

Freedom Reads

Impact Report 2021-24



Freedom Reads

As the 2020 global pandemic constrained our ability to spend meaningful time with each other, Reginald Dwayne Betts' mind turned to prisons. He came to think about what everyone needs when cut off from the larger world—books. With a significant grant from the Mellon Foundation, Dwayne launched an organization committed to putting millions of books in prison one Freedom Library at a time.

Freedom Reads was incubated at Yale Law School. Within a year, we opened the first Freedom Library at MCI-Norfolk, a Massachusetts prison where Malcolm X was incarcerated. Soon, letters from the Inside arrived from Norfolk. Men in other units wanted Freedom Libraries and Freedom Reads responded. We returned to open libraries in every cellblock across that prison.

Freedom Reads became an independent non-profit with the new goal of opening 20,000 libraries. Now, Freedom Libraries are visited daily in adult and youth prisons, from California to Colorado, from Maine to Maryland, to Connecticut, Louisiana, New York, and Virginia, where some members of the Freedom Reads team were formerly locked up. In a few short years, we went from a small but mighty team of three people to a staff of 20. We have expanded our goals—Freedom Reads' vision is to open a Freedom Library in every cellblock in every prison in the country. This report shows the impact of our work through the eyes of those who support us.



Reginald Dwayne Betts speaks at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, on March 4, 2022. (Photo: Jonna Algarin-Mojica)

By the Numbers

As of Oct. 1, 2024

392

Libraries Opened

37,800

People with Access to Freedom Libraries

43

Prisons with Freedom Libraries

128

Literary Events

226,000

Books Delivered by Freedom Reads

2,900+

People who Attended Literary Events

“

Books help you think about what it means to be alive in the world. When you have conversations about what it means to be alive in the world, suddenly, you're beginning to understand yourself better, and in understanding yourself better, you're better able to imagine a better future.”

**Reginald Dwayne Betts,
Freedom Reads
Founder & CEO**

The Impact of Freedom Libraries

With the Freedom Library, we bring hope and joy to everyone touched by incarceration. With these beautiful, handcrafted bookcases, we transform cellblocks into spaces of possibilities.

The Freedom Library is both an idea that unites people and a physical intervention into the landscape of steel and suffering that characterizes prison. In an environment where the freedom to think and contribute to a community is limited, Freedom Reads reminds those Inside that they have not been forgotten.

By opening Freedom Libraries in prisons we change lives.

- We build communities;
- We interrupt monotony, boredom, and frustration;
- We promote dignity; and
- We bring joy, spark generosity, and minimize the suffering of people in prison, which in turn contributes to the possibility of redemption.

In this, our first Impact Report, we highlight the voices of our Library Patrons. Through their letters, they reveal the impact that Freedom Reads has deepening their engagement with their families and the world. Our Library Patrons express their joy, appreciation, and desire to spread the generosity that Freedom Library openings spark in them. And Department of Corrections officials illustrate the impact Freedom Libraries have in changing prison culture. All said, this report provides a perspective on the Freedom Library from those who engage with it the most.

Photos of Freedom Library Patrons at Dillwyn Correctional Center (Virginia), Buckingham Correctional Center (Virginia), Arizona State Prison Complex-Perryville and Eyman, La Vista Correctional Facility (Colorado), and Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility (Colorado). (Photos: Gioncarlo Valentine)



The Impact of Books

Freedom Reads is starting conversations about books in prison cellblocks. We hear about the impact of the books from the letters we get from readers Inside, and the number of letters we have received has grown exponentially. We encourage Library Patrons to write to us, and we always write back.

One of the strongest impacts we've heard is about the ability of books to make tangible, sometimes profound, changes in people's lives.

“

We are excited about expanding reading opportunities and 24-hour accessibility ... This donation means so much to our prisoners as it will help broaden their horizons through reading. ... I don't think there's any question about the impact that books have. It's working and we see it first hand.”

James M. Le Blanc, Secretary,
Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections

Freedom Reads

“

A book has the power to unlock hidden talent, restore a father to his child, release an addict from the bonds of addiction, the possibilities for a paradigm shift are endless and is what is needed to create true change. It also motivates and inspires people such as myself.”

Adam, Freedom Library Patron at Carl Robinson Correctional Institution in Connecticut

Freedom Library at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York.
(Photo: Karen Pearson)



“ I just got off the phone with my son, an inmate in St. Brides Correctional in Chesapeake, VA. He was very excited to tell me about the new library going into each pod and the easy access to more books. First off he talked about how beautiful and well made the real wood bookshelf is. He felt the natural energy from real wood flowing and he was happy. ...

