



U.S. Department of Justice

Executive Office for Immigration Review


Office of the Director

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Director

January 17, 2018

MEMORANDUM TO: The Office of the Chief Immigration Judge
All Immigration Judges
All Court Administrators
All Immigration Court Staff

FROM: James R. McHenry III 
Director

SUBJECT: Case Priorities and Immigration Court Performance Measures

This memorandum is effective immediately, applies prospectively to all new cases filed and to all immigration court cases reopened, recalendared, or remanded, and serves to rescind the January 31, 2017, memorandum entitled "Case Processing Priorities" and all other prior memoranda establishing case processing or docketing priorities.

I. Background

On December 6, 2017, the Attorney General issued a memorandum to all Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) employees outlining several principles to follow to ensure that the adjudication of immigration court cases serves the national interest. It also provided that the Director of EOIR may issue further guidance to ensure the achievement of those principles. Pursuant to 8 C.F.R. § 1003.0(b)(1)(ii) and (iv), the EOIR Director has the authority to "[d]irect the conduct of all EOIR employees to ensure the efficient disposition of all pending cases, including the power, in his discretion, to set priorities or time frames for the resolution of cases and otherwise to manage the docket of matters to be decided by the immigration judges" and to "[e]valuate the performance of the Office of the Chief Immigration Judge (OCIJ) and take corrective action where needed."

Accordingly, pursuant to that authority and in accordance with the Attorney General's principles, this memorandum lays out EOIR's specific priorities and goals in the adjudication of immigration court cases.

II. Case Prioritization

EOIR has always designated detained cases as priorities for completion. In 2014, EOIR began designating other types of “priority” cases for docketing and processing purposes, and those priority designations have been subsequently modified three times—most recently on January 31, 2017.

The repeated changes in case prioritization have caused confusion and created difficulty in comparing and tracking case data over time. But, most importantly, the frequent shifting priority designations did not enhance docket efficiency. Not only were cases repeatedly moved to accommodate new priorities without a clear plan for resolving both the new and older cases, but also the designations did not adequately stress the importance of completing all cases in a timely manner.

For example, less than 10% of cases currently pending meet the definition of “priority” outlined in the January 31, 2017, memorandum—a statistic that conveys a potentially mistaken impression regarding the importance of completing the other 600,000-plus pending cases that do not bear a “priority” designation.

Accordingly, to address concerns and confusion, it is appropriate to clarify EOIR’s priorities and goals to ensure that the adjudication of cases serves the national interest consistent with the principles outlined by the Attorney General.

All cases involving individuals in detention or custody, regardless of the custodian, are priorities for completion.¹ Likewise, cases subject to a statutory or regulatory deadline, cases subject to a federal court-ordered deadline, and cases otherwise subject to an established benchmark for completion, including those listed in Appendix A, are also priorities. As developments warrant, other priority designations may be established as appropriate, and other categories of cases may be tracked regardless of whether they reflect a priority designation.

The designation of a category of cases as priority is an indication of an expectation that such cases should be completed expeditiously and without undue delay consistent with due process. Because the designations outlined in this memorandum apply prospectively, it is not intended to require the rescheduling of currently-docketed cases. The designation of priority cases is also not intended to diminish or reduce the significance of other cases. Indeed, the timely completion of *all* cases consistent with due process remains a matter of the utmost importance for the agency. Finally, the designation of a case as a priority is not intended to limit the discretion afforded an immigration judge under applicable law, nor is it intended to mandate a specific outcome in any particular case.

¹Cases of aliens in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security and aliens in the care and custody of the Department of Health and Human Services who do not have a sponsor identified were priorities under prior policy and remain so under this new policy.

III. Immigration Court Benchmarks and Performance Metrics

Apart from designated case priorities, EOIR's case processing has also involved other types of evaluative measures over time, such as statutory or regulatory deadlines for the completion of certain types of cases, including under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, and the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010. Although these case completion goals have not previously denoted case priorities *per se*, they do serve as indicators of the importance of completing certain classes of cases in a timely manner.

Historically, EOIR also utilized case completion measures for non-detained cases from FY 2002 to FY 2009, but it eliminated those measures in FY 2010, leading to confusion regarding the extent to which the timely completion of non-detained cases was perceived as a priority for the agency. The abolition of non-detained case completion benchmarks was also subsequently criticized by both the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office, both of whom recommended that EOIR reinstate goals for the completion of non-detained cases. In 2016 and 2017, the House Committee on Appropriations also directed EOIR to establish a goal that the median length of detained cases be no longer than 60 days and the median length of non-detained cases be no longer than 365 days.

