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## REACH OUT AND READ CONNECTICUT

January 27, 2015

Good afternoon, Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, and members of the Committee on Children,

I am Christine Garber and I am the Connecticut Executive Director for Reach Out and Read. Thank you very much for bringing forth Senate Bill 209, An Act Concerning Funding for the Reach Out and Read Program and for this opportunity to testify in favor of the bill today.

A pediatrician like Connecticut Children's Medical Center's Dr. Catherine Wiley sees about 110 low-income children weekly for routine well-child exams. In addition to having their physical development evaluated, these children also walk away with a prescription designed to boost their brain development and prepare them for school. That "prescription" is a book.

Dr. Wiley is one of 300 medical providers across Connecticut who are "prescribing reading" as part of their partnership with Reach Out and Read. Designed to develop critical early literacy skills and a love of reading, Reach Out and Read reaches nearly 40,000 children and their families in Connecticut through 71 clinical locations. We give out well over 60,000 new books each year.

The concept is incredibly simple. Take a child from a low-income family where books can be rare and parents often too stressed or lacking the knowledge to spend time on reading. When the pediatrician sees that child, she "prescribes" an appropriate book and guides the parents on reading with the child daily. The results are amazing.

Because the book has been prescribed almost as if it were a medication, parents are far more likely to make reading aloud a part of their daily routine. As a result, young children in at-risk homes can build their literacy and oral language skills and become better prepared for school – as they learn the joy of reading.

In one of our 15 research studies published in the *Journal of Community Medicine and Health Education* in 2012, researchers examined the home literacy environments, teacher evaluations, and reading readiness of low-income Latino kindergarteners (ages 4-6 years) who had participated in Reach Out and Read from age 6 months. By the end of kindergarten, 77% of these children had average, above average, or far above average literacy skills when compared to all students in the same grade. Results such as these can be even more profound in a state like Connecticut, where the achievement gap is among the highest in the nation.

Reach Out and Read was founded in 1989 by a group of doctors and educators who were concerned about the deficiency in pre-literacy skills in their low-income patients. Given that 90 percent of brain development occurs before age 5, they established a program to encourage shared reading by giving parents the tools they need to help develop their children's early literacy skills. Specifically, they developed this three-part model which medical professionals incorporate into regular pediatric checkups:

- In exam rooms, medical providers trained in early literacy development speak with parents about the importance of reading aloud daily with their young children.

[www.reachoutandread.org](http://www.reachoutandread.org)

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- At each regular checkup from 6 months through 5 years of age, the child receives a brand-new, developmentally- and culturally-appropriate book to keep.
- Armed with this guidance from the provider, parents make reading aloud a part of their daily routines.

Today, some 20,000 medical providers across the country volunteer their time to deliver the program through 5,000 clinical locations in all 50 states. Four million children are served by Reach Out and Read nationally, including nearly 40,000 in Connecticut.

In addition to the pre-literacy skills and language development Reach Out and Read promotes, it also serves as an effective way to increase family engagement and foster healthy early brain development. During the reach Out and Read intervention, medical providers are not simply handing out books. They are working to change parental behavior and increase parental involvement in their children's lives – a critical lever linked to the cognitive, emotional, physical and social health of children. In order for the brain to develop normally, children need a strong relationship with a parent or primary caregiver. The one-on-one time spent on a parent's lap reading together fosters this bonding experience. It also provides a buffering effect for toxic stress. We know that children growing up in low-income households are exposed to more toxic-stress than their more affluent peers. Prolonged exposure to multiple toxic stress indicators can cause life long, negative effects on a child's brain and emotional development. Reach Out and Read helps to create a buffer so that the toxic stress is mitigated in these children's lives.

Clearly Reach Out and Read is far more than a book give-away program. It is a national leader in school readiness and unique among all other early literacy interventions.

- By making literacy promotion a standard part of pediatric care, we have near-universal access to all children, even those not enrolled in a preschool program that desperately need our program.
- Reach Out and Read leverages two extraordinary forces to improve educational and social/emotional outcomes in children: The power of parents and in the influence of doctors. No other school readiness intervention uses medical providers in this way.
- Fifteen independent studies published in medical journals demonstrate the efficacy of the Reach Out and Read model. This body of scientific research proving our impact is larger than for any other psychosocial intervention in general pediatrics, again setting us apart from other interventions.
- By using the existing medical infrastructure, with doctors volunteering their time to deliver our program, Reach Out and Read is affordable, effective, and scalable.
- Reach Out and Read is the only program promoted by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) as a model for literacy development and book distribution by medical providers in the exam room. This recommendation by the AAP was made in their 2014 policy statement; *Literacy Promotion: An essential Component of Primary Care Pediatrics*, which I have submitted with my testimony.
- Reach Out and Read is a public/private partnership where each public dollar is matched by private funding.



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The passage of this bill will allow us to both sustain our 71 established Reach Out and Read programs in the state and expand our program to reach more children who desperately need our services. Based on the Annie E. Casey's KIDS COUNT DATA,

- 81% of our Connecticut 4<sup>th</sup> graders who were eligible for free and reduced lunch scored below proficient in reading on their 2013 Connecticut Mastery Tests. That means less than 20% of these children are proficient readers.
- 121,000 children in Connecticut ages 0-8 live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Limit. Reach Out and Read only reaches 40,000 children today.
- 46% of Connecticut 3 and 4 year olds who live at or below the Federal Poverty Limit do not attend preschool. Reach Out and Read has the ability to reach these children so that they don't continue to fall through the cracks.

Reach Out and Read is not the end all/be all to erasing the achievement gap in our state, but it is a very important part of the solution. The data is clear that we need more supports for our children and families starting before preschool. Reach Out and Read is an affordable and effective vehicle for that support. With a 26 year track record and 15 published research studies, we know our program works. The passage of this bill will directly help low-income children develop their essential early literacy skills, helping to position them to read and succeed alongside their more affluent counterparts – thus starting to close the large achievement gap we face in Connecticut.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.