



2024 IMPACT REPORT



Turning Pages: A Year of Growth and Change

In 2024, your support made an extraordinary impact, helping Free Minds expand our transformative programs that provide hope, education, and a sense of community to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth and adults. Through the power of books, creative expression, workforce development, trauma healing, peace-building, and advocacy, we engaged with 1,600 members across our Jail Book Clubs, Prison Book Club, and Reentry Book Club—ensuring they remained connected, supported and inspired to build a new future.

Free Minds is more than a book club and writing workshop. It's a movement. A movement where members not only heal and grow, but lead, using their voices to drive change and break cycles of incarceration. Our impact extends far beyond direct services—our members are advocating for equitable policies, guiding young people, and building stronger, safer communities. Thanks to the powerful network and continuous wraparound services they receive, 97% of members home from prison were employed, in school, or in vocational training programs, and 92% did not return to jail or prison. These outcomes prove what we've always believed: with the right support, every person has the power to turn the page and write a new chapter.

Free Minds 2024 Impact



97% of members employed or enrolled in a vocational training program



1,600

members served



92%

of members did not return to jail or prison



5,674

personally selected books distributed to members



288

book club sessions held



2,157

letters exchanged with staff, volunteers, and members in 110 prisons nationwide



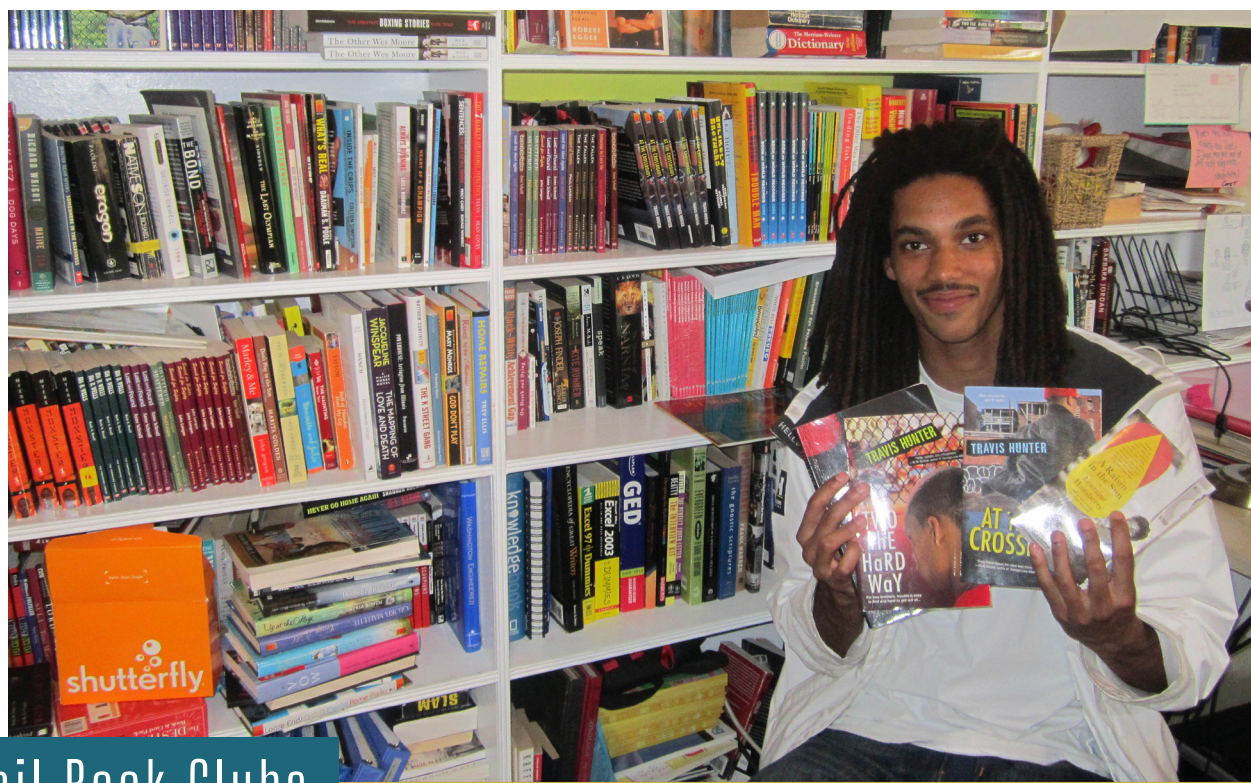
168

members served as peer supporters, advocates, and facilitators



2,593

people participated in our community peacebuilding sessions



Jail Book Clubs

The Jail Book Clubs at the DC Jail and juvenile detention center provide a rare and vital space for healing, learning, and self-expression. In an environment where vulnerability is often seen as a risk, our weekly book clubs create a sanctuary where members feel safe enough to read aloud, write openly, and share their thoughts and emotions. We offer specialized book clubs for youth, emerging adults (18-24), men, women, and Spanish speakers, ensuring that every member finds a space where their voice is valued.

Through bibliotherapy, literature discussions, and guest author visits, members develop literacy skills while also seeing reflections of their own lived experiences in the stories they read. Author visits are intentionally designed to validate members' identities as readers and writers, fostering a sense of belonging in the broader literary community. These encounters spark inspiration, helping members envision new possibilities for themselves and recognize their own potential as storytellers, changemakers, and leaders.

- 434 members participated in Jail Book Clubs, including 194 women and 42 youth.
