The background is a light cream color with several hand-drawn envelopes in various orientations. The envelopes are drawn with dark brown outlines and have a small yellow heart on the flap. A central white rectangular box with a thin red border contains the text. Two thick, dark brown horizontal bars extend from the left and right edges of the page, overlapping the central box.

# Letters to Strangers

Annual Report  
2024

# Introduction

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Letters to Strangers (L2S) is an award-winning, global youth-run mental health organization seeking to destigmatize mental illness and increase access to affordable, quality treatment through

- 1) **anonymous letter-writing exchanges in student clubs and online**
- 2) **science-informed peer education curricula and research**
- 3) **grassroots policy- and service-based advocacy**

Started in California but active with Chapters and Partner Sites on six continents, L2S is the largest youth-for-youth mental health nonprofit, with over **105,000 people** impacted in 2024.

*Most mental health organizations are not for youth or run by youth. L2S is here to change that.*

# Our Origin

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When I was 13 years old, I found out I had bipolar disorder. Not long after, I attempted suicide. I was saved by my younger brother on what has by far been the worst day of my life. As a first-generation immigrant to the U.S. from the poorest province in China, growing up under the poverty line with parents who didn't speak English, "mental healthcare" didn't exist in my vocabulary. So I turned to writing. As I wrote letters to no one, I recognized my voice. I realized that I have a story worth telling – and a life worth living. **Writing is humanity distilled into ink.**

Determined to never let anyone experience that same pain, I started Letters to Strangers in my sophomore year of high school in Southern California. The year was 2013\*. And the rest is *herstory*.

*-Diana Chao, Founder & Executive Director*

\*We received official nonprofit status years later, so our legal age is younger



# A Look Back

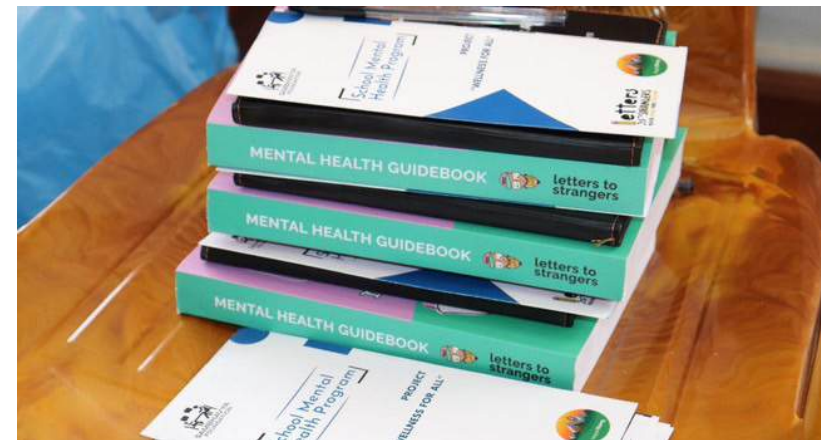
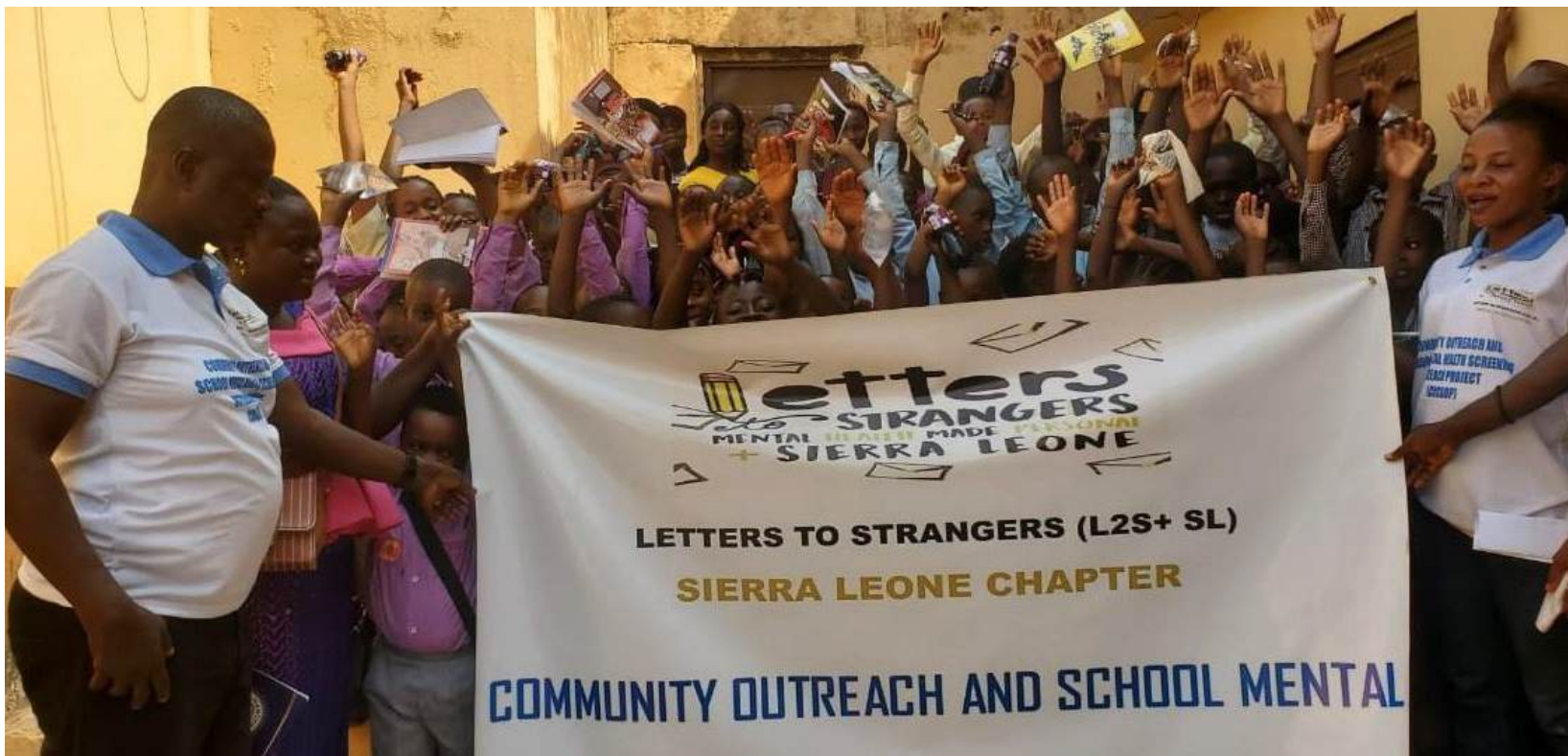
the 2024 edition



