

Freedom Reads

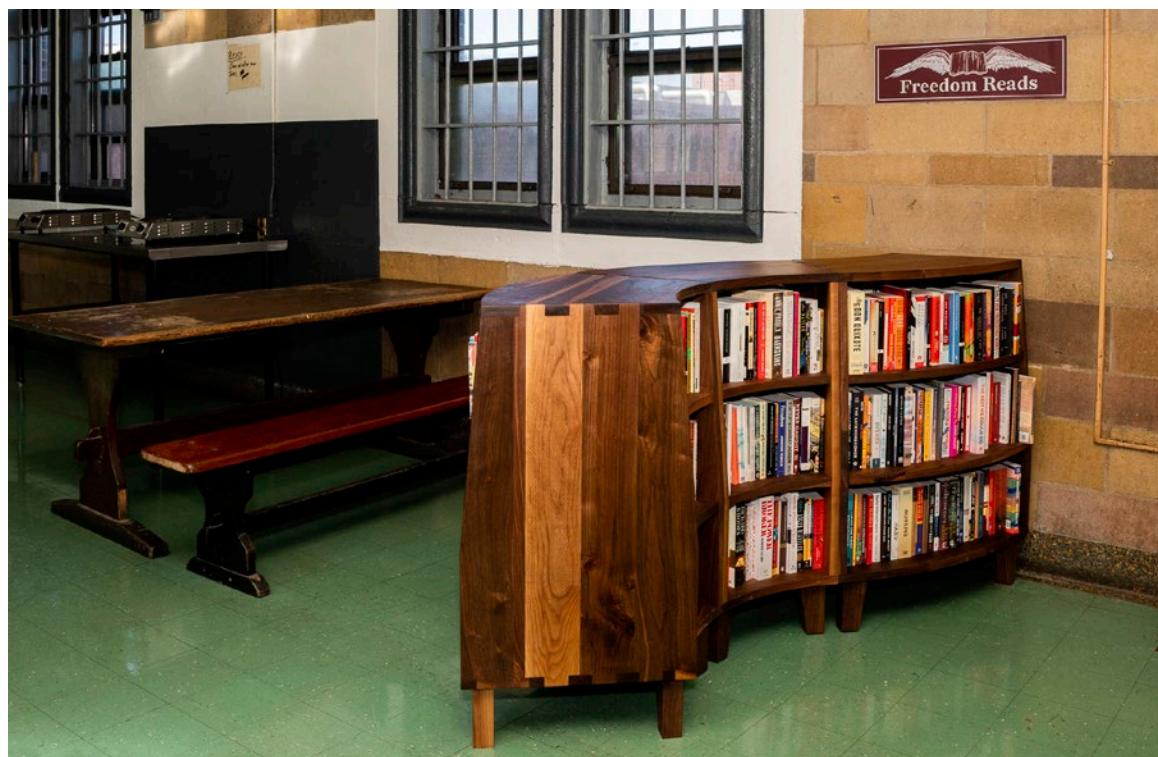
Strategic Plan 2024–26



Introduction

Prisons are cold, barren places, devoid of beauty and joy, that destroy hope and dampen people's spirits. Freedom Reads enriches the lives of people in prison in a way never before done. Opening the first Freedom Library in November 2021 in Massachusetts, Freedom Reads has since opened an additional 174 Freedom Libraries across 10 states and 32 prisons and juvenile detention centers. We have created transformative experiences for thousands of incarcerated people in America and, by extension, their families and communities—from California to Colorado to Connecticut, from Illinois to Louisiana, from Maine to Maryland to Massachusetts, to New York, to Virginia, where Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts served his time in prison. And these ripples of hope are just the beginning.

Freedom Library at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in Woodbourne, NY.
(Photo: Karen Pearson)



Confronting the Harm of Prisons

Amidst the chaos and control that characterizes prison, it is difficult to bring into focus the intellectual, cultural, and emotional loss that incarcerated people experience. While there are many organizations dedicated to decreasing the number of people in prison, few focus on the burdens of prison for those imprisoned. Freedom Reads, by opening libraries in prisons, works to address this intellectual, cultural, and emotional loss and the burdens such loss creates.

