

# Inside the Trump administration's unprecedented purge of immigration judges

[Priscilla Alvarez](#)



Shira Levine was on her third case of the day. By the afternoon, she had already presided over two immigration cases in a San Francisco courtroom and was in the middle of another — this one, about an asylum claim.

As she took notes on her computer, a notification popped up on her screen. Levine had been terminated from her job as an immigration judge.

"I see what it is. I ask for a quick break for the parties. I step out and decide for myself that this is unprecedented," she recalled in an interview with CNN.

[Asylum cases](#) take years to resolve in immigration court and the one

before Levine was no exception. It was about to end abruptly — with no resolution.

“With my apologies, I’m going to end the case,” she recalled saying when she re-entered the courtroom, then she read the termination letter into the record.

“I explained through the interpreter that I was unfortunately not going to be able to finish the case,” she said. “I packed up my office and walked out the door.”

Levine was let go in September, when such dismissals were a near-daily occurrence. Since Trump took office, 139 immigration judges have been fired, taken an early-out offer, or been involuntarily transferred, according to data provided by the National Association of Immigration Judges. September had the highest number of terminations, with 24 people dismissed. According to the Justice Department, there are more than 600 immigration judges located in 72 immigration courts nationwide.

Immigration courts, unlike federal courts, fall under the executive branch and are housed in the Justice Department, meaning that the administration can wield immense influence over the system even as judges try to maintain independence. The courts are crucial to Trump’s sweeping [deportation campaign](#) as the forum where [judges decide](#) if immigrants can remain in the United States or be deported.

## **“You cannot look at this in a vacuum”**

In the early days of the second Trump administration, newly installed leaders at the Justice Department [abruptly removed](#) senior leadership at the agency overseeing the nation’s immigration courts from service, known as the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

The removals, which targeted career public servants who together had

served in the agency for several years, illustrated the Trump administration's push to install officials who are aligned with his policy vision.

In multiple cases of firings, the judges were not provided a reason for the termination. At least 30 of them had grant rates of 30% or higher — meaning they granted asylum claims — according to an analysis by CNN of available records.

Fired judges have been located across multiple states, including California, Connecticut, Maryland, Florida, New York and Washington.

CNN reached out to the Executive Office for Immigration Review for comment.

Critics say the Trump administration is undermining its own priorities.

"The dismissal of more immigration judges is an illogical and costly setback for the nation's immigration courts," said International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers President Matt Biggs (NAIJ is an IFPTE affiliate) in a statement. "At a time when the backlog has reached historic levels and the administration has made immigration enforcement a central issue the removal of experienced judges is hypocritical, undermines the law, wastes taxpayer dollars, and further delays justice for citizens and immigrants alike."

Ashley Tabaddor, who served as an immigration judge for 15 years as well as president of the union four years during the first Trump administration, described terminations in the past as "exceedingly rare," and usually based on performance.

"You cannot look at this in a vacuum. This is part and parcel of a very, very grand scheme of creating a very frictionless deportation machine," Tabaddor said.

Immigration courts have recently garnered national attention over the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, who have been [on hand to arrest](#) some of those who come for their mandated hearing, and for instances of shoving.

Even during the current government shutdown, DOJ deemed court personnel essential, allowing courts to proceed as planned.

“EOIR currently has a backlog approaching four million cases which would be greatly exacerbated during a shutdown absent excepted activities,” [the guidance reads](#).

The immigration court backlog exceeds 3.4 million cases, [according to Syracuse University’s Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse](#). The termination of judges also means thousands of those cases are in limbo, according to experts and former judges.

## Challenging their removals

Levine's termination notice, like those received by others, was sent by the acting director of EOIR and was brief in nature.

"This notice serves to inform you that that pursuant to Article II of the Constitution, the Attorney General has decided to remove you from your position as an excepted service Immigration Judge with the United States Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review," read the notice shared with CNN. It was effective immediately.

No cause was provided and to her knowledge, no one alleged Levine had done anything wrong, she said.

Prior to serving as an immigration judge, Levine was a law clerk on the Ninth Circuit, served as an adjunct professor at an immigrant rights clinic and worked as an attorney representing immigrants in San Francisco and Los Angeles. She applied to become an immigration judge in January 2021 and began hearing cases in October 2021, following weeks of training that included sitting in on court hearings.

"I believe the Trump administration can't stand people who play by the rules," she told CNN. "My concerns are for the rule of law in this country. In terms of my own personal circumstances, I walked out of that courtroom with great pride, knowing I had done my very best to uphold rule of law and provide fair and full hearings."

Levine is legally challenging her removal, as are others in the same situation, like Chloe Dillon.

Prior to becoming an immigration judge, Dillon, who is also based in San Francisco, had been a federal public defender and clerked for immigration judges in Los Angeles. She started hearing cases in November 2022 following rigorous training.

On August 22 this year, Dillon received an email from the acting EOIR

director saying she had been terminated.

"I had been finishing up a case which had taken more than one scheduled hearing to do. We had done at least 3-hour testimony at prior hearings and did another hour and a half of hearings. It was about 3 p.m. I closed the record, heard the evidence, heard closing statements, and I was ready to render a decision. I was going to try to get it done that day," she said.

Dillon stepped out of her chambers to type up her notes of the hearing and prepare the oral decision. But when she logged on to her computer, an email awaited her with the subject line, "Notice of termination."

"I was going to do the verbal decision. Instead, myself and my coworkers were packing up my office. I had absolutely no time to hand off my 6,000 cases," she said.

The rest of the afternoon was dedicated to finalizing paperwork and preparing to leave. She could no longer render a decision to the 10-year-old case she had just been presiding over. The other cases she had on her docket would be in limbo.

"The immigration courts are being dismantled. They are firing judges at an extremely rapid pace," Dillon said. "I think it's fair to say that every judge sitting on a bench thinks they may be or likely will be fired."

## Enlisting military judges

In late August, the Justice Department [eliminated certain requirements](#) for people to serve as temporary immigration judges, paving the way for any attorney to fill the role. Among those the administration has moved to enlist are military lawyers.

The [Associated Press reported](#) that the first group of Army lawyers tapped to serve as temporary immigration judges would begin training Monday.

The Justice Department has hired attorneys from multiple backgrounds, including the military, in the past — not all of whom have extensive immigration experience — but all have received ample training. The concern among former immigration judges is that placing people in positions to make crucial decisions for immigrants without proper training could undermine due process.

"For them, all they care about is efficiency. ... They just want a check-the-box exercise," Tabaddor said.

A former senior military lawyer familiar with the situation told CNN that dozens of JAGs from at least one service, the Army, are likely going to have to be moved into immigration judge roles involuntarily because not enough have volunteered to be transferred.

"Immigration law is complex," this person said, and the JAGs will need training. "Yes, I think every judge advocate in the JAG corps could figure it out, because it's got amazing people, but they all have day jobs too."

This person also noted that detailing the JAGs to immigration judge roles could put them crosswise with the Trump administration if they don't rule how the White House and DHS want. "And then that puts them on the radar, and is a way for the administration to get rid of them," the person said.

CNN's Natasha Bertrand contributed to this report.