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# Project marks year of aiding immigrants

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NORTHAMPTON — Sitting in a prison cell in Boston, things at times looked pretty bleak for Niberd Abdalla. For more than seven months beginning last June, the Iraqi immigrant faced deportation to a country where he fears death.

“I will be targeted,” Abdalla, of Northampton, told the Gazette in August — a fear compounded in no small part by his Kurdish ethnicity. “They will bury me alive.”

However, although Abdalla was not initially eligible for bond, a team led by Northampton lawyer Buz Eisenberg volunteered endless hours fighting for Abdalla’s freedom. And, on Jan. 25, an immigration judge in Boston ordered Abdalla released, much to the delight of his wife, Ellen McShane, and a community of supporters.

Eisenberg and others, meanwhile, continue working to reopen Abdalla’s case, to have his removal order canceled and to get him legal status.

“It took an attorney taking the extra step,” Megan Kludt, a local immigration attorney who has also worked on Abdalla’s case, said of Eisenberg. And Kludt and Eisenberg are far from the only ones volunteering on the local level to fill a gap in legal immigration resources.

Abdalla and many other local immigrants have gained access to much-needed legal resources through the Immigrant Protection Project, a coordinated regional initiative on the part of the the American Civil Liberties Union of Western Massachusetts, local lawyers, volunteers and community organizations. After around a year of operation, the project has expanded its work providing legal assistance referrals and advice for immigrants and their advocates in the Pioneer Valley and beyond.

## Call center

The project is full of lawyers volunteering their time, including many local faces who have similarly worked on long-term or complex cases, and other Valley lawyers who are on the project’s coordinating committee.

However, the organization's foundation — its first point of contact for local residents in need — is its call center, run by some 25 bilingual volunteers. Those volunteers field phone calls from immigrants with legal questions or problems, and from as many as 30 community partner organizations. Those groups will also refer people to the project.

"We're getting calls on an extremely wide range of issues," said project coordinator Javier Luengo-Garrido, who previously worked as a liaison, interpreter and education specialist in the Northampton school system.

Call center volunteers come from many different professions and countries, Luengo-Garrido said, and they help to direct immigrants to legal services that will provide them with free assistance for everything from deportation proceedings to obtaining passports for citizen children.

Sitting with a decision tree in front of her late last month, volunteer Camila Rodriguez of Northampton was speaking in Spanish to someone about how an older citizen child might apply for legal status for a parent.

Following a detailed set of instructions, Rodriguez was able to gather all the pertinent information needed for a debrief conversation with Luengo-Garrido. The two then made a judgment about what legal services the caller would benefit from: a family law attorney and possibly an interpreter.

"It's just a reality check that it's happening right here, next to us, all the time," Rodriguez said of federal immigration enforcement and the effects it has on local immigrants. "It made me realize how bad the situation is, how bad people have it."

The project provides legal referrals to immigrants for a wide range of situations, and also trains others to do the same in their communities.

"We have a central place where immigrants and their families and supporters can call," said Bill Newman, director of the local ACLU office and one of the project's founders. Newman described the landscape of immigrant legal materials prior to the project's creation as underorganized and underresourced.

Kludt, the Northampton immigration-law expert, is another of the project's founders, and said the group initially tried to prepare for what they thought would be most-needed during the administration of President Donald Trump: lawyers who could provide legal defense to immigrant detainees.

But soon it became clear other things were more needed. Recently, Trump's rescission of two programs has been the focus of many calls: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which shields young undocumented immigrants from deportation; and Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, which offers relief to immigrants who are already in the United States from countries impacted by natural disasters or armed conflict.

“That’s the need of the community and what we’re requested to address,” Newman said.

“We are getting to a point where our state of mind is that we have to be flexible with whatever the immigrant community needs,” Luengo-Garrido added.

## **Family separation**

Another service the IPP has worked on is a “family preparedness plan” — a packet of advice on child care and legal rights, as well as translated forms, that helps immigrant families prepare for the possibility of family separation. The booklet has been endorsed by the state’s attorney general.

Now, the project’s volunteer army, around a year into its work, consists of dozens of lawyers specializing in bond hearings, family law and habeas corpus, some 10 translators, the 25 call-center workers and others. Partner organizations include local groups such as Casa Latina, Catholic Charities, Holyoke Health Center, the Pioneer Valley Workers Center and University of Massachusetts Translation Center.

“There was an incredible amount of people willing to do something a year ago,” Luengo-Garrido said, referring to the time around Trump’s election and inauguration. “How it started was with this raw energy. Now we’ve been able to harness that energy.”

An example of the quickness with which the project and partner organizations can respond happened on Nov. 7, when federal immigration agents pulled over a van in Hatfield with nine farmworkers inside. The target of the stop was the driver, but agents with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, also arrested two other men. All of them were undocumented Guatemalan immigrants.

A phone call about the raid came in to the Pioneer Valley Workers Center’s emergency hotline, and that group dispatched volunteers to the scene. The project was alerted and was able to arrange for a lawyer and interpreter to meet the detainees almost immediately at the Franklin County House of Correction.

## **Digital connections**

Kludt said the project has been able to build an extensive network that can remain digitally connected — and in many ways work like their own law firm — using software designed by the prominent immigration lawyer Stephen Manning, who like Kludt has worked representing clients on the U.S.-Mexico border.

“A project like this would never work without that,” she said of the software, which was developed for teams of lawyers traveling back and forth from the border and is given for free to pro-bono organizations like the Immigrant Protection Project.

And the project's network is expanding still. Sitting at the large desk surrounded by books in his Northampton office, Newman spoke about a recent training they had conducted in Boston, and was surprised to learn that another was fast approaching in Berkshire County. Newman said the project has done as many as 16 of those trainings.

ICE's infrastructure in New England is spread out between the agency's regional office in Boston, sub-office in Hartford, Connecticut, and several detention centers the agency operates, like one at the Franklin County House of Correction in Greenfield.

For that reason, and to spread the project's successes, the project has begun to connect with interested lawyers and advocates not just from Massachusetts, but from other states, too, including Connecticut and New Hampshire.

"It's bigger than just us, and that's part of what makes it so exciting and uplifting," Kludt said.

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