He told the people setting up the books that his mom was friends with S A Cosby. We worked together for several years in a retail store while he was writing and before he was published. I'm sure S A Cosby would be happy to know his words and stories are available to more people. I will share this with him.

I'm very glad that Freedom Reads is in jails and places where the books can get into more hands. ... I had an exciting conversation about this with my son today. That alone was wonderful. Looking forward to reading is fun. And can ease your worries if only for the moments you are in the pages.”

Mother of a Freedom Library Patron in a Virginia prison

Letters from the Inside by Theme

Of the 750 letters we have received that mention how Freedom Libraries make people feel, these are the most prominent reactions.



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The Impact of Reading

Neuroscientists, psychologists, literary critics, and philosophers have studied the connections between reading and pro-social behavior, particularly empathy and social understanding across differences. Studies have explored the various types of cognitive improvements reading fiction, biography, and other genres provide. Many of our Freedom Library patrons have expressed their own sense of the impact of reading.

“I never read a book until I was incarcerated, and I believe if I had, it would have changed the trajectory of my life.”

Brandon, Freedom Library Patron at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Colorado

“Reading is an essential part of literacy and by placing these libraries throughout the institution there will be many positive impacts such as reducing stress, improving mental health, vocabulary expansion, and improving communication skills. The positive impacts will be beneficial in the rehabilitation process.”

Travis Day, Warden, Rayburn Correctional Center, Louisiana

Freedom Library opening at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Colorado.

“Freedom Reads brought 500 new minds into conversation in my unit. The 50 or 60 men that occupy my cellblock are from small towns and cities in CT and most have not been much further than its shallow borders. With the introduction of the 500 books in the Freedom Library those borders now include different worlds. ...”

Minds are stirred and lives are opened as each book leaves the shelf. Freedom is possessed when the prisoner reads. The prisoner becomes freedom and of course freedom reads.”

James, Freedom Library Patron at Cheshire Correctional Institution in Connecticut

“You never know what one event, one book or one inspirational message can do for someone. Freedom Reads invigorated me with hope and possibilities.”

Daniel, Freedom Library Patron at Valley State Prison in California

“My need for serving others evolved out of reading. ... Reading not only allowed me to endure this lengthy prison sentence without losing my sanity, it gave me the wherewithal to change my mindset and expand my thinking. Indeed, reading has allowed me to open my mind to possibilities that I did not know were available to me.”

Kevin, Freedom Library Patron at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York

Inside Literary Prize judges during a book discussion at Minnesota Correctional Facility—Shakopee.

“...having read even a few dozen books in common is a force more binding than blood.”

Cormac McCarthy, Author of *The Passenger*



Changing Prison Culture

Testimony from DOC Leaders



"This visionary program provides ease of access for all in our care. Your program fits perfectly with the Maine Model of Corrections where we treat residents with dignity, respect and destigmatize incarceration."

Randall Liberty, Commissioner, Maine Department of Corrections (2023)

"The inmate library and the staff library have the same collection. I think this creates some commonality between all individuals, some shared interests and an opening for dialogue in everyday common interactions: a way to inspire some positive behavior, positive thinking, creativity, outside of the everyday normal interactions that occur."

Stephen Kennedy, Superintendent, Old Colony Correctional Center, Massachusetts (2022)

"Freedom Reads has given so much more than books, they have provided a vital resource for personal development and well-being with far-reaching and lasting effects for the incarcerated population. The libraries ... are a tangible example for the incarcerated population that their past does not have to define their future."

Angel Quiros, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Correction (2023)

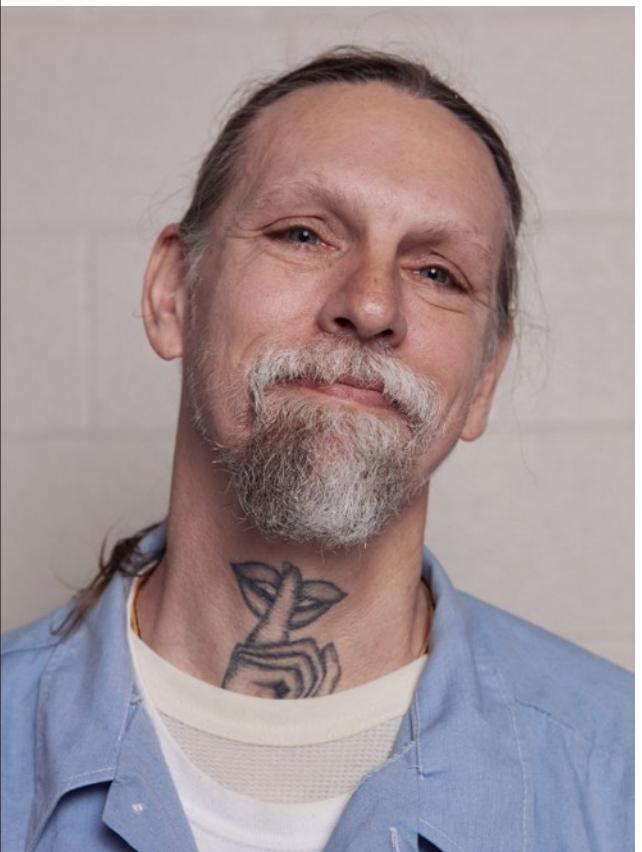
"These Freedom Libraries are a great opportunity to showcase the positive role reading can have in everyone's lives. Books are a great way to grow, to gain wisdom and to start affecting change in your life through inspiration."

