The background is a light cream color with several hand-drawn envelopes in various orientations. Each envelope is outlined in dark brown with a 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 box.

Letters to Strangers

Annual Report
2025

Introduction

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 **163,000 people** impacted in 2025.

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

Our Origin

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



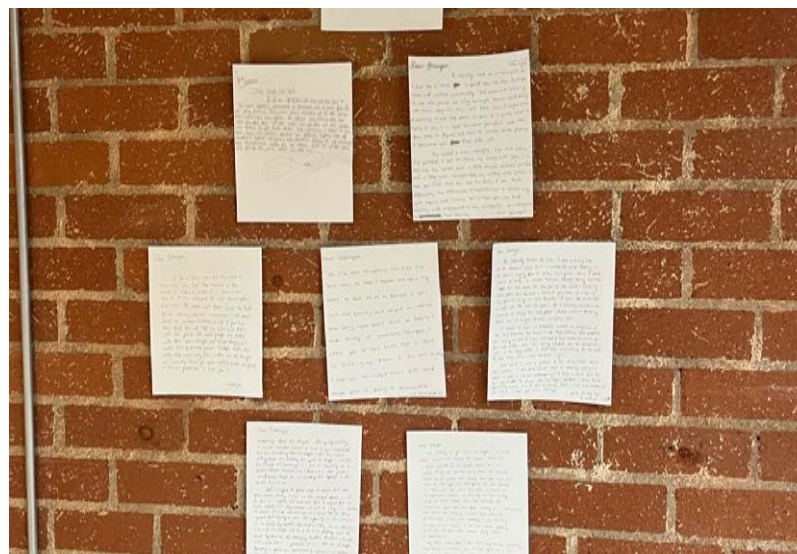
A Look Back

the 2025 edition



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*THE
NUMBERS*

40,426

middle school to college students educated with our mental health **curriculum**

163,084

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

17

countries

5,000+

letters submitted, including through our free online public platform

\$16,000 USD

awarded in global
scholarships for mental health
education, personal advocacy,
and treatment **alongside job
placement opportunities**

Government

of Liberia – National Police
Training Academy – signed a
MOU for us to train the entire
national security sector on
mental health

83%

of participants in our mental
health workshops reported an
improved understanding of
trauma, stress management,
and coping mechanisms

38

new Chapters registered in 8
countries

53,000+

individuals supported by our
**Pan-African Mental Health
Hotline**

37,400

words of new, free **mental
health educational materials**
and translations into **11
different languages**

20

countries represented by
contributors to Issue 2 of our
Lessons From Strangers
magazine centering
Environment & Mental Health

