

Care for Community: Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services Lobbies for State Support of Reading Program

Madison, WI – On January 10, Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services (PPCS) Communications Coordinator Liz Gunderson traveled to Madison to testify before the Assembly Committee on Children and Families in support of Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library program. Assembly Bill 741 requires the Department of Children and Families to establish a grant program to reimburse nonprofit organizations for 50% of the cost of providing books (up to \$10,000 total) to young children in partnership with “a national reading program.”

Dolly Parton first launched the Imagination Library in 1995 to provide free books monthly to children in her home county in east Tennessee, regardless of income. The program grew rapidly, expanding nationwide and internationally to Australia, Canada, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom. In 2023, the program gifted more than 29 million books to children, inspiring them to “Dream More, Learn More, Care More, and Be More.”

PPCS first became involved with the Imagination Library program after Gunderson learned about it in a Touchstone Energy Cooperative webinar. The PPCS board approved adoption of the program in the fall of 2020, and it was launched in August 2021, serving children from birth to age five in Pierce and Pepin counties.

The cooperative’s charitable foundation, Pierce Pepin Cares, acts as the local affiliate for Imagination Library. As of January 2024, Gunderson said they are serving 948 children who each receive one book per month, and 317 children have graduated from the program.

Under the Imagination Library program, partners such as PPCS are responsible for enrolling children who live within their geographical area. The Dollywood Foundation purchases the books, but the local affiliates and partners are responsible for securing funds to cover the cost of mailing. Books are 100% free to enrolled children.

Gunderson testified to the committee that “The hardest part of my job coordinating the program is having to deny a child who lives outside our territory,” which she said happens frequently.

“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,” Gunderson said, adding, “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.” There are currently 24 affiliates for the program across Wisconsin.

The bill has bipartisan support.



Liz Gunderson, PPCS communications coordinator, testified before the Assembly Committee on Children and Families in support of Assembly Bill 741 authorizing a grant program for a national reading program on Wednesday, January 10.



Gunderson, pictured with Majority Leader Tyler August, author of Assembly Bill 741, both testified before the Assembly Committee on Children and Families in support of the bill authorizing a grant program for a national reading program on Wednesday, January 10.