HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVER



The Advocates FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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Cover photo by longtime activist and photographer Brad Sigal | sigalphotos.com

Executive Director's Desk

At The Advocates for Human Rights, we believe that everyone has a part to play in defending human rights.

This year, Minnesota proved it.

When Operation Metro Surge targeted immigrants and refugees across our state, it did more than spread fear. It tested whether misinformation, intimidation, and division could overcome our commitment to human dignity, democratic values, and the rule of law.

Minnesotans answered that test.

Across the state, people stepped forward. Lawyers fought for people's liberty. Observers documented abuses. Artists captured the events and the emotions of the moment. People who had never thought of themselves as human rights defenders became exactly that.

We learned a sobering lesson this year: when the rule of law is weakened, human rights violations follow. But we learned something else, too.

We learned that showing up matters.

Because of supporters like you, The Advocates was able to show up when it mattered most. As plaintiffs in critical litigation, we challenged the denial of fair hearings, fought for public access to immigration hearings, demanded attorney access to people detained by ICE, and stopped the unlawful detention of refugees.

At the same time, we continued the work that defines us. We provided legal assistance in thousands of cases, strengthened justice for survivors of gender-based violence, advanced efforts to abolish the death penalty and to end the criminalization of same-sex sexual conduct worldwide, and expanded educational opportunities through the Sankhu Palubari Community School in Nepal.

One of the most important efforts this year has been the Minnesota Truth Council. By documenting hundreds of stories of both harm and resilience during Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS, the Truth Council is ensuring that the historical record reflects not only what happened, but how Minnesota responded with courage and solidarity.

Our partners around the world teach us that authoritarianism seeks to convince people that their actions do not matter. We know otherwise.

Courage is contagious. Truth matters. Solidarity works.

As we look ahead, the call is clear: keep showing up, keep telling the truth, and keep defending one another. Neither authoritarianism nor progress is inevitable. The direction we take depends on what each of us does next.

Thank you for standing with us. Thank you for making this work possible. And thank you for being advocates for human rights.



Michele Garnett McKenzie
Executive Director

Poverty, child labor, and trafficking continue to put many Nepali children, especially girls, at risk of losing educational opportunities and facing exploitation.

For more than 25 years, the Sankhu Palubari Community School has provided a different path. Founded by The Advocates in 1999, SPCS offers free, high-quality education and daily meals to 375 students. Our graduates have gone on to higher education and careers as engineers, nurses, doctors, teachers, and accountants, and every graduate has successfully completed the level of education required to pursue careers in Nepal's civil service.

SPCS serves children at risk of child labor and welcomes students of all backgrounds, helping make the right to education a reality for hundreds of Nepali children.



Sankhu Palubari Community School



A Powerful Evening Close to Home

We Are All In This Together



Photo by Tom Wallace

The **Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde** is the 2026 recipient of the Don and Arvonne Fraser Human Rights Award. We honor Bishop Budde for her commitment to human rights and the dignity of all people, particularly for her public defense of immigrants, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and those excluded from power. Her book, *How We Learn to Be Brave*, describes the moments in our lives when we must act with courage and the importance of what we do afterward.

> *"I accept this award on behalf of every Minnesotan who withstood the deployment of ICE and border patrol agents during Operation Metro Surge..."*
>
> Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde

Taylor P. Pentelovitch

Communications Committee Member and Pro Bono Contributor

I have had the privilege of attending The Advocates' Human Rights Awards Dinner for many years, and each year I leave reminded of the extraordinary reach and impact of this organization's work. The evening offers a powerful window into advocacy happening around the world, across the country, and in the lives of individuals and families seeking safety, dignity, and justice.

This year, what struck me most was how close to home so much of the evening felt.

The theme of the night, Shining a Light on Human Rights, carried through the program. It was a reminder that human rights work is not only happening far away. It is happening here, in our city, in our neighborhoods, and in the lives of our neighbors. Against the backdrop of Operation Metro Surge, that message felt especially urgent.

That local connection was present from the beginning of the evening, including in the silent auction, where art pieces like *Minnesota Strong* reflected resilience, solidarity, and the power of community. It continued through the program as we heard about volunteers whose work has strengthened human rights advocacy in meaningful ways, including Rebecca Schiller's pro bono legal work on behalf of asylum seekers, Mohammed "Duke" Dukuly's decades of interpretation and translation support, and Francesca Ceravolo's advocacy on human rights issues around the world.

But the power of the evening was not only on the stage. It was also in the room. **Looking around, I was struck by how many people have their own story of The Advocates in their lives, whether as volunteers, supporters, attorneys, interpreters, staff, or community members.** The room itself felt like a

reflection of what Minnesota went through this past year: people from many backgrounds, roles, and experiences coming together to protect our neighbors.

That message was reflected in the remarks from the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde, this year's keynote speaker and recipient of the Don and Arvonne Fraser Human Rights Award. She began by saying that the award should be going to the city. It was a generous and striking statement, and it captured the spirit of the evening: **human rights work is collective, and courage is built by communities willing to show up for one another**. The Advocates' work depends on people willing to show up. This year's dinner was a powerful reminder of what that commitment looks like in action, and of what becomes possible when people come together around truth, justice, accountability, healing, and human dignity.

AWARD RECIPIENTS

DON & ARVONNE FRASER HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD WINNER

Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

VOLUNTEER AWARD WINNERS

Francesca Ceravolo

Mohammed Dukuly

Rebecca Schiller

PRO BONO LITIGATION COUNSEL AWARD WINNERS

Berger Montague

Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law

Democracy Forward

Fredrikson

International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)

Stinson

SPECIAL RECOGNITION

Lee Svitak Dean

Tom Wallace

The Importance of Pro Bono Work

During the last year, our community, work, and mission have been under attack, but we could fight back in the courts because of **Berger Montague, the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, Democracy Forward, Fredrikson, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP),** and **Stinson**. In four cases, these law firms and organizations stepped forward at a critical time to challenge unlawful actions and defend human rights:

STOP THE ILLEGAL DETENTION OF REFUGEES (U.H.A., et al. v. Bondi, et al.) When the Trump administration was sending armed ICE agents door to door to arrest members of our refugee community, whisking them to detention centers in Texas, and interrogating them without access to attorneys in an effort to terminate their status and deport them, **International Refugee Assistance Project, Berger Montague,** and the **Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law** sued, ending these abuses in Minnesota.