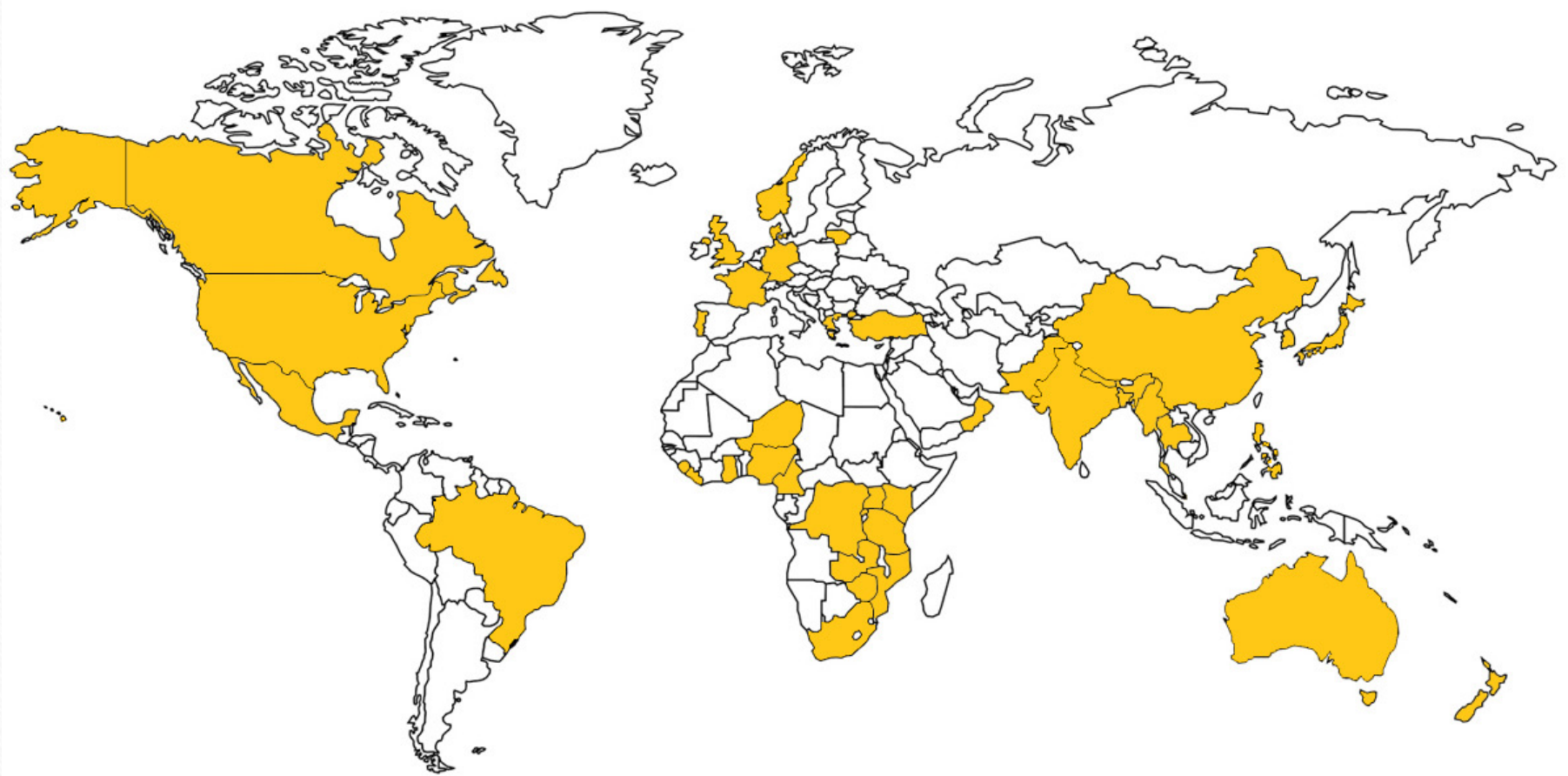
4.4/5

Average Chapter satisfaction
for being part of the Letters to
Strangers network and
recipient of L2S resources

72%

of callers to our Pan-African
Mental Health Hotline
reported reduction in
immediate distress after
intervention

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 part of Letters to Strangers has deeply shaped who I am and how I show up for my community. As a Kenyan youth leader, L2S has given me language, courage, and purpose to speak openly about mental health something that is still quietly suffered through in many of our communities. Through this Chapter, I’ve seen how simple acts of listening, sharing stories, and creating safe spaces can restore dignity and hope, especially for young people who often feel unseen or unheard. It has strengthened my belief that healing does not always start in hospitals or offices, but in honest conversations and human connection. L2S has also greatly fueled my passion to spread what I often call the gospel of mental health the message that mental well-being matters just as much as physical health, and that seeking help is not weakness. In Eldoret and beyond, I now carry this mission with confidence, knowing I am part of a global community that believes in compassion, empathy, and action. Being part of L2S has transformed my passion into purpose and given me the tools to turn care into impact, especially in spaces where hope is needed most.”

– *Allan K., L2S+Eldoret, Kenya*



Letters to Strangers members Say...

“Finding out the fact that I won the scholarship was...a turning point. This scholarship provided me with a sense of financial security, but it also became a source of fuel of hope. I now have...most important of all, a hope for the future.”

