



## New Jersey Department of Corrections

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### **New Jersey Department of Corrections Partners with Freedom Reads to Bring Libraries and the Inside Literary Prize to New Jersey Prisons**

*National non-profit Freedom Reads opens 37 Freedom Libraries across cellblocks in Northern State Prison and Edna Mahan Correctional Facility; facilitates Inside Literary Prize book discussions, voting, and author events at both prisons*

**May 20, 2025 (Trenton, NJ)** – The New Jersey Department of Corrections and the national non-profit [Freedom Reads](#) announced the opening of 37 new Freedom Libraries in two New Jersey prisons – 10 Freedom Libraries in cellblocks across Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, and 27 in cellblocks across Northern State Prison, a men’s prison. As of today, Freedom Reads has opened 478 Freedom Libraries in 48 adult and youth prisons in 12 states.

"We gratefully acknowledge Freedom Reads for their generous donation. The Freedom Library collections are more than books and resources," said Commissioner Victoria L. Kuhn, Esq. "They are agents for transformation and possess the power to empower individuals, unlock opportunities, and build a culture of learning that directly supports rehabilitation, reintegration, and the creation of a more promising future."

Books in the Freedom Library have been carefully curated through consultations with hundreds of poets, novelists, philosophers, teachers, friends, and voracious readers, resulting in a collection of books that are not only beloved, but indispensable. The libraries include contemporary poetry, novels, and essays alongside classic works such as Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* – titles that remind us that books have long been a freedom project.

"Freedom Reads’ vision is to open a Freedom Library in every cellblock in every prison in America, bringing the voices of Baldwin and Faulkner and Morrison to everyone Inside," said Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts. "At this week’s Freedom Library openings and Inside Literary Prize events, I read poems from my new book of poetry, *Doggerel*, and was again reminded of the power of literature to connect us all. We laughed, we wept, we imagined a possibility beyond prison walls, and we did it in collaboration with the leadership of the New Jersey Department of Corrections. And, most importantly, we tried to remind those Inside that their voices, their opinions, their lives matter."

"Each book had so many layers of symbolism and messages," Inside Literary Prize judge Tina at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility wrote to Freedom Reads. "I believe if I re-read these books again I would unravel more layers about each character. With each book I experienced many different feelings."

These books were different genres that I normally don't read but it was a good experience to venture out of my comfort zone."

The Freedom Reads team also facilitated [Inside Literary Prize](#) book discussions, voting, and author readings for the second annual Inside Literary Prize at Edna Mahan and Northern State. Launched in 2023 by Freedom Reads, the National Book Foundation, and the Center for Justice Innovation with support from Lori Feathers, the Inside Literary Prize is the first-ever US-based literary prize awarded exclusively by currently incarcerated people. Twenty-five incarcerated readers at two prisons within the [New Jersey Department of Corrections](#) – Edna Mahan and Northern State – are serving as judges for the 2025 Prize, casting their ballots this week for one of this year's four shortlisted books – [Chain-Gang All-Stars](#) by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, [This Other Eden](#) by Paul Harding, [On a Woman's Madness](#) by Astrid Roemer, and [Blackouts](#) by Justin Torres. The winner of the 2025 Prize will be announced this July.

As part of the Inside Literary Prize events, Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts performed a poetry reading from his latest collection, *Doggerel*, at Edna Mahan. And, Caitis Meissner, editor of *The Sentences that Create Us* by PEN America, joined Freedom Reads for an author event at Northern State Prison. Earlier this spring, Freedom Reads visited Illinois and Connecticut as part of the Inside Literary Prize tour. The team will be visiting prisons across three more states and territories this spring to bring the Inside Literary Prize to all 300 incarcerated judges.

Freedom Reads is a first-of-its-kind organization that empowers people in prison through literature to imagine new possibilities for their lives. The Freedom Libraries are the brainchild of 2021 MacArthur Fellow and Yale Law School graduate Reginald Dwayne Betts, who was sentenced in Virginia to nine years in prison at age 16. Freedom Libraries are spaces in prisons to encourage community and in which reaching for a book can be as spontaneous as human curiosity. Each bookcase is handcrafted out of maple, cherry, oak, or walnut and is curved to contrast the straight lines and bars of prisons as well as to evoke Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s observation about the "arc of the moral universe" bending "toward justice."

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## Event photos and video



## About New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC)

The mission of NJDOC is to advance public safety and promote successful reintegration in a dignified, safe, secure, rehabilitative, and gender-informed environment, supported by a professional, trained, and diverse workforce, enhanced by community engagement. For more information, visit: [NJDOC.gov](https://www.njdoc.gov).

**About Freedom Reads**

Founded by Reginald Dwayne Betts, who knows firsthand the dispiriting forces of prison, Freedom Reads works to empower people through literature to confront what prison does to the spirit. Inspired by the recognition that freedom begins with a book, Freedom Reads supports the efforts of people in prison to transform their lives through increased access to books and writers. For more information about Freedom Reads and the Freedom Libraries project, please visit [freedomreads.org](https://freedomreads.org).

**About the Inside Literary Prize**

In 2023, [Freedom Reads](#), the [National Book Foundation](#), and the [Center for Justice Innovation](#), with support from literary podcaster Lori Feathers, announced the launch of the [Inside Literary Prize](#), the first-ever US-based literary prize awarded exclusively by currently incarcerated people. The Prize is awarded each year to one of four shortlisted books by a jury of 300 incarcerated readers from prisons across the nation. This initiative seeks to honor the insights incarcerated readers add to cultural conversations and expand access to our country's most thought-provoking literature for people who are incarcerated.