

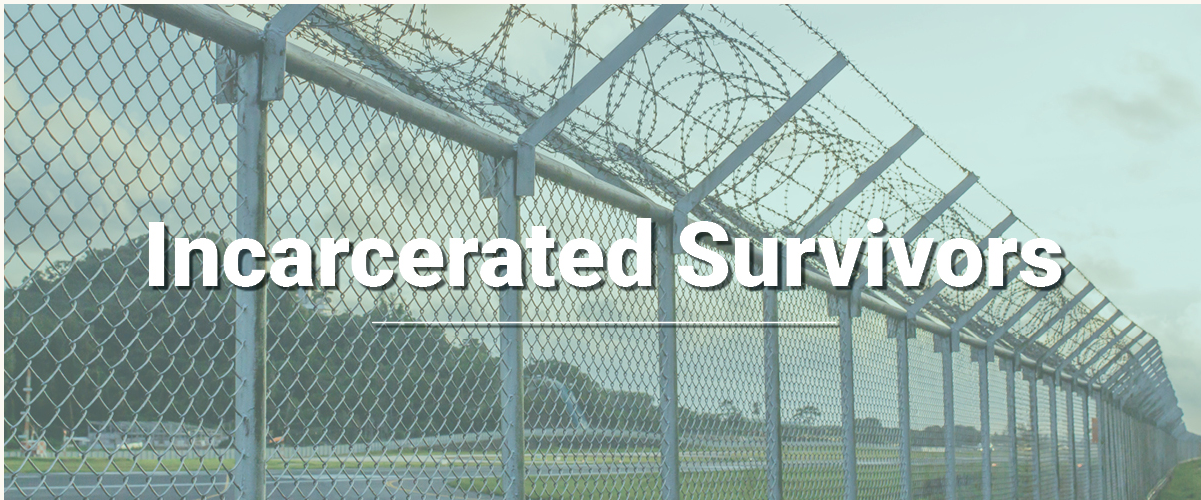
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The Ascend Justice Newsletter • October 2025



Incarcerated Survivors

On the second Thursday of every month, Ascend Justice attorneys join a regularly scheduled — and revolutionary — call. The Cook County Domestic Relations Incarcerated Litigants Call (ILC) is the only program of its kind in the country, and it's helping our incarcerated clients sever ties with their abusers and maintain crucial bonds with their children.

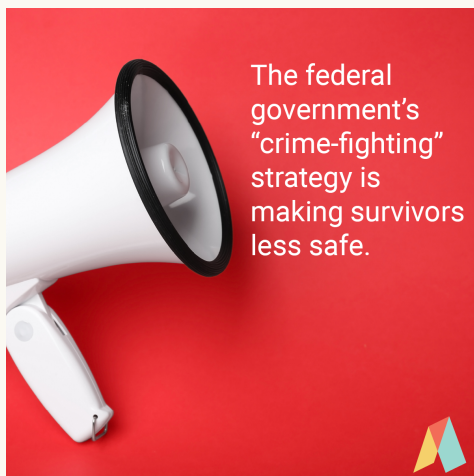
In most cases, incarcerated people are essentially locked out of the court system. Without access to transportation or the freedom to go to court on their own or the financial means to hire an attorney, incarcerated people need different accommodations to be able to access justice. That's where the ILC comes in. All cases on the ILC are pre-scheduled with the Presiding Judge, providing a set time for volunteer and legal aid attorneys to represent incarcerated clients in civil cases remotely, helping them get divorced from abusive partners and get parenting time with their children.

Addressing domestic relations matters like divorce and parenting time can have a dramatic impact on an incarcerated person, including on their lives after release. The ILC helps give clients

a fresh start when they get out and promotes maintaining vital relationships with their children. For example, the children of a mother who is married to an abusive spouse might end up in state custody upon her incarceration. Showing that she has left the abusive marriage by getting a divorce can go a long way to helping her regain custody of her children upon release. The benefits to divorce can be less tangible as well. In the words of one ILC client: "It was important to me because it means I can start over now. I can break the mental hold he had on me. My marriage was very abusive, with mental, physical, broken bones, and bruises. This was a start for me to be independent now and when I get out of prison."

As the only civil legal services provider in Cook County focused on the needs of incarcerated women, the Ascend Justice Incarcerated Survivors Program provided representation on roughly 85% of ILC cases in 2024. But with our recent partnership with the Pro Bono Network connecting volunteer attorneys to cases, the program is expanding. Because 70-80% of incarcerated women serve as primary caregivers to their children upon their arrest (as opposed to just 20-30% of fathers), there is a significant need for incarcerated women to access domestic relations court, and Ascend Justice is proud to play a vital role in providing that access.

If you are an attorney who wants to get more involved in the ILC, by either observing or taking on a simple divorce, please reach out to our Senior Attorney for Family Defense and Incarcerated Survivors, [Lauren Schroeder](#).



