

Controversial Cook County criminal judge appointed to immigrant court judicial seat

By **Emily Hoerner** (This article was co-published with the *Chicago Sun-Times*.)

Nicholas R. Ford, who left behind a checkered record when he retired from the Cook County circuit court last month, has a new job. Ford was appointed this week as a U.S. Immigration Court judge, based in San Francisco.

The appointment immediately drew criticism from one progressive lawyers group, the National Lawyers Guild San Francisco Bay Area, which strongly condemned the move and called on the Department of Justice to immediately rescind Ford's appointment to the bench.

“As someone who has dedicated his career to perpetuating racist state violence, Judge Ford has no place in a courtroom,” said the advocacy group's executive director, Jay Kim, in a news release. “He is particularly unfit for Immigration Court, where he will be deciding the fate of asylum seekers and torture victims.”

Kim said her group does not frequently oppose judicial appointments but based on the circumstances felt it was necessary. The group will be tracking Ford's work through their immigration court observation program.

A DOJ spokeswoman said immigration judges do not grant interviews.

As a former Cook County assistant state's attorney who went on to serve as a Circuit Court judge for more than 20 years, Ford had been reversed repeatedly in cases in which the appellate courts found that Ford had improperly restricted defendants' rights.

Ford retired from the bench in Cook County in April. In one case, the former Cook County prosecutor drew criticism for dismissing the claims of a man who contended he had been tortured into confessing to a crime by an associate of now-disgraced former Chicago Police Cmdr. Jon Burge. Ford had been personally involved with that case years earlier as a prosecutor.

The lawyer's group specifically cited that case in their call to the Department of Justice to rescind Ford's appointment.

Ford retained his seat on the bench several times, most recently in 2016, despite receiving a negative rating from a bar group, Chicago Council of Lawyers. The group cited two cases that raised “serious concerns about Judge Ford's ability to decide cases in an impartial manner.”

One case outlined the 100 year sentence Ford handed down to a 16-year-old convicted of first-degree murder. In his decision, Ford had noted several things that are not supposed to influence judicial decisions, including the teen's choice to remain silent at sentencing and the judge's personal feelings about gangs and gang violence, the bar group wrote. That sentence was among the cases that the appellate court overturned.