

PROJECT REPORT

By Aliyah Majeed-Hall

Title: One Word Reading Initiative, Inc. (“One Word Reading”)

www.onewordreading.org

Instagram: @oneworderading

[The Today Show, Jenna & Friends](#)

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A. INSPIRATION

For a few years, I’ve volunteered in an after-school program at Affordable Housing & Communities (AHC) in Arlington, VA. Some children I work with come from Spanish-speaking households. Most attend a local Title I school. All face economic hardship. The students are bright, curious, and dream big – they talk about flying to Mars, playing for Real Madrid, or writing the next *Encanto*. Despite their talents, many struggle with reading. A common thread: they have few books at home beyond schoolwork.

Having books at home early in life drives educational success (Scholastic, 2023). Children who grow up with books are stronger readers, perform better in school, and show greater social-emotional growth, regardless of parental income or education. Books at home can also reduce the achievement gap between low- and high-income children (Scholastic, 2023).

Volunteering at AHC made me reflect on my own childhood. I was lucky to be surrounded by books I treasured and returned to again and again – *Harry Potter*, *Matilda*, *A Wrinkle in Time*. Constant reading paved the way for everything else too: school success, summer jobs, a sense of well-being.

That’s what inspired me to create One Word Reading. I wanted to give children from lower-income families in my community the same gift I had growing up: a home with books and the chance at a strong start in life.

B. PROJECT PLAN

Mission: One Word Reading (www.onewordreading.org) is a student-led, all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to ensuring children from vulnerable communities have books of their own at home or wherever they may be living.

Since early 2024, One Word Reading has distributed over 3,700 new or gently used children’s books to more than 1,400 underserved families in 13 states. By helping families start home libraries, we aim to inspire a love of reading, boost academic achievement, and strengthen critical thinking and social-emotional skills.

Project Plan: One Word began as a small idea to address a large need. In 2023, after realizing many children I worked with didn't have books at home, I approached AHC Volunteer Director Laura Jackson and Education Director Laney Parrot. I asked if I could bring books to give to AHC's children.

With their support, I began collecting books and organized small pop-up book fairs at AHC's after-school programs at various sites. To my surprise, the children seemed excited. They spent time browsing titles, talked with friends about their books, and started reading almost immediately. Their enthusiasm made me realize this met a real need.

The success of these events led me to expand our reach. I recruited a small board, and we were approved as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in summer 2024. I also recruited two close friends (Satya Nachnani and Hannah Kelley) and my brother to join me. Our short-term goal was to provide high-quality books to children in Northern Virginia; our long-term goal is to reach children across the country.

C. PROJECT EXECUTION

Because I knew we would have a very small budget and volunteer staff, I embraced a few principles for reaching as many children as possible with minimal resources.

1. Conserving, Repurposing and Repairing High-Quality Books

We wanted to repurpose good books, conserving resources and minimizing consumption. Northern Virginia is a civic-minded, well-resourced area, and I hoped local residents would be eager to donate gently new or used books – and they were. I received generous in-kind donations from libraries, schools, organizations, and neighbors. Some schools even hosted book drives for us. I personally inspect and repair any used books to ensure they're in excellent condition for the children who receive them.

2. Meet Children Where They Are: Pop-Up Book Fairs

Lower-income families face significant barriers to accessing books: new books are expensive and libraries are often inaccessible.

We discovered the best way to reach children was to go to where families naturally gather and host pop-up book fairs on site. We travel to community centers, shelters, after-school programs, affordable housing developments, food pantries, social service centers, and other locations in Northern Virginia.

Once on site, we set up pop-up book fairs with a variety of books to choose from in English and Spanish – from board books to teen novels. And we invite children and families to look through and select 1-5 books from a variety of popular titles and award-winning books at our tables.

3. Offer Good Books Children Will Love

When I ask children what they like to read, they often answer “I don’t” and then explain that the books in school are “boring.” So I try to offer a variety of books that don’t feel like homework. We try to offer books that are:

- Popular with kids (e.g., “Dog Man,” “Baby Sitters Club” etc.);
- Received literary awards (Caldecott Medal, Newbery Medal, Coretta Scott King Award, Puré Belpré Award, Scholastic and other American Library Association awards)
- Reflect diverse characters and experiences
- Present interesting stories, characters, themes, and illustrations
- In Spanish and English

4. Simplicity: Reading Can Be As Simple as ‘One Word’

At book events, I wanted to show children and caregivers that reading doesn’t have to be complicated or require memorizing thousands of words. It can be simple—starting with one word in a good story. To encourage family interaction, we provide colorful “One Word” bookmarks printed with three simple questions family members can ask one another while reading a book together:

- *What one word did you learn while reading?*
- *What one word would you change if you were the author?*
- *What one word changed the story for you?*

5. Make it Fun and Festive

In addition to a wide variety of high-quality books, we also offer fun “reading swag” at our book fairs/events to get children excited about selecting books and reading. This includes colorful bookmarks, pencils, stickers, pens, erasers, stress balls and gift bags to hold their books and reading swag.

6. Expanding Our Reach Nationally Through Direct Service Organizations

To reach children we cannot visit in person, we identified organizations that serve vulnerable families in other states, including domestic violence shelters, emergency housing organizations and youth centers. With our books, these organizations have hosted mini book fairs, stocked small libraries for residents, or given books directly to children they serve.