Harold W. Clarke, Director, Virginia Department of Corrections (2023)

"It's been nothing but success."

James M. Le Blanc, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (2022)

Bringing Hope and Fostering Generosity



Freedom Library Patron David.
(Photo: Gioncarlo Valentine)

“...Not positive, this was the outlook yesterday morning, March 4, as I grumbled through waking up to raucous noise that I had no means of quieting, dressed in my prison uniform which I dutifully go out of my way to avoid having to wear, to go to a program I had no real interest in going to. It was my usual depressing morning with my usual frustrated self and the added extra of leaving the pod for anything other than outdoor recreation... Then, Reginald Dwayne Betts began to speak.

Can you name any one single person who has been released from prison, and who has chosen to get permission to willingly come back in to prison? Even for a single minute?

... How about more than one, several.... One of the people on the Freedom Reads crew served 30 years. Three full decades of his life in prison 15 months of freedom after 30 years of captivity and he willingly comes back into prison(s) to bring books and well-made furniture THAT is what it means to be a human being. That is THE ABSOLUTE BEST of humanity... He spent two more days in a prison and he absolutely did not have to do that...he made me think, without uttering a single word to the effect, that I just might be okay.”

David, Freedom Library Patron at Dillwyn Correctional Center in Virginia

“Just wanted to thank you for the beautiful handcrafted woodwork and books that you donated ... I speak for all of us here that we all appreciate the time, effort, and kind heart that you showed our prison. As you well know prison is not easy for people, nor do we have people that care enough about us due to our mistakes in life. ... Hopefully you continue to change people's lives by what you do, and strive to help others change.”

Shawn, Freedom Library Patron at Valley State Prison in California



“I don't think anyone has ever done something so gracious and beneficial for us ... thank you from the bottom of my heart for caring about our rehabilitation success. Most people forget about us and don't care if we change and become successful. ... Books can change people's lives if they want change, you're helping us change and empowering us to do so.”

Dan, Freedom Library Patron at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Colorado

“I want to thank you for your kindness. You have given me hope in a hopeless situation. I have been reading everyday now you have given the books to us. I will never forget this and I will pay it forward.”

Joseph, Freedom Library Patron at Correctional Training Facility in California

“The impact we leave can do good (or bad at times) for long after we’re gone. ... the books you leave here hopefully inspire others to do more, think more than of themselves and have a positive impact for the now and the future.

...Every time I see the bookshelf here I am reminded of the compassion that is still out there.”

Derek, Freedom Library Patron at Correctional Training Facility in California

“Thank you so much for your beautiful bookcase and also books. The smell of wood and the smell of a new book takes me right out of this place! ... I couldn’t check it out for the first few days and when I could, I was so happy and joyful. It made me feel free.”

Hillary, Freedom Library Patron at Central California Women’s Facility

Freedom Reads Founder & CEO
Reginald Dwayne Betts at a Freedom Library opening at Dillwyn Correctional Center in Virginia.

“A library is never just one thing.”

Reginald Dwayne Betts,
Freedom Reads Founder & CEO



The Impact of Returning to Prisons



When Freedom Reads travels to prisons to open Freedom Libraries, the team always includes people who have spent time in prison. When formerly incarcerated folks go back they are met by initial disbelief from soon-to-be Library Patrons—that astonishment quickly transforms into delight, and generates thoughts and feelings that are uncommon in prison spaces. Freedom Reads team members themselves are tremendously moved by the power of their return. When team members return to the very prisons they spent so much time in, the reunions are profound.

As just one example, on March 4, 2024, Freedom Reads went into two prisons in Virginia—Dillwyn and Buckingham Correctional Centers and opened 32 Freedom Libraries.

Audience (left) at Buckingham Correctional Center during Reginald Dwayne Betts' performance of *FELON: An American Washi Tale* (below) on March 4, 2024. (Photos: Gioncarlo Valentine)

Dwayne also did two performances of his powerful one-man show, *FELON: An American Washi Tale*. This date marked the 19th anniversary of his release from prison in Virginia.