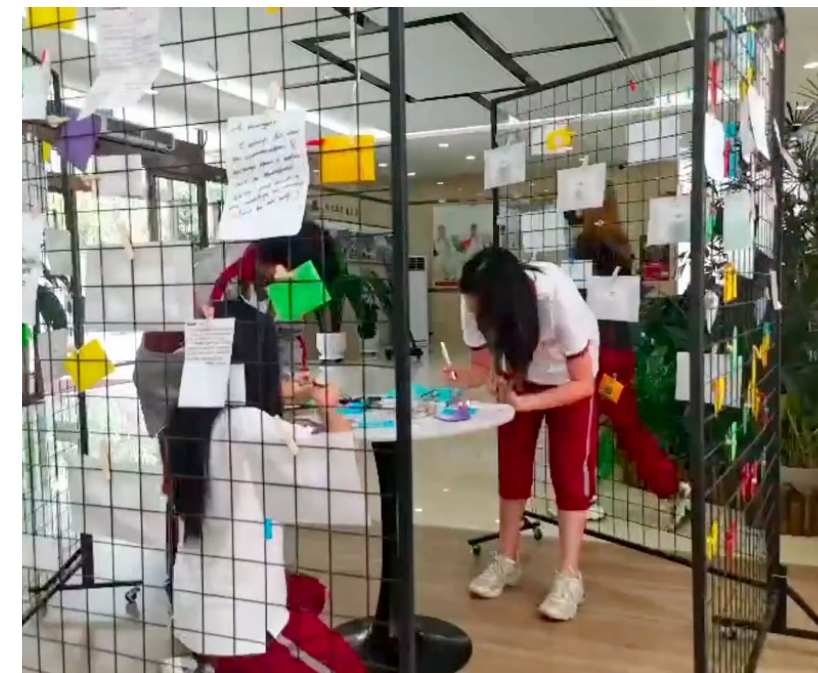
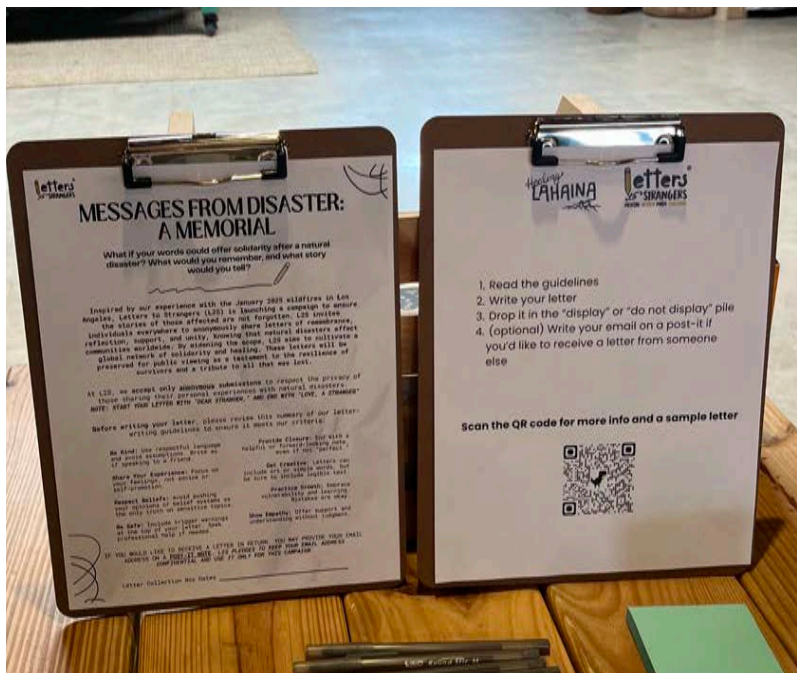
– Jay S., L2S Warrior Scholarship Winner


“L2S feels like being at home without the walls. I can be myself, get the help I need and also be the help I wish I had.”

– Noreen M., L2S+University of Zimbabwe

“Thanks to L2S+Türkiye, I finally have a place where I can share my thoughts and emotions without being scared of getting judged. It is such a comfort space for me.”

– member of L2S+Türkiye



The background of the slide is a close-up, shallow depth-of-field shot of numerous wooden letter tiles. The tiles are light-colored wood with black letters printed on them. Some tiles are in sharp focus in the foreground, while others are blurred in the background. The tiles are scattered across the entire frame.

The What

so what do we do, exactly?

The Problem

- 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*
- 50% 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.



Letter-Writing

Key Points

Background

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**

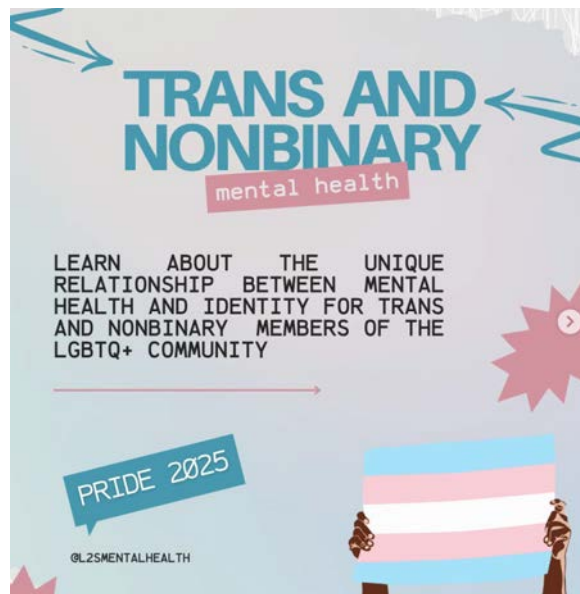
Rather than a **pen pal** approach, we take a message in a bottle format: anonymous letters are sent out and received, but there is no guarantee that the writer and reader receive each other's letters.

