The Alaska Institute for Justice’s inaugural program, the Alaska Immigration Justice Project, began in 2005 as a response to a pressing need for legal representation for immigrants in the state.

And although AIJ’s mission has expanded over the years to include climate change work, and the Language Interpretation and Access Project (LIAP) that provides language support to those with limited English proficiency, the Immigration Justice Project remains its flagship program; and, still, AIJ is the sole statewide organization dedicated to providing low-cost and free immigration legal assistance and language access services to Alaskans.

“I've come across so many times where a client has to go to my home country. ‘I'm here on a visa, and if I divorce him, or take my kids and deport them to my home country.’”

Over the past 16 years, founding members Mara Kimmel, Robin Bronen, and Jason Baumetz have been joined by a talented and diverse staff, backed by a hands-on board of directors, volunteer attorneys and wide community support.

The Immigration Justice Project fills a vital and urgent need for legal representation statewide; the majority of clients, some 65 percent, are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

These crime victims would otherwise be unable to come forward and access critical legal services due to fear of retribution and possible deportation. The Project assists them with holistic legal services including their immigration status and allowing them to access critical resources, making for a safer and more just community for all Alaskans.

The Project partners work closely with domestic violence/sexual assault programs all across the state who make referrals to the Alaska Institute for Justice legal program for help navigating what is a very complicated legal system.

Jason Baumetz AIJ’s legal program director for the past 16 years is recognized both nationally and within Alaska for his immigration legal expertise. Baumetz provides critical direct legal services and supervision for immigration law work with victims of human trafficking, domestic violence and sexual assault. He is also bilingual in English and Korean.

The work can be demanding and arduous, he says, but it also has its rewards.

“It’s very challenging, interesting and yes, you make a tremendous difference in people’s lives and watch people succeed and go from struggling to very successful,” he says. “It’s all really inspiring, what people go through and where they are in their lives, and that I can help folks get out of abusive relations."

Ivette Lugo, the Project’s multitalented extraordinaire whose official title is Juneau Rural Outreach Coordinator/Trained Interpreter & Translator, sees many of those clients on the front lines before referring them to attorneys or the many community service partners with whom the Project works hand-in-hand.

All too often, Lugo says, the Immigration Justice Project is contacted by those in dire situations who need help finding a legal system and finding community resources. “Many times, it’s a woman who is married to a U.S. citizen. She says ‘he abuses me, he threatened to call immigration if I divorce him, or take my kids and deport me to my home country.”

Alaska has some of the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual assault in the nation. Alaska’s rate of forcible rape is almost three times the national average. Immigrant victims face even higher rates of domestic violence and sexual assault and face significant barriers in finding help.

“The majority of clients, some 65 percent, are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.”

Grants and operations director Indra Arriaga, an immigrant herself who served on the board of directors before coming on staff in 2020, explains:

“One misconception is that our clients are immigrants that are here undocumented, illegally or overstayed their visas. The clients that we serve and the cases that we take on are rooted in the immigration process,” she says. “They have legal standing. These folks have a place here. They have a right to go through the process.”

Supervising attorney Anna Taylor came to AIJ seven years ago, first working at AIJ’s Juneau office and then transferring to Anchorage.

Although often her day-to-day involves walking clients through the recounting of horrific experiences in their lives, she takes satisfaction in knowing that the Project’s help can make a lasting difference.

“The impact of cases where immigration benefits a survivor of domestic violence, or another violent crime, those are the ones that stay with me the longest,” she says. “Those just reinforce to me how resilient our clients are, how they can continue to be kind, compassionate and smart people even though they have been treated horribly.”

AIJ also operates a Pro Bono Asylum Project. Dan Rodgers has been a full-time volunteer attorney at AIJ since 2008 and has represented many of AIJ’s clients. He is the recipient of the Pro Bono Lifetime Achievement Award and the Robert K. Hickerson Public Services Award from the Alaska Bar Association as well as many other pro bono awards.

The Immigration Justice Project’s continuing success is due to the devotion of its talented staff and its deep commitment to defending every individual’s human and legal rights, regardless of their country of origin, creating a vibrant, inclusive society. “We need to bring people out of the shadows, to make a better city and state,” founding member Mara Kimmel says. “We need to offer people the potential to do things the right way, and we can do that when all voices feel safe.”

For more information on the Alaska Institute for Justice’s programs or how you can help support their efforts, visit www.akijp.org.