

MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VOLUNTEER STATE HEALTH PLAN INVESTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY EFFORTS FOR SHELBY COUNTY

Managed Care Organization Commits to Multi-Year, Strategic Partnership with Shelby County Books from Birth

MEMPHIS, TENN. – The Governor's Books from Birth Foundation (GBBF) today announced a three-year, \$900,000 collaboration with Volunteer State Health Plan (VSHP) to support the Imagination Library program in Shelby County, where 18 percent of Tennessee's *total* population under age five resides.

Created in 1996 by Dolly Parton, the Imagination Library mails a new, age-appropriate, high-quality book to registered children, every month from birth until age five – at no cost to the family, regardless of income. In Tennessee, the cost of purchasing and delivering books – \$28 per child, per year – is split evenly between a non-profit sponsoring organization in every county and state funds administered by the GBBF. VSHP's contribution will be allocated entirely toward the local sponsoring organization's share in Shelby County.

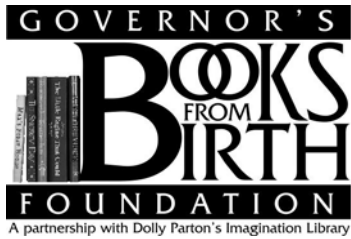
"I have long believed that our investments in early childhood programs give children the best chance for success in school and beyond," said Gov. Phil Bredesen. "Exposing children to reading at the earliest possible age can help eradicate the negative influence that low literacy has on the health status of Tennesseans. A monthly book delivered throughout the first five years of a child's life will go a long way toward increasing reading proficiency – and thereby preventing poor health outcomes – in Shelby County, where the state's under-five population is most heavily concentrated."

The collaboration between VSHP, Shelby Co. Books from Birth, and GBBF is exemplary of the public-private partnership structure that Gov. Bredesen envisioned for the statewide Imagination Library at its 2004 inception. The first of its kind among all Imagination Library affiliates in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom, this agreement goes above and beyond financial support to include a strategic action plan meant to considerably impact educational outcomes in greater Memphis.

Shelby Co. Books from Birth will work in lockstep with VSHP, making every effort **to enroll in the Imagination Library** each newborn covered by the VSHP TennCare MCO. VSHP's \$300,000 three-year annual pledge to Shelby Co. Books from Birth was approximated according to the number of Memphis-area children born each year who are insured by VSHP. A \$70 contribution *per newborn* will cover the county's half-share of the cost for a child's Imagination Library enrollment for the *full five years* of program eligibility – representing a personal home library of up to 60 books prior to entering kindergarten.

"A primary goal of VSHP is to help our members and fellow Tennesseans become healthier," said Sonya Nelson, president and CEO of VSHP. "We recognize that a population in good health starts with investments in early childhood programs, and this partnership with Shelby County Books from Birth affirms our belief that the Imagination Library will help to improve the health status of Memphians by enhancing and increasing their educational opportunities from birth."

Health care professionals recurrently affirm that patients who struggle to read find it difficult to access and navigate America's complex health delivery system. Low literacy also affects patient-physician communication dynamics, inadvertently leads to substandard medical care, and is associated with poor understanding of written or spoken medical advice. Essentially, illiteracy leads to adverse patient health outcomes, and negative effects on the health of our population.



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"Our county faces a unique fund-raising challenge in offering this critically important program to our youngest citizens," said AC Wharton, mayor of Shelby County. "Because the sheer size of our eligible population well exceeds that of any other participating Imagination Library community in Tennessee – and, thus far, even the nation – we realized that a creative partnership with a dedicated investor, whose mission was aligned with ours, was essential to the program's long-term success. We could not be more grateful to Volunteer State Health Plan for their generosity; I assure you that Shelby Co. Books from Birth will work diligently to deliver up to 60 Imagination Library books to every newborn to whom VSHP has pledged financial support."

Any child under age five living in Tennessee can be registered for the Imagination Library. According to 2000 U.S. Census results, 56 percent of the state's *total* eligible population – almost 210,000 preschoolers – are registered. With over 131,000 Tennessee five-year-olds having already "graduated," Tennessee's Imagination Library has served over 342,000 children and delivered nearly eight million books since the GBBF was founded in 2004. Of the state's 375,000 eligible children, more than 68,000 reside in Shelby County alone. Currently, 46 percent of children under age five (31,401) in greater Memphis are enrolled, and will receive a free book delivery in their mailboxes this month.

Volunteer State Health Plan, Inc. is an independent licensee of the BlueCross BlueShield Association and a licensed HMO affiliate of its parent company BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee. VSHP focuses on managing care and providing quality health care products, services, and information for government programs. VSHP's mission is to serve Tennesseans in its products and services, and through community outreach activities. VSHP was TennCare's first managed care organization.

To learn how you can support the Imagination Library in *your* county, or for information on registering a child, visit www.GovernorsFoundation.org, or call toll-free, 1-877-99-BOOKS.

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