D. COMMUNITY IMPACT

1. Children and Families

Since the beginning of 2024, One Word Reading has:

- Provided **3,724 children's books** to an estimated **1463 children** from economically vulnerable households
- Distributed **1997 children's books** to children in Virginia through **18** pop-up book fairs and community events
- Provided books to children in **13 states and District of Columbia**, including: AL, AZ, DC, DE, GA, KY, MD, MS, OK, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV through shipments to direct-service organizations (more below).
- Provided **754+** Spanish-language children's books to children and families

2. Direct Service Organizations

One Word Reading has provided hundreds of books directly to 18 organizations in 13 states serving vulnerable children, including domestic violence and family shelters, community centers, youth groups, and emergency housing providers. I worked closely with each to identify their needs and assembled boxes of 50–150 books. Some organizations hosted pop-up book fairs, others created resident libraries, and some distributed books directly to families.

3. Testimonials

The following sample of testimonials shows the impact One Word Reading has had on children, families and organizations.

“One Word Reading Team: This is AMAZING!!! We are ever so grateful... You are doing amazing work. They might start out school developmentally behind, but you will be a part of their growth in the years ahead! Again, my husband, brother, and I thank you so much, and are truly humbled.”

- Stephanie H., Oklahoma

“It feels insanely good to get all of this good stuff. And I’m really grateful for it.”

– Axwell, Age 10, AHC, Arlington, VA

“One Word Reading Initiative has put books in our students’ hands to take home as their very own. Our students were overjoyed to see some of their favorite titles.”

- Laney Parrott, Affordable Housing & Communities, Arlington, VA

“Children and families are so excited when One Word Reading comes to AFAC with books! Aliyah and her team bring wonderful energy and thoughtfulness about the local community.”

- Debbie Staren-Doby, Arlington Food Assistance Center, Arlington, VA

“We at Phoenix Indian Center are so appreciative of One Word ...Once we let our youth know there was free reading books for them, they literally jumped at the opportunity to select which ones they wanted to take home. It’s so wonderful to see kids excited about reading, thank you for that!”

- Utahna Blackwater, Phoenix Indian Center, Phoenix, AZ

“I know [the children at the shelter] will be excited, especially the Spanish books, they are all so nice... Although you are a new organization you are [on] the right path to greatness.”

- Latoya Poindexter, House of Ruth Maryland, Baltimore, MD

“As an emergency shelter for families experiencing homelessness, it’s incredible you offer our children the opportunity to delve into the world of reading. Our Free Library allows children to choose their own books and feel a sense of home. We’re also excited to use these new books for our Study Buddies reading program. It’s truly a joy to see families reading [. . .]!”

- Anna Krecklow, Families Moving Forward, Durham, NC

“We are incredibly appreciative! The Spanish-language books you sent will now be available in the reading nooks where they were previously absent. The books are all excellent, and we will make good use of them!”

– Doni Miller, Family Promise of Greater Phoenix, Phoenix, AZ

“Thank you so much for thinking of Atlanta Children’s Day Shelter! We are so excited for this partnership with One Word Reading Initiative”

- Emily Stinson, Atlanta Children’s Day Shelter, Atlanta, GA

4. Community Partnerships

One Word’s impact is reflected in the strength of our community partnerships, which help amplify our mission. Support has come from local schools, nonprofits, bookstores, media and national organizations. Notable partners include AHC, Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC), Friends of Arlington Library, Arlington public elementary and high schools, and Scholastic (donated \$10,000 in books).

These partnerships have inspired dozens of family members, neighbors, and even strangers across the country to contribute books, money, and time.

5. Public Awareness: Press and Recognition

Our impact has also been amplified by recognition from news outlets and foundations, including: *The Today Show* (Jenna & Friends), WUSA9, NBC4, George H.W. Bush Points of Light, Volunteer Arlington, the Leadership Center of Arlington, and the *Falls Church Press*. This recognition has inspired generous offers from people across the country eager to start chapters, contribute, or donate.

E. REFLECTIONS ON CIVIC VIRTUES

Through One Word, I’ve come to understand that **humility** and **respect** are paramount when working alongside different communities. At first I thought bridging the literacy gap by giving children books would be simple. But I learned that language barriers, geographic divides, cultural barriers, socio-economic differences, and mistrust of “do-gooders” like myself all shape whether a project like this succeeds. I learned to let families, staff and children guide me on what works best for them.

One Word also deepened my commitment to **justice** and a sense of **responsibility** to “do something” about the inequalities before me. Bringing books to different communities opened my eyes to the stark divide between “haves” and “have-nots.” Economic and racial segregation

are visible and affect everything from housing and schools to whether there are grocery stores and libraries nearby. It's clear that not everyone is starting from the same starting line in school or life. I want to continue to do whatever I can to address these inequalities through One Word and beyond.

I've also developed and strengthened my moral **courage**. One Word offers children diverse stories and books that they can see themselves in. At a time when anti-DEI forces are banning diverse books and silencing minority voices, I've learned to speak up – in school, in my community, and through this project – for the equity and inclusion values I believe in.