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Dear Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education,

On behalf of myself and the staff in the NICU at RiverBend Medical Center I would like to share the significant impact that Reach Out and Read Oregon has made in the lives of the children and families that the program serves within our clinic.

We started March 1, 2020 with a program where we distribute 2 free new books to every child who will remain in our NICU for at least 1 week. Our program is based on the nationally known Reach Out and Read program which has operated in pediatric clinics for the last 20 years. Part of the rationale is equity and the social determinants of health – where children from low income households are exposed less often to reading and thus to a more limited vocabulary than children from middle and higher income households. Part of the problem is that very few children's books are available to lower income households. So, if books are distributed to all pediatric families either in the NICU or during well-child visits, along with age appropriate advice about language development and parent-child bonding, we are helping create opportunities for all children to have advantages in language development.

Reading to a child for 20 minutes per day introduces them to 1,800,000 words per year, helps improve language development by 3-6 months, gives them the tools needed to become successful students. They just need access to books. Since March 2020 we have distributed about 500 books to almost 250 families (some duplicates for twins/triplets). We carry books in Spanish for Spanish-speaking families as well.

Initially this ROR program focused on children ages 6mos-5years. This year, NICUs have started coming into the fold. There is some new research about language development and that infants born prematurely miss out on the sounds and language they would hear in the womb, as well as being separated from parents for much of the day once they are born and are put into an incubator and exposed to a very quiet environment instead of a language rich one that would be the norm if they'd gone home a few days after delivery. The other reason promoting ROR in the NICU has become important is that parents struggle with children in the NICU feeling like such an artificial environment and giving them books to read and advice on doing so helps part of their stay feel like normal parenting. It promotes parent-infant bonding and reduces some anxiety parents have about how do they parent a NICU baby. Parents and staff overwhelmingly enjoy our program, the books buoy families' optimism and staff morale and we always get positive feedback about it.

By investing in the growth and sustainability of Reach Out and Read Oregon, you are investing in the lifelong health and wellbeing of not only the children and families I provide care for but also of children across the state. Thank you for this opportunity to share the impact of Reach Out and Read Oregon on my patients, their caregivers, and families, and I urge you to support the program through funding under the Department of Education budget.

Kind Regards,
Allison O'Brien, MD
NICU Medical Director
RiverBend Medical Center