



The Illinois Department of Corrections

1301 Concordia Court, P.O. Box 19277 • Springfield, IL 62794-9277 • (217) 558-2200 TDD: (800) 526-0844

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 24, 2025

CONTACT:

Naomi Puzzello, naomi.puzzello@illinois.gov

Illinois Department of Corrections Announces Expansion of Freedom Reads Libraries to Decatur and Illinois River Correctional Centers

Expands Freedom Reads partnership with 22 new Freedom Libraries in Decatur and Illinois River Correctional Centers; facilitates Inside Literary Prize book discussions, voting, and author events at Decatur and Western Correctional Center

April 24, 2025 (Springfield, IL) – Today, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) and the national non-profit [Freedom Reads](#) announced the opening of 22 new Freedom Libraries in Decatur and Illinois River Correctional Centers. Six were installed in housing units at Decatur Correctional Center, a women's prison, and 16 were installed in housing units in Illinois River Correctional Center, a men's prison. The new libraries make a total of 28 Freedom Libraries in four IDOC facilities, [with five in Logan Correctional Center](#) and one in Lincoln Correctional Center, opened in 2022.



Freedom Library installation at Decatur Correctional Center. Photo from IDOC.

Mission: To serve justice in Illinois and increase public safety by promoting positive change for those in custody, operating successful reentry programs, and reducing victimization.

www.illinois.gov/idoc

Freedom Reads also facilitated book discussions, voting, and author events for the second annual [Inside Literary Prize](#) at Decatur and Western Correctional Centers. 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. This week, 25 incarcerated readers at both Decatur and Western Correctional Centers 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 in July. As part of the events, poet [Roger Bonair-Agard](#) joined Freedom Reads inside Decatur and Western Correctional Centers for a poetry reading and book signing.



Inside Literary Prize book discussion at Decatur Correctional Center. Photo from IDOC.

“Books are windows to worlds other than our own that allow us to dream beyond current circumstances, and access to them can be a lifeline for incarcerated individuals as an invitation to think, grow, and imagine new possibilities,” said **Illinois Department of Corrections Director Latoya Hughes**. “By bringing Freedom Libraries and the Inside Literary Prize into more facilities, we’re expanding opportunities for the individuals in our care to engage with the transformative power of language. We’re proud to partner with Freedom Reads to support programs that foster reflection, learning, and critical thinking skills.”

“Freedom Reads has always been about showing up for those Inside,” said **Freedom Reads Founder & CEO Reginald Dwayne Betts**. “We are showing up this week in Illinois, bringing handcrafted Freedom Libraries full of great literature and the Inside Literary Prize to hundreds of folks inside prisons. The Freedom Library and Inside Literary Prize are about more than just access to books, they are about

starting conversations and community around literature, and reminding those Inside that they have not been forgotten. We are grateful to the Illinois Department of Corrections for their partnership in both of these important endeavors.”

“It is with renewed vigor that I begin to read the four books which I have received,” **Inside Literary Prize judge Sandra at Decatur Correctional Center** wrote to Freedom Reads. “I am a 79-year-old retired Elementary teacher with a Masters in Reading and Writing Literacy. My mantra is: ‘If you can read, you can do ANYTHING!!!’ Looking forward to reading and enjoying the books!”

Freedom Reads is a first-of-its-kind organization that empowers incarcerated individuals through literature. Founded by 2021 MacArthur Fellow and Yale Law graduate Reginald Dwayne Betts—who was sentenced to nine years in prison at age 16—Freedom Reads creates spaces in prisons, where reaching for a book can be as natural as curiosity itself. Each handcrafted bookcase, made of maple, cherry, oak, or walnut, features a curved design to contrast prison bars and echo Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of justice.

The libraries are carefully curated collections shaped by poets, novelists, philosophers, and avid readers. They include contemporary and classic works—from poetry and essays to novels like *The Odyssey* and *Invisible Man*—highlighting literature’s enduring role in the pursuit of freedom.

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.

About the Inside Literary Prize

In 2023, [Freedom Reads](https://freedomreads.org), the [National Book Foundation](https://www.nbf.org/), and the [Center for Justice Innovation](https://www.cji-innovation.org/), 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.

###