Letter exchanges conclude each time with **trained-peer-led group discussions** and debriefs, incorporating elements of peer support as well as meditative reflections

**** New in 2025 ****

→ Our free online letter exchange portal is now assisted by a custom-trained AI to speed up moderation results **without removing humans and safety protocol** that are **always** in the loop.

→ Preliminary data from a USC clinical study found that compared to traditional approaches like mental health videos, our letter-writing protocol **increases all dimensions of positive wellbeing** and **decreases all dimensions of negative wellbeing**



Mental Health Emergencies: Know Your Rights Guide

an educational pamphlet by Hannah Reynolds Martinez
Read the full educational pamphlet at letterstostrangers.org

Peer Education

Key Points

Background

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. 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. since 1999.

Mental health **workshops** are facilitated to **10000s of people** every year, including online through our research-based free webinars and class-lesson-length **videos**.

***** New in 2025 *****

→ We published 3 **new educational pamphlets** diving into mental health law, rights, and legal histories with over 60 pages of deep research

→ Our Guidebook was found to directly address every single component of the **CASEL Social Emotional Learning Core Competencies Framework**

→ Our curriculum, used by Nepal partner Sambhavya, statistically significantly **improved every dimension of social emotional learning**.



Advocacy

Key Points

Background

We run two annual global [scholarship competitions](#) worth over \$11,000 USD worldwide, the first of its kind to support mental health workforce diversity, growth, and advocacy since 8 years ago.

We created the [Mental Health Sustainable Development Goals](#) policy framework.

We created and run the **first pan-African mental health hotline**, toll-free. It is operated by our Liberia Chapter, the largest youth mental health service in the country and backed by the Ministry of Health.

**** New in 2025 ****

→ Our [Nepal Chapter](#) organized mental wellbeing and advocacy sessions + the first-ever youth mental health summit in the nation (featuring a skit on social media performed by 4th graders!) after the Gen Z Protests that toppled the corrupt administration

→ Worked with refugees, IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), health workers, and law enforcement across sub-Saharan Africa to bring training intersecting vocational training, mental health, and feminine hygiene



The How

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

Target Audience

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


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 over 12 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.*



The "But"

Executive Director shares and **learnings** and
reflections

Learnings from **Our Work**

From Diana:

Trust is built on honesty, transparency, and a willingness to grow. It means owning times I didn't succeed the way I wish I did – I'd be lying by omission if this report acted as if everything was smooth-sailing and successful!

With each fall, we learn how to move forward with more grace, precision, purpose, and steadiness. With that said, here are two things that didn't go as planned this year, and the lessons I'm taking forward.

Messages from Disaster

Lesson:

Wanting to do good (especially as this was motivated by the L.A. wildfires that ravaged my hometown!) is good, but our hands are already full. In addition to learning when to say 'no' to others, be more prudent about how we prioritize our own ideas, tasks, and projects, too.

We started the [Messages from Disaster campaign](#) to remember, honor, and help bring solidarity to those who have endured natural disasters by sharing our own experiences or volunteering to collect and archive letters.

While we achieved some initial success with local activations, we could not dedicate the capacity nor find the needed volunteer engagement to continue growing the campaign.

Scholarship Judging

Lesson:

Plan for more possible scenarios on both bad *and* good extremes for future projects and observe progress on a rigidly-followed schedule to ensure that precautions and preparation steps are taken as soon as possible to adapt to whatever scenario is looking most likely.

Our scholarships saw an unprecedented 4-5x increase in applications, and we had to scramble (and get *all* hands on deck) so that we can grade and determine the finalists in time for our judging panel to review.

We had to create brand new processes for decentralized, asynchronous scholarship judging, enhance our standardized criteria and minimize outlier results, and train new preliminary judges in just a few days!

