SNAPSHOT OF THE CRISIS FACING OUR IMMIGRATION COURTS TODAY

SALIENT FACTS AND URGENT NEEDS

January 2017

RECALCITRANT CASE BACKLOGS
As of the end of December, 2016, the Immigration Court backlog stood at 533,909. The caseload for the Immigration Court has more than doubled since 2010.

LENGTHY DELAYS
The average number of days a case was pending on the Immigration Court docket until decision was 678 days as of December 31, 2016, although 10 states – in order of descending magnitude: Colorado, Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey, Michigan, Nebraska, Texas, California, Arizona, and Massachusetts - exceeded that average.

SURGING JUVENILE CASELOAD ON THE HORIZON
An unprecedented influx of unaccompanied minors at our nation’s southwest border has been labeled a humanitarian crisis, prompting the President to establish an interagency unified coordination group and the Senate to nearly double the available funding for care and resettlement of child migrants. Of the 212,969 pending juvenile cases as of December 31, 2016, only 58% had legal representation and the impact of these cases has been disproportionately felt in six states (in order of descending magnitude): Texas, California, New York, Florida, Virginia and Maryland. It is inevitable that this influx has and will continue to result in dramatic increases in the dockets of the Immigration Courts. These cases will impact our system for years to come.

FAILURE TO MEET PREDICTABLE STAFFING NEEDS IN A TIMELY FASHION
Following a comprehensive review of the Immigration Courts by Attorney General Gonzales in 2006, it was found that a judge corps of 230 Immigration Judges was inadequate for the caseload at that time of approximately 168,853 pending cases. Despite this finding, the pledge to augment the judge corps, and the increase in caseloads since then, there were less than 235 active field Immigration Judges at the beginning of FY 2015. To make matters much worse, half of all Immigration Judges are eligible to retire by the end of 2015. Even with a recent renewed emphasis on hiring, the current number of Immigration Judges nationwide stands at approximately 300 today, well below authorized hiring levels. One expert observer recommends adding at least 150 immigration judges to the corps based on its
meticulous analysis of past caseload needs. xi The American Bar Association, Administrative Conference of the United States and two expert roundtables convened by Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration has all called for dramatically increased resources to staff up our courts. xii If the executive order freezing federal employment is found to include hiring for the Court, it will not be long before we are in much worse shape since we continue to lose Immigration Judges to retirement.

INADEQUATE SPACE, FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT
As caseloads explode, the Immigration Courts find themselves in desperate need of additional physical space and facilities to conduct hearings, to accommodate both staff and the voluminous legal filings. Modernized equipment and electronic filing initiatives are needed immediately in order to respond. The current courtrooms are too small to accommodate the large numbers of families now appearing before our courts, raising serious concerns regarding public safety and security. In addition, we don’t have enough courtrooms or courtrooms in the appropriate places to address the caseload.

FAILURE TO PROVIDE ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR ADJUDICATIONS
Despite express congressional authorization of contempt power for Immigration Judges in 1996, the Department of Justice still has not promulgated implementing regulations. Without authority to impose civil monetary sanctions for attorney misconduct, Immigration Judges lack an important tool in controlling court proceedings over which they preside.

DEEPENING DISCONNECT IN FUNDING BETWEEN DHS AND THE IMMIGRATION COURTS
In the past decade, budgets for components in the Department of Homeland Security (Customs and Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement) rose approximately 300% compared to 70% for the Executive Office of Immigration Review. xiii In the meantime, while grappling with this meteoric rise in our dockets, budget bills continue to ignore the needs of our courts. xiv

CHRONIC SCARCITY OF RESOURCES CRIPPLES DAILY OPERATIONS OF THE COURT
A catastrophic hardware failure on April 12, 2014 took the docketing system off-line for five weeks, impacting the public hotline, digital audio recording and access to the electronic docketing database. xv We fear occurrences like this are just the tip of the iceberg as our chronically resource-starved system continues to face the unprecedented challenges of aging technology, surging caseloads and potential retirements. xvi

JUDGES PUSHED TO THE BRINK
More than five years ago, Immigration Judges reported stress and burnout at higher levels than prison wardens or doctors at busy hospitals. xvii After continuing to struggle in an environment of decreased resources and skyrocketing caseloads for so long, morale is at an all-time low and stress at an all-time high. An unprecedented number of retirements is looming.

SOLUTION
While it cannot be denied that additional resources are desperately needed immediately, resources alone cannot solve the persistent problems facing our Immigration Courts. Structural reform can no longer be put on the back burner. Since the 1981 Select Commission on Immigration, the idea of creating an Article I court, similar to the U.S. Tax Court, has been advanced. xviii In the intervening years,
a strong consensus has formed supporting this structural change. For years experts debated the wisdom of far-reaching restructuring of the Immigration Court system. Now “most immigration judges and attorneys agree the long term solution to the problem is to restructure the immigration court system....”

The time has come to undertake structural reform of the Immigration Courts. It is apparent that until far-reaching changes are made, the problems which have plagued our tribunals for decades will persist. For years NAIJ has advocated establishment of an Article I court. We cannot expect a different outcome unless we change our approach to the persistent problems facing our court system. Acting now will be cost effective and will improve the speed, efficiency and fairness of the process we afford to the public we serve. Our tribunals are often the only face of American justice these individuals experience, and it must properly reflect the principles upon which our country was founded. Action is needed now on this urgent priority for the Immigration Courts. It is time to stop the cycle of overlooking this important component of the immigration enforcement system – it will be a positive step for immigration enforcement and due process.

For additional information, visit our website at www.naij-usa.org or contact:

Dana Leigh Marks, President
National Association of Immigration Judges
100 Montgomery Street, Suite 800
San Francisco, CA 94104
415-705-0140
Dana.Marks@usdoj.gov and danamarks@pobox.com

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iii Id.


v TRAC, http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/juvenile/


Id.

https://www.justice.gov/eoir/eoir-immigration-court-listing


Stuart L. Lustig et al., Inside the Judges’ Chambers: Narrative Responses from the National Association of Immigration Judges Stress and Burnout Survey, 23 GEO. IMMIGR. L.J. 57 (2009).


Prestigious legal organizations such as the American Bar Association, Federal Bar Association, and American Judicature Society wholeheartedly endorse this reform. While not as certain as to the exact form of change desired, reorganization has also been endorsed by the American Immigration Lawyers Association, and increased independence by the National Association of Women Judges.

Supra, note ii.