The experiences people have in prison often plague them throughout their lives. As incarcerated philosopher James Davis III writes in the *Yale Law Journal*, calling attention to the under-discussed lived experience of people in prison:

The prisoner is separated from his children, his family, and friends. But he is also separated from all the houses, stores, streets, and other spaces that constitute his environment. He is separated from all of the pieces that he used to construct his identity.... This assault on his identity is a profound psychological trauma.

For those incarcerated, the very character and atmosphere created by a prison's architecture reshape expectations people have of themselves, others, and the world around them. The prison cell is more daunting because of the absence of nature and natural light, the miles of barbed wire, and watchtowers that surround it. Most fail to understand that the harmful effects of this environment also impact the staff and correctional officers.

While the phrase “mass incarceration” has entered our national lexicon, the lives of the nearly two million people behind bars are largely invisible. The problem of what prison does to the spirit is seldom considered. A day in prison will haunt a person for the rest of their life.

The unnamed protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* remarked, “I am invisible because you refuse to see me.” Today, we refuse to see people in prison. Too often, what incarcerated people experience are long stretches of time in an environment that threatens to erase them. By bringing Freedom Libraries into these bleak spaces, Freedom Reads creates a physical and cultural intervention that addresses the assault on and erasure of a prisoner’s identity. Freedom Reads introduces transformative experiences, changing expectations about what is possible.

Freedom Begins with a Book



Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts signing copies of his book for audience members following a performance of *FELON: An American Washi Tale* inside Woodbourne Correctional Facility in Woodbourne, NY. (Photo: Karen Pearson)

Vision

A Freedom Library in every cellblock in every prison in America. Freedom Reads envisions a society that acknowledges and nurtures the basic dignity and humanity of people in prison.

Mission

Freedom Reads' mission is to bring joy, inspire hope, and help those Inside confront what prison does to the spirit.

We bring beautiful, handcrafted bookcases into prisons, transforming cellblocks into Freedom Libraries. The Freedom Library is a physical intervention into the landscape of plastic and steel and loneliness that characterizes prison. In an environment where the freedom to think, to contribute to a community, and even to dream about what is possible is too often curtailed, Freedom Reads reminds those Inside that they have not been forgotten.

"I understand the transformative power of reading and education. This visionary program provides ease of access for all in our care."

Randall A. Liberty,
Commissioner of the
State of Maine Department
of Corrections

The Origin of Freedom Reads

Founded in 2020 with a \$5.25 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, Freedom Reads is the only organization in the nation using literature, design, and architecture to create transformative experiences for people in prison and to meaningfully elevate the dignity of the millions of people in this country touched by the criminal legal system.

Poet, Lawyer, 2021 MacArthur Fellow, and Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts knows firsthand about the dispiriting forces of a prison cell. In 1996, at 16 years old, he pled guilty to carjacking a man and was sentenced to nine years in prison. A year later, he was in solitary confinement. Prison rules did not permit people in solitary to have books in their cells. To combat the loneliness, the men designed a way to get books in the hole. They created an underground library. On some days, you could see a rope made from a torn sheet suspended in the air, held in the hands of men in parallel cells in buildings forty-feet apart. Books would arrive to the hole carried in a pillowcase traveling along that line. One day, when Betts asked for a book, someone whose name he never knew slid Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* under his cell door.

For Betts, that moment was not just about books. It was the first time he witnessed men in prison working together to enrich their environments, against the odds, by transforming a place of desolation into one in which ideas could blossom.

Freedom Reads opens Freedom Libraries—finely hand-crafted, natural wood bookcases and the hundreds of books they carry on their shelves. The organization aims to open libraries inside of every prison in every state of this country, transforming cellblocks into Freedom Libraries. In the tradition of Freedom Schools and Freedom Riders, we call the libraries Freedom Libraries because we know that redemption is possible and that freedom begins with a book.

Redemption is Possible

Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts performs solo show *FELON* at Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Ordway, CO. (Photo: Colorado Department of Corrections)



The Freedom Library

**Freedom Reads
begins with the wild
belief that a book
might provide wings.**

When one of the earliest and most notorious prisons was built in Philadelphia in the 1820s, Eastern State Penitentiary operated on the principle of silence and solitude. More than 180 years ago, Charles Dickens visited the prison and was astonished by the brutality he witnessed. Long since shuttered, today, visitors enter Eastern, now a museum, and witness how devastatingly small those cells were and understand how silence caused men to lose their sanity.