Reflections from **Our** **World**



When Top-Down Systems Fail,
Grassroots Must Rise



Fund the Hype, or Fund the
Human?



Inherent goodness is not good
enough.

When Top-Down Systems Fail, Grassroots Must Rise

2025 saw unprecedented humanitarian aid cuts from donor countries such as the US and UK that are estimated to cause 22 million avoidable deaths by 2030. Questions have erupted: is this a cruel but “necessary” approach to preserve domestic economies and to end over-reliance on foreign aid that gives developing governments way too much slack? Is it using human lives – especially the futures of children – as bargaining chips, a not-so-subtle way to disguise greed as the world competes for dwindling resources and the increasing value of personal data? Something in between; both at once?

Then there are the NGO workers. 83% of USAID programs cut; in just two months since DOGE, 81 NGOs closed at least one office. Big programs scaled back; small programs shut down completely. Situations like this pose an impossible choice: keep going as demand for aid rises and staff count falters, burning everyone out; shut down and watch the world burn anyway.

Or, a third choice: the grassroot efforts must rise. Mutual aid networks have “swelled”; our peer-to-peer groups saw more interest and engagement than ever. Top-down institutions will not save us. When massive programs fail, it is not other massive systems that step in.

It is the local communities. The people who have always lived on the ground.

Fund the Hype, or Fund the Human?

AI startups in Silicon Valley raised \$150 billion in 2025. In comparison, the originally planned cuts to US global assistance amounted to \$60 billion. There was enough money in the economy to fund the entirety of the planned cuts and still have so much leftover to invest that it would've surpassed the previous high of AI investment (\$92 billion in 2021).

AI is, after all, the new "hype" – one that seems to be here to stay. New mental health tools boomed in the AI startup space, with Slingshot AI raising \$93 million for their "therapy-replacement" chatbot that has since, for regulatory reasons, rebranded itself into a "wellbeing" bot instead. This, despite AI-generated abuse being sharply on the rise with 97% of victims being girls - not to mention the countless cases of suicide and self-harm where AI played a role. Meanwhile, \$2 billion was almost cut from SAMHSA programs; \$863 billion was cut from Medicaid under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Funding follows the hype, so the solutions start to, too. Funders start launching AI-specific challenges or only fund AI-supported initiatives. It is staggering to watch billions flow into this while essential human safety nets are dismantled. Meanwhile, somewhere, a teenager asks her friend for a hug; her friend tells her to talk to ChatGPT instead. We refuse to accept this is all the future can promise.

Inherent goodness is not good enough.

I grew up believing that the nonprofit field is one of turning pain into power; past into purpose. That people try to do good because it's the right thing to do; because it's the only thing worth doing.

I am having hard time holding onto that belief.

At WEF I heard an investor walk into a mental health roundtable for the first time and say “I’m here because I heard the crazy people can make me money.” In a conversation with one sub-Saharan African president’s top advisor, I was told “All the big orgs know to play by the rules. Hand over the money or else you won’t see a dime of your own funding.” A senior editor at an immensely-popular magazine that features top young professionals confided that their social impact honorees are determined not by impact and by the number of followers the influencer has.

The social impact sector is increasingly driven by optics, politics, and the commodification of pain. Realizing that inherent goodness isn't always good enough – or even ‘inherent’ in the first place – was a hard lesson. But it was also a liberating one. It stripped away our naïveté and left us with something far more durable: grit. If the ground is splitting to reveal the lava underneath, I have a new skill I ask partners, team members, and myself to hone:

Stubbornness. Persistence. How steadfastly can you stand in quicksand?

2026 Focus Areas

Outreach & Awareness

- Update our **branding** and **design** strategy to reflect a growing demographic
- Increase number of case **studies** and **third-party partnerships/MOUs** showcasing the efficacy of our programs via collabs with governments and researchers

Team & Programming

- Elevate **team members** and **regional** champions through more paid opportunities – lead by example to show that *platforming* is the *minimum*.
- Facilitate more **in-person** activations where possible.

Education & Access

- Enhance our non-clinical **training and job placement** opportunities, especially in under-served areas
- Increase **intergenerational** access and support through **curriculum** training program for educators and parents

Values & Strategy

Human-first

- We're not Luddites. We use technology when helpful to our team and work. But it never comes as a replacement for the human involved.
Augmentation > automation.
- All AI-related integrations always have access to and is controlled by a trained human.