ENSURE ACCESS TO COUNSEL (The Advocates for Human Rights, et al. v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, et al.) When ICE was holding people at the Whipple Building in overcrowded conditions, obstructing attorney-client meetings, denying phone access, and rapidly transferring individuals out of state, **Fredrikson** and **Democracy Forward** sued to protect due process, the rule of law, and human dignity.

PROTECT TRANSPARENCY IN OUR IMMIGRATION COURTS (The Advocates for Human Rights v. Blanche, et al.) Without public oversight, government actors can violate human rights with impunity. After nearly ten years of our immigration court observation project, our volunteers have had obstacles placed in their way, limiting their ability to monitor public proceedings. **Stinson** sued the government to protect due process, government transparency, and the First Amendment.

DEFEND BASIC LEGAL PROTECTIONS (Hines Immigration Law PLLC, et al. v. Executive Office for Immigration Review, et al.) When immigration proceedings for Somali nationals were accelerated on extremely short timelines, making it nearly impossible for attorneys to prepare cases or represent their clients, **Democracy Forward** sued to protect fundamental rights, including the right to counsel and a fair hearing.

We are grateful for their exceptional commitment and courage and were honored to present these organizations with Pro Bono Awards at the Human Rights Awards Dinner.















At this year's dinner, we shined a light on human rights, celebrated the courage of human rights defenders, and recommitted to the work ahead.

Photos by Bill Cameron & Rebecca Mariscal

















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faegre drinker

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Nancy Speer & Jim Shaver
Sarah Stoesz & David Foster
Dan Supalla
The Minneapolis Foundation
Ellen & Jim van Iwaarden

In Memoriam

Bonnie Skelton

The Advocates mourns the loss of Bonnie Skelton, a longtime volunteer, donor and dear friend of the organization.

Bonnie lived a long life full of purpose, curiosity and joy. Just last year she celebrated her 99th birthday with family and friends at a party her family lovingly called “BonnieFest.” With Bonnie, every event was a celebration.

Bonnie was a teacher by profession. She spent her career inspiring young people, and she kept teaching by example long after she left the classroom. She believed in the dignity of every person and showed up wherever she was needed. For many years she supported our work as a volunteer and a donor, and she cheered on every effort to build a more just world.

Bonnie’s joyful spirit was infectious. Whether she was at a house party, the Human Rights Awards Dinner or volunteering in the office, she made everyone around her smile. “We will remember Bonnie as a bright light who made the world better,” said Robin Phillips. “Her warmth, generosity and commitment to others will stay with all of us who were fortunate enough to know her.”



The Advocates remembers friends we have lost through the year and those remembered through in memoriam gifts in 2026.

Delores Achenbach
Penelope Irene Bellin
Penney Bernier
Thomas Bloss
Sheila Boos
Connie Cameron
Veronica Clark
Phyllis Cruciani
Patrick J. Delaney
Maurice T. Donovan
Jack Edgerton
Phillip Eide
Louis Eisenberg
Mary Ellingen
Beyah Tehalim Esse
Elena Esterov
Nick Filth
Don & Arvonne Fraser
Renee Nicole Good
Bernice Greenwood
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Barb & Bob Loosbrock
María Emilce Lopez
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John Oldendorf
Dennis M. O'Toole
Bob Parr
Alex Pretti
Joseph Radermacher
Ginni Ringgenberg
Jim Rustad
Sigrun Sand
Emily Sandall
Bonnie Skelton
Larry Throndson
Concepcion Goo Tudon
Jane Vardeman
Chris Watkins
David Weissbrodt
Karen Winn
Harold Wolovitch
Mona Mae Zarling
Jill Zelinski
John B. Davis and his family

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead



On the Ground at the UN



Deputy Executive Director Jennifer Prestholdt and volunteer Rebecca Berhard join partners Kirsten Han (Singapore) and Al Moctar Garba Illou (Niger) at the Champions of Death Penalty Abolition 2025 side event.



March 2026 Volunteers Dave Vander Haar, Gayle Appelbaum, Dan Supalla, Jan Conlin, and Genell Lemley with Advocacy Director Madeline Lohman and Women's Human Rights Director Rosalyn Park



Rosalyn Park, volunteers Betsy Sitkoff and Karen Evans, and partner Anisoara Tun from Women's Law Center (Moldova) at Palais Wilson

A Week of UN Advocacy in Geneva

Smiles & Shoulder Taps



Bertilio "Lio" Correa, Jr.

Volunteer

When I was young, my parents told me stories about their upbringing in the Dominican Republic. They ran barefoot through neighbors' farms, they bathed in the river in the early afternoon, and they caught fresh mangoes that fell off the trees that lined the streets. Despite their deeply rooted connection to the island and its people, economic crisis and political instability led them to set their sights on the "American Dream." Without knowing the language, my parents immigrated to the United States as young adults hoping they could create a stable future for themselves and their family. Because of their unrelenting tenacity, I had the chance to become who I am today.

At the beginning of 2026, I drafted a report on the human rights situation for queer and trans people in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Reading firsthand accounts of discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ+ people in the Caribbean was difficult at first. I imagined what my life could have been, as a young queer person, had my parents decided to stay in the Dominican Republic. Writing the report in preparation for the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was my first exposure to the UPR and the work The Advocates does each session. When The Advocates invited me to join their mission at the United Nations in Geneva, I did not hesitate. Throughout my adult life, advocating for LGBTIQ+ people has been a common thread, and I am grateful to The Advocates for providing the opportunity and to Ballard Spahr LLP for providing the means for me to do so at this scale.

