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N.J. faces a ‘historic shortage’ of judges amid growing case backlog, officials say

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New Jersey desperately needs more judges to handle the cases mounting up amid the pandemic, judges told lawmakers Tuesday at a budget hearing.

There are currently 64 judicial vacancies out of 463 seats in Superior Court, with three vacancies more coming by next month, according to Judge Glenn Grant, acting Administrative Director of the Courts.

That amounts to almost 14% of the entire Superior Court system, including the trial and appellate divisions, at a time when jury trials have been delayed and officials are bracing for a glut of new complaints once landlords are allowed to evict tenants again.

“These extraordinary times are not a good time to be operating with a historic shortage of judges,” Grant testified before the state Senate Budget Committee.

New Jersey Superior Court judges — which handle criminal, civil and family law — are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate.

Vetting and hiring judges can be a long and complex process, and individual senators may unilaterally object to nominees. The senate did approve hiring a dozen new judges last month.

A spokesman for Gov. Phil Murphy said they had worked “expeditiously to fill judicial vacancies.”

“We look forward to working with the Legislature on efforts to fill the bench with qualified nominees,” Michael Zhadanovsky wrote in an email.

Several lawmakers expressed alarm during Tuesday’s hearing, including state Sen. Samuel Thompson, R-Middlesex.

“I’m going to make a statement I don’t think I’ve ever made on a budget committee,” Thompson said to the judges. “If you need more money, come back.”

Judges said they mainly needed more nominees.

More than 58,000 eviction cases have already been filed since last April through March of this year, all of which are pending, according to the Administrative Office of the Courts. Under the current eviction moratorium, landlords can file for evictions over nonpayment of rent but cannot lock out tenants during the pandemic. The eviction ban ends mid-June.

The state projects more than 194,000 landlord-tenant cases will be filed by next year, Grant testified.

Housing advocates have warned lawmakers of a “tsunami of evictions” followed by mass homelessness if the state does not find a way to streamline the outstanding cases.

“What is coming, we cannot even imagine,” said Judge Jeanne Covert.

The court system has continued to work during the shutdown, judges emphasized, and officials are strategizing ways to reduce the backlog.

More than two million people have participated in more than 156,000 remote events since the pandemic began, Grant said. Hundreds of people have also been sentenced and virtual grand juries have issued more than 5,200 indictments, he added.

But virtual proceedings sometimes take even longer than in-person meetings, Covert said.

In February, the state Supreme Court ruled that some people awaiting trial behind bars should be released because of the delay.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Sophie Nieto-Munoz contributed to this report.