

2 'Rocket Dockets' And The Rules That Propel Them

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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 2025, with a median time to trial of 17.9 months according to our customary measuring stick (but first by another measure). [The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida](#) took top honors this year with a median time through civil trial at 16.4 months.

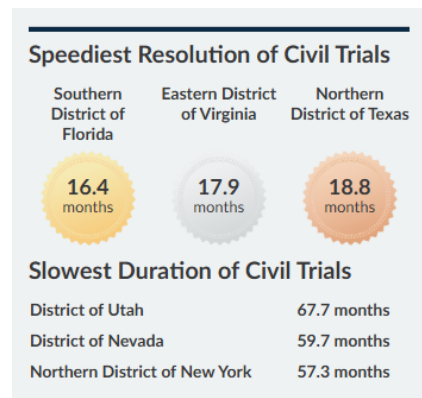
We have been writing about the EDVA rocket docket for [14 years now](#). For at least the last 15 years, aside from one, the EDVA has been the nation's fastest or second-fastest civil trial court of the 94 U.S. district courts. The original rocket docket is still old reliable with respect to speed and efficiency of the docket. But the SDFL — with divisions in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Fort Pierce, Key West and West Palm Beach — edged the EDVA out to become last year's fastest rocket docket of all district courts nationwide.

Checking the 2025 leaderboard, recently available data from the U.S. Courts' Caseload Statistics Data Table C-5 reveals that the SDFL won the gold medal for fastest civil trials, with a median time to civil trial of 16.4 months. The EDVA won the silver medal at 17.9 months. And the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas took the bronze at 18.8 months.

Meanwhile, the slowest pokes in the country in 2025 were the [U.S. District Court for the District of Utah](#) at a stunning 67.7 months to civil trial — that's a median of 5.5 years to trial for their 10 civil trials; the [U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada](#) (59.7 months to trial); and the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York (57.3 months to trial). Both of those courts clocking in at taking a median of almost five years to trial in 2025. 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.

In our past Law360 guest articles, in addition to reporting on the speed to trial, we have highlighted the EDVA's local rules ([2013](#)), patent practice ([2014](#)), the factors that continue to fuel the rocket docket ([2017](#)), some national comparisons ([2019](#)), the venue's return to the fastest civil trial rankings ([2024](#)), and, last year, the EDVA's newest and youngest district judge ([2025](#)).¹

This year, the chief judges of the two fastest courts discussed what makes them so efficient.



The Judiciary Data and Analysis Office's Tables

When we started this series of articles 14 years ago, we focused on the Judiciary Data and Analysis Office's Table C-5 as our proxy for speed. Table C-5 is labeled "Median Time Intervals from Filing to Disposition of Civil Cases Terminated." ²

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

But, as pointed out to us by the EDVA Deputy Clerk Laura Griffin, Judiciary Data and Analysis Office's Table T-3 is worth consideration as well. While U.S. Courts' Caseload Statistics Data Table C-5, which we have always used, measures time through completion of trial, U.S. Courts' Caseload Statistics Data Table T-3 measures time to commencement of the civil trial. The EDVA itself actually benchmarks based on Table T-3, which measures time to commencement of the civil trial. And EDVA was first on Table T-3 in 2025.

How Often Cases Go to Trial

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

Looking again at Table C-5, 2,960 civil cases were filed in the EDVA last year. And 16 of those were tried. So, only 0.54% of the civil cases filed were tried in the EDVA last year. Likewise, in the SDFL, 8,280 cases were filed and 48 were tried — just 0.58%.

Sound low? Last year, 211,175 civil cases were listed nationwide. A mere 1,414 of those were tried. That math reveals 0.67% of civil cases were tried nationwide last year.

The SDFL and EDVA Chiefs and Their Best Practices

U.S. District Judge M. Hannah Lauck leads the EDVA while U.S. District Judge Cecilia Altonaga leads the SDFL. We discuss each district's best practices below.

Chief Judge Hannah Lauck

Concerning best practices in the EDVA, Judge Lauck is quick to spread the credit, citing the hard work of lawyers, judges and clients. She points to the EDVA's "commitment to excellence" in a "formal, courteous, court" that seeks to avoid "rabbit holes." She stresses focusing on the elements of the case and encourages lawyers to start cases by considering the elements in the jury instructions.

While the EDVA has very important local rules, Judge Lauck notes that each of the EDVA's three primary divisions, Alexandria, Richmond and Norfolk, do have slightly different procedures, with each division having the flexibility to use what works best there. Trial dates may be set at the initial pretrial conference in some, and later in others. But generally, once a trial date is set, there must be really good cause to move it — really good cause.

Regarding settlement, the magistrate judges are available to mediate settlements. The EDVA has also developed a pro bono program whereby pro se clients can be represented pro bono for settlement purposes only. This has been a good time-saving device and the pro se litigants often end up having a much better experience.

Judge Lauck believes in the old idiom "justice delayed is justice denied." Her goal is to be available to help things run well, support her colleagues and avoid becoming the focus of the trial. And she is "most proud" of her EDVA colleagues and the bar.

Chief Judge Cecilia Altonaga

The SDFL, first in our rankings in 2025, includes courts in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Fort Pierce and Key West. There are 18 judges and 16 magistrate judges throughout the district. SDFL's speed and efficiency through trial in 2025 are not an aberration. Indeed, over the last 15 years the court has placed no lower than seventh among the 94 U.S. district courts in speed to disposition of civil trial. Like the EDVA, the SDFL has had a tradition of excellence for many years.

Judge Altonaga attributes the SDFL's sustained excellence to a confluence of factors, such as intentional data-driven case management, careful case tracking, and feedback including charts and graphs tracking performance, mentorship of newer judges and quick trial-setting.

The parties' joint scheduling reports, or scheduling conferences (which some judges hold), are events that generally occur shortly after all defendants appear in a civil case following service of process. So, generally, scheduling orders containing a case's trial date are entered early in a civil case — given that service of process must be accomplished within 90 days of a plaintiff filing a complaint.

The court's magistrate judges, who are often paired with district judges, and their discovery rules, help with docket discipline. And continuances of the trial date are disfavored. Judge Altonaga considers the SDFL to be a very professional, hard-working federal court, with a high-quality work product. She is clearly very proud of her colleagues, including judges, administrative staff, law clerks and practitioners.

Conclusion

The SDFL and EDVA were 2025's fastest civil rockets. And both districts emphasize hard work, dedication and commitment to excellence.

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[1] More information can be found here: <https://www.hunton.com/en/practices/litigation/rocket-docket-practice-us-district-court-for-the-eastern-district-of-virginia.html>.

[2] <https://www.uscourts.gov/data-news/data-tables/2025/12/31/statistical-tables-federal-judiciary/c-5>.

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