

What the Future Holds

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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 dedication to preserving and defending the rights of all Alaskans.

In 16 years, the Alaska Institute for Justice has made monumental strides in furthering the pursuit of legal, social and climate justice for all Alaskans. What began as a small non-profit focused on immigration law in 2005 has grown into a multipronged organization that is an indispensable part of building a just community.

AIJ aids Limited English Proficient (LEP) Alaskans through its Language Interpreter Center that began operations in 2007 and provides them with increased access to legal, medical and social services.

In 2015, AIJ expanded its mission to include climate justice by providing ground-breaking, community-led

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research on climate change and climate-forced relocation in Alaska through its Policy and Research Center.

Recognition for AIJ's work is widespread and the organization and its staff have received multiple awards over the years, including the

2017 Carla Timponi Award for Activism presented by the Alaska Women's Lobby to AIJ's deputy director

Kari Robinson for her hard work, dedication, leadership and advocacy on behalf of Alaskan women, children and families.

In 2014, AIJ's Pro Bono Asylum attorney Dan Rodgers was awarded the Robert K. Hickerson Public Service Award by the Alaska Bar Association in honor of his outstanding dedication and service in the provision of pro bono legal services and legal services to low-income persons.

In 2012, AIJ was awarded the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award in recognition of outstanding contributions to our nation's communities through unselfish dedication and leadership.

Throughout its history, AIJ's work has not only diversified, but intensified as the fight for social justice and basic human rights continues, and the organization is looking to the future to accomplish some big goals in service to Alaskans who share AIJ's dedication to justice in our state.

As AIJ heads into year 17, the organiza-



tion is looking to build new partnerships and deepen existing ones with other organizations seeking to defend and promote human rights around the state.

“My hope is AIJ can partner with other organizations that exist or that emerge to make sure that that client, that person has access to the extensive range of services that they need,” says AIJ co-founder and board member Mara Kimmel.

Just as AIJ has diversified its scope of work, it must also diversify its resource bases.

While federal grants help fund work with victims of crime and human trafficking, continuing to offer vital low-cost immigration legal representation, deportation defense and asylum services requires unrestricted funds.

“I look at legal status as one of the basic needs at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Unless you're able to secure your legal status you are always going to have insecurity and that insecurity is going to ripple through all other aspects of your life,” Kimmel says.

To this end, AIJ is looking to increase private donations in order to better serve its immigration services clients.

In order to increase donations, AIJ must raise its profile in the community, another of AIJ's future goals. Because AIJ is a small organization keenly focused on providing services to clients, there hasn't been a lot of time and financial resources to develop or implement communications strategies; this is now one of AIJ's board of directors' priorities for the coming years. Thanks to a grant from the Murdock Charitable Trust, resources have been provided to focus on this critical component.

Lessons learned from COVID-19, where the LIC was able to step in and translate important health and safety information into several languages, show that outreach into LEP communities needs to be prioritized.

“If we are going to achieve a sense of jus-

ice particularly in times of emergency,” Kimmel says, “we need to ensure that all residents have access to critical services regardless of status, regardless of language.”

Climate Justice work also needs to intensify as numerous rural Alaskan communities are in a state of emergency that is only becoming graver as time passes. These communities are in dire need of technical assistance and funding as they face the very real threat of climate-forced relocation due to flooding, erosion, thawing permafrost and melting sea ice.

AIJ is hopeful that, in response to a complaint filed in 2020 with the United Nations on behalf of four tribes in Louisiana and one in Alaska, the Biden administration will issue an invitation to the UN's Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons to visit the United States, including Alaska, to document the severity of the climate crisis and recognize that solutions need to respect each community's human rights and sovereignty.

“AIJ exists in a world that is not just and that has not protected the human rights of people,” says AIJ's co-founder and executive director Robin Bronen.

“We need to be better at building coalitions and connecting people across the diverse spectrum of humanity so that we are a collective of people seeking a shared vision that is just, equitable and sustainable. AIJ, of course, seeks to play a role in creating that coalition.”

AIJ's strengths lie in its utter commitment to justice, civil and human rights, as well as its talented and driven staff who work tirelessly to make Alaska a better place for all who live here.

It's people like rural outreach coordinator/paralegal Ivette Lugo, who wants to model how people should be treated for her daughter, or deputy director Kari Robinson who is devoted to keeping the ship afloat in order to protect and defend AIJ's clients.

There's retired attorney Dan Rodgers who volunteers his time as a Pro Bono asylum attorney and recruits other attorneys to do the same.

Legal program director Jason Baumetz has been with AIJ since the beginning, and even after 16 years is still surprised and inspired by the resilience of AIJ's clients.

In her role as director of the Language Interpreter Center, Mai La Vang took over from retiring director Barb Jacobs and helped AIJ rise to the occasion to translate important COVID information. Along with AIJ's newest member, LIC Program Coordinator, Kristina Luenstein, Vang continues to search for innovative ways to better serve the LEP community across the state.

Supervising attorney Anna Taylor remains determined to help clients in times of crisis, no matter the toll it takes on her personally, and grants and operations director Indra Arriaga has been devoted to helping Alaska's immigrant community long before she joined AIJ.

And the tireless Carmen Sanchez has helped support AIJ's work and growth for the past 15 years in her role as grant manager/rural outreach coordinator.

It's clearly a team effort, albeit a massive one, and there's still much work to be done.

“So as much as we can continue to speak out for justice for all of us, it is incumbent on us to do that. I think we do it well and I think we can do more of it,” Kimmel says.

And although no one expects injustices to be rectified in their lifetime, it's what's possible in the future that ignites passion.

“I think of the work now as scaffolding,” says Bronen. “We need to be building a foundation so that young people can build on the work that we're doing and pursue just futures for our community and our planet.”

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

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