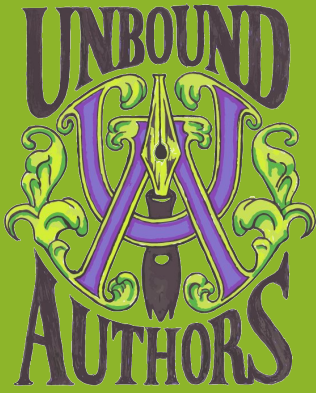




2025 ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

Unbound Authors

*Writing, publishing, and education
inside Colorado prisons*

332

Sessions
delivered

11

In-person
facilities

696

Writers
served



Letter from the Co-Founders

2025 marked a turning point for Unbound Authors. What began as a small, volunteer-driven effort has grown into a statewide writing center operating across Colorado's correctional system—serving incarcerated writers through in-person instruction, tablet-based access, and publication-ready infrastructure.

Unbound Authors is grounded in a simple belief: writing is not a luxury. It is a foundational skill that supports education, self-advocacy, journalism, creative expression, and reentry. Inside prison walls, consistent access to writing instruction, feedback, and publication pathways is rare. Our work exists to make that access durable, ethical, and statewide.

This year, Unbound Authors delivered in-person writing labs in 11 correctional facilities, expanded tablet-based access to all 21 facilities statewide, and supported more than 1,000 incarcerated writers. We secured approval from the Colorado Department of Corrections to publish incarcerated writers' work and built the editorial, ethical, and operational infrastructure required to do so responsibly.

This growth did not happen easily. Much of this work has been carried forward through a combination of volunteer labor and unpaid leadership—underscoring both the strength of our community and the urgent need for sustainable investment. We chose to build slowly and intentionally, prioritizing trust, consent, and long-term viability over speed or visibility.

Unbound Authors' leadership is shaped by lived experience. To our knowledge, Unbound Authors is led by the only formerly incarcerated person working at this depth inside CDOC while simultaneously building a penal press publishing platform. This perspective informs how we approach access, pacing, consent, and accountability—grounding the organization's work in both institutional fluency and lived understanding of incarceration.

This report reflects what we built together in 2025. I am deeply grateful to the writers who trusted us with their words, the volunteers who showed up with care, the partners who shared vision and resources, and the funders who believed in this work before it was easy to see.

With gratitude,

JoyBelle Phelan

Executive Director & Co-Founder, Unbound Authors

Executive Editor, Mercury Mountain Media

Libby Catchings, Ph.D.

Co-Founder and Writing Lab Director, Unbound Authors

Anthology Editor, Mercury Mountain Media

Our Leadership



JoyBelle Phelan

Co-Founder & Executive Director

JoyBelle Phelan is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Unbound Authors and Executive Editor of Mercury Mountain Media. She is openly formerly incarcerated, and that lived experience is foundational to how she leads — informing the organization's approach to access, consent, pacing, and accountability inside correctional systems.

Before co-founding Unbound Authors, JoyBelle worked as a Pre-Release and Re-Entry Clerk at La Vista Correctional Facility, a Re-Entry Specialist at Breakthrough, and Writer Relations Manager at the Prison Journalism Project. She delivered a TEDx talk at San Quentin and co-authored a chapter in Routledge Press's *Beyond Autoethnography: Lived Experience Criminology*.

She is a 2023 Solutions Journalism award winner and recipient of the 2024 Realness Project Exemplar Award. She currently serves as Operations Manager at Colorado Radio for Justice and Project Coordinator for the American Penal Press Contest.



Libby Catchings, Ph.D.

Co-Founder & Writing Lab Director

Libby Catchings, Ph.D. is Co-Founder, Writing Lab Director, and Anthology Editor at Unbound Authors, and a Teaching Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Denver, where she has taught writing, rhetoric, and prison-focused courses since 2016.

Libby has been doing prison literacy work since 2019, when she launched a pilot writing lab at Sterling Correctional Facility. She chaired the Prison Literacies and Pedagogies Standing Group at CCCC from 2021 to 2024, and currently serves as Co-Editor of the *Community Literacy Journal*.

Her scholarship focuses on carceral literacies, community writing, and the rhetorics of confinement. She holds a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing Studies from UC Irvine and a B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Colorado Boulder.



2025: At a Glance

A year of growth, infrastructure, and statewide reach

332

Sessions
delivered

11

In-person
facilities

21

Facilities with
tablet access

696

Individual writers
served

3,001

Total session
attendances

Three Years of Growth

Year	Sessions	Facilities	Attendances	Individuals
2023 — 6 months	32	3	258	61
2024 — full year	197	8	1,286	379
2025 — full year	332	11	3,001	696

2025 Milestones

- Delivered in-person writing labs in 11 correctional facilities
- Expanded tablet-based programming to all 21 Colorado facilities
- Secured CDOC approval to publish incarcerated writers' work
- Built statewide editorial and publishing infrastructure under Mercury Mountain Media
- Continued coalition-building within the higher-education-in-prison ecosystem
- Transitioned from programmatic initiative to institutional platform

Geographic Reach | 2025

Statewide — urban, rural, and geographically isolated

Unbound Authors served incarcerated writers in person across eight Colorado counties, with tablet-based programming extending reach to three additional counties.



