

# Houston Immigration Court has Thousands of Cases

December 23, 2013

HOUSTON (AP) — Those awaiting hearings at a Houston immigration court should be prepared to wait for much more than a year due to thousands of pending cases, a shortage of judges and the more than two-week federal shutdown in October, a report has found.

The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data gathering and research organization at Syracuse University, reported that the four judges assigned to Houston's downtown immigration court had 16,647 pending cases in November, up more than 250 percent since 2009. TRAC found that the wait for hearings reached an average of 555 days, up from 298 days four years ago, according to a report in The Houston Chronicle (<http://bit.ly/1e5sihX>) Monday.

TRAC data shows there were more than 50,000 cases pending statewide last month. Houston's downtown court led the state with backlogged cases, followed by San Antonio with 12,400 cases and El Paso with 7,792.

Gordon Quan, an immigration attorney, said clients are growing frustrated with the repeated delays, which often force them to reapply for work authorization and renew their fingerprint checks.

"Some people want justice," he said. "They want their cases heard."

Quan said he recently told a client who came to the U.S. without authorization 18 years ago that he would have to wait several years for his immigration case to come up in court.

Officials with the Executive Office of Immigration Review, which administers the court system for DOJ, have acknowledged the need to hire more judges.

In 2009, the agency had 237 judges and more than 223,000 pending cases, according to TRAC. Since then, the number of judges has grown to 252, while the number of cases on the docket has swollen to 350,000. The agency has 32 vacant immigration judge positions, said Kathryn Mattingly, an EOIR spokeswoman.

"We are drowning," said Judge Dana Leigh Marks of San Francisco, president of the National Association of Immigration Judges. "The volume is just overwhelming and because of the responsibility that the judges have — you have people's lives in your hands — you have this tremendous pressure to do the right thing, with the same pressure to work as quickly as possible. And it becomes extremely grueling."

<http://www.chron.com/default/article/Houston-immigration-court-has-thousands-of-cases-5087930.php>