Freedom Reads Library Production Assistant, Kevin ‘Luke’ Williams, who had a life + 33 year sentence and did time at Buckingham, was released in 2019 thanks to the work Dwayne did for his parole hearing. When he returned on March 4th to Buckingham, the surprise and joy from those who recognized him and realized he came back was overwhelming.

Reflecting on that visit, Luke says he regularly thinks about that return. The guys he knew while in Buckingham were shocked and then inspired. “I don’t remember anybody who had done as much time as I did coming back when I was inside...seeing me out, looking good, eating good, gave people hope,” he said. “Everybody made a mistake, but that mistake doesn’t define us.”



“

Being a part of Freedom Library openings is special to me because I realize that the work I had been doing on the Freedom Libraries mattered. That these Freedom Libraries were literally changing housing unit spaces nationwide, but most importantly, the culture of the prison as well. Literature was changing lives.

I got to talk to the youth in the facility and it was hard not to see myself in them. These people were so hungry for books and talked about how hard it was to get great pieces of reading material. They mentioned not having nothing to do all day. If there is one thing to know about prison is that if you have idle time, it's easy to fall into bullshit. However, providing the housing unit spaces with libraries changes that. Much like me during my time in prison, books were a vehicle that drove me out of prison and to places that I never imagined possible.”

Michael Byrd, Freedom Reads
Library Production Assistant



The Freedom Reads team, including (from left to right) Kevin Baker, Tyler Sperrazza, David Perez Jr., Steven Parkhurst, Michael Byrd, and fellow Cecelia Ramsey, at Garden State Correctional Facility in New Jersey.



Freedom Reads Library Production Manager Kevin Baker explains how to build a Freedom Library.

“

In August of 2024, I returned to Cybulski Correctional Institution in Connecticut as the Library Coordinator for Freedom Reads to work in collaboration with the Warden, Deputy Warden, and Captains who held the keys to my only exit out. We worked in collaboration to bring the power of literature to every housing unit at Cybulski. Since October of 2023, I have entered 19 facilities across the country but this one was different. Was I nervous? Absolutely. Did I think I would ever walk back into my old dorm and see the place I showered, slept, broke bread, and broke down? Absolutely not. Was it necessary? Absolutely. To see the faces of my brothers I left behind was invaluable. It filled me with courage, strength, and energy to continue this work me and my team do.

I feel a lot of different, conflicting emotions about going back. It's hard to explain – I'm grateful. I'm proud. Most of all, it makes me hungry to provide more joy in spaces where joy seems impossible.”

David Perez Jr., Freedom Reads Library Coordinator

“

Walking through the housing blocks with Wardens and staff, I am brought back to all the times I begged for just 10 seconds of someone's time, locked behind a steel door, and they walk right by me. It's hard to explain how bad this made me, and probably everyone who has experienced it, feel.

I know it won't fix all the issues for people still locked behind those doors, but to know we are bringing joy via our Freedom Library is some consolation. It is why I am here, doing this work. This is not a job, not even a career to me, it is a Calling. Freedom Reads is here to inject positivity into every housing block in this country and help combat the long list of negative experiences people have while incarcerated.”

Kevin Baker, Freedom Reads Library Production Manager

The Impact of Judging

The Inside Literary Prize

In December 2023, Freedom Reads, with partner organizations, created a first of its kind literary award in the US judged exclusively by incarcerated people. Four books were selected to send into 12 prisons in six states. The Freedom Reads team visited each prison to hold discussions of the books and provide the opportunity for the judges to cast their votes. The goal of the award is to create a way for incarcerated people to meaningfully participate in the national cultural conversation.

Over 200 incarcerated people served as judges and many expressed their appreciation for being included in this important award and being seen as dignified people and readers, not just “numbers.”

Timothy, an Inside Literary Prize (ILP) judge at Nash Correctional Institution in North Carolina, wrote about the experience: “I love, love, love books. For a book lover, getting to be a judge for a prominent literary prize ranks high on the life experience list, almost like a sports fan winning the Super Bowl.”

Heather, an ILP judge at Minnesota Correctional Facility – Shakopee said, “We’re in here, yes. We’re padlocked. But we have ideas and thoughts that really matter.”

The inaugural winning book was Imani Perry’s *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*.

“I don’t want to be looked at like the only thing I can do is something bad. I want to show that I can do something good.”

Janae, Inside Literary Prize Judge at Arizona State Prison Complex – Perryville

Janae, Inside Literary Prize Judge at Arizona State Prison Complex – Perryville. (Photo: Gioncarlo Valentine)





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