

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Early Literacy in Northwest Arkansas through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library

*Helen R. Walton Children's Enrichment Center becomes new  
regional affiliate for popular early literacy program*

For Immediate Release  
DATE: August 2, 2017

Bentonville, ARK. – United Way of Northwest Arkansas and the Helen R. Walton Children's Enrichment Center have partnered to ensure families living in poverty have access to books at home.

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library provides preschoolers with a library of books to encourage a love of reading and learning. From birth through age 5, young children will receive a carefully selected book in their mailbox every month. Books are selected from themes determined by the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program and include topics like repetition and predictability, science, and folk tales. Currently over 13,000 books are mailed to children in Northwest Arkansas every year, supporting early literacy, language acquisition and parent engagement.

Sixty-one percent of low-income families have no age appropriate books in the home for their children. While children living in middle-income homes have on average 13 books per child, there is only one book for every 300 children in low income neighborhoods. When children have access to books at home, they have opportunities for stimulating parent-child interactions around the books and stories. When read aloud to, children acquire a more sophisticated vocabulary beyond their everyday language and begin learning how to abstract information from print.

Brain architecture is affected by experiences in the first years of life and lays the foundation for future learning, health, and behavior. Researchers are looking at this period of life as the best opportunity to break the cycle of poverty due to this rapid brain development, and the benefits that arise. Early childhood experiences establish the foundation for children's capacity to learn and thrive when they reach school.



Jeff Shipley, HWCEC board member, John Shaw, UWNWA board member, Sunny Lane, HWCEC development manager, Rachel Harrison, HWCEC Business Coordinator, Michelle Barnes, HWCEC executive director, Jim Lester, UWNWA board member, Kim Aaron, UWNWA executive director.

One of the only behavior measurements that correlates significantly with reading scores, is the number of books in the home. Similarly, having books in the home is twice as important as the father's education level. The most successful way to improve the reading achievement of low-income children is to increase their access to print. When young children have access to print materials, they have improved reading performance, through letter and word identification, phonemic awareness, and sentence completion. They also have an improved attitude toward reading and learning, along with increased reading frequency and length of time.

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library removes barriers, expands opportunities, and assists parents in fulfilling their roles to serve as partners in the success of their children. Families are relieved of the financial burden of providing books for the home, along with the expertise to ensure the books are developmentally appropriate for their young child, all delivered to comfort of their home by their neighborhood mailman! It should be noted that while the program itself is not limited to families in financial need; in the first year, the Helen R. Walton Children's Enrichment Center will focus on children living in poverty through the funding awarded by United Way NWA, and will be seeking additional partners to help expand the program in the future.

For more information, contact Sunny Lane or Kristen Herbert at (479) 273-3552 or visit [ecicnwa.org](http://ecicnwa.org).

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#### **About Helen R. Walton Children's Enrichment Center**

Children are our first priority at the Helen R. Walton Children's Enrichment Center; our doors opened in 1982. We are a trusted name in both the community and the early childhood industry. Our commitment is to provide families access to the highest quality early childhood education and care. The Center reaches beyond our families served and collaborates with early childhood programs throughout Northwest Arkansas. Visit [hwcec.org](http://hwcec.org) to learn more.

#### **About the Early Childhood Initiatives Center**

The ECIC collaborates with the nearly 500 early childhood programs in Northwest Arkansas, to ensure that every child, infant through pre-k, has access to the highest quality of early childhood education and care. High-quality early childhood education benefits the child, workforce and society through increased graduation rates, parental earnings and employee retention, and ensures a talent rich pipeline, leading to a \$9.21 return on investment for every dollar spent in early education. We rely on the generosity of volunteers, advocates and donors in our community. Visit [ecicnwa.org](http://ecicnwa.org) to learn more.

#### **About United Way of Northwest Arkansas**

The United Way of Northwest Arkansas mission is to unite our community to empower people and improve the lives through volunteers, advocates and giving. Bold Goal: To Provide Every Child in NWA a Pathway Out of Poverty! For more information, visit [unitedwaynwa.org](http://unitedwaynwa.org).

#### **About Dolly Parton Imagination Library**

The Imagination Library is a book-gifting program for preschool age children birth to the month of the 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. To enroll in the program, the children must live in a community that sponsors the Imagination Library.