

Growing Number of Immigration Cases in RGV Causing Backlog



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MCALLEN - The Rio Grande Valley is getting more judges to help ease the load in the U.S. immigration courts.

There are currently only seven judges handling more than 4,000 cases in the Valley. Although help is on the way, experts said it might not be enough.

Dozens keep arriving at Sacred Heart Church's respite center in McAllen. It's a haven for people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally.

Honduran native Lourdes Ordonez is one of many who came to the U.S. seeking a better life for her family.

"We are going to back up why we are coming to this country, and we are going to contribute to society the same way we used to do in our country," she said.

However, new numbers from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University shows Ordonez would wait for 18 months before she sees an immigration judge.

"As the people come in and they're being processed through the courts, the number that is being completed is less than the number of people that are being added to the dockets," said immigration attorney Lionel Perez.

Perez said more than 520,000 cases are backlogged across the country. Texas alone accounts for more than 93,000 pending cases. He said it's a massive workload for immigration judges.

"You have 300 judges. So every judge has to handle 1,500 cases," he said. "Five are devoted to detain persons. Those are handled a lot quicker than the ones that are not detained."

Two Valley judges currently preside over the non-detained cases. Although three additional judges are set to help with the load, Perez said it might not be enough.

"I don't think they can hire enough judges to process the backlog. I just don't think so. You have 50,000 Border Patrol men arresting all these people to be handled by 300 judges," he said.

The immigration attorney said the backlog will continue to grow as people keep crossing into the U.S. illegally.

The three judges are expected to start hearing cases next year.

While the average wait for a case to be heard in Texas is about a year and a half, Perez said his clients usually have to wait for up to three years for their cases to be heard.

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