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The Ascend Justice Newsletter • April 2026



Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has been in the headlines for months — and it is happening around us all the time. Trafficking is a type of extreme abuse that happens when a person forces someone else to perform labor or sex. Trafficking networks operate on both large and small scales, exploiting millions of people every year and making human trafficking a \$236 billion global industry.

Although not all trafficking is gender-based, it can be a form of gender-based violence and can overlap with other forms, like sexual assault and domestic violence. Traffickers use fraud, manipulation, coercion, and force to gain the trust of their victims and erode their autonomy. For instance, in labor trafficking cases, a trafficker's promise of work can lead a person to leave their community and travel somewhere isolated, where the trafficker charges them for everything from food, clothing, medical needs, rent, travel to and from work, and other basic needs. The continually increasing debt allows the trafficker to create a situation a person can never leave. In sex trafficking, victims are often promised a successful modeling career and shown a glamorous lifestyle, while the trafficker simultaneously introduces them to alcohol, drugs, and

people who will buy them for sex. Traffickers use relationships (romantic, parent, sibling, boss, benefactor, etc.) to convince their victims that they "chose" to do what the trafficker demanded.

This kind of grooming makes identifying trafficking victims difficult. Matt McGuire, a senior attorney on our immigration team and expert in human trafficking, explains: "The psychological impact of surviving trafficking makes untangling the will of the trafficker from the survivor's self-perception incredibly difficult, as the survivor can begin to automatically internalize the trafficker's narrative. Once a survivor is able to escape the trafficker, they feel shame, guilt, and disbelief that a person could have exerted such a level of control over them. The trauma and pain of accepting the seriousness of trafficking, the erosion of self, the difficulty accepting another person so completely controlled a survivor, and misconceptions about trafficking itself all create additional barriers to our clients' self-identification as a trafficking survivor, which makes access to support services a challenge."

Even when survivors self-identify, and even though human trafficking carries serious legal consequences on paper, reality is that human traffickers and those who benefit from the trafficking are rarely prosecuted. Ascend Justice and organizations like ours with in-house trafficking experts are best situated to identify and support trafficking survivors and help them seek justice. We understand what power and control look like, how trafficking impacts survivors, and how to work with lawmakers to implement survivor-centered laws and policies. So as a community dedicated to eradicating gender-based violence and human trafficking, **let's get loud with our representatives on this issue and advocate for expanded social, healthcare, and legal services for survivors of trafficking and all forms of gender-based violence.** Every single one of us can work toward a world where survivors have access to the justice they deserve.

#TogetherWeAscend



You're Invited

Please join us in June for the event of the year, our annual Celebration of Courage (and tell everyone you know)!

On Thursday, June 11, we will spend an evening together in the Chicago Athletic Association's beautiful White City Ballroom celebrating our clients, staff, supporters, volunteers, and people who champion our mission. We can't wait to see you there!

[Early bird tickets are on sale now!](#) Be sure to grab yours before prices increase next month.

We still have sponsorship opportunities available! If you think your company would be interested in sponsoring this wonderful event, please reach out to our Director of Development, [Joy Wright](#).

Sabbatical Announcement

Our Executive Director, Margaret Duval, will be taking a sabbatical starting at the end of June this year. Margaret has been doing gender-based violence work for more than 25 years, including leading Ascend Justice (fka the Domestic Violence Legal Clinic) for almost 14 years. Given her dedicated, singular focus for so long to this field, the Ascend Justice Board of Directors has approved a 14-week sabbatical so Margaret can step away, spend time with her family, learn to rest, and return rejuvenated and even more inspired for our collective work.

While Margaret is on sabbatical, our Associate Director, Ashley Olson, and our Managing Director for Immigration and Client Services, Angelica Gonzalez-Lopez, will serve as co-Acting Executive Directors. They are knowledgeable and experienced leaders with a combined 23 years serving the Ascend Justice mission.

This opportunity is new for Ascend Justice staff, and after Margaret returns, we will begin to offer sabbatical leave to other long-time employees so that our team remains healthy and able to help survivors heal.



Sexual Assault Awareness Month

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and you can help us raise awareness! Here are three ways:

Have you shared sexual assault resources with anyone you know? 'Cause you should! [Check out RAINN's toolkits](#) to learn more about sexual assault, and then share with someone you love!

Do you have kids? Have you talked to them about sexual assault prevention yet? The National Sexual Violence Resource Center has a bunch of prevention resources to get you started. [Take a look!](#)

If you're in Chicago, what are you doing on Friday, April 24, at noon? Join us in Daley Plaza as we support Resilience at their annual [Standing Silent Witness](#) event.

Self-Care & Safety Drive

For Mother's Day this year, the incredible Ascend Justice Young Professionals Board is collecting self-care and safety items to create care packages for our clients, many of whom haven't had the

opportunity to prioritize their own well-being or feel safe in a long time.

Please help us make Mother's Day a little more meaningful for our clients who need it most! Consider purchasing a few items from our Amazon wishlist:

https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/3HCQ1E-FXRJIOT/ref=hz_ls_biz_ex



Food Drive

Our pantry is looking a little bare these days, and we need your help! With recent public benefits changes and price increases for everyday staples, many of our clients are experiencing financial and food insecurity right now, so we are collecting shelf-stable food items to distribute to clients in need.

We like to have a good supply and variety of foods on hand to offer our clients, so if you'd like to help us restock, please consider purchasing several items from our pantry wishlist:

<https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/202IUSE-FL902Q>



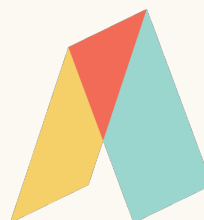
There are so many ways to support us!

Make a **one-time** contribution.

Join our **Sustainer Circle** with automatic, monthly donations.

Buy our **merch**.

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