



Chicago immigration court slows pace amid more cases

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CHICAGO (AP) — Statistics show Chicago's immigration court now has the second-longest average time to dispose of a case in the U.S. due to a spike in pending cases and the complexity of some of them.

National data collected by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University show the average wait time for a case to be processed in Chicago's immigration court increased from less than 750 days in 2014 to more than 1,000 days at the end of fiscal 2017.

The latest figure has pushed Illinois to second among all states in lag times, only behind Colorado, the Chicago Tribune reported.

The complexity of some cases can at least partially explain the slow process, said Gail Montenegro, a spokeswoman for the Chicago court.

"When looking at the average length of time it takes to resolve a case, it is important to note that average processing times do not represent the unique factors of each case," Montenegro said. "As an average, they do not provide information about the group of cases that take a relatively short time to complete, nor do they provide information about those that take a longer time to complete."

Court officials said Chicago's court had more than 25,000 pending cases in its system at the end of fiscal 2017. The number of pending cases nationwide has tripled in recent years, according to leaders of the federal Executive Office for Immigration Review, which is part of the Department of Justice.

Part of the slow-down comes in response to the Trump administration directing courts to prioritize people in the system with criminal backgrounds who are detained. This pushes back cases for people who aren't detained.

"In 2021, I have a hearing scheduled already," said Dario Castaneda, an attorney in Chicago. "What do you say to your client — sit tight? For four years?"

The Justice Department said it has added 50 immigration judges since January 2017 and plans to add dozens more to improve efficiency.

Information from: Chicago Tribune, <http://www.chicagotribune.com>

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