In-Person Facilities

- Chaffee County (Buena Vista)
- Crowley County (Arkansas Valley)
- Denver County (Denver Women's & DRDC)
- Fremont County (Fremont, Skyline & Territorial)
- Garfield County (Rifle)
- Lincoln County (Limon)
- Logan County (Sterling)
- Pueblo County (La Vista)

Tablet-Based (Additional)

- Bent County
- Delta County
- Las Animas County (Trinidad)

Through this hybrid model, Unbound Authors provided educational access inside correctional facilities located across diverse urban, rural, and geographically isolated regions of the state.

Program Overview | 2025

1. Writing Labs

Unbound Authors operates as a writing center model, rather than a single-genre or time-limited program. In 2025, in-person writing labs were offered in 11 facilities, meeting weekly, biweekly, or monthly depending on access. Tablet-based access extended programming to all 21 facilities statewide.

Writers engaged with journalism, academic writing, creative work, and personal practice within the same ecosystem. Writing labs functioned as structured but flexible spaces—often described as “study halls”—where writers could work independently while receiving guidance, feedback, and encouragement.

Unbound Authors' model centers incarcerated writers not only as participants, but as peer leaders and collaborators, shaping programming, supporting one another's work, and contributing to a culture of shared learning inside facilities.

2. Publishing & Journalism — Mercury Mountain Media

In 2025, Unbound Authors formally launched Mercury Mountain Media (MMM) as its publishing imprint. This year focused on infrastructure-building rather than public output.

- Received formal CDOC approval to publish incarcerated writers' work
- Designed a statewide editorial workflow aligned with CDOC review processes
- Established ethical standards for consent, attribution, and publication



- Trained inside and outside editorial teams
- Built systems for intake, review, revision, and approval

Publication-Ready by Year's End

While no publications were released in 2025, writers actively engaged in journalism training, drafting, revision, and feedback. Writing for practice was treated as a core educational outcome — not merely a step toward publication. By the end of 2025, Unbound Authors entered 2026 with approval secured, infrastructure in place, and a community of writers prepared to step into public-facing storytelling.

3. Education & Coalition-Building

Unbound Authors operates within the broader higher-education-in-prison ecosystem, supporting writing as a foundational educational skill that strengthens academic readiness, civic participation, and reentry pathways.

- Coalition-building through the Colorado Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (C-CHEP)
- Research on best practices in higher-education-in-prison coalitions nationwide
- Relationship-building across education, corrections, journalism, and community organizations

Community, Partnership & Trust

Impact Arts & Grapefruit Lab

Co-applicants on the Arts in Society coalition grant — supporting collaborative work at the intersection of art, incarceration, and public dialogue.

Pollen Initiative

Collaboration to build out publishing and journalism infrastructure grounded in national best practices for ethical carceral storytelling.

The Community / Carceral Learning Network

Partnership with Shannon Ross to design and pilot a Carceral Learning Network — exploring new models for education and peer learning across incarceration and reentry contexts.

DU Prison Arts Initiative

Teaching journalism inside facilities and supporting incarcerated writers through instruction and mentorship. DU Prison Arts Initiative provided a small grant to support this work.

Anonymous National Funder

Small grant in support of Unbound Authors' leadership development and field engagement.

RedLine Contemporary Art Center

High Walls Summit — panels and conversations examining incarceration, art, and structures of confinement.



High Walls Summit at RedLine Contemporary Art Center, 2025. Left to right: Jeff Wise, Director of Advancement, REMERG; JoyBelle Phelan, Co-Founder, Unbound Authors; Libby Catchings, Ph.D., Co-Founder, Unbound Authors.

“

Across all partnerships, Unbound Authors remains committed to collaboration rooted in respect for incarcerated writers, ethical practice, and sustainability over speed.

Volunteers: The Backbone of the Work

Unbound Authors' statewide reach in 2025 would not have been possible without the dedication, skill, and care of our volunteers.

- Facilitating and supporting in-person writing labs

- Providing written feedback and mentorship to incarcerated writers
- Serving on editorial teams preparing work for publication
- Supporting curriculum development, research, and administrative systems
- Traveling long distances to facilities across Colorado, often using personal vehicles and personal time

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Their work is not ancillary to our mission; it is essential to it. Their contributions represent thousands of hours of unpaid labor, relationship-building, and intellectual care.

Many of our volunteers are educators, writers, journalists, artists, and formerly or currently system-impacted individuals who bring deep professional expertise and lived understanding to their work. All volunteer engagement is grounded in clear expectations, ethical practice, and respect for incarcerated writers' agency and boundaries.

Unbound Authors operates through a layered labor model that combines paid roles, structured internships, and volunteer leadership. As funding increases, Unbound Authors is committed to transitioning critical functions into paid positions and strengthening coordination, training, and support across the team.

