

Proposal to add judges to backlogged immigration system clears legislative hurdle

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Fifty-five new federal immigration judges would be added to the nation's backlogged immigration courts in October under a new congressional budget plan that passed a critical vote out of a subcommittee Thursday, U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, said.

"This would be the largest increase and it's historic," the Laredo Democrat said after learning from congressional leaders that the funding appears secure. "Right now, the backlog is just tremendous so this will allow us to have hearings before the judges on a much faster pace so we can get rid of the backlog."



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Cuellar, whose district extends across Starr County and into western Hidalgo County, requested \$124 million for 55 new judges plus "judge teams," specifically asking for judges to be hired along the Southwest border, including the Rio Grande Valley.

Nationwide, there are 59 federal immigration courts and 241 immigration judges, according to the Executive Office for Immigration Review, an arm of the Department of Justice that oversees immigration courts.

Current wait times for an immigration hearing stretch 900 days — nearly two and a half years.

The funds are being requested through the House Appropriations Commerce-Justice-Science Subcommittee, chaired by U.S. Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston.

Cuellar said Culberson told him Thursday morning that the request has passed the subcommittee. The next step is for a full committee hearing of the House Appropriations Committee and a final vote by all representatives.

But once language is approved by a subcommittee and put into an appropriations measure, "99.9 percent of the time it passes," Cuellar said.

“It’s a victory. I feel extremely excited,” Cuellar said. “I think this will bring fairness to the system, in a sense. Everyone talks about adding Border Patrol, Border Patrol, Border Patrol, but if you just have detentions then you are just adding to the backlog.”