Let's  
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# *THE NUMBERS*

41,000

middle school to college students educated with our mental health **curriculum** in Nepal with [Sambhavya Foundation](#)

105,000

individuals impacted in the **past year** across Chapters and partnerships in

17

countries

10,000+

**letters** exchanged, including through our free online public [platform](#)

**\$10,000 USD**

awarded in global **scholarships** for mental health education, personal advocacy, and treatment

**Government**

of Zimbabwe officially recognized our Harare Chapter during the Southern Africa Development Community Symposium

**11,000+**

new students at community schools added to our mental health education program in Nepal, with municipal backing

**25**

new Chapters registered in 8 countries

**65,000+**

individuals supported by our **Pan-African Mental Health Hotline**, toll-free at **9898**, and other local programs in Liberia

**100+**

teachers completed our teacher training program to bring mental health education to their schools

**137**

pages of new **educational materials** released in 9 languages

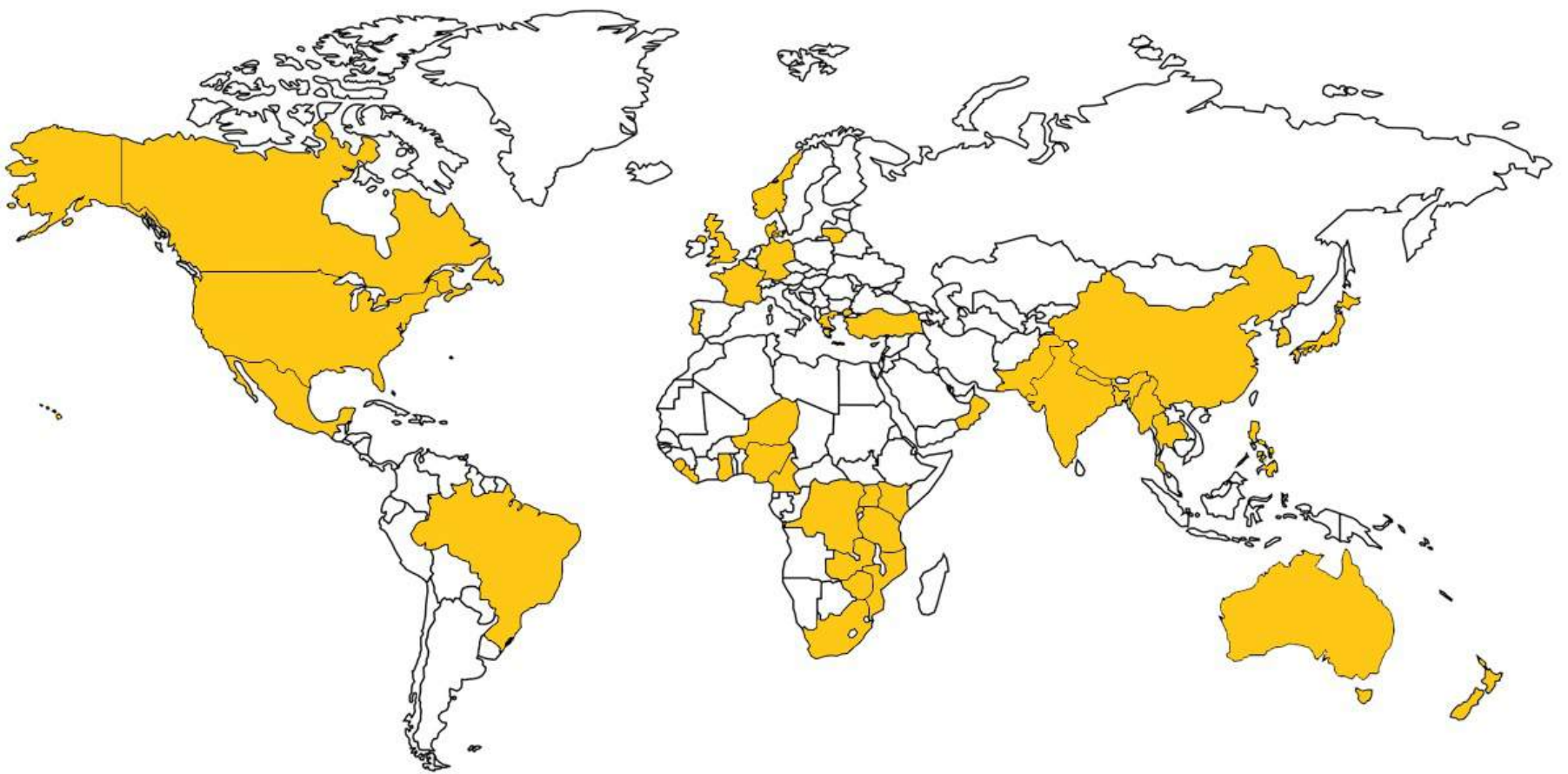
**Studies found**

statistically significant improvement in every social emotional learning dimension (SEL) among students of our mental health curriculum

**90%**

of callers to our Pan-African Mental Health Hotline rated our services a 9/10 or higher.

# Where We've Worked





# Where We Were Featured...

about mental health, climate change, racial equity, and their intersectionalities





## Letters to Strangers Chapter Members Say...

“Being a part of L2S for me means being a part of a moving train changing the way mental health works for the youth population. For me, it's being part of the bigger picture that gives life and opportunities to the smaller ones that just want to do something meaningful. For me, it means being hope to other through the efforts put together by L2S. It means being light.”

– *Deborah O., L2S+Mental Health Transformation, Kaduna State, Nigeria*

“I love being a part of L2S as it is a great organisation with such an amazing message. I feel a deep connection to Letters to Strangers as I have been a part of the organisation since I started high school in 2022, and a leader of the Chapter since 2023. The club at my school allows me to encourage destigmatisation around mental health based conversations around my school and beyond and that means so much to me.”

– *Zoe S., L2S+Rangitoto College, Auckland, New Zealand*



## Letters to Strangers Chapters Say...

“L2S means a lot to me (and my members) as it gives everyone a place to comfortably talk about their feelings and just be seen and heard. This is something that is very important especially since we live in a country where mental health is literally so rarely talked about.”