Although EOIR has previously stated that case completion goals are statements of agency priorities and has tracked performance relative to those goals, it has not expressly designated cases subject to such measures as priorities, unless they happened to fall into another category that was a priority (*e.g.* detained cases). This has led to even further confusion regarding the interaction between case priorities and case resolution goals, especially because the overwhelming majority of pending cases in recent years were neither designated as a priority nor subject to a performance goal.

Almost every trial court system utilizes performance measures or case completion metrics to ensure that it is operating efficiently and appropriately. Some of these are established by statute or regulation whereas others are set by policy; nevertheless, trial court performance measures are an essential and widely-recognized tool for ensuring healthy and effective court operations.

In the federal system, for example, the Civil Justice Reform Act of 1990 requires semiannual reporting of the number of certain types of civil cases and motions pending beyond a particular date with the intent of reducing litigation delays in federal district courts. Many administrative adjudicatory systems also feature case processing time standards, either by statute,

regulation, or policy.² At the state level, most states have adopted court case processing time standards, many of which follow model standards approved by the American Bar Association (ABA).³

In fact, over 25 years ago, the ABA recognized the importance of establishing court performance standards to ensure effective case management and to avoid undue delay; in doing so, it outlined seven essential elements for managing cases, including several that are now being implemented by EOIR such as “[p]romulgation and monitoring of time and clearance standards for the overall disposition of cases,” “[a]doption of a trial-setting policy which schedules a sufficient number of cases to ensure efficient use of judge time while minimizing resettings caused by overscheduling,” “[c]ommencement of trials on the original date scheduled with adequate advance notice,” and “[a] firm, consistent policy for minimizing continuances.”⁴ In short, court performance measures and case completion goals are common, well-established, and necessary mechanisms for evaluating how well a court is functioning at performing its core role of adjudicating cases.

EOIR is no exception to the rule that court performance measures are a necessary accountability tool to ensure that a court is operating at peak efficiency, nor is there anything novel or unique about applying performance measures to EOIR’s immigration courts.⁵ Rather, a review of such measures is vital to ensure that the immigration court system is performing strongly, that EOIR is adjudicating cases fairly, expeditiously, and uniformly consistent with its mission, and that it is addressing its pending caseload in support of the principles established by the Attorney General.

Accordingly, to ensure that EOIR is meeting these goals, the court-based performance measures outlined in Appendix A to this memorandum will be tracked by EOIR, and court

² See, e.g., 42 U.S.C. § 1395ff (establishing hearing deadlines for cases before administrative law judges at the Department of Health and Human Services); Fed. Energy Regulatory Comm’n, Summary of Procedural Time Standards for Hearing Cases, <https://www.ferc.gov/legal/admin-lit/time-sum.asp> (last updated Mar. 10, 2017) (outlining time standards for administrative law judges hearing cases at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission).

³ See *Case Processing Time Standards*, Nat’l Ctr. for State Courts, <http://www.ncsc.org/cpts> (last visited January 9, 2018); *Model Time Standards for State Trial Courts* (Nat’l Ctr. for State Courts 2011), http://www.ncsc.org/Services-and-Experts/Technology-tools/~/_media/Files/PDF/CourtMD/Model-Time-Standards-for-State-Trial-Courts.ashx.

⁴ See Judicial Admin. Div., Am. Bar Ass’n, *Standards Relating to Trial Courts* § 2.51 (vol. II 1992), available at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/divisions/Judicial/MO/MemberDocuments/trialcourtstandards.authcheckdam.pdf>.

⁵ EOIR’s other adjudicatory components, the Board of Immigration Appeals and the Office of the Chief Administrative Hearing Office, are also subject to performance measures.

performance in meeting them will be regularly audited. These goals are intended to help determine which courts are operating in a healthy and efficient manner, and which courts may be in need of more specialized attention in the form of additional resources, training, court management, creative thinking and planning, and/or other action as appropriate.

As published here in Appendix A, these court-based goals are not intended to apply specifically to any individual employee; rather, these goals apply to the court as a whole, and all court employees accordingly share responsibility for working together to successfully meet them.⁶

OCIJ will provide additional “not-to-exceed” guidelines for each goal, as appropriate. Further, some cases may be subject to more than one goal. EOIR will also track the clearance rate (the ratio of new cases filed to cases completed) and the age of existing cases at each court and may announce future goals for those statistics at a later date.

