

ABOUT

In 2nd Place, Va. 'Rocket Docket' Remains Old Reliable



The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, known by many as the original rocket docket, was the second-fastest civil trial docket in the country in 2024, with a median time to trial of 14.2 months.[1] The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania took top honors this year.

For the last 15 years, aside from one, the EDVA has been the nation's fastest or second-fastest civil trial court of the 94 U.S. district courts. The original rocket docket remains the most reliable rocket docket.

Recently available data from the U.S. Courts' Caseload Statistics Data Table C-5 reveals that, in 2024, the Eastern District of Pennsylvania won the gold medal for fastest civil trials, with a median time to civil trials of 13.4 months. The Eastern District of Virginia won the silver medal, at 14.2 months. And the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana took home the bronze, with 16.4 months.

As a benchmark, the EDVA was fastest in 2023, at 16.4 months to civil trial. It seems the federal courts have successfully rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the slowest pokes in the country in 2024 were the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California, with a stunning median 67.5 months to civil trial — that's a median 5.5 years to trial; the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, with a median 59.7 months to trial; and the U.S. District Court for the Western District of New York, also with a median 59.7 months to trial. In other words, both of those latter courts clocked in at a median of almost five years to trial in 2024.

Of course, the longer it takes to try a federal case, the more likely it is to cost more — likely millions of dollars more in a hotly contested civil case.

This is our 13th year writing for Law360 regarding the EDVA rocket docket. In the past, in addition to reporting on the speed to trial, we have highlighted the EDVA's local rules (2013), its patent practice (2014), the factors that continue to fuel the EDVA's rocket docket (2017), some national comparisons (2019), and the EDVA's return to the fastest in the speed-to-civil trial rankings (2024).[2]

Speediest Resolution of Civil Trials

Eastern District of Pennsylvania	Eastern District of Virginia	Eastern District of Louisiana
13.4 months	14.2 months	16.4 months

Slowest Duration of Civil Trials

Eastern District of California	67.5 months
Northern District of Illinois	59.7 months
Western District of New York	59.7 months

This year, we spoke to the newest EDVA judge, U.S. District Judge Jamar K. Walker.

When we started this series of articles 13 years ago, we focused on the Judiciary Data and Analysis Office's Table C-5 as the best proxy for speed. Table C-5 is labeled "Median Time Intervals from Filing to Disposition of Civil Cases Terminated." [3]

We look under the last column header "Median Time Interval in Months" for termination "During Trial." We have used that chart every year since because it appears to be the best proxy for speed to resolution at trial.

For historical context, when I first wrote on this topic in 2013 regarding 2012 statistics, the median time to civil trial in the EDVA was 11.3 months. This year, it is 14.2 months. That computes to a 26% increase in the amount of time to civil trial in the EDVA over 12 years.

How Often Cases Go to Trial

It is an old adage that, of all the cases filed, only 5% get tried. Actually, it is far fewer.

Looking again at Table C-5, 2,706 civil cases were pending in the EDVA last year. And 18 of those were tried. So less than 0.7% of the civil cases were tried in the EDVA last year.

Sound low? Last year, 374,094 civil cases were pending nationwide. A mere 1,549 of those were tried. That math reveals just 0.4% of civil cases were tried last year nationwide.

This year, in preparing this article, we spoke with Judge Walker to discuss some of the reasons that he believes the EDVA stays at or near the top in the annual civil trial rankings.

The EDVA's Newest Judge

It may be helpful to understand a judge's background and formative experiences to provide insight into their judicial approach and how they complement the district bench.

As often as Judge Walker has been the first or the youngest to achieve something, you might not expect to encounter such a humble man. As far as I can tell, he is the first federal judge to hail from the Eastern Shore of Virginia — certainly the first from tiny Nassawadox, Virginia, population 533. He is the first openly LGBTQ+ Article III judge to serve in Virginia.

And, when sworn in at 37 years old, he became one of the youngest federal judges in the country.

Judge Walker is quick to credit his many mentors for his success. He reminisced affectionately about Carla Savage-Wells, his speech and debate coach at Nandua High School, for helping him gain confidence and overcoming early obstacles. While an undergraduate at the

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University of Virginia, he benefited from advice from Toby Heytens — then a UVA law professor, and now a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. During his time at Covington & Burling LLP, he valued the wise counsel of John Hall and others who supported his move to the U.S. attorney's office.

And, of course, he treasured his clerkship with U.S. District Judge Raymond Jackson — whom he would later replace, and whom he described as an "incredible mentor." Their connection included, but went way beyond, both having ministers in their family.

As I do with other EDVA judges I've interviewed, I asked the judge about how the EDVA rocket docket stays at or near the top of the civil rankings virtually every year, including when judges turn over. Judge Walker had some cogent insights.

He pointed to everyone's "respect for the history of the court." And by "everyone," he means everyone in the system, including judges, staff members, the EDVA bar and others. There is an expectation from the EDVA bar that the court will be fast and efficient. And the fact that all the recent judges appointed in the last few years are EDVA alumni gives them a "double appreciation" for the reputation of the court. No one needs to indoctrinate all this "homegrown talent" about the expectation for speed and efficiency.

Finally, Judge Walker did mention a couple of best practices for the EDVA. Certainly, preparation is paramount. And Judge Walker believes that "the best lawyers are people who can distill a case down to what it's really about."

But the judges in the EDVA, like judges elsewhere, each have their individual practices, preferences, traits and styles. Indeed, during his first couple of weeks as a judge, Judge Walker attended hearings held by other local Norfolk judges in order to get a sense of the current court, even though he had clerked there 12 years earlier.

He suggested that counsel seek to learn about the specific practices of the particular judge who is handling their case by talking to colleagues in the bar, attending a hearing or doing other due diligence.

Conclusion

The EDVA rocket docket remains one of the fastest civil dockets in the country, year in and year out. And the rocket continues to roar with a bevy of EDVA alumni judges!

Notes

1. <https://www.vaed.uscourts.gov/>.
2. More information can be found on Hunton's ["Rocket Docket Practice" webpage](#).
3. [Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Judicial Bus. of the U.S. Courts, Table C-5, U.S. District Courts—Median Time From Filing to Disposition of Civil Cases, by Action Taken— During the 12- Month Period Ending December 31, 2024.](#)

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