Intersectionality

- Pain does not exist in a vacuum. Wars, climate change, fears surrounding concepts of home/safety/belonging – these play a role. We cannot solve every issue, but we *can* be cognizant of how these issues impact our work.

Learn from History

- History has answers we cannot ignore. Colonization turned digital with AI driven by 90% Western, English training materials. PTSD made viral by sensationalized violence and abuse. To dissect new trends, we must learn from the past.

Preview



Timely Projects

We are working with funders to target the biggest areas affected by cuts and the attention economy:

- Mental Health Education
- AI



Global Support

We are bringing our online letter-exchange platform and other programs into different languages and culture contexts, starting with Asia and Africa



Money Matters

how did our **2025** go?

Balance Sheet/Statement of Financial Position

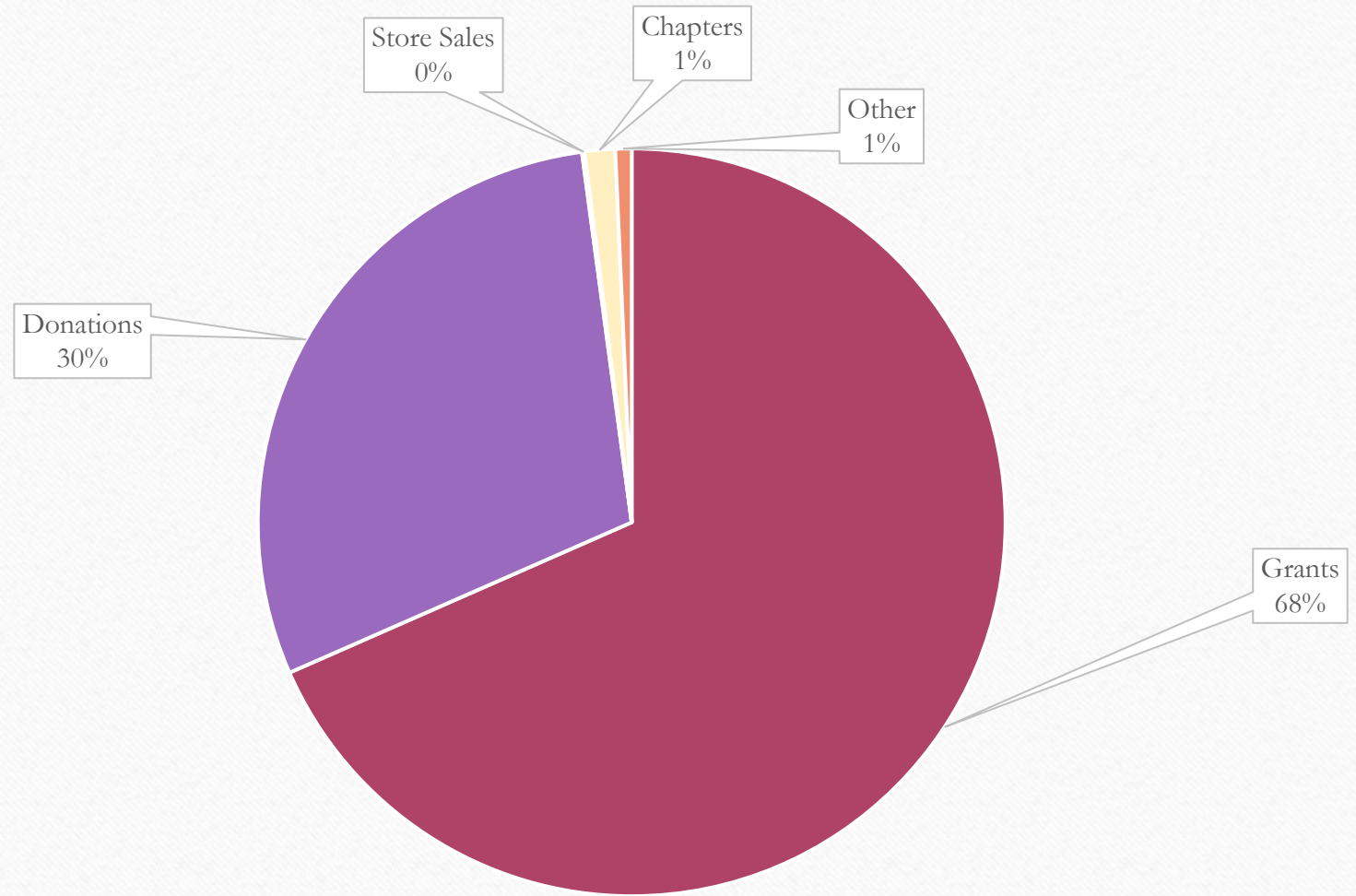
Asset Type	FY 2025 (\$ USD)
Revenue	162,767
Program Expenses	178,103
Supporting Expenses	9969
Total Expenses	188,072
Net Income*	-25,305

