

Summary of Proposed “United States Immigration Court Act” (as of 7-16-2019)

Purpose of Legislation

To transfer to an independent court established under Article I of the Constitution the adjudicative functions under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) that were performed, prior to the legislation, by the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) in the U.S. Department of Justice.

Basic Features

The legislation establishes a “United States Immigration Court” with responsibility for functions of an adjudicative nature that had been performed under the INA and Justice Department regulations by EOIR’s immigration judges, administrative law judges, and Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA).

The new court is comprised of a trial division operating at various locations within the United States, and an appellate division based in the Washington, D.C. area.

The judges of the court have fixed terms of office and are removable only for cause. The judges in the appellate division are appointed by the President subject to Senate confirmation, and the judges in the trial division are appointed by the appellate division using a merit-selection process.

The substantive law of immigration and the corresponding enforcement and policy-determining responsibilities of the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice under the INA are unchanged. However, the legal precedents established in decisions of the new court’s appellate division are binding on those departments as well as other executive branch authorities with administrative responsibilities under the Act and other immigration-related laws.

Final decisions of the new court are subject to review in the regional U.S. courts of appeals under the same circumstances as EOIR’s administrative decisions had been reviewed by those courts, but only with respect to constitutional claims, issues of statutory or regulatory interpretation, or other questions of law. Findings of fact by the new court are not subject to further judicial review.

Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction is transferred to the new court with respect to all hearings, quasi-judicial decision making, and first-level appellate review authorized by pre-existing statute or regulation for proceedings arising under titles I and II of the INA.

The court’s trial division has jurisdiction generally corresponding to matters of the kind previously addressed in EOIR by immigration judges and administrative law judges.

The court’s appellate division has jurisdiction generally corresponding to matters of the kind previously addressed by the BIA, including appeals in proceedings that originate in the trial division.

Court Administration and Operations

Cases in the appellate division are heard by the judges sitting *en banc*, in panels of two or more members, or individually. Cases in the trial division are heard by individual judges. The appellate division sits *en banc* to exercise its administrative authority.

The appellate division has overall governance responsibility for the court, with specific authority to prescribe the court’s rules of practice and procedure, determine the geographic areas served by judges in the trial division, establish operating procedures with respect to the timing and location of court sessions and other matters, and participate in court staff appointments and management of the court’s budget.

The chief judge of the court is a judge in the appellate division determined by seniority and serves for a 5-year term. The chief judge takes a leading role with respect to appointing non-chambers court staff and, in general, is responsible for overseeing the court's administrative operations in addition to discharging his or her regular judicial duties.

Each geographic area served by the court's trial division has a chief trial judge who is also determined by seniority and, in addition to discharging his or her regular judicial duties, may exercise administrative authority locally as delegated by the appellate division, and is consulted on court administrative and governance issues directly affecting the trial division.

The court is empowered to use its appropriations to satisfy its administrative needs directly (i.e., through funding of its own employees, operations, and facilities), or to secure administrative support services on an agreed-upon, reimbursable basis from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, another Article I court, or any executive agency.

The clerk of the court is appointed by the appellate division, and the clerk appoints other (non-chambers) court staff with the approval of the appellate division or, by delegation, the chief judge.

Each judge appoints chambers staff (secretaries and law clerks) to serve at his or her pleasure.

Judges

The appellate division consists of 21 "immigration appeals judges" who are appointed for 15-year terms that are staggered so that 7 judges come up for appointment every 5 years.

The number of "immigration trial judges" in the trial division is determined by the appellate division, subject to the availability of funding, based on periodic surveys of workload and resource needs. The appellate division establishes for each geographic area served by the trial division a merit selection panel that is responsible for advertising vacant positions, reviewing applications, conducting interviews, and recommending applicants to the appellate division for appointment as immigration trial judges for 15-year terms.

Appointments to the court's appellate and trial divisions are to be made without regard for race, color, sex, religion, national origin, or political ideology or affiliation, with appointees selected on the basis of solid professional credentials and attributes befitting service as a judge, and to reflect overall a balance of public and private sector legal experience.

Immigration appeals judges receive the same salary as a U.S. district judge, and immigration trial judges receive a salary equivalent to 92% of the district judge salary (i.e., the same salary paid to bankruptcy judges and full-time magistrate judges in the judicial branch).

All judges of the court may elect to participate in retirement and survivor benefits that are equivalent to those afforded judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (another Article I court) and similar to those available to bankruptcy judges and magistrate judges in the judicial branch.

Retired judges may be recalled, as needed, to temporary service on the court, and non-retired judges in the trial division may be designated, as needed, to sit temporarily on the appellate division.

Court Authorities and Responsibilities

The court's rulemaking authority includes power to regulate its own bar and establish procedures for admission of attorneys and others to practice before it.

The judges of the court may punish contempt of the court's authority by imposing civil money penalties (monetary fines) in accordance with rules prescribed by the appellate division.

The court may impose filing and similar fees that do not exceed in amount the analogous fees imposed in the district courts or by the Department of Homeland Security.

The records of the court are open to the public, but the court has authority to protect confidential information and is responsible for preserving confidentiality as otherwise required by law.

The court is generally required to publish its appellate decisions, but may make exceptions (e.g., for rulings without precedential value), and may authorize publication of trial decisions as appropriate. It must also submit annual statistical reports to the Senate and House Judiciary Committees.

The court has authority to hold periodic bench/bar conferences, similar to those authorized by other federal courts.

Technical, Conforming, and Transitional Provisions

Pre-existing references in the INA and Justice Department regulations to the BIA, immigration judges or administrative law judges, or to proceedings before such officials, are generally deemed to refer to the successor judges and/or proceedings in the new court.

The Attorney General's statutory authority to regulate EOIR adjudicators and proceedings is transferred to the new court's appellate division, and pre-existing Attorney General regulations that are consistent with the legislation remain in effect until modified or revoked by the appellate division.

The legislation takes effect on October 1 in the year immediately following the year in which it is enacted, or a year after enactment, whichever occurs later. At that time, EOIR is abolished and that office's personnel and assets (including funding) are transferred to the new court.

The BIA members and the immigration judges and administrative law judges in office immediately before the effective date continue in office as immigration appeals judges and immigration trial judges, respectively, for a transition period of four years and until successors are appointed under the legislation, to ensure appropriate continuity and permit sufficient time for the court to establish itself as an independent entity. Immigration appeals judges must be nominated by the President within 90 days after the legislation takes effect, and the merit selection process for immigration trial judges must be established by the appellate division within 180 days after the effective date. The legislation includes a "sense of Congress" statement that all qualified former BIA members, immigration judges, and administrative law judges who carry over to the new court and wish to continue serving should be fully considered for appointment to the court for 15-year terms.

Study

Beyond establishing a new Article I court to perform the adjudicative functions heretofore performed by EOIR, the legislation requires the Justice Department, in consultation with the Departments of State, Labor, and Homeland Security, to study and, within three years, report to Congress on the potential for consolidating within the new court the conduct or review of immigration-related adjudications that are currently performed by federal agencies other than EOIR.