

TRI-CITY HERALD

Our Voice: Immigration backlog is unacceptable

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The backlog in the nation's immigration courts recently hit an all-time high, and it appears some people may not get a hearing until 2019.

Clearly, that's unacceptable.

It's also cruel, especially in a country with a judicial system that traditionally attempts to treat people fairly.

But immigration issues are varied and volatile, and lawmakers have yet to fix any one of them. A failing system, like a failing machine, will simply continue to fall apart unless repairs are made.

Backlogged immigration courts stall lives and cause stress and uncertainty for people trying to follow the rules and enter the country legally.

The buildup of court cases has increased steadily over the years, but a huge influx of immigrants from Central America last summer sent the numbers soaring. In April, pending immigration court cases hit a record 445,000 nationwide.

There are 233 judges in 58 courts around the country. Seventeen more judges are expected to start soon, and another 68 are in the process of being hired, according to Lou Ruffino, a spokesman for the Executive Office for Immigration Review at the Justice Department.

But another 100 judges are expected to retire by the end of the year, according to Judge Dana Leigh Marks, president of the National Association of Immigration Judges. So that influx may not help much.

She told the Los Angeles Times that the courts need to be doubled, and perhaps tripled, in order to make a difference in the backlog. She also suggested another 100 judges should be hired immediately.

There are two immigration courts in Washington, one in Seattle and the other in Tacoma. Each has three judges. As of late April, the number of Washington's pending immigration cases totaled 6,558, according to the tracking tool set up by Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse.

That puts Washington at 15th in the nation for its backlogged immigration cases, with California, Texas and New York taking the top spots.

While most backlogged cases involve immigrants from Mexico, their cases increased about 4 percent from the start of the fiscal year. Immigrants from Central America, however, flooded the system as many tried to escape violence in their home countries.

Drug cartels and gangs have taken over in many parts of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. They try to fill their ranks by targeting young boys and men, and those who refuse have little choice but to flee. Many families also left in order to get away from the hostilities.

Nationally, the juvenile case backlog is 68 percent larger than it was last June, and unaccompanied children's cases were given priority, leap-frogging over others. But without additional staff, the backlog will grow. More staff is needed, even more than what is currently planned for.

There are people in the system stuck trying to follow the rules. They deserve a faster way out.

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