As I arrived in Geneva, with a couple of college semesters of French under my belt, I felt excitement for what would be an incredible week. On day one, Nathan Madson, Rose Park, and Michele Garnett McKenzie taught us about the UN system and how to approach representatives of the various countries at the Palais des Nations. In the beginning, I was nervous to approach people, but by the second time I "shoulder-tapped" a delegate, I felt like a professional. A close friend, who has since passed, taught me a lesson in my early twenties that was my mantra throughout my shoulder-tapping excursions: **"You'd be surprised how far you can get with a handshake and a smile."** On our last day of outreach at the Palais, I used my Spanish skills to help secure a meeting with a delegate from Colombia. The next day, I got to sit down with him and fellow volunteer Mark Addicks to explain why Colombia should recommend to several Caribbean nations that they decriminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. The mantra paid off!

There were many moments over the course of the week that will have a lasting impact on who I am as a human and an advocate, but I'd like to highlight one in particular. I gave an oral statement about the United States to the Human Rights Council, detailing how the country has stripped access to sexual and reproductive health, targeted and attacked non-citizens, and flouted its obligations to international human rights bodies. Speaking on behalf of The Advocates before the Council, being who I am and looking the way I do, felt meaningful. While I may have several distinct identities—American, Afro-Latine, queer, veteran, and the child of immigrants—I possess them all at once. This experience showed me that lasting human rights reforms are possible when we see each other as complex humans with intersectional and intertwined histories and approach each other with kindness and curiosity.

Building Towards Abolition

The death penalty returned to public attention in the United States this year, as a failed execution attempt and a threat to televise another took the headlines. The debate comes amid increasing international recognition that capital punishment causes profound physical and psychological suffering.

In June, The Advocates for Human Rights welcomed a report from the UN Special Rapporteur on executions concluding that the death penalty is incompatible with the prohibition against torture. The report reflects a growing global consensus that the harms associated with capital punishment cannot be separated from the punishment itself.

At the same time, momentum for abolition continues to build. In June, Associate International Justice Program Director Amy Bergquist, along with volunteer Kent Richey, traveled to Paris for the World Congress Against the Death Penalty, where more than 1,300 elected officials, civil society leaders, judges, journalists, artists, and young activists gathered to advance the shared goal of universal abolition.

Bergquist participated in workshops hosted by the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, speaking about the power of storytelling in abolition advocacy and leading a session on how United Nations engagement can help drive reform.

Today, countries that have abolished the death penalty outnumber those that have not by more than two to one.



Attacking Immigrants, Consolidating Authoritarian Control:

Advocacy Director Madeline Lohman Testifies at People's Hearing on Immigration Enforcement

Advocacy Director Madeline Lohman testified at the **People's Hearing on Immigration Enforcement** held March 10 in Saint Paul. Rochelle Garza, Chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, chaired the hearing in her official capacity. Shaped by the Minnesota-based organizations CLUES, Immigration Defense Network, UNIDOS MN, and COPAL, the hearing brought together community members, advocates, public officials, and civil rights leaders to document experiences with immigration enforcement and their impact on civil and human rights.

Lohman testified about the structural failures of immigration policy. She pointed to three main interlocking patterns of human rights violations. First, unchecked racial discrimination. Second, the weaponization of detention to punish opponents and to coerce people into abandoning claims for immigration status. And third, the lack of any accountability.

Lohman reminded the panel that all of this has been done without passing new laws, indicating the problems exposed during Operation Metro Surge are built into the system. "The solution is not just to roll back some policy memos or change where resources are being spent. **We need to rebuild from the ground up and make human rights the foundation of the system** with access to independent, impartial, effective, and rapid oversight and accountability."

Watch the hearing:



Minnesota Habeas Project Continues Fight for Release

The Advocates joined the James H. Binger Center for New Americans at the University of Minnesota Law School, the National Immigration Project, and several law firms to launch the Minnesota Habeas Project. Founded amid escalating ICE detentions during Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS, the Minnesota Habeas Project provides legal support for Minnesota immigrants facing unlawful detention without access to bond or meaningful judicial review.

"People in immigration detention are not provided an attorney if they cannot afford one," said Theresa Dykoschak, Pro Bono Director at The Advocates for Human Rights. "The pro bono representation that so many attorneys provided has been essential to due process and the rule of law."

Project partners train and support volunteer litigators to represent clients in habeas corpus actions in district courts in Minnesota and other jurisdictions throughout the country. Demand continues, with a dozen or more requests each week.

> "The pro bono representation that so many attorneys provided has been essential to due process and the rule of law,"
>
> **Theresa Dykoschak**
> Pro Bono Director

500+ **REQUESTS FOR REPRESENTATION**

110+ **PETITIONS FOR HABEAS CORPUS FILED**

25+ **LAW FIRMS VOLUNTEERING**

More than 100 people joined The Advocates for Human Rights and the Acacia Center for Justice in July at the Cedar Cultural Center for Bearing Witness, an evening highlighting the power of communities to witness, remember, and act together.

Since 2017, thousands of volunteers in The Advocates' immigration court observation program have documented more than 30,000 immigration court hearings, helping shine a light on a system that too often operates out of public view.

Shaina Aber, Executive Director, Acacia Center for Justice and Michele Garnett McKenzie, Executive Director, The Advocates for Human Rights



The Advocates for Human Rights provides free legal help to people seeking asylum from persecution or torture, trafficking survivors, children facing deportation, and people detained by ICE. Today a team of nineteen lawyers and legal professionals mobilize more than 1,000 pro bono legal professionals to provide legal help in approximately 3,000 cases throughout the Upper Midwest. As part of the Minnesota Immigration Legal Alliance: The Hub, The Advocates works closely with colleague organizations to bring legal help to people when and where they need it.

About Our Legal Services

Our free legal help is available to people whose household income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines and who live or are detained in Minnesota, North Dakota, or South Dakota. We do not charge any legal fees.

Not in Our Service Area?

ImmigrationLawHelp.org is a searchable online directory of over 1,000 free or low-cost nonprofit immigration legal services providers in all 50 states.

