

STALLED JUSTICE [Corrected 04/17/2023]: Yearslong delays in Cook County murder cases break rules, inflict pain and gouge taxpayers

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[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Every month or two, a mourning mother and the man accused of killing her son journey to a Cook County courtroom for another seemingly pointless hearing.

Corniki Bornds' only child was shot in the head six years ago. Early on, the grief was so jarring that her mind used to freeze up at every court hearing. Now, 70-plus hearings into the 2017 case, each appearance instead fuels disgust and agony, like "pouring salt in an open wound."

Zeron Moody was charged with the murder. He describes a different torment: that of a young father jailed for much of his 20s with no trial date in sight for him or his co-defendant. The long delay gets "harder as the years go on," his depression so intense he recently threw himself down a flight of jail stairs.

Once Bornds and Moody are in the same courtroom -- one after waiting in a long security line, the other after winding through a long tunnel from the jail -- the hearings typically last a minute or two. Nothing much happens. Lawyers and the judge pick another date to meet.

Another hearing. Another delay.

This is what passes for progress in the Cook County criminal courts, a system that a Tribune investigation found is failing at its most essential function: ensuring fair and timely justice.

In an unprecedented review of murder cases, the Tribune found Cook County's courts are taking longer than ever to separate the guilty from the innocent -- longer than courthouses in any city for which comparable data was available, including New York and Los Angeles. Delays here were growing before the pandemic, and have been getting worse since.

Advocates nationally aim for murder cases to take no more than a year. Cook County's goal is a little more than two years. But it's now taking more than four to complete most of the county's murder cases, with some lasting up to a decade or more.

"I think what you're discovering is a crisis," said Tom Geraghty, a Northwestern University professor emeritus who's worked in and studied the county's courts for decades. "I mean four years to wait for a trial is ridiculous. Two years is ridiculous."

Experts and advocates agree that justice shouldn't be rushed, but in Cook County the pace of prosecution for murder cases has slowed to a near standstill.

Murder defendants typically linger in jail longer than a presidential term. For those wrongfully accused, the process costs years with their families on the outside. Taxpayers are left to foot the bill for tens of millions a year in extra jail housing costs.

And victims' families must wait years for justice.

To document the problem, reporters interviewed courthouse attorneys, defendants, victims' families and their advocates, while filing three dozen record requests, poring over more than 40 case files and attending more than 1,000 hearings.

Among the findings:

* Historic delays: In cases concluded before the pandemic, more than 80% took longer than the court's two-year goal. Last year, it was nearly 90%. Some cases linger a decade or more. One is so old that its evidence includes the alleged use of a Blockbuster video card.

* A big-city outlier: Delays have ballooned more in Cook County than other parts of Illinois. And delays are worse here than in any other large court system experts have studied, from Philadelphia to the Bronx.

* Broken rules and laws: Cook County judges and attorneys ignore official court timetables for tasks without punishment. Judges don't enforce a state law requiring attorneys put requests for delays in writing, supported by sworn statements.

* Action without progress: Court hearings can eventually number in the 50s, 60s and 70s for each murder case, with little accomplished.

* Untamed bureaucracy: As defendants sit in jail, police can take years to turn over all their evidence to prosecutors. Attorneys can take years to draft and file pretrial motions on how to interpret the evidence. Judges can take years to schedule pretrial hearings, which routinely get delayed because cops don't show up to testify.

* Failing leadership: For 50 years, study after study has documented serious problems. Yet, from Chief Judge Timothy Evans on down, judges show little alarm and won't discuss the issues in a system that, by design, limits transparency and accountability. No one comprehensively tracks why cases are delayed.

The investigation revealed a system in which the people with the power to limit delays -- including judges, police and attorneys -- have little incentive to do so, while the people who pay the price -- defendants, victims and witnesses -- are largely powerless to speed up things.

The law technically allows defendants to demand a speedy trial within months of arrest. But defendants and attorneys have told the Tribune they'd be foolish to do so because it would risk missing the chance to review and challenge the evidence prosecutors want to present.

At the top of the county courts is Evans, among the last political survivors of rough-and-tumble 1970s Chicago ward politics. He spent nearly two decades on City Council, then lost a bid for mayor before becoming a judge, then the chief judge. He's kept that job for nearly 22 years by continuing to win an internal vote taken among the very judges he's supposed to be supervising.

Evans would not agree to an interview with the Tribune, instead issuing a statement that did not respond directly to many of the Tribune's questions. In that statement, his office downplayed the Tribune's findings, saying murders make up just 1% of all felonies and overall court performance has been improving since the worst of the pandemic slowdowns.

"Justice and fairness are our most cherished goals," the chief judge's office said in its statement, "and judges, as well as all court stakeholders, work diligently to avoid unnecessary delays from the time a case is filed until it is resolved."

