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**ASSEMBLYMEMBER RIVERA, UNITED WAY
ANNOUNCE SUCCESS AND EXPANSION OF
DOLLY PARTON’S IMAGINATION LIBRARY
TO ALL ERIE COUNTY ZIP CODES**

Roughly one year after the launch of the program, childhood literacy initiative is now available to all Erie County families

WILLIAMSVILLE, NY – Just over one year after launching Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library in three initial ZIP codes, Assemblymember Jon D. Rivera announced today that the program is now available in every ZIP code in Erie County, marking a historic expansion of access to free early-childhood literacy resources for families across Western New York.

Rivera made the announcement at the Williamsville Branch Library, joined by representatives from United Way of Buffalo & Erie County and from the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library.

Since its launch in September 2024, the partnership between the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County and Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library has delivered more than 20,000 free, high-quality books directly to the homes of Western New York children. The overwhelming response from families, educators, and community leaders has propelled the rapid growth of the program, achieving what Assemblymember Rivera called “a long-held goal for our community.”

United Way of Buffalo & Erie County, which oversees local implementation, credited the expansion to strong enrollment numbers, unanimous community support, and the Assemblymember's continued advocacy for early literacy programs.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library mails a free, age-appropriate book each month to enrolled children from birth to age five. What began in 1995 as an effort to support children in Dolly Parton's home community in East Tennessee has grown into one of the most impactful early childhood literacy initiatives in the world.

Now, its reach extends to every neighborhood and child in Erie County, and the timing of the program's expansion could not be more pertinent.

[A 2024 Investigative Post analysis of New York State Education Department data revealed](#) that only 39 percent of third through fifth graders in Western New York's 99 school districts scored at grade level on recent English Language Arts tests, while 31 percent of students lack even basic reading and writing skills.

Economically disadvantaged students were found to be more likely than wealthier students — 42 versus 17 percent — to score at the lowest range on tests, indicating they lack the basic skills needed to read and write at grade level.

The Imagination Library has demonstrated success in helping to improve these numbers.

A 2015 study conducted by professors at Le Moyne College found that children enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in the City of Syracuse were significantly better prepared to enter kindergarten than their peers who had not participated in it. Among children who were consistently enrolled in the program, 61.1 percent were assessed as ready for kindergarten based on their performance on the test compared to 47.4 percent of children who did not take part in the program.

With every ZIP code now included, families throughout Erie County can sign up their children to begin receiving monthly books at no cost, helping build home libraries and strengthen school readiness. [Research consistently shows that children exposed to books and regular reading from birth develop stronger language skills, improved early literacy, and greater long-term academic success.](#)

[For more information or to enroll a child in the program, visit the United Way enrollment page.](#)

Assemblymember Jon D. Rivera said, “When I first secured state funding to bring Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to Western New York, it was always my hope that one day every child in Erie County would be eligible to receive free books in their earliest, most formative years. To see this program expand countywide in just over a year and to know that more than 20,000 books have already landed in the hands of local children, is extraordinary. This is how we

build a lifelong love of reading, and this is how we strengthen opportunity for an entire generation.”

Trina Burruss, President and CEO of United Way of Buffalo & Erie County, said, “During this season of gratitude, I’m so thankful for our partnership with Assemblymember Rivera to bring free books to children ages 0-5 through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. Our goal was to cover every community in the county and we achieved this goal thanks to support from the Buffalo Bills, local partnerships, state support, and our donors who believe in breaking down barriers so the youth in our community can thrive. Over 20,000 free books and counting have been delivered, and I encourage anyone who has a young child in their life to sign up for this program today.”

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library Interim Director Dorinda Darden said, “As a frontline organization committed to literacy, we're thrilled to partner with Assemblymember Rivera and the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County to expand Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Getting books into the hands of every child in Erie County takes the whole community working together – and this program has a proven track record of making that a reality for children, no matter their zip code or means.”

Kristi Dougherty, Amherst Public Libraries Director said, “The Dolly Parton Imagination Library inspires a love of reading from birth. It is my hope that the books received will lead to increased family engagement and library visits to discover even more free books to read. Librarians and other staff can also provide access to resources for daily literacy-building activities.”

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