



**Making our community a safe and healthy place  
to live, work, raise a family, and enjoy life.**

**HEALTH, LIFELONG LEARNING, LIVABILITY, LEADERSHIP**

January 27, 2024

Dear House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services,

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Malheur County is volunteer-run through the local nonprofit, Four Rivers Healthy Community. This letter provides specific details about the program in Malheur County and why statewide funding and coordination for the program is critical for its success.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a book-gifting program for all children in communities with a local affiliate. Four Rivers Healthy Community is the local affiliate serving Malheur County. A free book is mailed directly to each enrolled child every month until their fifth birthday. This upstream strategy positively impacts academic success and the mental health of children during the most critical brain-development phase of their lives.

Research is clear that literacy is one of the best tools to help lift people out of poverty. The Western Treasure Valley is experiencing extremely high rates of substance abuse, poverty, homelessness and teen pregnancy rates. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has proven to help level the playing field for children so that they can arrive at kindergarten with higher literacy skills, larger vocabularies and more awareness of the world. The correlation to this and school success is a fact. Literacy is directly linked with employment rates, healthier families, and increased community involvement. Research supports that early literacy efforts enhance the brain's foundation for future learning at a critical time in children's development. Other research has linked the number of books in a home to increased grades completed in school. Specific studies on Dolly Parton's Imagination Library have repeatedly shown an increase in kindergarten readiness, a marker for potential future academic success. Children are being set up for higher achievement and engagement in school, work, personal health and community when literacy is supported in the early years.

According to a recent study released by [the Yale Child Study Center–Scholastic Collaborative for Child & Family Resilience](#) titled "Reading for Life: The Impact of Child Literacy on Health Outcomes," profound and lifelong positive physical and mental health outcomes were associated with childhood literacy. Studies reveal a significant connection between literacy and physical health, positively impacting our overall well-being. Just 30 minutes of reading a day can lead to measurable improvements in physical health, including reductions in systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, and heart rate. This finding suggests that engaging in reading regularly may not only enrich our minds but also contribute to a healthier body.

[Linda Mayes, a professor at the Yale Child Study Center](#), emphasized that individuals with higher reading skills are likelier to experience better health outcomes, regardless of whether they hold a high school degree. On the other hand, lower literacy rates during high school have been associated with long-term health issues, including aggressive behaviors, substance use, and sexually transmitted infections, that can set individuals on a chronic poor health trajectory during adolescence and adulthood.

(<https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/using-literacy-to-boost-your-childs-health-and-resilience/>)

Our strategy is Targeted Universalism since we want all children to have literacy rich homes and healthy attachments, therefore our approach acknowledges the need to be intentional in enrolling hard-to-reach families. Our target audience is all children under the age of five and their families, especially those:

- living in isolated or remote areas,
- experiencing poverty,
- experiencing out-of-home placement (foster care),
- speak a language other than English,
- and other challenging life experiences.

Our long-term goal is to enroll 65% of all children under the age of five in Malheur County. According to Dollywood research, when 65% of children in a community have literacy-rich homes, there is a community-wide impact on education, health, and the economy.

Malheur County estimated children under age five is 2,026

2024 goal:

- ✓ Malheur County 50% of 2,026 = 1,013
- ✓ Enrollment on December 1, 2024, for books delivered January 2025 = 1,010
- ✓ Enrollment on January 1, 2025, for books delivered February 2025 = 1,013

2025-26 goal: 60% of 2,026 = 1,216

2026-27 goal: 65% of 2,026 = 1,317

To achieve these ambitious goals, we have implemented the following strategies:

- Collaborate with pediatricians and OB clinics, EO Early Learning Hub (Coordinated Enrollment & Parent Councils) libraries, head start programs, EO Child Care Resource & Referral, childcare programs, and school districts to enroll children;
- Gather input from parents on outreach (examples: providing free books during sign-up events, providing outreach materials in Spanish, and using a QR code so parents can register on their phone);
- Engage parents and community members who currently have access to books to ensure community-wide support;
- Engage with successful affiliates across the US to identify new strategies;
- Fundraising strategies include individuals sponsoring a child (\$31), businesses sponsoring books for a month (\$1,000), and grant writing to philanthropic organizations and programs with aligned missions.

Four Rivers Healthy Community depends on our working relationships with medical providers, head start and childcare programs, home visitors, school districts, and libraries to outreach to the population they already engage with. This is the most successful strategy to sign up children since these are established, trusting relationships with parents. Four Rivers Healthy Community provides outreach materials and attends events sponsored by these organizations. Several of these organizations include an Imagination Library registration form with their intake paperwork.

There is no other free book program in the whole Western Treasure Valley like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library that allows access to all children under the age of five regardless of social or economic background.

The sustainability of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is dependent upon the support of State funding as well as a well-organized statewide collaboration team. Together we can strengthen families, provide hands-on experience for children during their most critical time of brain, mental and physical health development to ensure more Oregon children arrive at kindergarten ready for success in school and life!

Respectfully submitted,

Kelly Poe



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