

IMMIGRATION

# S.F.'s last immigration court will be reduced to a satellite by end of summer

*Days after closure of one city immigration court, feds say second will be run out of Concord*



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The federal building at 630 Sansome St. in downtown San Francisco houses immigration courts as well as private ICE and USCIS field offices.

By Sept. 4, San Francisco will no longer have any immigration courts under its own jurisdiction.

The federal government confirmed on May 1 that the city's two remaining courtrooms at **630 Sansome St.** will fall under the administration of the Concord immigration court across the bay.

This ends a decades-long **history** of what was once one of the largest immigration court systems in the nation. The city's other longtime immigration court at 100 Montgomery St. **closed** at the beginning of May.

The Executive Office of Immigration Review, which runs the federal government's immigration courts, said that the Sansome court will stay open as a "hearing location" under the administrative control of Concord. Most cases from San Francisco will be re-assigned to Concord, since 630 Sansome will be operating at a limited capacity.

The change may sow more confusion for asylum-seekers and other immigrants in a rapidly changing system where legal statuses are being revoked, judges are being fired and, now, courts are closing.

"I think it's very unfair to the public, because think about how much farther the public must go, and how much more difficult it is for public transportation," said Dana Marks, a retired immigration judge. The Concord court is around an hour and a half from San Francisco by BART, or 45 minutes by car.

Marks said the change "shows the federal government's callousness and lack of sensitivity to the needs of the immigrant community."

For an asylum-seeker who has an initial case in San Francisco, their subsequent hearing may be transferred to Concord without a motion to "change venue," which was previously required and would require more paperwork and acknowledgment from the asylum-seeker.

The change of venue can now occur simply by updating the online hearing schedule, which can be easily missed, especially for immigrants without attorneys who do not have a **lawyer** tracking their changes. And an accidental no-show can mean deportation.

The two remaining judges in San Francisco will also now be led by the chief assistant immigration judge in Concord, Julie Nelson, who lawyers said has a reputation for being "tough."

Between 2020 through the first 11 months of 2025, Nelson denied 69.3 percent of asylum claims in her courtroom, according to **TRAC**, a research institute out of Syracuse University that analyzes federal immigration data.

The Executive Office for Immigration Review, who manages the court system, said transferring the Sansome Street location, would be "cost effective." That is the same reasoning given by the feds for the **closure** of 100 Montgomery St.

The city's immigration courts had already been **decimated** since the start of the second Trump administration. Almost all of the city's **immigration judges** were **fired** or **resigned** last year, part of a

national wave of terminations targeting judges.

“It’s the final nail in the coffin,” said immigration attorney Julia Pilkington-Alexander of the Sansome Street closure.

The Sansome court location, which has a long history of detaining immigrants and was once dubbed a “skyscraper concentration camp,” set the legal precedent for many immigration cases over its 80 year history, and went on to have judges who Pilkington-Alexander said “tried to make the process as humane as the law allowed.”

Over the decades, the San Francisco immigration court, which for years was known as the most prestigious in the nation after Manhattan, heard high-profile cases.

One such case was *Immigration and Naturalization Service v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, a highly cited asylum lawsuit that held asylum-seekers need only demonstrate a “well-founded fear” of persecution in order to be eligible to remain in the United States.

Marks herself represented the defendant in that case, which ultimately went before the U.S. Supreme Court.

“This court that used to be a leader in a lot of ways just combusted, and what was left in the wreckage was really devastating,” Pilkington-Alexander said.

In the first year of Trump’s second term, the Sansome Street location was at the heart of a **lawsuit** alleging Immigration and Customs Enforcement **detained immigrants** in “inhumane” cells that were “bitterly cold” and “filthy,” and that it did so for **extended periods**. A federal judge **ordered ICE to improve conditions** there.

Retired judge Marks said the court system has been increasingly used as a “law-enforcement tool” for Trump’s deportation agenda and as a way to push immigrants out of the country by **dismissing** cases, **arresting** immigrants at immigration appointments and making the process so lengthy that they decide to self-deport.

Bill Ong Hing, an immigration attorney and professor at University of San Francisco, said that although the administration has managed to close down the San Francisco immigration court, “the war is not over” when it comes to fighting immigration enforcement decisions.

There are at least two ongoing class-action lawsuits against The Department of Homeland Security filed by Bay Area attorneys, including the one targeting holding cells at 630 Sansome.

The other puts restrictions on re-arresting immigrants who have had no change in their immigration cases, which effectively curtails arrests outside court hearings.

“I have faith that we will prevail on many important matters,” said Ong Hing.