The architecture of prison imposes hardships on those inside that cannot be downplayed. From the foreboding physical structures to the absence of nature to the sensory deprivation and lack of caring touch, prisons are unquestionably sites of harm.

Men at the Dorsey Run Correctional Facility in Jessup, MD, after helping Freedom Reads' team members open Freedom Libraries there. (Photo: Gioncarlo Valentine)



A three-shelf Freedom Library in American Black Walnut reflecting the curved design filled with the 500-book collection. (Photo: Karen Pearson)

Every element of the Freedom Library's design serves as a physical intervention into the chaos of prison, introducing a beautiful and regenerative addition to the space. To bring nature into the lives of men who have not seen a tree in years or decades, the bookcases are carved from solid wood: maple, cherry, walnut, or oak. Instead of leaning against a wall, the Freedom Library curves and is positioned in the middle of an open space because, as Alberto Manguel argues in *The Library at Night*, "a circular library more generously allows the reader to imagine that every last page is also the first."

With books on each side of the bookcase, Freedom Reads transforms a part of a cellblock into a space that welcomes and invites conversation. Neuroaesthetic research has shown that humans are drawn to and calmed by curves and rounded objects. Introducing these into a built environment has been shown to counterbalance stress, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Freedom Libraries turn cellblocks into communities



The Freedom Library inside a cellblock within Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Ordway, CO. (Photo: Colorado Department of Corrections)

Freedom Libraries introduce the opportunity for informed serendipity, engagement, and the growth of communities of readers. Their curved, two-sided design showcases the 500-book collection—featuring such authors as Gabriel García Márquez, Dashiell Hammett, James Baldwin, Natalie Diaz, Miriam Toews, and John Edgar Wideman—and brings people, who might otherwise never speak, together over books. The library's beautiful curving shelves suggest a universe that ultimately bends towards justice.

By opening a Freedom Library for prison staff, Freedom Reads acknowledges the crucial role that they play in transforming the experience of incarceration. We recognize that the absence of beauty, the absence of nature, and the absence of the transformative power of a book frustrates their experience of prison as well. The Freedom Library is an intervention that changes the experience of everyone who enters a prison. The libraries include a range of materials designed to comfort and challenge, to meet readers where they are and where they're going. Freedom Libraries turn cellblocks into communities.

Men at Raymond Laborde Correctional Center in Cottonport, LA, taking their first glimpse of the Freedom Library. (Photo: Doug Harmon)



Goals

Open at least 200 new libraries each year, refining and adapting our fabrication and delivery model to identify the most efficient and successful strategies for scalable expansion.

- Bring a beautiful, handcrafted Freedom Library to every cellblock in every prison that we visit, ensuring that once we leave a prison everyone incarcerated there has access to a Freedom Library.
- Open Freedom Libraries at prisons with different security levels and architectural challenges, identifying challenges to be addressed and the factors that make openings most successful.
- At prisons at which we have opened Freedom Libraries, solicit, collect, and analyze data from currently incarcerated individuals and Department of Corrections staff to help maximize Freedom Reads' impact.

Freedom Library at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in Woodbourne, NY. (Photo: Karen Pearson)



Dear Freedom Reads Family

Today I was filled with excitement, curiosity, inspiration and deep gratitude when a Freedom Reads book shelf was delivered to our housing unit. And these books are New! by amazing authors, some I was familiar with but also new to me, I felt so excited picking up titles, reading the back and feeling the overwhelm ~~being~~ in the company of so many good books. At one point, in our mutual excitement, I locked eyes with a woman I had conflict with, and after a pause she asked me how I was doing. Just like that weeks of resentment and animosity towards this person evaporated over a shelf of books in the unlikeliest of places, your project already made a ripple in my life on day 1. Prison is not a place that nurtures inspiration, curiosity or gratitude; and inmates are not given trust. But today I experienced all of the above. So I can tell you honestly that I witnessed the Freedom Reads project transcend prison in a matter of minutes. I'm grateful your project exists and has enough energy behind it to make a difference. Your effort matters! This is my first time in prison and everything about it insults my soul. I didn't know we treated people with such a lack of regard until I came here. I feel called to use my experience in a meaningful way. ~~and hope~~ and Thank you for showing me how!

