

READING AHEAD



2023 - 2027
STRATEGIC PLAN

DEAR READER,



I am excited to share with you the work we are embarking on for the next three years. This strategic plan is the culmination of months of listening and collaboration, understanding our community's needs, and

envisioning of possibilities; taken up by the staff and board, partners (like you), and most importantly, Telling Room writers and alumni.

As you read on, I hope you are energized by our path forward, which is grounded in experiences and learnings from the pandemic, our leadership transition, and the reality of what is happening now, for youth, our staff, our organization, and the communities we share.

During these three years, we will celebrate our 20th anniversary, and as we look towards that milestone, this plan is critical. The Telling Room community will focus on fully living our values, centering the what and how of our mission, building from our strong foundation to move from the deeply beloved and impactful organization we are, to an institution that sustains and supports young writers—for generations to come.

Thank you for supporting the power of youth voices, your trust and confidence in The Telling Room, and for moving forward with us in the work ahead.

Kristina M.J. Powell
she/her/hers
Executive Director



You hold in your hands our fresh-off-the-press strategic plan, one that evolved from intensive heartfelt work, and is deeply aligned with The Telling Room's mission to empower youth through writing and share their voices

with the world.

Our plan reflects our valuing of creativity and curiosity; commitment to racial and social justice; and efforts to build a community rooted in empathy and inclusion that nurtures a true sense of belonging.

Uplifting youth voices empowers not only our present, but builds the foundation for our future, where youth have the confidence to make themselves heard and communities value what they have to share. Where imagination and reality fuse and this generation becomes changemakers: dreaming into being their own visions for their—and our—futures. And when we dream together, in partnership with our communities? There's no 'The End' to what we can do.

The stories of our youth are *our* stories, too.

As we step into our new beginning—from 200 books and counting towards our 20th anniversary—would you join us in telling it?

Tanuja Desai Hidier
she/her/hers
Board President

READING AHEAD

““ *The Telling Room's growth is not only due to the hard-working, kind people leading it, but also because communities from every corner of Maine believe in its mission. During the planning process, I felt grateful and proud to be a part of an organization that valued my feedback, sought ways to implement it, and thoroughly reviewed a diverse set of community input.* ””

— Khalil Kilani

Telling Room Alumni Ambassador

Over the next three years, we will strengthen what we do by deepening our understanding of the impact of both our programs and publications. This means looking closely at access and how it presents itself, both physically and pedagogically. We will learn more about the youth we serve and stay connected with them as they transition from students to alumni. Along the way, we seek to enrich our relationships with community partners while cultivating new networks of support for Maine's young writers.

Simultaneously, The Telling Room will be positioning ourselves for the next chapter, building on our strong foundation of support as a beloved organization, and exploring our future as a lasting institution. To do this, we commit to expansively living our values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, both internally and externally, so that youth exploring their voices can find support at The Telling Room, now and for years to come.

We hope you will join us in reading ahead—and writing this bright future together.

Have you ever read a book so good that you couldn't put it down—you just had to keep going to see what happens next? That's exactly how The Telling Room team feels as we look towards the future with eagerness and excitement.

The Telling Room began our three year strategic planning process in the summer of 2022 in partnership with Reflector Lab, a consultant group with roots in the literary arts, serving youth, and Maine. As we began this work as an organization, we were grateful to the many Telling Room stakeholders who shared their perspectives and experiences with us, as well as the opportunities and possibilities they saw ahead. We heard from all corners of our community and—most importantly—from youth and alumni. We convened a board and staff retreat in the fall of 2022 to synthesize this input and shape our priorities. Smaller committees then focused on these priorities, structuring our goals and objectives for the next three years. This input, along with our working group comprised of board and staff, has guided the creation of the plan presented here.

In this reflective time, we have closely examined what we do and what is important to us as a youth-serving, literary arts nonprofit based in Maine. Together, we have revisited and revised our organizational values, and crafted our first-ever vision statement, which shares what we aim to accomplish when we apply our values to our mission.

OUR MISSION

The Telling Room empowers youth through writing and shares their voices with the world.

OUR VISION

A future where youth make themselves heard and their communities value their voices.



Youth find a quiet corner of the **Desert of Maine's** Gemstone Village to write in during a free six-week afterschool workshop in 2023. *Photo by Rylan Hynes*

OUR VALUES

CREATIVITY

We engage in writing to spark imagination, foster courage, and cultivate joy in the creative process.

CURIOSITY

We believe awakening the innate curiosity of youth builds their confidence in learning and engaging with the world.

VOICE

We uplift the transformative, powerful voices of youth writers and changemakers.

JUSTICE

We commit to racial and social justice by centering our community's diversity of perspectives, experiences, and identities.

COMMUNITY

We build a community that is rooted in empathy and inclusion, nurturing an authentic sense of belonging.

