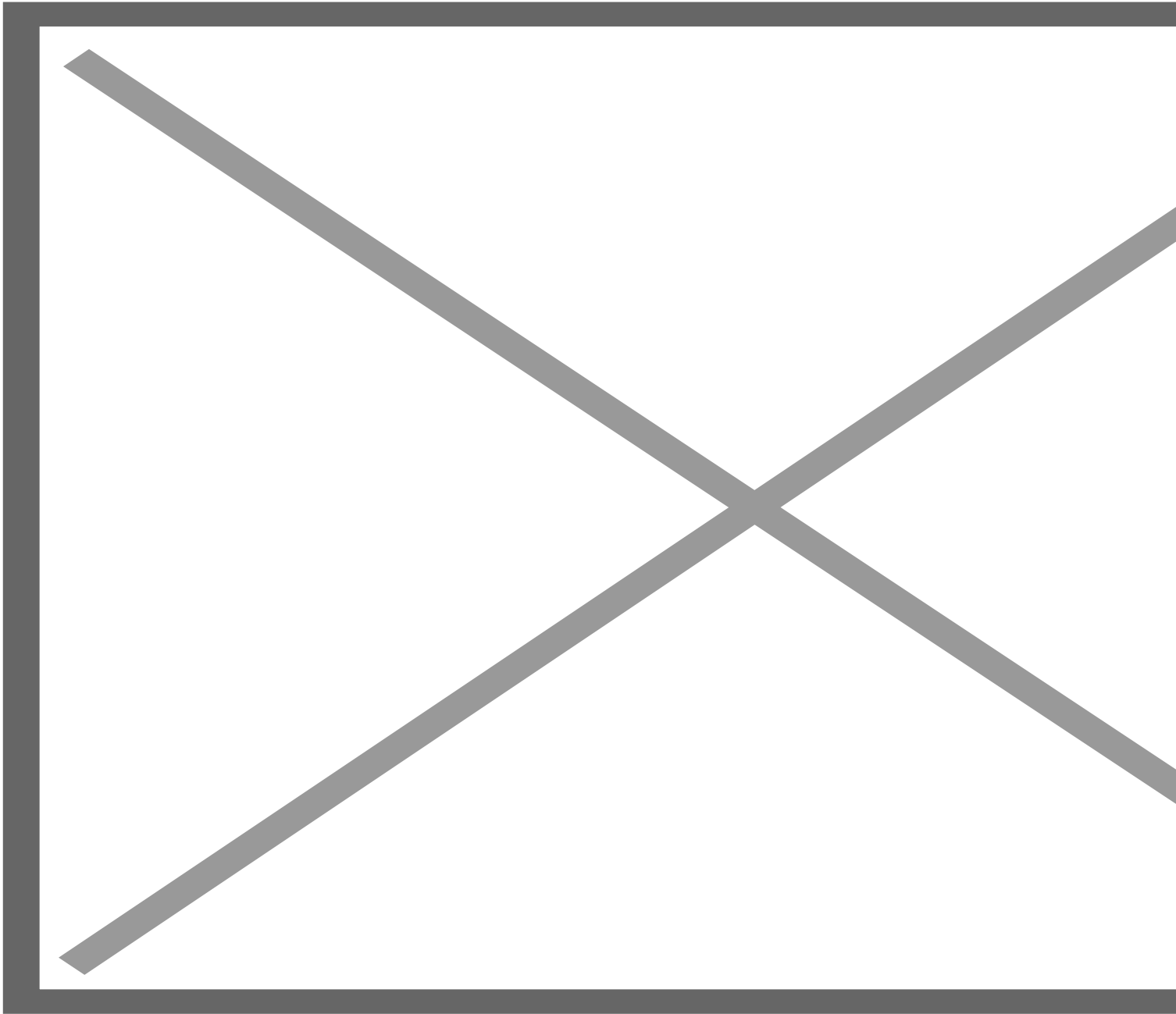


Irrevocable harm and irrevocable good

A favorable immigration ruling in Chicago was overturned. The growth of our bond fund was not.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue
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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

It felt like a brightly colored life preserver amid an ocean of bad news. On November 12, a federal judge in Chicago ruled that 615 people who had been arrested by federal immigration agents there, likely illegally, were eligible for release on \$1,500 bonds. I found out about the ruling during my lunch break, not 20 minutes after the ruling, when a stranger sent an Instagram message to the bond fund I volunteer for, asking if we were fundraising to help pay for these bonds.

