

Statement of  
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Councilman Jones and Members of the Special Committee on Criminal Justice Reform: I am Siobhan Reardon, President and Director, of the Free Library of Philadelphia. I appreciate the opportunity to be here this afternoon to share with the Committee the work that we do to provide our children with meaningful and productive activities, particularly over the summer, and also our special initiatives for the incarcerated and their families.

The Free Library has a historical commitment to meeting the literacy needs of our children. It is among the highest priorities in our strategic plan, and part of our staff's work every single day. We are committed to building the skills of our young people, and working with them towards their academic and life success. LEAP, our afterschool program, began as an anti-crime initiative to keep children off the street during the most dangerous hours of the day. We continue to serve tens of thousands of children in this program at every neighborhood library in the city.

With summer close upon us, staff are focusing on *Summer Reading*, one of the most important ways that we keep children engaged and stave off the so-called summer slide. Combating literacy loss is particularly critical in Philadelphia where literacy levels are already below average. Additionally, research has shown that reading for fun can lead to improved academic achievement. *Summer Reading* provides a safe, positive place for young people to be engaged and productive during the summer months. We expect to reach 35,000 children in the coming season, which launches on June 5 and runs through August 5.

In order to attract more children and test ideas that could be even more beneficial, we are running three small pilots this summer. They include:

*The Spy Club*: Children will be engaged as Secret Agents, and given mysteries to solve. Clues will lead them to literacy and STEAM tasks that will help them solve the challenge.

*Healthy NewsWorks*: The Free Library is partnering with this non-profit organization to teach children journalistic skills – how to ask questions, determine reliability, and writing – and conclude with the production of a health-focused newspaper.

*Reading Buddies*: This pilot will pair adult volunteers with children to read one-on-one several hours a week. It will give children a meaningful relationship with a trusted adult, while building their vocabulary. City Council members are invited to participate in this program over the summer.

Continuing for the second year is *JumpStart*, an intensive back-to-school program that prepares children to be ready to return to the classroom in the fall. Tested at three libraries last summer, the results were strong – 90% of the children held off the summer slide – and we hope to expand

the program to eight neighborhood libraries this summer, thereby almost tripling the number of children that we reach.

The *Read by 4th* campaign, which the Free Library manages, is a citywide effort to significantly increase the number of students reading on grade level by the time they reach 4th grade. Summer camps can be a key ingredient in success, and the Campaign is committed to helping summer camps embed fun-filled literacy activities in their programming. Over 100 camps have contacted us requesting age-appropriate books for the summer; unfortunately current funding is sufficient to help only 80 camps.

Another Free Library initiative that would be of special interest to the Committee is our Prison Literacy Outreach. We have opened small libraries in cell blocks at Curran-Fromhold and Riverside Correctional Facilities, and the Alternative and Special Detention Unit. Not only do prisoners have access to a range of materials, but we have also trained prisoners to manage the loans and return process. Other city and Federal facilities have expressed interest in replicating these services, and we would welcome the opportunity to expand, both to bring literacy to the incarcerated and to provide valuable job skills.

Additionally, we have launched *Stories Alive*, a program that benefits both the incarcerated and their children. A key factor that leads to a decrease in recidivism is connection to family. In response, the Library has created a program that allows incarcerated parents to read to their children, through Skype-like technology, while the children are in the Library. We provide the children with a copy of the book that their parent has read to them. In addition to reading, parents have used the time to practice spelling, discuss school projects, and sing. This program runs through December, and we hope to be able to continue to offer it after then. The Library has also compiled a resource guide for returning citizens, a copy of which is available for each of you. We would be happy to provide more if needed.

We commend City Council for seeking strategies to reduce the city's rates of incarceration and recidivism. The Free Library is proud of its efforts in this regard, and stands ready to support your further deliberations. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.