- 71% of members completed reading assignments.
- 73% engaged in writing exercises, using poetry and personal essays to process their experiences.

“Free Minds walked into my life when I was 17, charged as an adult, and lost in the system. I didn't know who I was or where my life was headed. Free Minds was my only support system while incarcerated, and they're still my family now that I'm home. They helped me see something good for myself and reach my goals, and I'll forever be grateful.”

— Free Minds Member Victor

Prison Book Club

For members serving time in 110 federal prisons, the Free Minds Prison Book Club is more than just a book program—it's a vital lifeline to hope, connection, and self-discovery. In the isolation of incarceration, where personal agency is often stripped away, receiving a personally selected book or a handwritten letter is a powerful affirmation of one's humanity. Through our robust correspondence program, members engage in a literary community that sees and values them. They receive books tailored to their interests, writing exercises that encourage self-reflection, heartfelt letters from volunteers, and issues of our literary magazine, Connect, where their own poetry and essays are published and celebrated. These connections remind members that their voices matter and that their stories—past, present, and future—are still being written.

"Free Minds helped me discover who I am and what I love—expressing myself through poetry. Writing opened doors I never imagined, allowing me to share my goals and dreams with the world. The encouragement I received for my poem inspired me to keep going, knowing my words resonate with others and help them through their struggles. Poetry has given me the motivation to change my life and pursue success in everything I do."

— Free Minds Member Antonio

This year, the Prison Book Club reached hundreds of members across the country, ensuring they remained connected to a supportive literary community:

- 828 members served through the Prison Book Club.
- 5,674 personally selected books mailed to members.
- 2,157 letters exchanged between members, staff, and volunteers.
- 401 original poems submitted and featured in 5 Connect magazine issues.

One of the most meaningful ways we bridge the gap between incarcerated members and the wider community is through Write Nights. During Write Nights, volunteers read and respond to members' poetry, providing handwritten feedback that is then mailed back to the poets. In an environment where many feel forgotten, these words of encouragement serve as a reminder that they are seen, heard, and valued.

For members, receiving a letter from someone on the outside can be transformative—proof that their voices matter and that their stories resonate beyond prison walls. Time and again, members tell us that this simple act of connection fuels their hope, inspiring them to keep writing, keep growing, and keep believing in a future beyond their current circumstances.