The system's other major players -- prosecutors, public defenders and private attorneys -- did not dispute the increase in delays but said they're working hard to make justice as swift and as fair as possible, in increasingly complex cases amid an explosion of video and forensic evidence.

In an interview, the second in command in State's Attorney Kim Foxx's office acknowledged delays but said prosecutors are often waiting to get and share records from law enforcement, then waiting for the court to work through defense requests to limit what evidence could get in front of a jury.

In a statement, Cook County Public Defender Sharone Mitchell Jr.'s office said it takes time for it to do the "thorough, exhaustive and meticulous" work required to represent indigent clients in a county with high caseloads and notorious for wrongful convictions.

Attorneys and judges in Los Angeles and New York expressed surprise to the Tribune at how long Cook County cases were taking. Academic researchers have chastised the county's management of its criminal courts in increasingly sharp terms, with one recent study floating the idea of a state takeover.

To critics of the county's court management, such as Sheriff Tom Dart, the ever-growing delays contribute to feelings of lawlessness, particularly in high-crime neighborhoods. Not only do those residents see many murders go

unsolved, they watch "solved" cases stall in a court system seemingly unconcerned about timely justice.

"It poisons the community," Dart said. "They do feel like the system's not working."

GROWING WAITS

On a brisk January night in 2016, Barack Obama was still president. R. Kelly was finishing up a Christmas album. The Cubs hadn't been to a World Series in seven decades.

Maurice Pearson sat in a cold Chicago police interrogation room, warming his hands inside his shirt. He was three hours into his arrest on suspicion of killing a man during a robbery.

The interrogation turned to what lay ahead for the 19-year-old, a transcript shows. A detective warned Pearson that he could face a judge and jury.

"There's gonna be other people judging you ... whether this happens in a year or two years," the detective said.

That's how long Pearson said he thought it would take too.

Fast forward to September 2022. At age 26, in a jailhouse interview with the Tribune, Pearson fidgeted in a hard plastic chair, his hands cuffed behind his back, while lamenting what by then had been a 6 1/2-year wait in Cook County Jail for his day in court.

"But," he said, taking a breath, "when you're in here and you're stuck, you have no choice. You have no choice but to go with the flow."

It wasn't always this bad. In the mid-2000s, the county courts completed most murder cases in less than two years, according to studies done at the time.

But by 2011, the median completion time -- with half taking more, and half taking less -- was roughly three years after an arrest, the Tribune found.

Just before the pandemic, the median was approaching four years.

In 2022, it was nearly five years.

At one of the county's satellite courthouses, in south suburban Markham, murder cases now typically take nearly seven years to complete, the Tribune found.

Another way to look at it: The court wants murder cases completed within two years of an early-stage hearing called an arraignment. That goal was met in a fifth of murder cases completed systemwide in 2019. In 2022, just a tenth met that goal.

The figures come from a Tribune analysis of raw case data collected and published online by the Cook County state's attorney's office, part of a transparency effort by that office. Reporters tried to get a complete set of official court data to analyze, but the circuit clerk's office has said since July that it was too busy to provide it.

The delays come into sharper focus when comparing Cook County to other large systems. For defendants awaiting murder trials, the average wait behind bars was notably lower in New York City and Los Angeles County, according to jail data collected last year by the Tribune.

And a Tribune review of Illinois prison data shows that it takes less time to convict people of murder in other parts of the state than it does in Cook County, and that gap is widening.

Perhaps the most striking comparison comes from data collected in the years before the pandemic by the National Center for State Courts. The respected national group -- one often cited by Cook County's chief judge -- studied data from courthouses across the country. One calculation was how often homicide cases were completed in a year or less -- considered a gold standard in effective case management.

Some courthouses, including Cook County's, didn't participate in the study. For the busiest courts that did, the percentage of murder cases completed within a year ranged from 15% to 71%. For example, in New York City's five boroughs -- which have separate court systems -- 19% to 38% of their murder cases were resolved by then.

Those aren't stellar numbers for advocates who want nearly all felony cases to be completed in a year. But those numbers are blazing fast compared with Cook County's, where a Tribune analysis of prosecutors' data shows that mark was met in just 5% of homicide cases completed in 2019.

It can be difficult to compare court systems because each place has a unique set of circumstances -- such as sentencing ranges and staffing structures -- that can make it easier or harder for cases to progress. For example,

some homicide charges in Illinois carry comparatively long mandatory prison terms of at least 45 years, leaving many defendants and their lawyers with little incentive to plead guilty or rush to trial.

But the national study shot down one argument that court officials have made in the past: that bigger court systems like Cook County invariably are slower than smaller ones.

There's another factor too: whether powerful officials aggressively push to limit delays.

In the past decade, New York officials -- including the state's top judge -- publicly pushed plans to tackle their case backlogs. That judge, Jonathan Lippman, told the Tribune "there's no excuse" for delays to have ballooned in Chicago in ways that let defendants fester in jail for four, five or more years without a trial.