The UN Refugee Agency provides information and advice to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless and internally displaced people through its partners in many countries around the world.

help.unhcr.org

New Client Intake

Tuesdays, 10am-12pm
Thursdays, 12pm-2pm

New clients must call or complete online intake during intake hours. We cannot help new clients with walk-in intake.

Call (612) 341-9845 or fill out the form on our website.

Standing Together Through It All

The Advocates Reflects on Operations Metro Surge & PARRIS

Standing United

"This year, I've watched families in Minnesota live with the fear that the rules could change overnight. Even legal pathways like asylum and refugee processes have been turned against the people who use them, so someone can follow every step and still end up kidnapped, disappeared, and deported. We have had to move quickly, filing habeas petitions for individuals and for whole groups of refugees to protect them from unlawful detention.

Legal and community-based organizations across the state are working side by side so that people facing enforcement are connected with a lawyer and with the support they need. Our volunteers have stepped up in incredible ways - representation is more important now than ever as this administration seeks to erode due process and use racist and xenophobic policies to tear our communities apart. "

Hanne Sandison
Director, Immigration Legal Services

Refugee Status

"Beginning in early 2026, the Trump Administration detained refugees in Minnesota, along with other immigrants, during Operation Metro Surge. DHS also targeted refugees in Minnesota through Operation PARRIS, scheduling interviews on short notice to search for problems with their refugee case that could be used to terminate their refugee status, put them in removal proceedings, and deport them. The Trump Administration has continued to target refugees by issuing notices terminating refugee status and, most recently, issuing an interim final rule that significantly reduces their time to respond to the termination from 30 days to only 10 days. The Advocates continues to stand with refugees and work in partnership with other legal service providers and pro bono attorneys to respond to these terminations and to prepare their case before the immigration court."

Chris Jardine
Supervising Attorney, Immigration Legal Services

Unaccompanied Children

"Since the beginning of the second Trump Administration, we have seen a coordinated narrowing of protections for immigrant children, including increased immigration enforcement, information-sharing between ICE and the federal agency responsible for the children's care, and accelerated immigration court and asylum proceedings. As a result, children who have already been found to be victims of abuse, abandonment, or neglect face heightened risks of detention, deportation, and family separation while navigating increasingly complex legal processes.

At the same time, legal service providers are managing a surge in expedited hearings and interviews amid shrinking resources and funding. In response, The Advocates and our partners continue to provide direct legal representation, challenge harmful policies through advocacy and litigation, and work to ensure that children and families understand and can exercise their legal rights. We remain committed to protecting due process and ensuring that vulnerable children have access to the legal protections they need to remain safe and stable."

Yleana Roman
Managing Attorney, Immigration Legal Services

Ongoing Litigation

"2026 has been the most robust year for litigation in The Advocates' history. Beginning during Operation Metro Surge, The Advocates was a named plaintiff and active participant in lawsuits that challenged illegal government actions. We stopped Operation PARRIS, where ICE was arresting resettled refugees on the street, in their homes, and at their workplaces. We protected access to counsel for individuals detained in the Whipple Building and limited ICE's ability to transfer arrested Minnesotans within days, or even hours, of arrest. We sought to stop immigration hearings from being closed to observer projects like ours and challenged the racist "Somali Rocket Docket." And The Advocates continues to push for the faithful interpretation of refugee law in multiple pending Petitions for Review and amicus briefs filed with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit."

Zack Albun
Legal Director, Immigration Legal Services

Read more about litigation on page 4.



Photo by Chris Juhn

Bearing Witness

The Advocates plays a critical role in creating the historical record of Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS

Documenting the Truth, Defending Human Rights

“This record establishes that federal immigration activities during Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS violated the U.S. and Minnesota Constitutions and laid waste to due process and the rule of law.” – Minnesota Truth Council Chair Peter Cahill

The effects of federal immigration enforcement actions carried out during Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS continue to reverberate across Minnesota. Families were separated, communities lived in fear, and many Minnesotans experienced violations of their rights and dignity.

In March, Governor Tim Walz established the Governor's Council to Record the Truth of Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS, commonly known as the Minnesota Truth Council. Charged with collecting testimony, holding public hearings, and documenting the impact of these operations, the Council was tasked with creating a public record and recommending reforms to prevent similar abuses in the future.

To help make that work possible, the governor named The Advocates for Human Rights as the Council's implementing partner. As The Advocates’ designee, Deputy Executive Director Jennifer Prestholdt served as vice chair of the fifteen-member Council.

"Our role is to ensure that people can safely share their experiences and that those experiences will be responsibly documented and preserved," said Prestholdt.



Bringing Human Rights Expertise to the Process

As implementing partner, The Advocates is responsible for much of the infrastructure behind the Truth Council's work.

Heading up the team is Senior Advisor Robin Phillips. Phillips draws on decades of experience documenting human rights violations around the world, including supporting initiatives such as Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation process.

The Advocates designed and implemented Minnesota's story collection effort, identified and prepared witnesses for public testimony, and authored a comprehensive report detailing both the human rights violations Minnesotans suffered and the resilience they showed.

An early priority was creating a secure process through which people could share their experiences, either publicly or anonymously. “We were fortunate to be able to work closely with UNIDOS MN to design and pilot the story collection process,” said Michele Garnett McKenzie. By October, approximately 2,500 individuals and over 185 community organizations have participated in outreach and story collection efforts.

Among those are more than 330 volunteers trained as story collectors statewide. Volunteer story collectors help create welcoming, trusted spaces in churches, libraries, community centers, and other gathering places across the state.

Policy Counsel Veronica Cadavid González leads community outreach, equipping organizations around the state as story collectors. “While The Advocates created a process for collecting stories, our community partners brought their own wisdom and relationships to make this a safe space for people to engage,” Cadavid said. “The Truth Council was an opportunity for people to choose to ensure Minnesota’s history is built by each of us.”