"[The Connect] gives me a much needed opportunity to connect with others on important, positive topics. I am inspired, motivated, and uplifted by hearing of other members' successes after coming home. It lets me know I'm not alone. As we work individually to move the obstacles out of our way, it turns into a group effort through the same hardships that we face, which makes the job to be done that much easier."

— Free Minds Member Jasper

Reentry Book Club

The Free Minds Reentry Book Club builds upon the sustained connection made through our Jail and Prison Book Club programs, where planning for reentry begins long before release. These programs lay the foundation for successful reentry by fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and a sense of community. Once home, recently released members continue their journey through the Reentry Book Club, where they receive essential resources, community support, and leadership opportunities. Through a holistic, member-led approach, Free Minds offers individualized case management, job readiness training, peer mentorship, healing-centered support, and leadership development—all centered on the lived experiences of our members. The result is a transformative program that fosters resilience and meaningful reintegration into society.

Building Community and Healing Through Literature

At the heart of our reentry programming is The Build Up, our weekly virtual book club and writing workshop where members gather to read, discuss literature, exchange advice, and provide emotional support. In 2024, The Build Up reached a record-breaking attendance of over 160 reentry members at each session, underscoring the vital role of storytelling and shared experience in healing from the trauma of incarceration. The encouragement and sense of belonging fostered in these sessions contribute directly to Free Minds' exceptional outcomes: 97% of members were employed or enrolled in a training or education program, and only 8% recidivated—far below the national average.

Since 2019, Free Minds has experienced unprecedented growth and rising demand due to the passage of DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA)/Second Look Amendment Act, which allows individuals given extreme sentences when they were between the ages of 16 and 24 to seek resentencing. We are proud to say we are the leading organization in DC supporting IRAA/Second Look petitioners and recipients, and the only one providing extensive educational and reentry services pre- and post-release, as demand continues to rise.

Our holistic, wraparound approach—combining job readiness programming, mentorship, and reentry navigation with dedicated IRAA support groups—provides a crucial foundation for individuals returning home. Already, we've supported 252 members in achieving full employment, becoming changemakers who play a key role in enhancing public safety and transforming our city. Thanks to our generous donor community, we can continue to meet this critical need, ensuring that those granted a second chance have the tools, community, and opportunities necessary to rebuild their lives and actively advance racial justice.

Our growth is not only limited to IRAA recipients; we are also experiencing growth in our Spanish language membership as well as our women's membership in reentry. Our commitment to gender responsive and culturally conscious reentry support is unwavering, and we look forward to continuing to grow our community and expand our services in 2025.

Job Readiness and Skill Building

Preparing for sustainable employment is a key focus of the Reentry Book Club. Our week-long Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship equips members with practical tools for workplace success, covering topics such as professional communication, resume building, digital literacy, social media management, financial planning, and interview skills. In 2024, 78 reentry members completed this intensive training, gaining critical competencies to navigate the modern workforce. Participants also receive one-on-one job coaching, referrals to vetted service providers, and personalized job placement assistance, ensuring they have the support needed to achieve their career goals.

Peer Support: Navigating Reentry Together

The Free Minds Peer Support Training Program encourages members to use their lived experiences to help others successfully transition home. This 12-week program, completed by 22 members in 2024, provides training in trauma-informed care, healing-centered engagement, healthy boundaries, emotional regulation, and crisis response. Graduates, known as Peer Supporters, are paired with newly released members, providing weekly social wellness check-ins and guidance through the reentry process. These relationships foster trust, reduce isolation, and create a powerful network of support rooted in shared experience.

When Ned returned home after 28 years in prison, he was immediately welcomed by his Free Minds peers, receiving the social-emotional support that helped ease his transition. Inspired by this camaraderie, he was eager to give back and seized the first opportunity to complete our 12-week Peer Support Training Program. Despite balancing two jobs and family responsibilities, Ned remains deeply committed to supporting others on their journey home:



"I'm so grateful for how receptive people were to me when I came home. It made it so much easier for me, so I want to be part of that for others when they come home."

