

The Alaska Immigration Justice Project's enduring commitment

The Alaska Institute for Justice's (AIJ) mission is to promote and protect the human rights of all Alaskans, including immigrants, refugees, crime victims including survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, and Alaska Native communities by providing critical services to these underserved populations through legal representation, language access, training and educational programs and advocating for climate justice.

This series of six articles, *Human Rights: Legal, Social, and Climate Justice*, explores the origins of AIJ 16 years ago, the various programs it offers, and its impact on our state in its unwavering devotion to preserving and defending the rights of all Alaskans.

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 Interpreter Center, the Immigration Justice Project remains its flagship program; then, and still, AIJ is the sole statewide organization dedicated to providing low-cost and free immigration legal assistance and language access services to Alaskans.

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.

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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 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 relationships.”

Ivette Lugo, the Project's multitasker extraordinaire whose official title is Juneau Rural Outreach Coordinator/Paralegal/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 navigating the 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.



Above: East High School teacher Yoko Grove raises her hand and repeats the Oath of Allegiance during a naturalization ceremony at East High School on April 23, 2019. (Marc Lester/Anchorage Daily News photo) At right: Mara Kimmel and Robin Bronen at “Si Se Puede,” a gathering in Anchorage to support comprehensive immigration reform legislation, 2005



“Startling statistics from the 2015 Alaska Victimization Survey found that 48 percent of women who reside in Alaska have experienced intimate partner violence, sexual violence, or both,” says Kari Robinson, AIJ's deputy director.

In the first half of 2021, the Project “assisted 115 crime victims with immigration legal services including a wide range of legal immigration remedies to help crime victims obtain temporary or permanent legal status in the United States,” Robinson adds.

And there are other crime victims served by the Project as well.

“We also assist people suffering from human trafficking, often labor or domestic servitude,” Lugo says. “Many people from other countries are hired by companies here in Alaska and they don't get paid, don't get days off or overtime. In industries such as fisheries, companies hire people from overseas and don't keep their promises.”

Robinson notes that, also in the first half of 2021 alone, the Immigration Justice Project helped 40 victims of human trafficking whose home countries include Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Gambia, Germany, Honduras, India, Jordan, Korea, Mexico, Mongolia, Peru, the Philippines, Senegal and Vietnam. The legal program also relies on long-time support staff including Carmen Sanchez who for the past 15 years helps clients feel welcome and supported in accessing legal services as well as keeping track of client service statistics critical for all of AIJ's funding sources and identifying unmet needs within the state.

In addition, the Project provides legal immigration services to non-victims of crime — such as those seeking applications for lawful permanent residence status, naturalization and citizenship assistance, assistance with family immigration law and removal/deportation defense — on a sliding scale. These services are offered at a fraction of the cost of retaining a private attorney.

To be clear, the Immigration Justice Project helps immigrants who have a legal right to be in the United States.

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.