

	LiGHT Grant Application 2026	
2026 LiGHT Grant Cover Form and Guidelines		

Name of individual, group or organization: United Way of Wells County, Inc.

Contact name(s): Ben Renkenberger

Address: 122 Lamar St Suite 118 Bluffton IN 46714 United States

Phone number: 260-824-5589 Email Address: uwdirector@unitedwaywells.org

Name of the program as it would appear on the grant award: _____

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Wells county

Describe who the grant award will serve and approximate number affected: _____

More than 930 Wells County children from birth through age five each month

Dollar amount requested: \$3,000

Would the program be offered if only a *partial* grant from LiGHT is made? Yes

Summary paragraph of the grant award requested: United Way of Wells County is requesting \$3,000 to help close

➤ May be utilized for part of the presentation.

the projected \$3,300 funding gap for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library from June-Oct 2027. The program

currently provides one free, age-appropriate book each month to 930+ Wells County children from birth to five.

Your support will provide approximately 4.650 deliveries as statewide, private funding has been exhausted.

Complete all requested items below:

1) This Cover Form

2) Project Narrative, 1-5 pages typed, including:

- What need in the Community will this program address? Give evidence to substantiate your request. (i.e., data, letters of recommendation, etc.)
- What do you want to do?
- What is your timeline?
- What results do you expect?
- If partnering with other organizations, please list.
- Describe the program and tell how the funds from the grant will be used based on your budget
- Signature page: To include endorsement of the project or program by the requesting agency's Board of Directors. This page must include a signature of the Board president.

3) Detailed budget



United Way of Wells County

122 LaMar St, Suite 118

Bluffton, IN 46714

260-824-5589

Contact:

Ben Renkenberger, Executive Director & CEO

Project:

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Wells County

Community Need Addressed

Serving Wells County Children with early literacy support

Amount of Support Requested

\$3,000

8/26/26

Project Narrative:

Introduction

For the past two years, LiGHT has stood behind Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Wells County. That support has helped us keep books moving into homes all across our county.

During those two years, United Way of Wells County has averaged more than 930 children enrolled each month. Using the conservative average of 930 children, that means at least 22,320 books have arrived in Wells County mailboxes in the past two years alone. That is 22,320 opportunities for a child and an adult to slow down, sit together, and read. For something so simple, the impact is incredible.

We are proud of that progress. We are also honest about the challenge in front of us. Indiana's direct state funding for the program ended in 2025. A privately funded statewide effort is helping offset costs for a limited time, through June 2027, but there is no ongoing state appropriation behind the program. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in Wells County is now sustained through private philanthropy, our United Way fundraising, and local grants such as LiGHT.

The number of children counting on the program remains high, while the funding beneath it has become far less certain. Our goal is simple: keep serving these children and make sure a family's ability to purchase books never determines whether a child can have a strong start or not.

Wells County Community Need Addressed

Early literacy begins long before a child enters kindergarten, but not every Wells County family has the same access to books.

- **The cost of books:** According to United for ALICE, 33 percent of Wells County households are living in poverty or earning more than the federal poverty level but still struggling to afford the basics. That represents approximately 3,867 local households. When families are choosing among housing, food, transportation, childcare, and healthcare, new children's books are easy to put off.
- **Access in a rural community:** Dolly Parton's Imagination Library removes both the cost and transportation barriers. Every enrolled child receives an age-appropriate book delivered directly to the child's home each month. Families do not need to travel anywhere, attend a program, or meet an income requirement.
- **Kindergarten readiness:** Research consistently shows that families participating in the Imagination Library read together more often. Studies have found that 66% – 75% of participating families increase how frequently they read together. ***Families with the lowest incomes often show the greatest increase, and participating children regularly enter kindergarten better prepared for early literacy activities.***
- **Time together as a family:** Parents tell us their children run to the mailbox when their book arrives. One Bluffton mother told us the books created the first bedtime routine that truly stuck with her toddler. A grandmother raising two young grandchildren described the books as one consistent bright spot each month. Teachers throughout Wells County tell us they can often recognize children who have been regularly exposed to books before entering school.