I've been working with the Midwest Immigration Bond Fund for a few years. We're a small group of volunteers who do everything from creating endless Canva graphics to the actual posting of bonds. We began in 2020 and have gotten off the ground slowly. In 2024 we paid 19 bonds, helping midwesterners leave immigration detention and fight their cases from their homes and communities.

The year that followed had already been a time of unprecedented growth. From inauguration day forward, people had been raising funds for us in creative and brilliant ways all year, each sticker sale or merch drop or benefit concert or supper club seemingly spawning another three, the money rolling in a steady stream from our neighbors' pockets into our account and then spun out nearly as fast into paying bonds. We had more than tripled the number of people we had bonded out and had been able to pay higher and higher bonds. And now this.

The answer to the man's question—were we raising funds to help pay for these bonds?—seemed obvious. Yes, of course, who else? Still, we did the math. We would need almost \$1 million for the bonds alone, not to mention the many administrative questions and potential expenses. (Could we use money orders? How much would that cost?) There were 15 of us, all with day jobs, some even as immigration attorneys representing clients during the madness, some with small children or sick parents or the thousand other responsibilities being a grownup brings, but we were pulling 12-, 15-hour workdays, switching from one laptop to another, trying to figure it all out.

And yet, even within 24 hours of the ruling, it felt like we had the wind in our sails, the tide of popular opinion on our side. We were getting tens of thousands of dollars a day, mostly in small donations, under \$100 each—a tidal wave of people opening their wallets because there was a chance it would help get people home, because there was a chance that it would help undo the harms that had been done to Chicago over the course of a brutal occupation by federal agents, kidnapping neighbors and loved ones. We got matching grants from community members and small businesses; foundations reached out asking how to best support us; events and popups and Instagram story sales all blossomed in the course of a few weeks.

And meanwhile, the slow machinery of the court ground on—the order for release was stayed and then appealed. No one would get out until after Thanksgiving. Oral arguments happened, and then we waited. And then, a month after the initial ruling, the circuit court found that the initial judge had overstepped his authority in ordering a mass release on bond. Cases had to be decided on an individual basis, leaving the status quo more or less as it had been before the last month of upheaval. There would be no mass bailout.

The flow of donations slowed—but it didn't stop. We reached our funding goal before the end of the year. People kept creating events, writing checks, reaching out, asking how they might best support. At first I was confused, but now I think I understand a little bit better.

We often talk about the bond fund's budget being a moral statement: it's not just about how much our web service costs or how much we pay our bookkeeper or how much we spend on bonds; it's an allocation of money that aligns with our priorities as an organization. Accessibility to anyone who needs us, good pay for good work, abolition—all these are as much a part of our budget as the goods and services we purchase with them. This fundraiser—and more importantly, the response from the people who donated—was no less a moral statement. A statement of reclamation of their city, of love and solidarity for all those detained, of community and hope.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about harms that can't be taken back. In advocacy work, there's a reason we cling to the victories, but I think we often forget to talk about the losses. Those 615 people who were initially ordered released are a subset of those who were arrested—they're the ones who are still in the country. We know that many others were deported or pressured into signing voluntary departure forms, separating them from their families much more decisively. Those who remained in detention, on the other hand, were in different kind of hell—dealing with incarceration and neglect and bad food, all for just a chance at due process. Every victory comes ringed with defeat. Every unfair policy overturned has doubtless already affected hundreds of lives for the worse.

What the events of this fall taught me is that there are also good things that can't be taken back. We are using the hundreds of thousands of dollars we raised during the campaign to get people out of immigration detention, in record numbers. The fundraiser not only caught the attention of donors, who have continued reaching out, but also of people who need our services. The volume of requests—and releases—has gone up dramatically as a result. This is a good that can't be taken back by a simple court ruling: a community built up in a moment of hope which then, even when that hope was narrowed, decided not to become undone.