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Reach Out and Read Celebrates 20th Anniversary

Early literacy program has distributed more than 20 million children's books since 1989

(BOSTON, MA) March 11, 2009 -- In March 1989, Boston City Hospital pediatricians Barry Zuckerman and Robert Needlman began handing out books to their youngest patients, offering advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud, and employing volunteer readers in their waiting room. That was the birth of Reach Out and Read, one of the most successful early childhood interventions ever developed, which currently serves 25 percent of the nation's at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

More than 20 million books have been distributed to children in the 20 years since Drs. Zuckerman and Needlman and early childhood educators Jean Nigro, Kathleen MacLean, and Kathleen Fitzgerald-Rice first developed the Reach Out and Read model: a brilliant, yet simple strategy to promote childhood literacy and school readiness.

Every child who participates in Reach Out and Read (ROR) starts kindergarten with a home library of up to 10 brand-new, developmentally-appropriate books and a parent who has heard at every regular checkup about the importance of reading. Proven to improve school readiness, ROR focuses on those children at greatest risk -- children living at or near poverty -- during the critical years before they enter kindergarten.

More than a dozen research studies demonstrate Reach Out and Read's powerful impact, unmatched among other early literacy interventions. Studies show that parents who get books and literacy counseling from their health care provider are more likely to read to their young children, read to them more often, and provide more books in the home. Children who participate in Reach Out and Read score significantly higher on vocabulary tests and show improved language development -- the single strongest predictor of school success.

Since that first Reach Out and Read book was handed out in 1989, more than 50,000 pediatricians, family practitioners, and pediatric nurse practitioners have been trained in the ROR model. Today, Reach Out and Read partners with 4,121 hospitals, clinics, health centers, and practices in all 50 states to serve more than 3.5 million children ages 6 months to 5 years old, including more than a quarter of America's most impoverished children.

One of Reach Out and Read's greatest strengths, especially during challenging economic times like these, continues to be its cost-effectiveness. The cost of the full, five-year ROR program is just \$40 per child.

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Endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Reach Out and Read is the model of a successful public-private partnership, drawing funding support from the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Defense, 14 state governments, and individuals, corporations, and foundations nationwide.

Reach Out and Read's National Center, Coalitions, and Sites plan to celebrate the program's 20th Anniversary with a yearlong campaign aimed at boosting nationwide awareness of the importance of early literacy.

After 20 years, Reach Out and Read's goal remains the same: that every child grow up with books and a love of reading. Reach Out and Read's website includes information for all parents including how to select age-appropriate children's books, reading tips, and developmental milestones. For further information, visit www.reachoutandread.org.

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About Reach Out and Read

Reach Out and Read (ROR) is a national, nonprofit children's literacy program that works with medical providers to reach the children at greatest risk – children aged 6 months to 5 years living at or near poverty. Medical providers participating in ROR give books to their youngest low-income patients at checkups and advise their parents about the importance of reading. More than 20 million books have been distributed through ROR, which currently serves 25 percent of the most impoverished children in the U.S. The only American literacy program featured at the 2006 White House Conference on Global Literacy, ROR is endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. ROR has one of the strongest records of research support of any primary care intervention. Peer-reviewed studies indicate that parents who get books and literacy counseling from their doctors and nurses are more likely to read to their young children, read to them more often, and provide more books in the home. Low-income children exposed to the program have shown improvements in language development, a critical component of school readiness, and score significantly higher on vocabulary tests.

Reach Out and Read is working to make literacy promotion a standard part of pediatric primary care. More than 50,000 doctors and nurses have been trained by ROR since its founding in 1989. This year ROR will provide 5.7 million new books to 3.5 million children at 4,121 health care sites in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. International programs modeled on ROR have been started in Italy, Israel, the Philippines, England, Bangladesh, and Canada. UNESCO awarded ROR an international 2007 Confucius Prize for Literacy in recognition of its particularly effective contribution to the fight against illiteracy. For further information, please visit ROR's website at www.reachoutandread.org.