— Free Minds Member Ned

Now, as a Peer Supporter, Ned is using his training and lived experience to uplift his peers and spread hope throughout our community.

Advocacy and Leadership: The Changemakers

Free Minds members are not only rebuilding their own lives—they are leading the fight for systemic change. 123 reentry members participated in our Changemakers advocacy program, writing letters and Op-Eds, testifying before the DC Council, and engaging in direct action campaigns to reform policies that impact incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Our members' firsthand experiences with the criminal legal system make them uniquely positioned to drive meaningful change, ensuring their voices shape the policies that affect their lives.

In addition to advocacy, 40 Free Minds members engaged in leadership training with experienced organizational partners in the criminal legal system field. Ten members received ongoing facilitation training for The Build Up, strengthening their ability to guide meaningful literary discussions and peer support spaces.



Healing-Centered Support and Mental Health Resources

Understanding that successful reentry requires emotional as well as practical support, Free Minds offers trauma-focused mental health services tailored to the unique challenges of formerly incarcerated individuals. In 2024, we provided access to culturally responsive trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, led by a licensed clinical social worker specializing in the criminal legal system. Additionally, we hosted two four-week workshop series focused on managing anxiety and stress, providing a safe space for members to navigate the emotional challenges of reentry.

At the request of our members, we extended free therapy services to include their loved ones and partners, with a focus on rebuilding relationships after incarceration. This included a day-long program for couples, led by our long-time partner—a vetted therapist specializing in marriage and relationship counseling.

Congressman John Lewis Fellow: Leading Through Experience

In 2024, Free Minds member Antoine Coleman was selected as our Congressman John Lewis Fellow, a prestigious staff position for a formerly incarcerated member leading system change efforts and peacebuilding initiatives. Antoine used his voice and storytelling skills to advocate for nonviolence and racial equity, engaging with DC youth in schools and community spaces. Through this role, he gained invaluable leadership and advocacy experience before transitioning to a new position as a reentry advocate with our partner, BreakFree Education.

Expanding Opportunities for Leadership and Growth

The Reentry Book Club is more than just a program—it is a thriving, member-led community where individuals returning home from incarceration find belonging, healing, and a renewed sense of purpose. In 2024, our members took on full leadership responsibility for the Thrive Under 25 Coalition, working to prevent youth from entering the criminal legal system. As we look to the future, we remain committed to expanding leadership opportunities, strengthening reentry support services, and ensuring that every Free Minds member has the tools to build a bright and self-determined future.

Community Engagement and Education

Free Minds members used their voices to foster understanding, connection, and social change in 2024. We conducted 115 community education and engagement events with DC schools, corporate partners, and community groups, led by 67 formerly incarcerated Free Minds members, known as Poet Ambassadors. These powerful events brought together diverse audiences to engage in open conversations about the impact of mass incarceration. Poet Ambassadors shared their personal journeys, offering firsthand insight into the criminal legal system, while participants read and responded to poetry written by our incarcerated members. Their heartfelt feedback provided encouragement and support, breaking through the isolation of incarceration and strengthening the community bonds that fuel personal transformation. These events had a profound impact, with 100% of participants reporting a positive experience, and 90% saying they were motivated to learn more about or take action on youth violence prevention.



We also deepened our public education efforts, amplifying the voices of our members through storytelling and media. Free Minds members contributed to an NPR report on the inhumane use of solitary confinement in a notorious federal prison in Virginia and shared their perspectives in *Inquest*, discussing the devastating environmental and human costs of a proposed federal prison in Eastern Kentucky. In December 2023, our members were featured in the powerful documentary *District of Second Chances*, which follows three Free Minds members from incarceration to release and reentry under DC's groundbreaking Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA). The film premiered at the National Press Club and, in 2024, was screened at the DC Independent Film Forum and a Free Minds-hosted event attended by over 40 community members. These conversations continue to educate the public on the challenges of reentry and the urgent need for fair sentencing reform.