– *Defne A., Izmir, L2S+Türkiye*

“Being a part of L2S makes me feel like I'm truly giving back to the community, knowing that my efforts contribute to something meaningful. It's a great sense of fulfillment to help others, and at the same time, I feel supported by a strong network of like-minded individuals. The connection and camaraderie within L2S create a positive environment where we all grow together.”

– *Mia A., L2S+FrHS, Elk Grove, California, USA*



mental health warrior  
*Vaishnavi Rana*

“This scholarship will enable me to maintain a focus on my mental well-being, which is essential for me to achieve my aspirations of consistently supporting my mother, excelling in my career, and dedicating myself to research and advocacy in the mental health field.”

2024 winner

Letters to Strangers India

THE JULY EVENT

MELODY OF EASE


19 JULY 5 PM

DR. ROSHAN MANSUKHANI  
Music Therapist

DEBARPITA DUTTA  
Artist

DR. SHAMBHAVI DAS  
Indian classical singer & Music Therapist



A top-down photograph of a white coffee cup filled with dark coffee, sitting on a light green napkin. To the right of the cup is a bouquet of pink roses with green leaves and stems. The background is a plain, light-colored surface. A white rectangular box with a thin red border is centered over the image, containing the text.

# The What

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so what do we do, exactly?

# The Problem

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- COVID-19 led to a 25% increase in depression and anxiety, disproportionately affecting youth and women
- 50% of lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24
- 37% of students with a mental health condition drop out of school – the highest dropout rate of *any* disability group
- More than 700,000 people die by suicide worldwide *every year*
- 1/2 of all countries in the world have fewer than 1 psychiatrist per 100,000 residents
- Suicide is the 4th leading cause of death in the world for ages 15 to 29, and rates increased by 60% worldwide in 45 years

We need something reflective of the world today. That starts with asking the people who have the biggest stake: **the youth.**

# Our Solution



## Letter Exchanges

Our unique, **art therapy-informed anonymous handwritten** letter-writing exchange program connects youths through Chapters, Partner Sites, and a free online platform with themes, guides, and trained peer-led discussions.



## Peer Education

From the world's first youth-for-youth mental health guidebook (at 500 pages!) to our science-backed **S.I.M.P.L.E.** and **E.M.P.A.T.H.I.Z.I.N.G.** mental health acronyms, our resources & workshops are designed to be actionable and *remembered*.



