



Hughes Center report: N.J. District Court has huge backlog of cases

By **Emily Bader Galloway**

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In the state's **U.S. District Court**, the backlog of pending cases per judgeship is up by 230% since 2016, standing at nearly 39,000 in total, according to an analysis by the **William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy** at **Stockton University**.

"Recent years have seen an unprecedented and significant jump in total case filings in the New Jersey District Court. This jump has coincided with several vacancies opening up on the bench," Daniel Tidcombe, a political science major at the Galloway-based school and the center's research intern, said.

The backlog, Tidcombe said, is from the combination of unfilled federal judicial vacancies mixed with a surge of new federal case filings.

New Jersey's backlog is larger than Pennsylvania's, which covers three district courts, compared to the state's single district; is slightly more than New York, which has four; and is more than the Southern District of New York, considered to be the busiest district throughout the United States, the report said.

"Justice delayed means that thousands of parties to civil and criminal cases in New Jersey are left hanging with little hope of a speedy trial," John Froomjian, executive director of the Hughes Center, said. "The judicial vacancies and backlogs seriously affect the administration of justice, and it is hurting New Jersey more than other nearby states."

Six of the 17 district court judgeships in New Jersey sit vacant, the analysis said, up from two in 2018. A few judges have stayed on past retirement to help with the surge, including two in the federal courthouse in Camden, however, no new judges have been appointed to fill them.

"This in turn means that fewer judges are available to shoulder the increased burden, driving up the number of cases each judge must take on," he said.

Other highlights from the report:

- Federal civil and criminal case filings were up 7% prior to 2017;
- Filings increased by 47% in 2019, up from 11,300 in 2016 and 16,700 in 2017;
- Total filings in 2019 hit 27,000, a 62% increase over two years;
- The number of pending cases went from under 700 at the end of 2016 to 2,300 at the end of last year, a 230% jump;
- The backlog of total cases increased from 11,700 in 2016 to 38,700 in 2019.

Judge Joseph Rodriguez, a 89-year-old district court judge in Camden County, could retire but hasn't. As part of being a senior judge, he can request as low as 25% of a regular judge's caseload.

Rodriguez, however, takes on a full one.

"There obviously is a massive problem in the District of New Jersey," Rodriguez said of the backlog.

The New Jersey District Court handles cases on constitutional issues, acts of Congress and maritime law. The number of cases it handles in the pharmaceutical industry is on the rise.

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