This fall, the Truth Council held four public meetings focused on four key themes:

- Violations of the Constitution and the Rule of Law
- Direct Harm and Ripple Effects on Families, Businesses, and Communities
- Communities Respond with Resilience, Support, and Solidarity
- A Window into Policies and Systems Contributing to Harm

“With more than seventy witnesses and thirteen hours of testimony, witness preparation was essential,” said Jennifer Prestholdt. The Advocates’ Immigration Legal Services Director Hanne Sandison, Pro Bono Director Theresa Dykoschak, and Managing Attorney Yleana Roman were among the witnesses, speaking to serious issues relating to detention conditions, illegal detention, and the targeting of children for deportation.

Hearings can be viewed on the Minnesota Truth Council’s YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/@MinnesotaTruthCouncil.

From Testimony to Recommendations

The final report of the Minnesota Truth Council documents harms experienced by Minnesota residents, businesses, schools, childcare providers, and communities and recognizes the ways Minnesotans responded with solidarity and resilience. “The report strives to reflect the hundreds of voices who shared their stories,” said Associate International Justice Director Amy Bergquist, who anchored the writing team.

Charged with identifying reforms that can help prevent future human rights violations, the report also includes more than 100 recommendations for policy change.

The final report of the Minnesota Truth Council will be presented to the Minnesota Governor, members of the Minnesota Legislature, and the Minnesota Congressional Delegation on December 1.

A Community Effort

None of this work would have been possible without the extraordinary commitment of volunteers, community partners, and supporters.

Hundreds of volunteers contributed their time to outreach, story collection, witness support, and other critical tasks. They include longtime volunteer Joan Kuriansky, who temporarily relocated from her Washington, D.C. home to spend months in Minnesota as part of the Truth Council team. In addition, pro bono partners in Minnesota and around the United States contributed hundreds of hours of legal research, database management, and leadership. “We could not do this without the tech team at Fredrikson,” said Robin Phillips. “Their expertise and personal commitment are the backbone of story collection.”

The Council's work also depends on the generosity of donors. While The Advocates is honored to serve as the Truth Council's implementing partner, no state funding was provided for the organization's role.

"We had to make strategic decisions to support this effort while continuing our existing programs," said Michele Garnett McKenzie, The Advocates’ executive director. "We're deeply grateful to everyone whose generosity made it possible."

As the Truth Council approaches completion of its work, The Advocates is proud to have helped create a lasting public record of both the harms Minnesotans endured and the ways communities came together to support one another.

"Documenting the truth is an essential step toward accountability," says Robin Phillips. "It has been an honor to help ensure that people's experiences are heard, preserved, and used to inform a more just future for Minnesota."

Story collection remains open through 2026. We all have a story. Share yours today.

COUNCIL MEMBERS

Peter Cahill, Chair

Jennifer Prestholdt, Vice Chair
The Advocates for Human Rights

Deepinder Singh Mayell,
ACLU of Minnesota Representative

Ana Pottratz Acosta

Kate Beane

Jenna Chernega

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Pakou Hang

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Governor's Office

Truth as an Act of Courage

The Minnesota Truth Council held four public meetings for individuals to share their experiences. The Council will use these stories as their primary source of information and analyze them to uncover trends, causes, and impacts of the surge.



Testimony of Ms. A.

Minnesota Truth Council Participant at the 4th Public Meeting

I was detained in January. My son has a disability. I've been in this country for 25 years, struggling and working very hard.

Every time ICE was around, I felt a sense of uncertainty. That day in January, I didn't have any food. I drove to the store and parked in front of a black truck. I stayed there for about 20 minutes. I thought, "They're not going to leave." I got out with my groceries and got back in the car. I drove home, but the van was following me. I was pulling into my driveway when an agent knocked on my window.

They took me away, and I didn't know where I was because the windows were tinted. We arrived at Whipple, and they took everything from me—including my gold jewelry, my ID, and my work permit—and they never gave those things back to me.

I was dying of worry about my son because he was at school. There were more than 35 women in a tiny room. I was dying. I called an officer and started explaining about my son. He said to me, "Do you have a phone number? Look for your cell phone." There were a lot of belongings on the floor. Finally, I found my purse inside a plastic bag and took out my cell phone. I called someone I knew and said, "I don't have time. ICE detained me. Go to the school and bring my son home."

I spent the night in the cell, sleeping on the floor. I spent a day and a half at Whipple. It was freezing cold on the concrete. The blanket they brought us was just a piece of aluminum foil. They told me they were going to put me on the afternoon flight on the first day, but I didn't end up leaving until the afternoon flight on the second day. They started taking my fingerprints, but they wouldn't register. The officer got angry and treated me aggressively.

Another officer arrived and handed me a piece of paper, saying, "This is your deportation order and your son's—sign it." I replied, "I'm not signing anything; my son is a citizen. I know his rights." He took the paper, crumpled it up, and threw it at my feet.

The next day, they handcuffed our arms and legs and put us on the plane; there were 30 of us. The plane began to move, and I thought about death. I told myself, "I'll never see my son again." After 20 minutes in the air, the plane turned back due to mechanical problems.

The first time, I wet myself. I felt like I couldn't breathe. My blood pressure was 255 and my blood sugar was 600. I was on the verge of a diabetic coma. The paramedic said, "They have to get her off the

plane." The officer said to give me two pills (Tylenol) and send me back to my seat. But they didn't give me anything. Once again, I felt like I was dying.

The first time, they took me to Texas, to Camp East Montana. I spent two days there and still felt terrible; I kept asking for medication. There were four rooms, each with 80 women, all from Minnesota. On the second day, they selected only a few of us and transported us to New Mexico, to Camp Otero, in a van. I was there for a month. I became seriously ill twice; one time, I fainted instantly. Another time, they took me away in a wheelchair at 2 a.m.

There wasn't enough water for everyone. The water was frozen, and if we tried to thaw it, we were punished. They gave us 10 minutes to eat. As a diabetic, I didn't have a healthy diet. I had to beg for more toilet paper and sanitary pads when I got my period. When someone complained about something, they'd lock you in a solitary confinement room with a name I don't want to repeat. In New Mexico, I heard about three deaths at Camp East Montana.

