

Reach Out and Read of Greater New York

Kari Kurjiaka, Director of Literacy & Public Policy
In Support of Funding for Reach Out and Read
New York State Budget

My name is Kari Kurjiaka, and I serve as the Director of Literacy & Public Policy at Reach Out and Read of Greater New York. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of **\$3 million in the FY27 state budget to support and expand the Reach Out and Read program**, a proven, evidence-based early literacy intervention that improves both educational and health outcomes for New York's youngest children.

Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit early literacy program that integrates books and literacy guidance into pediatric primary care for children from birth to age five, with a focus on low-income and underserved communities. During routine well-child visits, medical providers give children a developmentally appropriate book and coach parents on how reading aloud supports early language development, brain growth, and strong parent-child relationships. In doing so, Reach Out and Read transforms a standard medical visit into a powerful two-generation intervention.

Today, Reach Out and Read serves more than **300,000 children annually across 340 clinics throughout New York State, spanning 122 Assembly Districts and 60 Senate Districts**. The program leverages the trusted relationship between families and clinicians to promote reading, school readiness, and healthy development. The American Academy of Pediatrics endorses Reach Out and Read, reaffirmed that literacy promotion is a critical component of pediatric care, emphasizing that reading from infancy stimulates brain development, strengthens bonds between caregivers and children, and builds foundational language skills essential for lifelong success.

Despite this progress, the need for early literacy intervention in New York remains urgent. Nearly **two-thirds of low-income children enter kindergarten without the language skills needed to learn to read, and 58% of New York's fourth graders are not proficient in reading**, with even higher rates among low-income and multilingual students. Many families also live in "book deserts," where access to age-appropriate books is extremely limited. In some zip codes, there is only one children's book for every 300 children. At the same time, **91% of children under five attend at least one well-child visit each year**,

making pediatric care one of the most equitable and effective platforms for reaching families early.

An investment of **\$3 million** would allow Reach Out and Read to bring this proven intervention to **95 pediatric clinics currently on our statewide waitlist**, expanding access to underserved communities at a cost of approximately **\$20 per child per year**. This investment would ensure that every well-child visit doubles as a literacy intervention, closing the word gap, strengthening families, and preparing children for school and beyond.

The impact of Reach Out and Read is well-documented. Research shows that children participating in the program score **three to six months ahead of their peers in vocabulary development**, a critical predictor of school success. Importantly, immigrant children experience similar gains, underscoring the program's effectiveness across diverse populations. Families participating in Reach Out and Read are also more likely to return for regular well-child visits and to stay on schedule with recommended vaccinations, supporting early detection of health concerns and consistent preventive care. These outcomes help New York meet key performance targets and strengthen the early childhood system as a whole.

In closing, Reach Out and Read represents a cost-effective, evidence-based strategy to improve early literacy, strengthen families, and advance child health equity across New York State. A **\$3 million investment** will ensure that more children enter school ready to learn and thrive.

Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to New York's children and families.

Respectfully submitted,
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