Through the arts, Free Minds members continue to inspire and heal. They performed in a two-hour poetry and spoken word event at the Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery, sharing personal reflections on incarceration, systemic racism, and the transformative power of literature.

"I always wrote poetry to help me through what I was experiencing, but I kept it to myself until I joined Free Minds. That changed everything. The Spoken Word event was the first time I shared my poetry with an audience, and the response was beautiful."

— Regina, Free Minds Member and Program Coordinator

We partnered with Theater Alliance to elevate the voices of incarcerated poets. Following a performance of *Poetry for the People: The June Jordan Experience*, Free Minds members performed their own poetry and led the audience in reading and responding to works by our incarcerated members, demonstrating the profound intersection of literature and activism.



New Programs, Partnerships, and Leaders

Throughout 2024, Free Minds members continued to lift one another up, using the power of literature and community to heal and pursue their personal and professional aspirations. We launched the Leadership and Learning Program, designed by Free Minds members to provide culturally competent training in group facilitation, restorative justice, digital literacy, public speaking, Black history, and movement building. 149 members participated in its first year, gaining practical work experience in roles such as book club facilitators, peer supporters, advocates, youth mentors, and program specialists. Participants also received wraparound support from Free Minds staff to ensure they had the resources needed to thrive and advance in their careers.

In February, Free Minds reached a historic milestone with the election of Chris Turner as Board Chair, the first formerly incarcerated Free Minds member to serve in this role. Wrongfully convicted as a youth and imprisoned for over 25 years, Chris has since dedicated his life to criminal legal system reform. His leadership is a testament to the power of second chances and the strength of our Free Minds community.

Our impact was further recognized through our selection to the prestigious Kennedy Center Culture Caucus, a dynamic cohort of DC-based cultural leaders. This partnership underscores our commitment to using literature as a vehicle for racial justice. As part of the Culture Caucus, Free Minds will lead four activations at the Kennedy Center's REACH in 2025-2026, featuring workshops, performances, and interactive programs that amplify the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

We also expanded our workforce development efforts with the hiring of Special Projects Coordinator and Digital Literacy Coach Emily Daly, who provides members with critical technology skills training, from job applications to online communication. These trainings foster peer-to-peer learning, equipping members to support one another in navigating the digital world and building confidence in their abilities to achieve personal and professional goals.

Additionally, three Free Minds members were selected as Color Me Community Fellows with our partner Life Pieces to Masterpieces, an award-winning nonprofit that uses artistic expression to develop character and leadership in young Black men. As fellows, our members underwent youth development training and served as mentors to young boys, gaining hands-on experience in community leadership and best practices in youth development.



Turning the Page to 2025

As we look ahead, Free Minds remains deeply committed to serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth and adults through expanded educational programming and leadership development opportunities. Our members will continue to harness the transformative power of literature to drive personal and collective change. By strengthening partnerships with educational institutions, arts organizations, and social justice advocates, we will expand the reach of our high-impact literary arts and reentry support programs.

In 2025, we will introduce expanded healing circles, an initiative designed to address the trauma of incarceration through restorative peer-led discussions. We will also continue to advocate for open access to educational resources within the federal prison system, reinforcing our role as one of the few organizations providing a comprehensive continuum of support from pre-release through successful reentry. Above all, we will remain steadfast in our mission to equip Free Minds members with the literary tools and supportive community they need to achieve their goals and contribute to the broader movement for justice and social transformation.

We could not do this work without our community of support. Your commitment has helped bring hope, healing, and opportunity to thousands of people. We invite you to continue this journey with us—ensuring every Free Minds member has the tools to thrive. Visit www.freemindsbookclub.org to learn more about how you can get involved.



freemindsbookclub.org