## Grassroots Advocacy

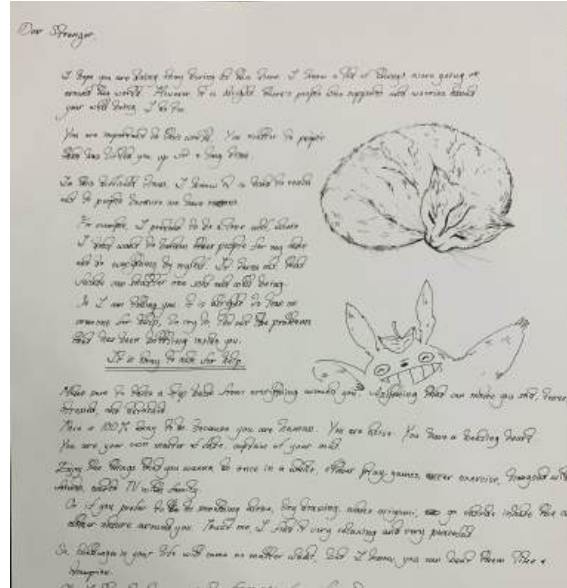
From **re-introducing a bill** in the U.S. Congress to involving our Chapters in policy and service advocacy in their communities by building hotlines and peer-led reform, our Chapters make strides where they are.



## Dear Stranger!

The holidays have always been both my favorite and least favorite time of the year. On one hand, I love the coming together of people, kindness shown, and obviously winter break but I also feel a sense of pressure and anxiety. Of course, this is something I struggle with throughout the entire year but in a sense I feel like it's amplified. The hope of bringing everyone together and making everyone feel loved has always been a struggle coming from a long history of divorced and separated households. For every moment I have with one parent I have to recreate with the other. It constantly leaves my sister and I feeling alone in a sea of pleasing people.

I wanted to write to you today in the case that you've ever felt the same as I do, alone even when there are people around you. I've found that finding joy in small things makes it a little easier to bear. For me that's often personified through my dog who finds joy in every little moment. As I write this and watch him prance around the yard it reminds me that regardless of how alone I feel there is joy to be found.



# Letter-Writing



# Key Points

- In the U.S. alone, 80% of youth with severe depression receive little to no treatment. Art therapy has been scientifically proven to work, esp. across languages. Our exchanges are based on therapy-informed **themes** and **guiding questions**
- Rather than a **pen pal** approach, we take a message in a bottle format: anonymous letters are sent out and received, but there is no guarantee that the writer and reader receive each other's letters. This eases the fear of not knowing the exact right thing to say, reduces assumptions & stereotypes that can impact one's empathy, and gives people the chance to reinvent their own voice by writing to new people as they figure out the trajectory of their stories
- Letter exchanges conclude each time with **trained-peer-led group discussions** and debriefs, incorporating elements of peer support as well as meditative reflections
- In June 2020, we launched a **free online letter exchange portal** coded entirely by undergraduate students, with rewards badges, safety-first moderation, journaling, and customization systems.
- The activity is simple enough that anyone can get involved – even those far removed from the mental health conversation

@L2SMentalHealth

**Living through Conflict and Humanitarian Crises**

Educational Pamphlets from L2S  
Written by Hannah Reynolds Martinez

*Read the full pamphlet via link in our bio*

**LEGAL RIGHTS OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

By: Hannah Reynolds

**LETTERS TO STRANGERS**  
MINTAI KADU PANDU TELAGANI

# Peer Education

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# Key Points

- Our 80000-word **World's First Youth-for-Youth Mental Health Guidebook** was written entirely by 14- to 21-year-olds and reviewed by medical and industry professionals. It is **free to download in black & white online**
- The Guidebook received **endorsements** from National Alliance on Mental Illness(NAMI)'s Chief Medical Officer, the former VP of Yale-NUS college, former HR director at Bain Capital, Terry Crews, Earl Charles Spencer, His Eminence Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche, etc.
- Over **3000+** **physical copies** are currently in use, and a **supplementary teacher's curriculum handbook** was released in December 2021 for adoption in classrooms worldwide
- We focus on **intersectionality and mental health**. Our Guidebook includes the first deep dive into race, ethnicity, and mental health in the U.S. in 20+ years since the U.S. Surgeon General's Report in 1999.
- Mental health **workshops** are facilitated **to 10000s of people** every year, including **more** who are educated online through our research-based free webinars and class-lesson-length videos.



# Advocacy

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# Key Points

- We run **two annual global [scholarship competitions](#)** worth over \$10,000 USD worldwide, the first of its kind to support mental health workforce diversity, growth, and advocacy since 7 years ago
- Created the **[Mental Health Sustainable Development Goals](#)** policy framework guide
- Created & expanded the **first pan-African mental health hotline**, toll-free at **9898**. It is operated by our Liberia Chapter, the largest youth mental health service in the country and backed by the Ministry of Health
- Our India Chapter's annual "**July Event**" coordinates a multi-day digital art festival to raise funds to provide free therapy to youth in need
- Chapters also advocate for changes through providing services where gaps exist. Testimonials include:

**“For the first time**, having a counselling session two times every week is something that is normal to us. We cannot thank L2S enough.” – *Princess P.*

**“This program really helped me understand what Mental Health is. Until I met L2S I had never heard about Mental Health.** I am thankful to the Letters to Strangers team for the opportunity to gain experience and take actions to protect our mental health.” – *Aaron G.*



# The How

what are our **strategies** and **plans**?