“ ...EVERYWHERE YOU GO
SOMEONE WILL ALWAYS HAVE YOUR BACK. ”



In partnership with the **Hurricane Island Outward Bound School**, Telling Room summer campers head into the Maine wilderness each year on our Writers Expedition. *Photo by Jenny O'Connell*
— Excerpt from “Home” by Kai Berelowitch, written during Writers Expedition 2023

FOSTER & EXPAND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The Telling Room engages with the literary arts, education, and youth empowerment communities. We aim to deepen our ties with existing partners and alumni as we forge and foster new connections.

By furthering our values-centered funding and resource opportunities, we will collaboratively expand access to our programs and publications while advancing alumni engagement.



WE WILL **DEEPEN** OUR PARTNERSHIP MODEL BY:

- Formalizing existing (and seeking new) partnerships to enhance organizational development goals in:
 - » Program access
 - » Publication and distribution
 - » Culture of learning
 - » Literary Arts field leadership
- Expanding opportunities to engage alumni

WE WILL **STRENGTHEN** OUR FUNDRAISING AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS BY:

- Advancing values-centered fundraising
- Diversifying funding opportunities

STRENGTHEN PROGRAM MODEL AND IMPACT

Our programs uplift the voices and perspectives of thousands of Maine youth across the state. As we deepen our understanding of our organization's impact through refined evaluation and data collection, we seek opportunities to advocate for and expand access to our programs, ensuring youth have space to explore their world through writing.

Curiosity drives us to continue to examine our program model while strengthening the systems and infrastructure that support our mission. We will regularly share our practices and the impact of our work with the community.



WE WILL UNDERSTAND OUR PROGRAM EFFICACY BY:

- Launching systems for data management
- Revising our program evaluation model through:
 - » Partnering with an evaluation consultant to refine evaluation tools and create a Theory of Change
 - » A longitudinal narrative study that demonstrates our long-term organizational impact
- Evaluating program growth feasibility through:
 - » Focus groups that explore growth and identify community needs and interest
 - » Surveying communities to understand their interest in future engagement
 - » Executing an expansion report that maps growth recommendations, including partnership and program targets, staffing model, and financial model

WE WILL ADVANCE OUR PROGRAM MODEL BY:

- Creating impact-centered decision-making tools
- Establishing accessibility goals that serve as a guide for decision-making

WE WILL INCREASE PROGRAM VISIBILITY BY:

- Connecting to the field of youth writing and publishing
- Communicating our program impact



“ WE ARE LIVING.
WE ARE EXISTING.
WE ARE VERBS.
AND ISN'T THAT BEAUTIFUL? ”

Summer sessions of **Young Writers & Leaders** bring middle school students from **Portland Public Schools** into The Telling Room for a week-long writing intensive. *Photo by Brooks Peters*
— Excerpt from “Isn't It Beautiful?” by Avalon Tate, *Statewide Writing Contest Hancock County Winner*

“ WHAT HAVE I BEEN DIGGING FOR THESE PAST FEW YEARS IF NOT A GARDEN? ”



The soil is rich with stories at **Growing to Give's Scatter Good Farm**, where young writers find inspiration in greenhouses, the woods, flower gardens, goat pens, and more. *Photo by Kelsey Kobik*
Excerpt from "Gardening" by Molly Roe, Published in SWARM! Volume Five

ENHANCE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR GROWTH

Since its inception, The Telling Room has built a foundation that has enabled our organization to grow continually. We commit to formalizing systems and centering our culture of learning so that our team, the youth we work with, and the broader Telling Room community, are holistically supported.

With enhanced infrastructure, we position The Telling Room to effectively support and reach more of Maine's young writers, now and in the future.



WE WILL ALIGN OUR SPACE WITH THE TELLING ROOM'S NEEDS BY:

- Assessing physical and virtual space needs
- Evaluating alternate space possibilities through:
 - » Reports from established space committee outlining adequacy for current and future needs, based on projected growth
 - » Exploring and evaluating creative solutions and space alternatives based on needs and financial impact
 - » Budgeting for future space, outlined in a financial plan

WE WILL ADVANCE PEOPLE, TALENT, AND CULTURE BY:

- Mapping staffing and compensation aligned with future growth through:
 - » Developing salary bands based on regional market studies
 - » Creating a multi-year compensation and benefits plan that guides hiring decisions and references regional market studies
- Developing our culture of professional learning through:
 - » Staff developing annual professional learning goals
 - » Offering regular professional learning opportunities that are accessible to individuals, teams, and the full organization
- Advancing board governance through:
 - » Developing a board matrix that identifies skills and characteristics of current and future members
 - » Assessing and reviewing governance documents annually

BUILD A MORE DIVERSE, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATION

We aim for justice to be authentically felt, seen, and centered in our practices as an organization. We intentionally foster belonging and actively uplift the diverse identities that strengthen our organization and community. Through continuous learning, we commit to developing our individual and shared cultural competency, advocating for youth, and increasing accessibility at The Telling Room. Led by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices, we will align operations and build organizational infrastructure to better support staff and volunteers who reflect the youth we serve.



We recognize that this is the largest area of growth for The Telling Room. This ongoing work is integral to each aspect of our organization, both internal and external. Once we meet these current goals and objectives, these outcomes will be palpable organization wide—in all that we do.

