



**Testimony in support of HB 243, Young Readers Program Expansion Act of 2023
Hearing before the House Ways & Means Committee
February 8, 2023
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 support HB243: Young Readers Act Expansion bill sponsored by Delegate Marc Korman. Signed into law in 2022 (Article 446), this bill seeks to give additional funding to the Maryland State Library Agency (MSLA) to expand Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) programs throughout the state.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a book gifting program that mails free, high-quality books to children from birth to age five, no matter their family's income. The books are designed to aid the development of reading skills. Because a child's early years are the most critical period for brain development and set the foundation for lifelong learning and achievement, it is vital to expose children to books as soon after birth as possible. Consider the following:

- As early as 18 months, low-income children begin to fall behind in vocabulary development.
- The number of words a child knows by the time they are 2 to 3 years old predicts third grade reading levels.
- In Maryland, less than half of preschoolers demonstrate readiness for kindergarten. That number is significantly higher for children in low-income households.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to administer DPIL programs in their counties because before children attend school, they visit libraries with their parents and caregivers. Libraries reach all segments of the community – through mobile units, partners, and their library branches.

In Howard County, the DPIL program is currently administered by Bright Minds Foundation, the educational foundation for Howard County Public School System. Due to capacity and funding issues, they serve fewer than 1,000 children. Because Howard County Library System sees tens of thousands of children before they enter preschool and the school system and is connected to numerous potential partners, Bright Minds approached HCLS about co-owning the program.

For all the reasons noted above, Howard County Library System is in favor of this bill, which helps prepare young children for kindergarten.

Thank you very much for your consideration and continued support of Maryland libraries.

Sincerely,

Tonya Aikens,
President & CEO