# Target Audience

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*Talking about mental health matters not because of everyone who cares, but because of everyone who doesn't*

## The EveryPerson

Our **letter-writing exchange program** is uniquely designed to be useful for both those with mental health concerns and those far removed from them. The emotional content level of the letters vary across demographics, and the wide range of topics covered reminds individuals that they are not alone—all the while reinforcing the diversity of mental health experiences through heartfelt, personal, *real* anecdotes.

## Youth 13 to 24

The [United Nations](#) defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24. We include all teenagers to arrive at 13 to 24, though we do often go up to 30 to match other international definitions of youth\*. Some of the most life-defining experiences unfold between middle school and early career, after all. Navigating growth in the digital world amidst increasingly sensationalized and violent storytelling requires an empathetic space to feel, discuss, and grow. With our peer group structure, anonymous nature, and youth-led awareness of unfiltered but community-supported reality, we believe all young people can find the programs of L2S helpful.

\*We do not *require* someone to be within this age range to participate in or benefit from L2S programs, but this is the age range to which most of our team members & audience belong

# Our Advantages

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## Our Simple Model

Our goal is to **maximize impact**. Our most simple programming can be sustained on a very small budget (letter writing requires only stationery, writing tools, envelopes, and stamps), but more funds don't go to waste. Instead, our programming is designed to be flexible and scalable to address access and educational gaps once letters start the conversation. Funding helps support trainings, hotline costs, resource centers, and other programs.

It's the *ease* with which one can get started with Letters to Strangers that speaks to the power of our multi-pronged, ground-up movement: *any young person who cares can make a difference.*

## Why We Stand Out

- We were the first **global, equity & inclusion-focused, youth-for-youth** mental health organization in existence when we formed 11 years ago
- We address **all** key facets of mental wellness: **self-reflection** with our letters, **education & support** with our peer groups and research, and **access** with our grassroots advocacy
- We are **youth-led**, so the people we talk to know they can trust us to understand. We remind them of their own power. *We don't just speak or inform: we show them what follows once they claim their power.*



# What We Learned



Global work deserves not  
applause but humility.



Big names and big numbers  
require even bigger questions.



Traditional funding models –  
especially for nonprofits - are  
not the answer.

# Global work deserves not applause but humility

---

Doing truly global work is hard. “Global” is not just a few countries in the Western world or token Global South involvement. It is dealing with governance, logistics, financing, healthcare, and more, that have been corroded and eroded by generations of genocide and colonization.

It might mean we can't write physical letters due to low literacy rates, and switch to roleplaying exercises instead. It might mean we have to budget for food and clothing in workshops even if some funders view it as unnecessary overhead. Communities are full of inherent strength, and we have to be humble enough to know when “standard” impact measurement – AKA traditionally Western models of financing – is not doing the communities justice.

**There are no beneficiaries, only partners.** We *all* benefit from learning *alongside* each other.

# Big names, big numbers, require even bigger questions.

---

We have faced too many disappointments from big names that promised big things for big audiences – without being asked big enough questions.

*Why are they reaching out? Do they see us as partners or a token? Do they show due respect to our community?*

Our team may be young, but we've been doing this work for a decade. We will not waste any more energy and expertise on pursuing potential conversations that do not lead to impacts in alignment with our values.

# Traditional funding models are not the answer.

---

In the pursuit of funding and partnerships, we have for too long chased after moving goalposts. Some funders want big numbers across x many countries; others want big numbers but only in a select few localities. Most ask how we will scale, and in the age of everything becoming an AI mental health app, we felt the need to compete with the mind-boggling numbers a tech company can give for how many users click their 'download' button.

But studies have found that none of these solutions work, because they are individual-focused. To create actual change, we need to build community. And that needs **patience**. So, we will stop services where necessary, even if it means a reduction in number of active countries. We will test iterations of the same program, even if it means a smaller number of people impacted at first. We want to give our focus on building trust, taking the time to make a solution that *works*, a solution that *continues* to work if/after we leave. We will no longer be confined by these funding goalposts and instead let the value in our approach speak for itself.

*Scale is not just lateral. Scale should be intergenerational.*

# 2025 Focus Areas

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## Outreach & Awareness

- Increase number of case **studies** and peer-reviewed **papers** showcasing the efficacy of our programs via partnerships with governments and researchers
- Enhance **online presence** through regular e-newsletters and digital campaigns

## Team & Programming

- Elevate our **network of youth** as **experts** who can bridge the insight and trust gap between funders and developers in the mental health app space and real community needs on the ground
- Facilitate more **in-person** meet-ups where possible

## Education & Access

- Continue **scholarships** for mental health care & education, adding on components of career coaching, job training, and **job placement** opportunities
- Fund more **teachers** to complete our **curriculum** training program

# Values & Strategy

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## Scale

- Scaling is not just *lateral* but *intergenerational*. **De-growth** is not failure but an intentional strategy to do the best we can within where we can.
- Big numbers do not always = biggest impact. Cycles of trauma take time to break. **We invest in patience.**

## Sustenance

- Donations and grants are not always reliable, especially with volatile political climates.
- We will increase engagement with **income-generating ideas** such as leveraging our network's expertise in the existing funding space