Many of these measures derive from statutory or regulatory mandates, including the INA; others derive from EOIR’s goals developed under GPRA. Still others, such as a goal of ensuring file completion and accuracy, are simply reflections of the standard that a professional administrative court system should endeavor to attain. Although many of these goals have already existed for several years at EOIR, their current designation clarifies that cases subject to a goal should be considered priority cases and reiterates that the goals themselves reflect considered policy judgments regarding optimal court performance and functioning that EOIR’s immigration courts should strive to achieve.

EOIR is already meeting, or close to meeting, some of these goals; for instance, the median length of time a detained case is pending at the immigration court level is currently less than 60 days. For other goals, they may appear merely aspirational at first, and the agency is cognizant that it may take time for them to be fully realized. Nevertheless, as a professional administrative court system within the DOJ exercising the Attorney General’s delegated authority, EOIR should strive to become the preeminent administrative adjudicatory agency in the federal government and to fulfill its mission at the highest level possible. Further, by making you aware of these goals, you can begin thinking about how, with these goals in mind, EOIR’s day-to-day activities can be streamlined to improve efficiency while maintaining due process. Moreover, there is no doubt that as the agency puts into place additional resources, training, and

⁶ In autumn 2017, following collective bargaining, EOIR and the National Association of Immigration Judges jointly agreed to remove language from Article 22 of their labor agreement that had limited EOIR’s ability to measure and evaluate immigration judge performance. Although many of the policy considerations relevant for setting court performance goals are also relevant for setting performance metrics for individual immigration judges, especially regarding goals that have existed in some form at EOIR already for several years, the implementation of those metrics specifically for immigration judges is subject to an ongoing process and is beyond the scope of this memorandum.

more efficient processes, you will continue impress with your dedication to our mission. As the Attorney General indicated, every employee at EOIR can contribute something to improve the system, and your creative suggestions regarding more effective case management are welcome.

IV. Conclusion

Thank you for your dedication and professionalism as we work together as a team to ensure that the adjudication of immigration court cases serves the national interest in accordance with the principles outlined by the Attorney General.

Please contact your Assistant Chief Immigration Judge with any questions you may have concerning this memorandum.

This guidance is not intended to, does not, and may not be relied upon to create, any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person. Nothing in this memorandum should be construed as mandating a particular outcome in any specific case.

Attachment

APPENDIX A

IMMIGRATION COURT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

1. Eighty-five percent (85%) of all non-status⁷ detained removal⁸ cases should be completed⁹ within 60 days of filing of the Notice to Appear (NTA), reopening or recalendaring of the case, remand from the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), or notification of detention.
2. Eighty-five percent (85%) of all non-status non-detained removal cases should be completed within 365 days (1 year) of filing of the NTA, reopening or recalendaring of the case, remand from the BIA, or notification of release from custody.
3. Eight-five percent (85%) of all motions should be adjudicated within 40 days of filing.
4. Ninety percent (90%) of all custody redeterminations should be completed within 14 days of the request for redetermination.
5. Ninety-five percent (95%) of all hearings should be completed on the initial scheduled individual merits hearing date.
6. One hundred percent (100%) of all credible fear reviews should be completed within seven (7) days of the initial determination by an asylum officer that an alien does not have a credible fear of persecution. *See* INA § 235(b)(1)(B)(iii)(III). One hundred percent (100%) of all reasonable fear reviews should be completed within 10 days of the filing of the negative reasonable fear determination as reflected in Form I-863. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 1208.31(g).
7. One hundred percent (100%) of all expedited asylum cases should be completed within the statutory deadline and consistent with established EOIR policy. *See* INA 208(d)(5)(A)(iii); OPPM 13-02.
8. Eighty-five percent (85%) of all Institutional Hearing Program (IHP) removal cases should be completed prior to the alien's release from detention by the IHP custodian.
9. One hundred percent (100%) of all electronic and paper records should be accurate and complete.

⁷ A status case is (1) one in which an immigration judge is required to continue the case pursuant to binding authority in order to await the adjudication of an application or petition by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, (2) one in which the immigration judge is required to reserve a decision rather than completing the case pursuant to law or policy, or (3) one which is subject to a deadline established by a federal court order.

⁸ A "removal" case includes a case in removal proceedings, in addition to any reopened, recalendared, or remanded cases in exclusion or deportation proceedings.

⁹ A completed removal case is one in which a final decision has been rendered concluding the case at the immigration court level and encompasses an order of removal, an order of voluntary departure, an order terminating proceedings, or an order granting protection or relief from removal. For other types of cases, a completed case is one in which a final decision has been rendered appropriate for the specific type of case proceeding.