With this, we impacted 163,084 people. That's **\$1.15 per life changed!**

**Our net income is negative but our overall balance is not, as we had a cash reserve from previous years.*

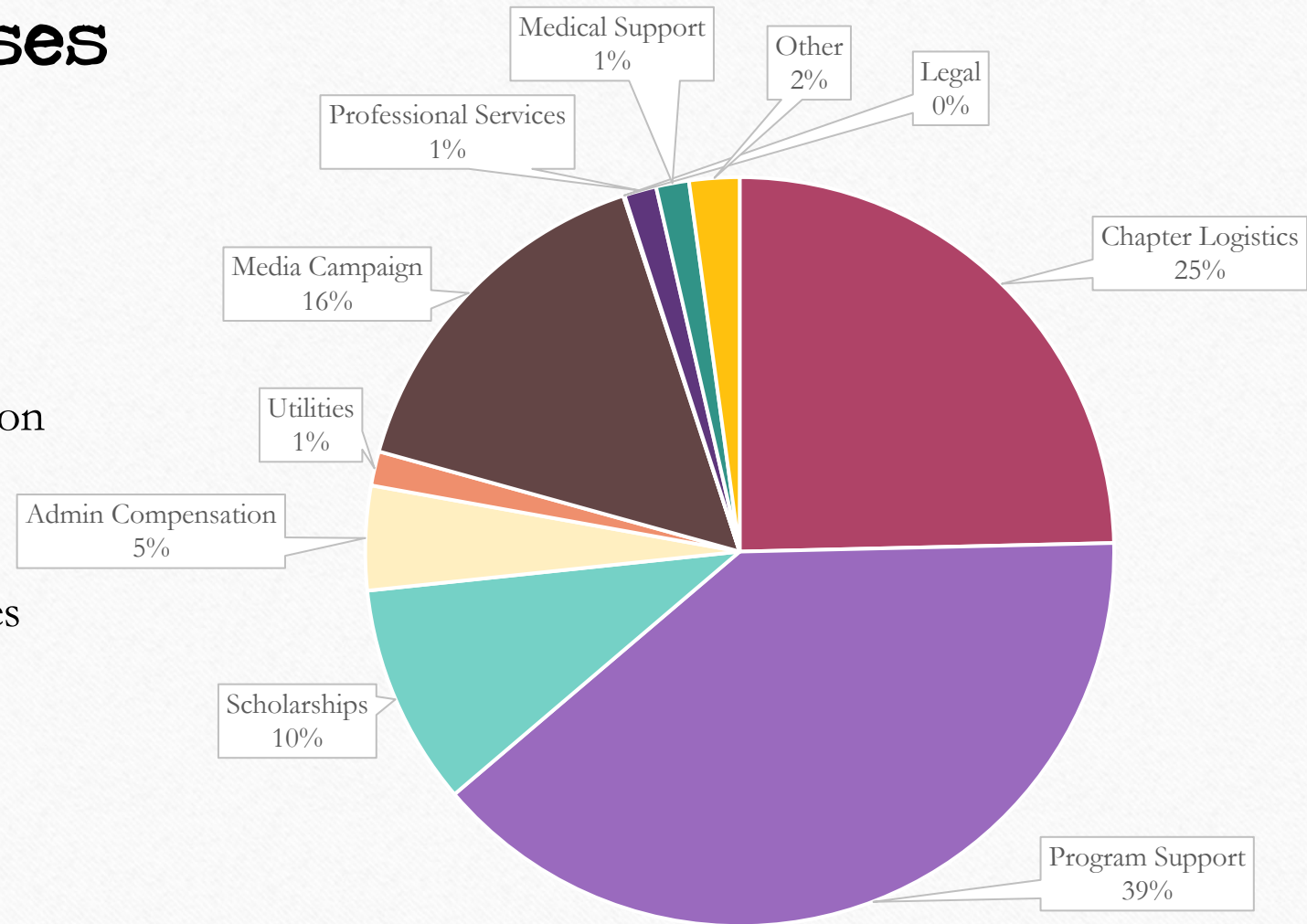
2025 Income

- Grants
- Donations
- Store Sales
- Chapters
- Other



2025 Expenses

- Chapter Logistics
- Program Support
- Scholarships
- Admin Compensation
- Utilities
- Media Campaign
- Legal
- Professional Services
- Medical Support
- Other



Money Matters 2.0(26)

what are our forecasts for **2026**?