## Spotlight

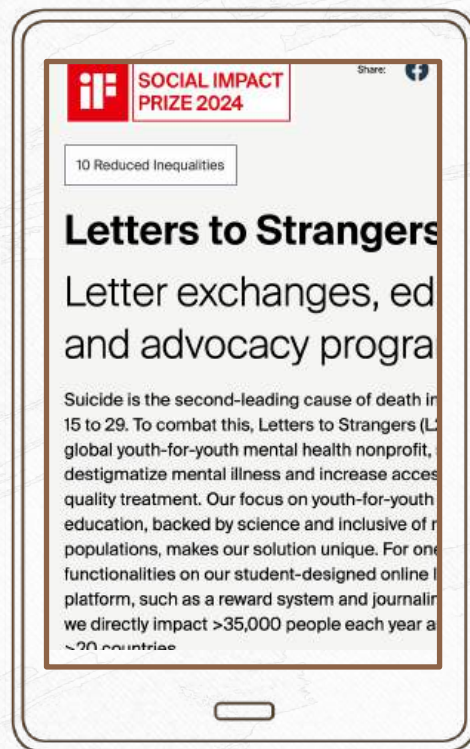
- Spotlights on our work must **recognize our expertise** and diversity. We use “no”s to ensure respect for our “yes”es.
- Collaborate with other **orgs**, prioritizing local/regional partners and tangible outcomes.

# Preview



## Partnerships

We are working with more organizations and schools within Europe, from Romanian podcasts to Italian newspapers to winning the **iF social impact prize**.



## AI Integration

We are utilizing AI to bring our letter writing to more languages with faster and more accurate moderation, while factoring in data privacy and environmental concerns.

# Money Matters

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how did our **2024** go?



# Balance Sheet/Statement of Financial Position

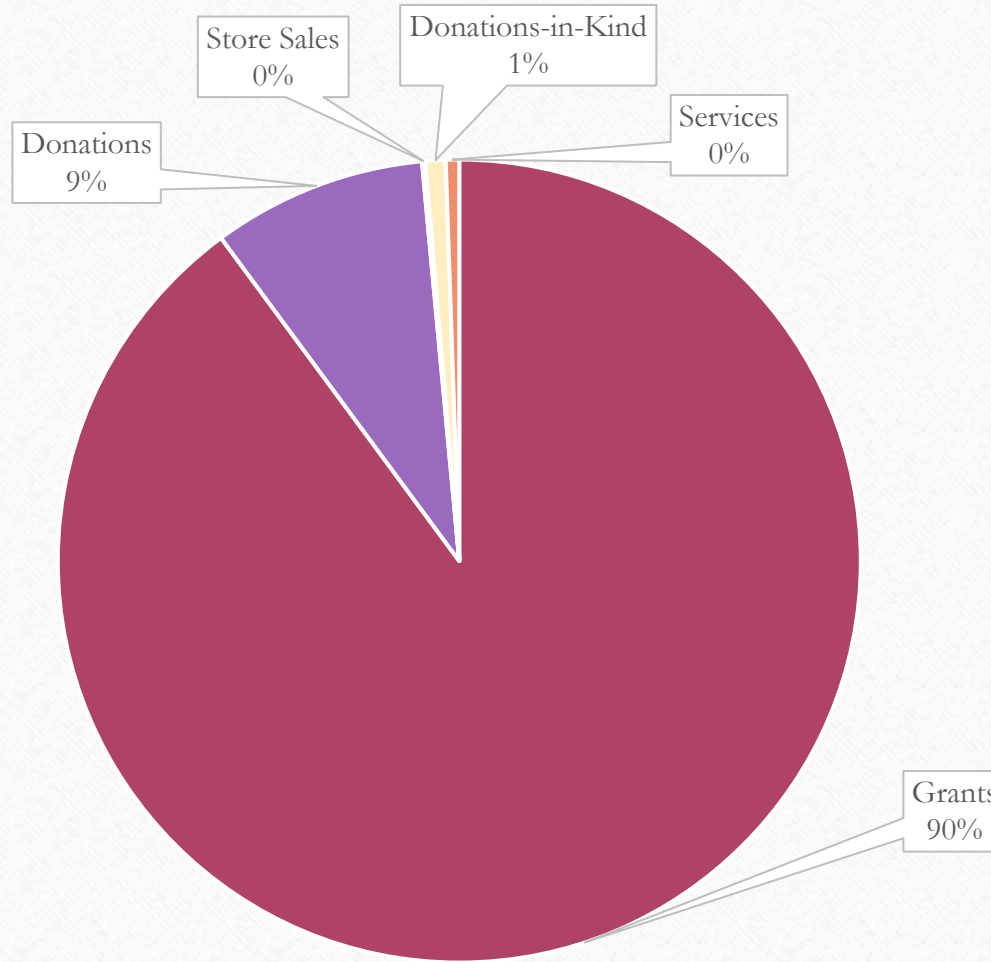
Asset Type	FY 2024 (\$ USD)
Revenue	370,537
Program Expenses	95,121
Supporting Expenses	27,665
Total Expenses	122,787
<b>Balance</b>	<b>247,750</b>

With this, we impacted 105,000 people. That's ~\$1 per life changed!

