



Freedom begins with a book.

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## **The Forix Foundation Grant #092201 Freedom Reads Final Report**

Freedom Reads (FR) is grateful for The Forix Foundation's support of its Freedom Library initiative from December 2022 through June 30, 2023. FR believes the first metric of success is showing up to inspire and to confront what prison does to the spirit. We bring beautiful handcrafted bookcases into prisons, transforming a prison housing unit into a Freedom Library. We aim to shift the narrative around incarcerated individuals and provide them greater opportunity. FR achieves this work through its core initiatives, including the Freedom Library, which The Forix Foundation supported during the grant period.

**The Freedom Library:** FR's centerpiece is the Freedom Library, beautifully designed hardwood bookshelves handcrafted by teams that include people who have served time in prison. The bookshelves hold a specially-curated, 500-book collection that transport readers to a world of possibility. To date, FR has constructed and installed 172 libraries in 30 prisons and juvenile detention centers in ten states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia. FR has opened Freedom Libraries at Rikers Island in New York, the infamous Angola penitentiary in Louisiana, and Massachusetts's MCI-Norfolk, adding a new chapter to the story of the prison where Malcolm X transformed his life. By the end of July, FR will have opened Freedom Libraries in two juvenile detention facilities, with plans to install Libraries at a total of eight juvenile detention facilities in the coming months.

Unlike other arts and social justice organizations, FR has to navigate the logistics of building, transporting, installing, and opening Freedom Libraries. It originally took FR 18 hours to produce a single bookshelf, and a skilled woodworker one week to build one library. This amount of time and effort for one library presented an obstacle to our goal of saturating each prison housing facility with as many Freedom Libraries as possible. Moreover, before Freedom Libraries can be placed into prison housing units, there is an immense effort by the entire FR team to transport and prepare the libraries. Days before the opening of a library, a FR staff member personally drives upwards of 13 hours to transport thousands of pounds of wood and books to a warehouse. Then, FR staff make sure that all the books are correctly organized and separated to be placed into the units. Each bookcase weighs about 100 pounds, requiring significant physical effort to place dozens of libraries into each housing facility. As we are still a small team, opening each of the 160-plus Freedom Libraries we've opened in the past 12 months has meant physically pushing our team to the extreme. This is not tenable in the long-term, given our goal to open a Freedom Library in every prison housing unit in the United States,

and we are therefore taking measures to better optimize the manufacturing, transportation, and installation of Freedom Libraries.

Being able to saturate a facility with multiple libraries (ideally one in *each* housing unit) is really the goal – and we have found that when a facility says yes to one, once they realize the demand and excitement, they quickly (overnight, in some cases) increase the order to eight or 16 or 24 Freedom Libraries. Multiply that number by all the prisons we have in the pipeline, and there is the potential for exponential growth– if we have the infrastructure to support it. In 2023, FR is investing in the buildout of its workshop in Hamden, Connecticut, so that as the demand for Libraries increases, we can respond quickly and affirmatively. Capacity building also includes adding a shop manager, increasing the number of Freedom Fellows we can employ, as well as resources for raw materials, finishing, and shipping. We have also hired several new staff positions to support and expand our work and lessen the burden on existing staff members.

### **Woodbourne Correctional Facility, New York**

The Forix Foundation's \$5,000 grant funded the purchase of 500 books for a Freedom Library at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York, where FR opened a Freedom Library on February 14, 2023. Woodbourne Correctional Facility is a medium-level security prison for men with a capacity to hold about 850 people.

FR Founder and Executive Director Reginald Dwayne Betts reflected on the opening: "Woodbourne for me was different. As a law student, I worked on Dempsey L.'s parole case with Professor Issa Kohler-Hausmann. Dempsey was incarcerated at Woodbourne and I remember how foreboding that day felt and how when he walked into the visiting room and quoted Tom Hardy, I was reminded of the best of what can be nurtured in prison. He was like Freedom Reads in that moment. And I've always thought about that, how books provide a way to sustain even when the world is deeply troubling." On April 19, 2023, Freedom Reads returned to Woodbourne Correctional Facility, bringing a professionally staged verbatim adaptation of Junot Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to an audience of 35 incarcerated men. In the Q&A after the performance at Woodbourne, one audience member shared that he had never seen a play before; another shared his appreciation that his Dominican culture had been so faithfully represented in literature; still another shared that for the 60 minutes of the show he felt he was "out again." This event was part of FR's in-prison performances produced in partnership with Literature to Life, with the goal to extend the work of Freedom Ambassadors and make prisons another venue for cultural events, and for the reconnection of those inside and outside through art and literature.

### **Conclusion**

FR's team was able to make the idea of Freedom Libraries a reality in 26 prisons and juvenile detention facilities across the United States in just the last 12 months, and in 30 total since FR began installing Freedom Libraries in late 2021. Freedom Reads has now installed 172 Freedom Libraries since late 2021. That said, equally important are each conversation we have been able to have with incarcerated men, women, and youth when

Freedom Reads is opening libraries or in correspondence before or after a visit; each time Department of Corrections (DOC) or a warden takes a chance and adapts their system and bureaucracy to welcome our team and the libraries into their program; each returning citizen Freedom Reads is able to employ in meaningful work, helping to ease reentry; and each time Freedom Reads' audiences thumb through the crisp pages of a new book and learn something new about themselves and their own stories.

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator says, "I am invisible because you refuse to see me." We do not see people incarcerated, and those inside often struggle to see themselves as distinct from the tragedies of their lives. Opening libraries rich with fiction, biography, and poetry in prisons offers an opportunity for those inside, through story, to see themselves and be seen in a different light, with the potential to define new narratives for their futures. And correspondingly, it offers an opportunity for those outside to remember that, though separated, we are in community and in humanity with the men, women, and youth in our penal system today.

The core problem of our carceral system is beyond questions of rehabilitation or punishment – it is about the erasure, the dehumanization that sets up a premise that there is no path from here, no narrative but this one. We cannot forget to address what prison does to the human spirit and make room for transformation. Literature is a powerful technology that allows us to affirm humanity, defend against despair, and to build community and hope. Freedom Reads is immensely grateful for the generous support of The Forix Foundation, which has allowed us to serve this greater purpose.



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Freedom Reads Final Report  
Photos**



Freedom Reads Founder and CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts leads a Q&A session during the opening of a Freedom Library at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York.  
Photo by Karen Pearson, 2023.



Inmates at Woodbourne Correctional Facility participate in the opening of a Freedom Library in their prison housing unit.  
Photo by Karen Pearson, 2023.



Freedom Reads Founder and CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts shows off a hand-crafted Freedom Library inside the housing unit at Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York, during the opening of the library.  
Photo by Karen Pearson, 2023.



The Freedom Library that was installed at Woodbourne Correctional Facility. The Library is hand-crafted at Freedom Reads' headquarters and workshop in Hamden, Connecticut, which employs formerly incarcerated individuals. The Library contains a curated selection of 500 books.  
Photo by Karen Pearson, 2023.

Find My Order

**MILLION BOOK PROJECT**

Account Number: 20X4522

User ID: celliman

[Change User](#)**Online Payment History****Confirmation Number:** 0094231505 **Standard Version**

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Total 58788.83

