

Federal immigration court backlog tops 500,000 pending cases

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The backlog in the federal immigration court system has eclipsed half a million pending cases, The Associated Press has learned.

The Justice Department's Executive Office for Immigration Review said Wednesday there are now 500,051 pending immigration cases in the agency's courts.

The backlog has been steadily rising in recent years as the number of unaccompanied children and people traveling as families have been caught crossing the Mexican border illegally. Since 2011 more than 200,000 cases have been added to the court's docket and backlog is likely to continue growing.

More than 51,000 people traveling as families and more than 43,000 unaccompanied children, mostly from Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala, have been caught crossing the border illegally since the start of the budget year in October.

Cases of newly arrived immigrants facing deportation have been made a priority, but the backlog still means that many immigrants are likely to face years long delays before a judge makes a final decision on their cases. And while people are waiting to go before a judge, their case could dramatically change, for good or bad.

The president of the union representing immigration judges, Judge Dana Leigh Marks, said multi-year delays are frustrating to immigrants fighting for permission to stay in the United States and the judges hearing those cases.

"As a judge, it's very frustrating because we have to go back to the beginning," said Marks, who is a judge in San Francisco. "It's a more time consuming job, more difficult. It's very different when you (hear a case) within a year, as compared to seven or eight years.

Marks said the judges' union has long seen this backlog coming and has pressed for more resources.

A spokeswoman for the court system, Kathryn Mattingly, told AP that 34 new judges have been added since the beginning of the year and there are now 277 judges hearing cases. She said approximately 100 other judge candidates are in the process of being hired.

"We've been undergoing a robust hiring initiative," Mattingly said. She added that a pending budget proposal would allow the court to have as many as 399 judges on staff.

This story corrects the number of new judges hired since January.

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