# 2024 Income

- Grants
- Donations
- Store Sales
- Donations-in-Kind
- Services

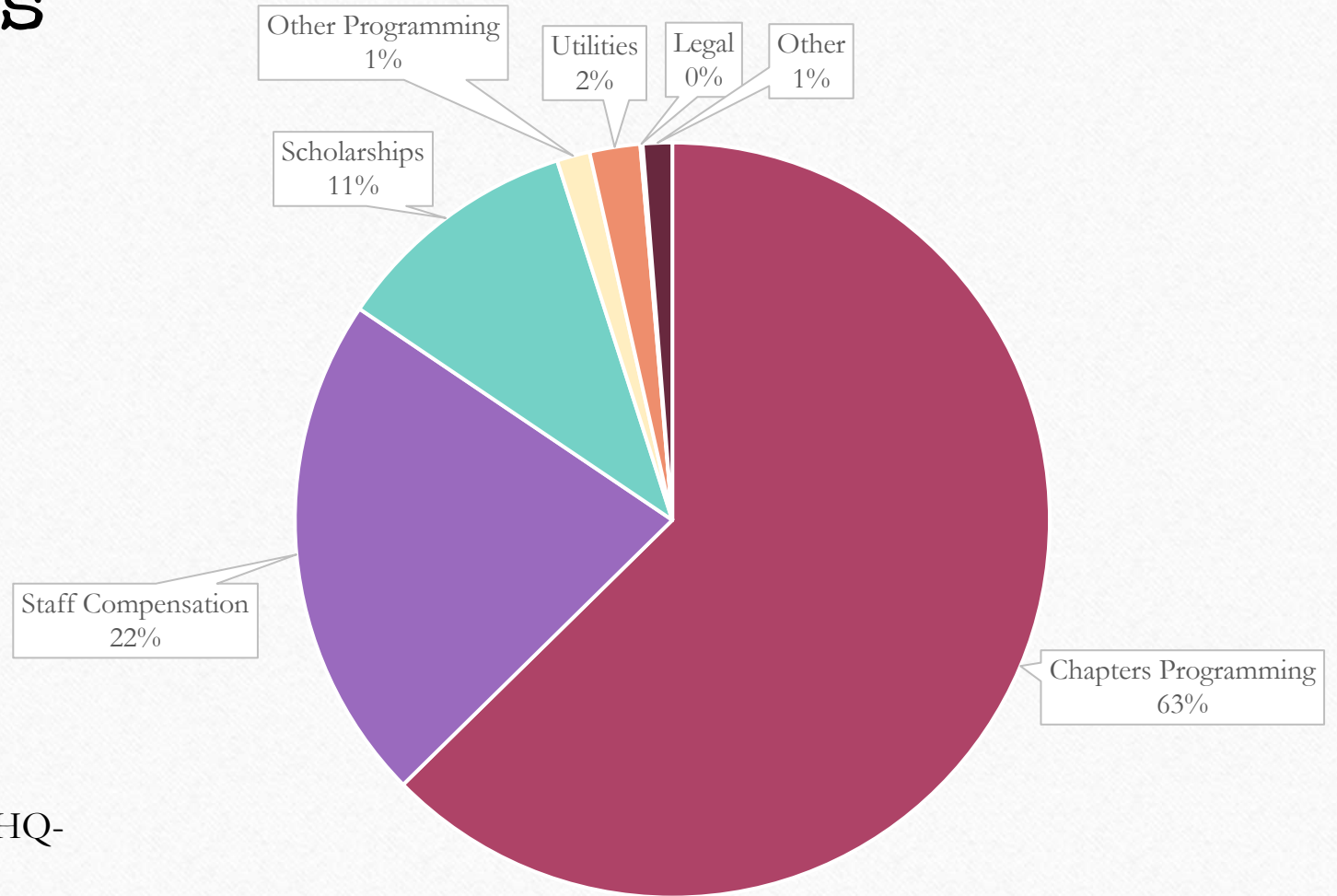
\***Services** indicates income from providing education, consultancy, and other support to other organizations



# 2024 Expenses

- Chapters Programming
- Staff Compensation
- Scholarships
- Other Programming
- Utilities
- Legal
- Other

\***Other Programming** include amounts spent on launching new HQ-based programs not restricted to Chapters



# Money Matters 2.0(25)

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what are our forecasts for *2025*?

# 2025 Financial Forecasts

including committed, incoming grants

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Asset Type	FY 2025 (\$ USD)
Cash	420,550
Program Expenses	267,000
Long-Term Expenses	7,500
Total Expenses	274,500
Balance	146,050



# The Who

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who makes all of this happen?

# Our Team

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**Diana Chao**

**Founder & Executive Director**

Honors B.A. from Princeton University, University of Oxford MBA and Skoll Scholar, Former UN IPCC Climate Scientist, Former Crisis Counselor @ National Suicide Prevention Hotline, White House Honoree, HRH King Charles and Prince Harry Honoree



**Pearl Lee**

**Chief Programs Officer**

Graduate student at Boston University's Masters in Medical Sciences program. Broad experience across clinical research, hospital logistics, medical scribing, and patient care.