WE WILL ADVANCE CULTURAL COMPETENCY BY:

- Defining and facilitating DEI learning
- Centering and embedding DEI in organizational structures and strategies
- Developing and supporting diverse talent

WE WILL EXPAND INTERNAL SYSTEMS FOR JUSTICE BY:

- Setting and tracking diversity goals that will inform staff hiring and Board recruitment
- Assessing and refining our Human Resources structure through:
 - » Reviewing staff benefits and Human Resources policies annually through a lens of inclusion
 - » Planning our annual calendar with the diversity of our team and community in mind
 - » Using salary bands and market studies to drive compensation decision-making and hiring strategy
- Expanding recruitment strategies through:
 - » Developing a DEI-centered board recruitment and staff hiring strategy that results in prospect identification, hiring, and onboarding
 - » Recruiting efforts that yield a diverse group of new staff and board members who represent the community we serve

WE WILL INCREASE PROGRAM ACCESSIBILITY BY:

- Defining who we serve through data-informed criteria that guides enrollment outreach and decisions
- Centering and uplifting diverse voices, regularly weaving diverse student identities into:
 - » Mentor texts utilized in Telling Room programs & curriculum
 - » Our physical space and library
 - » Publications
 - » Program guest authors, mentors, teaching artists & ambassadors

WE WILL ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH AND THEIR COMMUNITIES BY:

- Rooting communication in our values
- Defining audiences and accessibility needs, ensuring that messaging and methods are aligned with accessibility requirements
- Advancing values-based messaging by detailing our organizational positions and beliefs in public-facing statements, such as the following:
 - » Equity statement
 - » Land acknowledgment
 - » Positionality statement
 - » Pronoun use language

“IT WAS MORE THAN JUST A FOUNDATION WITH WALLS. MORE THAN JUST A HOME. IT WAS A STORY. OUR STORY.”



Author Leela Marie Hidier reads from the first chapter of her novel, *Changes in the Weather*, in Augusta before Maine’s Capitol building at **Maine Youth Climate Justice’s Youth Day of Action**. Photo by Kaitlin Toto, Excerpt from *Changes in the Weather* by Leela Marie Hidier



“ I MAKE MY THOUGHTS DOMINATE MY FOCUS
I WONDER BEFORE I ACT, BEFORE DESIRE ACTS
I ENTER A SPACE, AND MAKE MY SPACE ”

TIMELINE

PLANNING PHASE

Strategic Planning | June - December 2022
Operational Planning | January - June 2023

ACTIVATION PHASE

Year One: Fiscal Year 2024 | July 2023 - June 2024
Year Two: Fiscal Year 2025 | July 2024 - June 2025
Year Three: Fiscal Year 2026 | July 2025 - June 2026

PROGRESS CHECKS
Quarterly
Led by Working Group

EVALUATION & CALIBRATION
Annually in 1st Quarter
Led by Executive Committee, Leadership Team, Strategic Plan Working Group

CONCLUSION & REFLECTION
Monthly | July 2026 - January 2027
Led by Strategic Plan Working Group

STRATEGIC PLAN WORKING GROUP

Kristina M.J. Powell, *Executive Director*
Anya Endsley, *Board President*
Sonya Tomlinson, *Young Writers & Leaders Program Lead*
Rob Gould, *Board Vice President*

SUBCOMMITTEES

PRIORITY AREA: PARTNERSHIPS
Lead: Marjolaine Whittlesey, Staff
Sally Newhall, *Board*
Sonya Tomlinson, *Staff*
Molly McGrath, *Staff*
Ninette Irabaruta, *Board*
Sarah Schneider, *Staff*
Kristina M.J. Powell, *Staff*
Meghan Vigeant, *Staff*
Khalil Kilani, *Ambassador*

PRIORITY AREA: PROGRAMMING
Lead: Nick Whiston, Staff
Rob Gould, *Board*
Catherine Richards, *Board*
Laura Shen, *Board*
Sara Crisp, *Board*
Anya Endsley, *Board*
Kristina M.J. Powell, *Staff*
Amy Kimball, *Staff*

PRIORITY AREA: INFRASTRUCTURE
Lead: Deanna Harnett, Board
Peyton Black, *Staff*
Rachele Ryan, *Staff*
Bob Zager, *Board*
Donna Simonetti, *Board*
Kristina M.J. Powell, *Staff*
Peg Smith, *Board*

PRIORITY AREA: JUSTICE
Lead: Rylan Hynes, Staff
James Kim, *Staff*
Sarah Welch, *Board*
Tanuja Desai Hidier, *Board*
Hipai Pamba, *Staff*
Kristina M.J. Powell, *Staff*
Mo Nuñez, *Board*
Amanda Dettmann, *Ambassador*



This plan was created in partnership with Reflector Lab of Chicago, Illinois.

Mohamedamin Mohamed takes the stage of **Mayo Street Arts** during the Young Writers & Leaders and Second Story reading in December 2022.
Photo by Rylan Hynes
Excerpt from "Untitled" by Mohamedamin Mohamed

LEARN MORE AT:
tellingroom.org/strategic-plan



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