Nicole Schalles

Goals

Bring joy, possibility, and hope for redemption to all adults and children in prison.

- Invite people from the local community into prisons with us to experience and participate in a Freedom Library opening. Together, alongside our incarcerated neighbors, we carry thousands of pounds of maple, walnut, cherry, and oak bookcases into prison cellblocks. We unpack hundreds of boxes of brand-new paperbacks and shelf them, together participating in the magic of transforming a cellblock into a Freedom Library.
- Over three years, feature at least 100 thought-provoking poets, writers and artists who are shaping the way we think about our world, sharing their work with those incarcerated and the staff, and meeting and engaging with people through their art, at in-prison events that will be recorded and archived.
- Develop a membership program to stay connected with and grow our 25,000 library patrons, creating a vibrant community based on shared experiences that emerge from the Freedom Library.

“I am a navy veteran who served proudly and I love our great country, but our justice system is broken. So the joys of reading, writing, and learning are the great escapes from this place. Hopefully you continue to change people’s lives by what you do.”

Shawn Yates, California

Books become essential when you want to imagine a new life for yourself

Men at the Dorsey Run Correctional Facility in Jessup, MD, assembled for the library opening event featuring presentations by public and prison officials and a performance by Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts. (Photo: Giancarlo Valentine)



To add a library to a house is to give that house a soul

Reginald Dwayne Betts presenting his solo performance, *FELON: An American Washi Tale*, for Freedom Library patrons inside Logan Correctional Center, a women's prison in Lincoln, IL. (Photo: Illinois Department of Corrections)



Goals

Work with Departments of Corrections senior leadership to influence changes in public awareness and shifts in prison culture.

- Create opportunities for Department of Corrections leaders to support Freedom Reads by co-writing opinion pieces, being featured in media stories, and publicly promoting the importance of Freedom Reads' work and the impact of opening Freedom Libraries in their prisons.
- Expand awareness of Freedom Libraries by hosting several major public events that coincide with our national efforts to raise awareness of Freedom Reads' work in prisons across the nation.
- Provide a beautifully handcrafted 500-book Freedom Library for the Department of Corrections staff break room in every prison in which we open a Freedom Library.

"We are proud to be part of the process, proud to be part of Dwayne's journey, and we are humbled by his story. I want to share a quote I read that reminded me of Dwayne: 'To add a library to a house is to give that house a soul.'"

Nelson Alves, Superintendent,
MCI-Norfolk in Massachusetts

Showing Up is the First Metric of Success

"Let me show you why we need 17 more Freedom Libraries," said Mark Fairbairn, Warden of the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility in Ordway, Colorado, to Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts. Initially, he'd been lukewarm on the idea of libraries in prison cellblocks. But that morning, staring at the Freedom Library, he explained how it brought hope. Around us, men discussed and debated the books they'd read or would read. Then we walked next door. "This cellblock reminds me of places I've done time," said Betts. The eyes of the folks around were in their own world; the prison offered little light or beauty. Freedom Reads began with the goal of bringing a single Freedom Library to each of 1,000 different prisons. But a single Freedom Library per prison would leave thousands awakening to a prison with beauty and possibility just out of reach. "This is why we need 17 more," Fairbairn said.

And so, we will continue to show up carrying hundred-pound bookcases and thousands of books, which we shelve, in community, with everyone in the prison. All the while, we discuss the things that we've discovered in literature that will remain with us forever. We will do this again and again until there is a Freedom Library in every cell-block, ensuring that reaching for a book can be as spontaneous as human curiosity.



Freedom Reads Fellows Steven Parkhurst, Jovan Butler, and James Washington collectively served more than 70 years in prison. (Photo: Doug Harmon)

Cover: Freedom Library at Dorsey Run Correctional Facility in Jessup, MD.
(Photo: Giancarlo Valentine)

Freedom Library inside a cellblock at Elayn Hunt Correctional Facility in St. Gabriel, LA. (Photo: Cristoforo Magliozzi)





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