Our Plan and Expected Results

We want to continue providing Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to children from birth through age five throughout Wells County. We are not asking LiGHT to fund a new experiment. We are asking LiGHT to continue investing in a proven program that local families already know, use, and love!

LiGHT's \$3,000 investment will cover \$3,000 of the projected \$3,300 funding gap from June through October 2027. This support will help maintain uninterrupted monthly book delivery for more than 930 enrolled Wells County children during that period.

Expected Results:

- **LiGHT's \$3,000 investment** will help sustain approximately 4,650 book deliveries from June through October 2027, based on a conservative monthly enrollment of 930 children.
- We also expect to **maintain overall monthly participation** of more than 930 Wells County children. Continued funding will help us avoid interruptions, continue accepting eligible children, and keep books arriving for families already enrolled.
- **The longer-term results** are increased family reading, stronger vocabulary and letter recognition, greater confidence when children enter kindergarten, and more Wells County homes with books children can use and love on their journey to kindergarten.
- **United Way will track** results through monthly enrollment records, book and mailing invoices, total delivery counts, and feedback from families and community partners. The numbers are straightforward and easy to report back to LiGHT.

Timeline

LiGHT funds will be reserved for program expenses incurred from June through October 2027. The Wells County Foundation's \$17,500 DPIL allocation is projected to be fully expended by June 1, 2027, and the temporary statewide private funding commitment extends only through June 2027. During this period, United Way will continue monthly book delivery, enrollment, family communication, outreach, and program tracking. United Way will provide LiGHT with an impact update following the funding period.

Partnerships

- United Way of Wells County serves as the local program partner. We manage enrollment, family communication, outreach, fundraising, program records, and payment of the monthly invoices.

- The Dollywood Foundation selects, prints, and mails the books. Local schools, libraries, childcare providers, health care offices, Helping Hands, Family Centered Services, and other community organizations help promote the program and connect families with enrollment opportunities.
- Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Indiana coordinates the temporary statewide private funding available through June 2027. LiGHT and other local donors provide the dependable local support needed to continue the program in Wells County.

How Funds Will Be Used

- \$3,000 Request = 85+ children x \$35 each
- \$30 per child covers books and mailing for a year.
- \$5 per child supports program delivery: including staff registration support, booths, local and school presentations, parent communications, and community outreach.

The \$3,000 LiGHT request will cover \$3,000 of the projected \$3,300 program funding gap from June through October 2027. The full program budget includes monthly book and mailing costs, along with local staff time for enrollment, family communication, outreach, reporting, and program administration. United Way of Wells County will cover the remaining \$300.



Organization: United Way of Wells County

Program: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

Grant Amount Requested: \$3,000

We, the undersigned, affirm that this proposal has been reviewed and endorsed by the United Way of Wells County Board of Directors. We support this request to the LiGHT Steering Committee and affirm that the requested funds will be used solely for the purposes outlined in this application.

Please reach out with any questions, comments, or concerns!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jessica Bricker".

Jessica Bricker

Board Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ben Renkenberger".

Ben Renkenberger

United Way of Wells County

Executive Director & CEO



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Budget Detail 2026/2027

Imagination Library

Books Mailed To Up To 1000 Children's Books Each Month Over 12 Months	\$3,000
Total	\$36,000

United Way Staffing & Impact Costs to Facilitate Programs

Local program delivery and outreach, based on an average of 935 enrolled children at \$5 per child annually	935+ Children x \$5 Per Child per Year
Total	\$4,675

True Annual Cost For Program: \$40,675

Total Raised Funds for the 2026/2027 Program Year (Through June 2027):

Wells County Foundation, Bright Beginnings DPIL Gap Support	\$17,500
Power of the Purse (event proceeds – partial to DPIL)	\$5,000
IN26 Funding Internally Allocated to DPIL	\$1,375
Statewide Private Donor Support, Available Through June 2027	\$13,500
Total Confirmed Funding:	\$37,375

Projected Funding Gap, June, 2027 - Oct. 2027. \$3,300

LiGHT Grant Request \$3,000

Remaining Local Amount to Raise \$300