2026 Financial Forecasts

including committed, incoming grants

Asset Type	FY 2026 (\$ USD)
Cash	452,631
Program Expenses	350,000
Long-Term Expenses	3,000
Total Expenses	353,000
Balance	99,631



The Who

who makes all of this happen?

Our Team



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



Samantha Ng

Chief of Staff

USC Pre-Medical student pursuing a B.S. in Neuroscience. USC Presidential Scholar and Certified Nursing Assistant. Research Assistant at the USC Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute



Helen Chen

Chief Technology 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



**Alyssa
Vassel**

Content Officer



**Dan
Kanceljak**

Strategy Consultant



**Kathy
Rocha**

Digital Presence
Manager



**Libby
Loftin**

Education Intern



**Hiram
Nhemachena**

Regional Coordinator



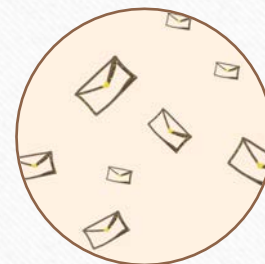
**Reuben
Reeves**

Regional Coordinator



**Poorvita
Vijayananda**

Programs Intern



**Sonny
Xu**

Regional Coordinator

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

It's like writing on a page but with invisible ink. It almost feels like someone just took everything out of your brain. It always happens when I try to make a speech or anything on stage. I found a way to deal with the issue though. I just try to ground myself, know that everyone has such moments.

Dear Stranger

Being at such a high grade and age, I have a large issue of the peer pressure in this age. It's like the people around me expect way more than I can perform. I know my future depends on this but I am still sick of the constant pestering of the people around me.

Sometimes it gets a bit too stressful too. If this happens, I just take a deep breath and know they are just looking out for me and my future.



Letter from the Executive Director

I did not know the human heart could hold so much.

In 2025, I visited some of our global Chapters in person for the very first time. In Nepal we hosted the first ever youth mental health summit to hundreds of attendees right after Gen Z toppled the corrupt administration. In Zimbabwe we spent a day discussing substance abuse and why hope cannot be a luxury; it is a requirement. In Liberia I gave rural health workers their very first workshop on mental health, then got us a partnership to train the entire nation's security sector on mental health and crisis intervention.

In Nepal, Laeta gave me the most beautiful Newar welcoming ceremony while Ashish and I dodged motorcycles at 10PM. In Zim, Hiram and Munya and I ordered the biggest possible banana-flavored Chibuku and then I bungee jumped off the Victoria Falls bridge. In Liberia, I hugged Reuben after meeting him in person for the first time in six years then he told me no, you are not riding a kekeh.

In every place I jostled between daydream and despair. In the most beautiful of moments I wondered how the world could be so unfair: history, chaos, trauma, healing – these seep into the peeling “just opened” sign on the side of a muddied abandoned building; on the newly-applied paint of a Hindu god after a flood washed the last coat away; in the fruit stalls jammed into street corners run by people with Master's degrees. It's not some sort of magical awakening or a privilege-delayed wrestle with inequality. It's just a reminder to how quickly we forget. I am from a village where we shared ditches for toilets and rice paddies for roads. Where the mountain herbs served as the hospital and the aunties and grandmas never cut their hair. Everybody has a story worth telling. But not everyone gets the chance I got to tell their story.

This, after all, is why Letters to Strangers exists. I begged for a way to author my own odyssey, to be my own hero, and at 14 I spelled it out in a letter. With your support, I got to take these letters and tales with me to friends in places I would've never known I could visit. I get to carry others' stories in my heart anew, to learn how even a small girl can be a big megaphone. The heart is the size of a fist; at 5'2" my fist is smaller than average. But what it can hold – the tales it knows – is infinite.

-Diana Chao



Thank You!

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 2026 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!

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