After I was released, I had to wear an ankle monitor. They told me I could only travel within the state of Minnesota. But that's not true. One day, I wanted to take my son to Duluth. But the monitor started beeping and tightened around my ankle. I got a call from ICE saying I was outside the "Master Zone." They've replaced this ankle monitor about 10 times. They call me at midnight to track me down. It's very frustrating. **So much so that, because of this, my son has tried to take his own life twice**. He says that, with that monitor, we have no life.

Everything you see on TV — they're still doing it.



Art As Witness

Arts and cultural activism served as forms of expression, practical tools of mutual aid, and community organizing. During and following Operation Metro Surge, art was also a mechanism for healing and a form of public witness to what was happening in Minnesota.

Artist and community advocate Leon Wang testified before the Minnesota Truth Council, describing how, as immigrant communities faced fear and uncertainty, artists stepped forward to create spaces for hope, connection, and solidarity.

Wang's *We Are Family* butterfly campaign used art to center the humanity of targeted communities and build support across diverse audiences. The iconic image appeared throughout the community during Operation Metro Surge. Wang also spoke to his collaboration with fourth-graders at Valley View Elementary School in Columbia Heights, whose students included 5-year-old Liam. Students developed a series of posters expressing their hopes for their community. One student explained, "This art is for the world. Everyone should get freedom. We should have peace and freedom for all."

Top left photo by Leon Wang
Top right photo by Caroline Yang

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MINNESOTA TRUTH COUNCIL

Fighting Back Against the Criminalization of Women Around the World

For the first time, the CSW called on governments to review laws and policies that disproportionately criminalize women and girls and to address the links between violence against women and girls and increased incarceration.

Around the world, survivors of gender-based violence are often punished rather than protected. This year, The Advocates joined partners from around the world at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to ensure that the experiences of criminalized survivors were part of the global conversation on access to justice.

In multiple events over two weeks, The Advocates brought global attention to the ways survivors of violence can become criminalized, incarcerated, and even sentenced to death because of discrimination, systemic bias, and inadequate legal protections.

One panel, *Reclaiming Justice: Addressing the Criminalization of Women from Global Perspectives*, examined how discriminatory laws, gender-blind procedures, and systemic bias shape women's experiences throughout the criminal legal system, from first contact with law enforcement through reentry after incarceration. A second, *Broken Promises: How Legal Systems Can Harm Instead of Heal*, was presented in partnership with Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE). In both, WATCH Advocacy & Programming Director Anne Applebaum presented data and findings from WATCH, leveraging local data from court observation and interviews to push for change on the international level. The Advocates also coordinated a civil society gathering for partners and organizations who work with or advocate for criminalized survivors, facilitating cross-learning and connection.

Two additional panels focused on women facing the death penalty. *Access to Justice Denied: Women Facing the Death Penalty* explored the intersecting forms of discrimination that place women at risk of criminalization, including gender-based violence, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and unequal legal protections. *Access to Justice Denied: Advancing Solutions for Women Facing the Death Penalty* highlighted practical legal strategies, defense tools, and advocacy approaches to better protect women facing capital punishment.

Beyond public events, staff contributed proposed language and feedback for the CSW Agreed Conclusions, advocating for recognition of the experiences and needs of criminalized and incarcerated women as a critical access-to-justice issue. For the first time, the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions called on governments to review laws and policies that disproportionately criminalize women and girls and to address the links between violence against women and girls and increased incarceration.

CSW70 provided valuable opportunities to strengthen existing partnerships and build new relationships to advance transnational efforts to protect the rights of criminalized women, gender-diverse individuals, and survivors of gender-based violence.



Photo by The Advocates Staff at the CSW side event.

The Monster Under The Bed of Gender Politics



Sheldon Clay

Contributing Author

Few political tools are more powerful than fear. The far right clearly understands this. It's evident in their relentless use of anti-trans rhetoric as part of a larger effort to shape the public debate. This is often framed as a fight against "gender ideology," a fabricated construct used to portray transgender people and their attempts to live dignified lives as a threat to society. There is more to it than the harm done to a small, vulnerable group of fellow humans. It's also damaging the larger political institutions that serve all of us.

We must remind ourselves that such toxic political fearmongering is like the childhood "monster under the bed." Switch on the light and fear no longer appears overwhelming. Its power vanishes.

Shedding that sort of light on the anti-trans fearmongering of far-right ideologues is a worthy goal for the upcoming election cycle. We have to come to terms with the success the far right has had with anti-trans rhetoric, then replace it with the sort of understanding that is born of both education and empathy. The narrative that succeeds must communicate that trans people are, quite simply, us. We all benefit when they are allowed to participate in society. We all suffer when they are threatened.

Since our founding in 1983, The Advocates for Human Rights has offered legal support to hundreds of LGBTIQ+ clients, while documenting the fear-based narratives being used to restrict their rights both here and around the globe. More recently, we have devoted significant attention to examining the movements that have promoted anti-trans rhetoric, while focusing our efforts on challenging narratives surrounding so-called "gender ideology." We have learned that anti-trans rhetoric rarely emerges in isolation; it is often part of a broader political strategy that uses fear to reshape public discourse and weaken protections for all vulnerable communities. In many cases, this rhetoric shifts public attention toward questions of gender identity and away from other pressing issues like the cost of living, public safety, healthcare, education, and economic stability. Those targeted obviously have much to gain from improved understanding. A growing body of research suggests that greater acceptance of diverse gender identities is associated with improved individual wellbeing, stronger social cohesion, and more inclusive institutions. For individuals who face discrimination, inclusion is linked to lower stress, reduced isolation, and better mental health outcomes.

But we shouldn't lose sight of the positive effects that extend to society as a whole. Countries that protect individual rights and promote inclusion tend to have stronger democratic institutions and higher levels of public trust. When people feel accepted in their communities and workplaces, they are better able to participate fully in social and economic life, strengthening collaboration and institutional effectiveness. More broadly, these societal gains include greater innovation, improved retention, stronger economic performance, and lower public health costs.