**Helen Chen**

**Chief Content Officer**

Bachelor's at Princeton in Computer Science. Former L2S+Princeton University Chapter board member and events task force leader. Graphic designer and coder by training and experience. Software engineer with roles at Meta and more.

# Other Key Team Members

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**Clayton  
Becker**

Chief Learning Officer



**Dan  
Kanceljak**

Strategy Consultant



**Samantha  
Ng**

Chief of Staff



**Libby  
Loftin**

Education Intern



**Hiram  
Nhemachena**

Regional Coordinator



**Reuben  
Reeves**

Regional Coordinator



**Alyssa  
Vassel**

Content Assistant



**Poorvita  
Vijayananda**

Programs Intern



**Thuyanh  
Vo**

Development Intern



# Our Board

---



**Amy Levin,  
PhD**

Director



**Pooja S.  
Mehta, MPH**

Director



**Dr. Goiteseone  
Tanki Thebe**

Director



**Diana  
Chao, MBA**

Director



**Samantha  
Ng**

Secretary



**Lee McClellan,  
CPA, MBA**

Treasurer/Accountant



**Paul G.  
Haaga, Jr.**

Advisor

The  
Beauty  
of  
Earth



# Dear Stranger

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it would be improper for us to sign off without a *letter (or two!)*

The Earth has so many things to offer.  
You can travel around the world to  
different cultures you can



Hi Stranger,

Imagine my astonishment when the moment I open a new document to write this letter and I feel tears pooling in my eyes. Had I been deprived from people for that long? These past few weeks I have been rearranging my room to make it more comfortable for me. My room is my safe haven, where I spend most of my time, it felt like an obligation to make it as comfortable as I could. Needless to say, after tearing down old pictures after years of compressing them onto a small blank wall, I was ready to change my environment.

I saw a quote once, "I love my life, I hate my mind."

It took my breath away, literally. I find myself enjoying the memories I make with my friends and family, even when I'm alone; but somehow, in the midst of the night, when all is dark and the shadows present illusions I wish to not see, I convince myself that happiness was not inevitable for me. But for what reason? I do love my life, I love it to the point where I feel undeserving of it. I make precious memories I wish to replay constantly, but my mind taints every memory with the idea that I was selfish and undeserving. Had I not have amazing friends, I wouldn't know how I could fight with the darkness. I am not saying you need friends to pull yourself out of the dark abyss you may have fallen into, but every now and then, I appreciate them lending me a hand.

I seek comfort through inanimate objects. Looking at my squishmallows (they are so cute and soft) I get this odd sense of hope. I picture myself as a parent to them, as I confide in them, knowing my secrets aren't going anywhere. I picture myself being their friend, as I create false illusions about their lives. Crazy enough, that's all it takes for me to calm my nerves. Something so simple and childlike, was able to soothe the storm pounding in my head. I hope that you find comfort in something simple or spectacular, your mind deserves rest. I suggest investing in a squishmallow, once I got one, I never looked back. Then again, that's what we do, move forward, no days will rewind for us, we just keep moving.

Love,

Stranger

# Letter from the Executive Director

After a decade, I am finally receiving a salary from Letters to Strangers.

It feels like a strange thing to say. Is this good? I felt a misplaced sense of earnestness when I shared how tirelessly I gave all my energy to Letters to Strangers before, for free, while working countless jobs alongside school to ensure I could still make ends meet for both my family and me.

But as I get older, I've gotten tired. I've gotten wiser, I've gotten tired. I've gotten more inspired, I've gotten tired. And it's not just me. It's the people who've stuck by me all these years as we fought to turn our dream of a mentally healthier world into reality. We spent our youth fighting, and at a certain point, the exhaustion from our brains seeps down throughout our bodies.

For everyone's sake, I am questioning the premise upon which we erase ourselves to uplift others. If we become ghosts in a shell, then what corporal strength do we have left to pull others up with us, to keep holding their hands? And as your support allowed Letters to Strangers to continue our programming, continue paying our incredible team whom I started compensating five years before I saw a dime myself, you also allowed me to finally take a deep breath and just give this my all. I cannot thank you enough for that. Because of you, I can continue to be there. Because of you, we can continue to be there. For each other. For ourselves. For the future we all deserve.

The work is so important. But it does not get done by itself. Thank you for believing in the people who make the work happen.

*-Diana Chao*



# Thank You!

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Thank you so much for your support this past year and in the year to come! We would not be where we are without your faith and championship. Letters to Strangers has been by far my life's most humbling journey, and I hope to do it justice. We are welcoming 2025 with the utmost excitement and dedication. Here's to making this a year of change, growth, and sustainability. *Here's to mental wellbeing!*

Diana Chao

Founder & Executive Director

# Follow Us & Contact Us!

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- **Website:** [www.LetterstoStrangers.org](http://www.LetterstoStrangers.org)
- **Email:** [hi@letterstostrangers.org](mailto:hi@letterstostrangers.org)
- **Social Media:** [@L2SMentalHealth](https://www.instagram.com/L2SMentalHealth)
- **YouTube:**  
[www.youtube.com/c/LetterstoStrangersMH](https://www.youtube.com/c/LetterstoStrangersMH)
- **DONATE:**  
[www.letterstostrangers.org/donate](http://www.letterstostrangers.org/donate)

