FROM THE MEXICAN BORDER TO THE HALLS OF CONGRESS, the controversy over immigration law has intensified and become more critical to U.S. policymakers.

Virginia’s Immigration Law Program allows students to explore the key legal and public policy issues affecting this debate, including whom the United States should admit, who should qualify for political asylum, what should be done about the undocumented, and the impact of immigration on the economy or on national security.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCED FACULTY, STUDENTS CONSIDER ISSUES posed by immigration and build practical skills through an immigration clinic and pro bono efforts offering aid to clients. The program also brings in expert speakers on immigration law, including leading attorneys and policy advocates, immigration judges and government officials.

WITH HELP FROM IMMIGRATION LAW CLINIC STUDENTS, an Afghan national who had been imprisoned for three years on a misdemeanor charge was recently freed on bond.

LAYLA KHALID ’23 and JORDAN WOODLIEF ’23 argued their client’s case at the Arlington Immigration Court and won his release in December 2021.

“From the start, the case was an uphill battle,” said clinic instructor Sophia Gregg, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Justice Center. The case was further complicated by his asylum appeal before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

The client had fled Afghanistan to live in Pakistan as a child due to persecution by the Taliban, and later came to the United States on a student visa in 2015 to seek refuge when the persecution continued, Khalid said. In 2018, he was convicted of a misdemeanor simple assault with a 90-day suspended sentence, but was detained by the Department of Homeland Security at the Farmville Detention Center in Virginia for more than three years.

“Our client faced severe medical issues in detention, including contracting COVID-19, experiencing symptoms of PTSD and schizophrenia, as well as enduring physical violence from the prison guards,” Khalid said.

The clinic first won a bond hearing in immigration court. “Jordan and Layla worked all throughout the Thanksgiving break, filing over 100 pages of documents in support of the client’s case, and spoke to the client every other day for months to gather the facts and to prepare for the bond hearing,” Gregg said.

The students obtained records confirming that their client was abused by Farmville Detention Center guards, and that an internal investigation absolved him of any responsibility. “This fact proved to be very poignant to the immigration judge,” Woodlief said.

Khalid said she felt “incredibly relieved” upon the client’s release. “Instead of learning about the complexities of the immigration system in a classroom, we were able to experience it firsthand with real cases and learned how to navigate the system along the way,” she said.

IMMIGRATION LAW
AFGHAN IMMIGRANT PROJECT
Coordinated by the Charlottesville-Albemarle Bar Association Volunteer Pro Bono Program, the project deploys students to help Afghan refugees fill out paperwork aimed at reuniting them with family members stranded abroad.

MIGRANT FARMWORKER PROJECT
Run by the student group the Latin American Law Organization, the Migrant Farmworker Project works with the Legal Aid Justice Center’s Immigrant Advocacy Program to assist an isolated population often in need of legal counsel. The program represents immigrants and farmworkers throughout the state. Although the center handles mostly employment law cases, it also takes housing and discrimination cases. Student members of the Migrant Farmworker Project visit migrant farm labor camps and inform workers about their rights. The project also seeks to increase awareness about the substandard treatment of immigrant workers and conditions in which they live and work in Virginia. Students do not need to speak Spanish to participate.

IMMIGRANT JAIL OUTREACH PROJECT
In conjunction with the Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights Coalition, law student volunteers are trained to help CAIR Coalition attorneys in their work at local jails in Virginia housing hundreds of immigrant detainees. Students may assist with know-your-rights presentations, interview detainees and conduct initial case development.

INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE ASSISTANCE PROJECT
UVA Law is home to one of 29 student chapters of IRAP, which develops and enforces a set of legal rights for refugees and displaced persons.