For politicians and voters alike, there are signs this is an opportune time to push back against anti-trans rhetoric. In last year's gubernatorial race in Virginia, Republican candidate Winsome Earle-Sears used a political strategy that placed transgender issues at the center of her campaign, portraying gender diversity as a threat to social order. Virginians ultimately rejected both her and her message by a wide margin. On a larger stage Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who'd shown himself a master at using scare campaigns targeting everyone from migrants to LGBTIQ+ people to keep himself in office, was decisively swept out in that country's recent election.

Like children who learn to stop believing in the "monster under the bed," it's up to all of us to take a stand against fear-based narratives in the public debate. We can't expect to destroy the grip of anti-trans scare campaigns in one election cycle. But every electoral upset or bad poll number moves us closer to that end. That's the power we all possess. Once we recognize this, we can refocus public debate on the full range of issues that shape people's daily lives, ensuring that the rights and dignity of all people remain part of a healthy democracy.

Supporting One Another Through Challenging Times

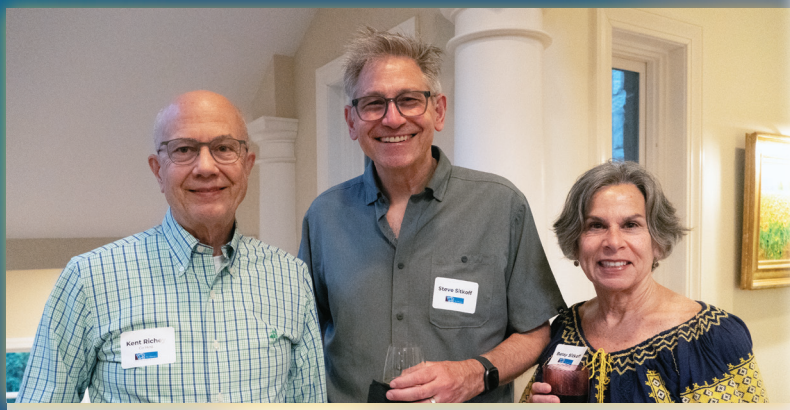
House Parties bring human rights activists together to learn about and support the work of The Advocates

Thanks to our house hosts for opening their doors to us!

Mark Addicks and Tom Hoch, Chris Bercaw and Mary McKelvey, Steve and Amy Clay, Linda Foreman and Mel Dickstein, Peggy Grieve, Jim and Andy Rubenstein



Linda Foreman, Robin Phillips, and Aviva Breen



Kent Richey, Steve Sitkoff, and Betsy Sitkoff



Chris Bercaw



Nathnael Berhanu, Eric Stults, Michele Garnett McKenzie, and Lorrie Janatopoulos



Loan Huynh



Jan Conlin



Mimi Hockert



Kwame Reed and Mike Zumbrunnen



Lynn Vander Haar, Rosalyn Park,
David Vander Haar, and Sandra Schlafge



Alissa Cole and Dan Hockert



Kerri Andersen, Heidi Fessle, Theresa Pautz, and Sabina Marty

Photos by Christian Zander and Rebecca Mariscal



Carrie Brasser

Donate to The Advocates

Volunteer with The Advocates

Listen to the Music

Brandi Carlile & Bruce Springsteen Stand up for The Advocates



Photo by The Advocates Staff Featuring Bruce Springsteen with our Executive Director, Michele Garnett McKenzie

Pat Courtemanche

Communications Committee Member and Pro Bono Contributor

The first months of 2026 were trying times for our state. Immigrants and underrepresented communities were under attack, literally and figuratively, as some in government and their acolytes continued their relentless assault on basic human rights. These were also months in which we saw the very best of the human spirit – proof that America is still a land of hopes and dreams for those who demand justice for all. Americana artist and multiple-Grammy winner Brandi Carlile and rock legend Bruce Springsteen were two who represented that enduring human spirit for good. Both singled out The Advocates for Human Rights.

On February 21, Brandi Carlile took the stage at Target Center in Minneapolis in front of an adoring live crowd and a livestream audience on the streaming service Veeps. Brandi's career began in the early 2000s, and since that time she has been a spokesperson for justice to a devoted and growing audience. She made her tour stop in Minneapolis a fundraiser titled "Be Human: A Concert for Minneapolis." Brandi raised precious awareness and vital funds for The Advocates for Human Rights as one of her chosen charities for the benefit.

Roughly one month later, on March 31, Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band kicked off the "Land of Hopes and Dreams" tour at the same venue in Minneapolis. The tour was devoted to raising awareness and action in the fight for justice, particularly in the face of an oppressive administration and the brutal, deadly tactics employed in ICE operations. The Advocates was Bruce's chosen organization for the Minneapolis show and, like Brandi, he brought us further into the public eye while providing essential financial support.

This financial support allows us to do more and to help more. We believe our track record, dating back to 1983, is what drew these two show business icons to The Advocates. They see the value in what we do, and they attached their names to our mission because they believe we are trusted stewards.

What does their support mean for The Advocates? We are more visible to other people who want to be part of the fight for justice, building a bigger human rights movement. The funds that were raised also provided a desperately needed boost as we confront new challenges and opportunities in the wake of the largest immigration enforcement operation in our country's history.

There is so much more to do. We again thank Brandi Carlile and Bruce Springsteen for their faith in us and their support for our mission. We thank the countless volunteers and staff who have worked tirelessly to promote justice. We thank the generous people who have donated funds to support human rights.

We are in it for the long haul. We hope you join us (and Brandi and Bruce) in our continued defense of dignity, equality, and justice.