Read our Letter to the Editor in the Chicago Tribune

As attorneys who work with survivors every day, we are concerned that the federal strong-arm tactics being used indiscriminately during "Operation Midway Blitz" are creating an atmosphere of fear in Chicago that further isolates survivors from the support services they need to leave abuse. Read more in our recent Letter to the Editor:

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/10/19/letters-101925-domestic-violence-awareness/>

If you are interested in reading this but do not have access to the Tribune, please reach out to our Communications Manager, [Meggan Taylor Trevey](#), for the full text.

Raising Awareness During Domestic Violence Awareness Month

On October 7, Ascend Justice joined more than 20 anti-gender-based violence organizations in Daley Plaza to stand in solidarity with survivors and let them know they are never alone.

More than 100 people gathered in the rain to hear from more than a dozen speakers, including our own Senior Attorney for Immigration, Matt McGuire (pictured right), and the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Mariyana Spyropoulos. The lunchtime event ended with a passionate and moving performance of spoken word poetry by survivor and advocate, Nikki Patin.



The event, called You Are Not Alone, was the first of what we hope will be an annual Domestic Violence Awareness Month collaboration across organizations, so if you weren't able to make it this year, mark your calendars for next October!



Help Us Get Toys for Incarcerated Survivors and Their Kids!

Many of the women we help inside Logan Correctional Facility are incarcerated because they were abused. Many have children who come to visit them whenever possible. Together with the [Women's Justice Institute](#), we'd like to help make these visits a happier time for the reunited families with toys and activities our clients can do with their kids.

Please take a look at this [Amazon wishlist](#) and help us stock the visiting center at Logan!

New Illinois Law Will Help Survivors of Financial Abuse

A new law in Illinois prohibiting collection of "coerced debt" goes into effect on January 1, 2026. Enacted as an amendment to the Collection Agency Act, the new law will offer relief for survivors who are burdened with debts due to financial abuse.

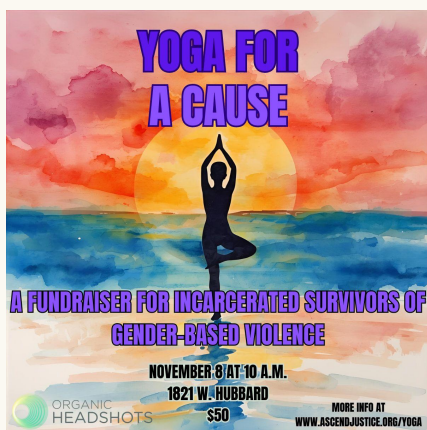
"A debtor is not responsible for coerced debt," the statute states. "Survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking should not be haunted by debts that were forced upon them during their trauma," said Illinois Senate Majority Leader Kimberly Lightford.

Coerced debt is defined in the statute as any debt that was incurred because of "identity theft, fraud, duress, intimidation, threats, force, coercion, undue influence, or the non-consensual use of the debtor's personal identifying information." The new law, states Lightford, "ensures that survivors aren't pursued for debts they never freely chose to incur."



To dispute a debt, a survivor must submit a "statement of coerced debt" along with supporting documentation such as a police report, order of protection, or written verification from an attorney from whom they sought assistance. Once a collection agency receives a statement of coerced debt and supporting documentation, they must cease collection of the debt and conduct a review of the submitted materials. A collection agency may resume collection only if they determine in good faith that the debt does not qualify as coerced debt.

While 99% of all survivors face financial abuse, roughly 52% of survivors also face debt resulting from that abuse, and many of our clients will greatly benefit from the ability to discharge debts that were coerced. For more information, please contact our Senior Attorney for Economic Justice, [Elizabeth Yoo](#).



Yoga for a Cause

If you like to do yoga and want to help us raise money for incarcerated survivors, this event is for you! Longtime Ascend Justice Board member and yoga instructor, Karen Munoz, and Young Professionals Board member, Elena Panyard, have organized this incredible yoga fundraiser to help our clients get access to justice!

Join us Saturday, November 8, at [Organic Headshots](#) for yoga, community, and fundraising for survivors! Learn more and RSVP today:

<https://www.ascendjustice.org/yoga/>

Remote Court Option for Orders of Protection

While the federal government continues its occupation of our city and masked agents are free to grab anyone off the street simply for the way they look, many of our clients are feeling unsafe, even going to court.

Thankfully, remote court is an option for clients seeking to obtain an Order of Protection. [Check out this handy guide](#) from our partner organization, The Network, to learn more and see if remote court is right for you.





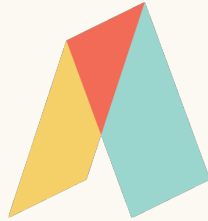
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