandsons (age 1 and 4). They look forward to receiving these in the mail and enjoy our special time together as we read them. Sorry I was tardy in responding to your email. I appreciate having such a nice variety of books to share with the boys!

Thanks again for your part in providing this program!

Theresa Fusilier



**Liz Gunderson**

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**From:** Theresa Fusilier <jtfusilier@att.net>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 17, 2024 6:44 PM  
**To:** Liz Gunderson  
**Subject:** Imagination Library

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of PPCS. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

To Whom it May Concern:

My daughters ages 2 and 4 have both been in the Imagination Library program since birth. They love getting new books every month and are always very excited to read them. We read together every night before bed and during the day as well when time permits. The program has been a blessing for our family in that it not only gets the kids excited about reading but also gives us another way to spend quality time together.

Thank you so much for all that you are doing for my children and for so many others in the state of Wisconsin!

Amanda Gibbs





**TO:** Chair Jagler, Vice-Chair Quinn, and Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Education

**FROM:** Ragen Shapiro, Legislative Advisor

**DATE:** January 23, 2024

**SUBJECT:** Senate Bill 707

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DCF is submitting this memo for information only on SB 707. 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.