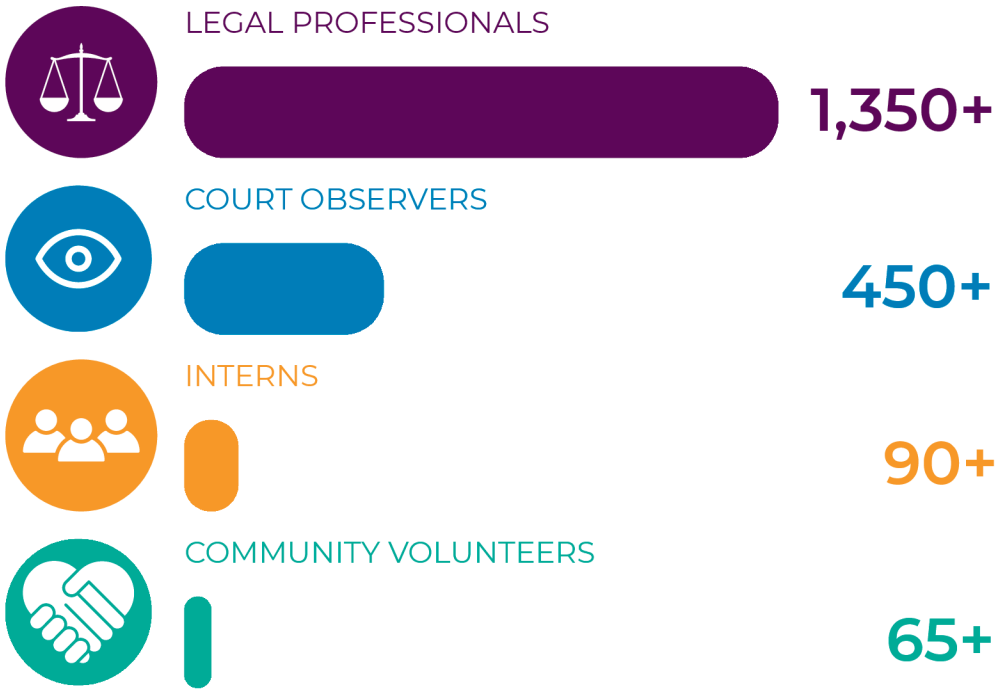
Photo by The Advocates Staff with volunteers from the Looking Out Foundation at the Brandi Carlile concert

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William D. Zabel Human Rights Award

Human Rights First presented the William D. Zabel Human Rights Award to the People of Minnesota for demonstrating what is possible when neighbors choose solidarity over fear. COPAL (Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina) and The Advocates for Human Rights accepted the award on behalf of The People of Minnesota.



Securing Human Rights Is Generational Work

A deep friendship, a sense of adventure, and a willingness to jump in led Julianne Bye to The Advocates for Human Rights. When Julianne's friend and long-time Advocates supporter Gretchen Piper told Julianne, "We're going to Croatia in six weeks!", Julianne enthusiastically said "Yes!" Little did she know that the one-week trip in 2019 would lead to a long-lasting relationship with The Advocates.

Julianne and Gretchen had worked together for a women-focused nonprofit, where Julianne's gifts for rapport, relationship-building, and follow-through stood out. These skills were exactly what The Advocates needed for a human rights convening in Zagreb, Croatia, with nearly 30 women's organizations from Eastern European countries.

Building trust and creating a network

For the convening, Julianne and Gretchen co-designed an icebreaker—giving participants room to speak fully about the situation in their respective countries and the challenges facing their organizations, however long it took. Julianne, Gretchen, and The Advocates team did what they always do so well: they listened, gave space, and built trust, which created a strong, connected bond among the attendees.

"By the end, participants found they had networks; they had friends," says Julianne, "and I had an overwhelming realization that the rise of authoritarianism happening in Bulgaria was occurring in Ukraine and Poland, and increasingly in the United States—it was global." Julianne had found her part to play in the human rights movement: building connections, fighting authoritarianism, and defending human rights.

Investing in the global fight for human rights

Julianne has continued her involvement with The Advocates, eventually becoming a monthly, sustaining donor. Julianne praises The Advocates' discipline, focus on human rights—and our collaborative model and partnership with attorneys. Then, there's our staff.

"The commitment of The Advocates' staff inspires me," says Julianne. "They are such dedicated workers and experts in their field, advocating for human rights in the United States and across the world. My financial contributions are so their staff—and their work—are supported."

Today, Julianne lives in Tempe on the Arizona State University campus, where she enjoys the thriving senior community and intellectual engagement. To spread awareness of The Advocates and its work, she organized and funded a human rights talk by Senior Advisor Robin Phillips for her retirement community's foreign affairs group. She continues being a member of the Human Rights Awards Dinner Committee, and each year purchases a table, invites friends, and solicits auction donations.

During a recent Women's Rights House Party, Julianne told The Advocates that she had included the organization in her legacy plan. For Julianne, the power of a legacy gift helps combat the well-funded and well-organized authoritarian right-wing movement.

"Securing human rights is generational work," says Julianne. "Through a legacy gift and as a sustaining donor, I am ensuring that The Advocates has the resources to continue the global fight for generations to come—and that good people are positioned to do this great work."

Julianne turned 75 in January with no plans to slow down, and a travel schedule that spans four continents this year. She invites everyone who cares about human rights to join her in supporting the Advocates.



Give Forever

Including The Advocates for Human Rights in your will is one of the most effective, long-lasting ways to support the mission. Since 1983, The Advocates has worked to ensure that all people live with dignity, justice, and equality. Your gift ensures the future of The Advocates' work in Minnesota, the U.S., and around the world, and builds a better, stronger future for us all. A gift in your will allows you to include human rights in your legacy.

For more information on becoming a legacy giver, please contact Thekla Rura-Polley at 612-746-4678 or email trurapolley@advrights.org.

Ways to become a Legacy Giver:

1. Bequest: leave a gift in your will or trust.
2. Beneficiary Designation: name The Advocates as a beneficiary of your retirement account, life insurance, annuity, or donor advised fund.

Learn more about Legacy Giving:

Every gift of any amount drives positive impact. To give from your DAF or IRA, or donate stock, please contact Thekla at 612-746-4678.

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"Activism works. So what I'm telling you to do now, is to act. Because no one is too small to make a difference."

Greta Thunberg
Swedish climate change activist

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