Field Leadership, Research & International Engagement

In 2025, Unbound Authors' co-founders contributed to national and international conversations about incarceration, education, and lived-experience criminology across multiple venues and platforms.

Routledge Press Publication — December 2025

Co-Founders JoyBelle Phelan and Libby Catchings, Ph.D. co-authored “Swapping Policing for Possibility: Reframing Community Corrections” in *Beyond Autoethnography: Lived Experience Criminology* (Routledge Press, edited by Dwayne Antojado and Matt Maycock). The chapter examines community corrections through the lens of lived experience criminology, reframing systems of supervision toward dignity and relational accountability.

EuroCrim — European Society of Criminology Annual Conference, Athens

JoyBelle Phelan and Libby Catchings presented at EuroCrim 2025, one of the most significant international convenings in criminology. Presenting at EuroCrim placed Unbound Authors' lived experience perspectives into direct conversation with global research, policy, and practice communities.



Conference on Community Writing — Detroit, October 2025

Libby Catchings presented “Finding and Building Worlds within Worlds: Profile of a Library-Writing Center Partnership in Colorado Prisons,” placing Unbound Authors’ statewide model in conversation with community writing practitioners across the country.

High Walls Symposium — RedLine Contemporary Art Center, Denver

Libby Catchings co-moderated and organized “Voices Beyond the Wall,” a reading and panel at the High Walls Symposium 2025 — bringing incarcerated and community voices into direct public dialogue.

Libby also serves as Co-Editor of the Community Literacy Journal, where she has worked to clear a two-year manuscript backlog, mentor international scholars, and secure publication funding — field-building work that directly strengthens the national ecosystem Unbound Authors operates within.

Collectively, this engagement reflects Unbound Authors’ role not only as a program provider, but as a field-building organization — contributing practice-based knowledge and lived expertise to criminological, rhetorical, and community literacy discourse at every level.

Writer Reflections

Across facilities, writers consistently shared that Unbound Authors provided:

Protected time to write and reflect	Space that belongs to the writer — unhurried, purposeful, and consistently held.
Respect for their ideas, voices, and goals	Recognition that every writer’s perspective carries weight and deserves a serious audience.
Opportunities to revise and grow over time	Writing as an ongoing practice — not a one-time event, but a long-arc skill.
Connection to a broader intellectual community	A sense of belonging to something larger than the walls of a single facility.

“

Writing is not only about output — it is about dignity, agency, and belonging.



Financial Snapshot | 2025

Statement of Activity — January through December 2025

Revenue

Source	Amount
Individual Donations (incl. GiveButter, Colorado Gives)	\$4,442
Corporate Donations	\$850
Arts in Society — Creative Practices in CO Prisons	\$13,000
DU Prison Arts Initiative	\$5,000
Anonymous National Funder	\$2,500
Services	\$300
Total Revenue	\$26,092

Expenditures

Category	Amount
Program Supplies & Materials	\$4,567
Digital & IT Costs for Programs	\$574
Training & Development (incl. EuroCrim)	\$4,575
Office Expenses	\$2,030
Administrative & Operating	\$366
IT & Software	\$525
Marketing & Fundraising	\$99
Transportation, Travel & Meals	\$343
Miscellaneous	\$1,126
Total Expenditures	\$14,205

Total Revenue	\$26,092
Total Expenditures	\$14,205
Net Operating Revenue	\$11,888

Year-End Financial Position

Total Assets: \$13,121 | Total Liabilities: \$3,000 | Net Assets: \$10,121 Cash on hand at Dec 31, 2025: \$11,659. Founder contributions payable of \$3,000 reflect deferred compensation owed to founding leadership — a direct indicator of the investment founders have made in building this organization.



Published under



With Gratitude & Looking Ahead

None of this work happens in isolation. We are deeply grateful to the writers who trusted us with their words, the volunteers who offered their time and care, the partners who shared resources and vision, and the funders who made this year possible.

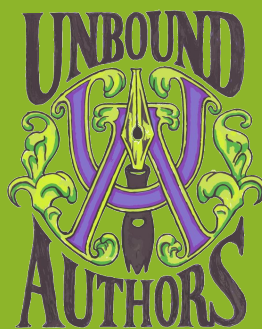
Looking ahead to 2026, Unbound Authors is focused on:

- Sustaining statewide access across 21 facilities
- Transitioning toward paid leadership and operational stability
- Launching publications through Mercury Mountain Media
- Continuing to center incarcerated writers as leaders and collaborators
- Investing in volunteer coordination, training, and long-term support

Thank You

Thank you for believing in the power of writing to build skills, tell the truth, and open pathways forward. Sustaining this work long-term will require investment not only in programming, but in the people and systems that make it possible. We are grateful for every person who has been part of this journey.

unboundauthors.org • (720) 251-4945 • Mercury Mountain Media



Supporting Writers, Transforming Futures

Through our Writers Mentoring Labs, publishing programs, and public engagement, Unbound Authors creates space for incarcerated writers to develop their skills, share their stories, and connect with community.



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