"It's inhumane. It's not just," said Lippman, now retired and of counsel in a New York firm. "And it just defies any view of a system that works."

LAW, DEADLINES IGNORED

The slow pace of the Cook County courts has been known to academic researchers and state lawmakers since at least the 1960s. Researchers at Loyola, Northwestern and Georgia State universities concluded in one recent study that the county had "structural-level failures that create and perpetuate cyclical courtroom dysfunction."

That is also the picture that emerged from the Tribune's reporting.

After charges are filed, the next step is for prosecutors -- aided by police -- to quickly gather all the evidence and share it with the defense. But that process can get bogged down for years, the Tribune found, as reports, videos and other records slowly make their way to the courthouse in dribs and drabs from police, crime labs, hospitals and others.

The more information that comes in, particularly lengthy video files, the more time attorneys seek to go through it all, adding to delays.

Attorneys then get time to argue over what's fair to show eventual jurors. That process can also stall a case for years, especially when judges let the motions sit without resolution for months, or police officers fail to appear in court to testify about whether they followed the rules in making the arrest or questioning the defendant.

Other holdups include waits for mental health exams, delays in the cases of co-defendants and other side issues. Attorneys' heavy caseloads leave little wiggle room on scheduling, so backups in one case can cause slowdowns in others.

How often do each of these things happen? It's impossible to know, because the court has never put a system in place to comprehensively document why delays occur.

Nor are the courts enforcing what few rules exist about explaining the reasons for delays.

For example, a state law sets up a strict protocol for lawyers who ask a judge for a "continuance" on a case -- to end a hearing and resume the case on another date. For all except the earliest hearings in a case, the request must be in writing and supported by a sworn statement.

But that law is routinely ignored, as researchers have repeatedly pointed out and which the Tribune confirmed by examining dockets and case files.

In a Tribune review of 30 older murder cases, reporters found at least 1,500 delays that would appear, by law, to require that lawyers file written motions and sworn affidavits to explain why they wanted to wait. Reporters found no such documents in the files.

Chief Judge Evans' office did not respond to questions about these omissions. Lawyers, if they knew of the law, brushed it off to reporters as unnecessary or impractical to enforce.

Local court rules also require court clerks to document, in a "memorandum of orders," the reasons for continuances for all except the earliest hearings in a case. But the court has yet to enforce that, on paper or otherwise. Evans said two years ago that his staff was working to create a system for clerks to record the reasons electronically, but it hasn't happened.

Finally, the court isn't making much use of case-management orders that it developed a decade ago to help move cases along. For example, the judge in a murder case could issue a standard order stating that sharing evidence shouldn't take more than a year, with another four months to handle pretrial motions and another six months to set

up a pretrial conference. If followed, that schedule would result in a trial held within two years of the defendant's arraignment.

But judges have not widely adopted these orders, the Tribune found. In a review of the dockets for 20 randomly chosen murder cases that began in the first half of 2022, reporters found only one that mentioned the filing of a case management order. In a random review of 2023 cases, just a third mentioned the orders being filed. Evans' office did not respond to a question about the lack of such orders.

In a court system that offers no data on why delays occur, and where few reasons are documented in court records, the best hints of what's going on come from attending the hearings.

THE DELAY FACTORY

For murder cases, most of those hearings occur at the county's main courthouse, a century-old limestone building in Little Village. Its official name is the Honorable George N. Leighton Criminal Court Building, for the late judge and civil rights trailblazer. But the courthouse is better known as "26th Street" or "26th and Cal" -- a nod to its location at 26th Street and California Avenue.

The seven-story building has an air of a grand edifice gone slightly shabby -- wide, tall hallways with carved stone walls where you might encounter a dead roach, belly-up.

There are spacious older courtrooms boasting high ceilings and dark polished wood, and newer, smaller courtrooms so crammed that the county installed glass walls to keep spectators from crowding the courtroom players. All courtrooms show signs of aging -- flaking paint, wallpaper that's begun to peel.

While courtrooms sometimes host trials or substantive hearings in the afternoon, the busiest part of the day is in the morning, when status hearings are bunched together. It becomes a showcase of delays.

Most hearings are officially scheduled for 9 a.m. But judges may not filter in until 10 or later. Their docket may be full -- with a dozen or more cases to be called in no particular order -- but they frequently take breaks as they wait for the right mix of attorneys and defendants to be present. Judges often walk into back offices, leaving attorneys to make small talk or work on their laptops. Spectators, sitting on hard wooden benches, are not told when court will resume.

When the right set of players has finally assembled, a hearing typically goes fast, often a minute or two.

Attorneys fire off a few sentences to the judge about what they're doing to inch closer to a trial, like students updating a teacher on a group project, albeit one with no real due date. The update typically devolves into excuses. They could be waiting for others to give them stuff. Or need time to go through files or fashion legal arguments. Or cite any of a host of other unique circumstances, such as being new to the case or struggling to corral witnesses to show up for hearings.

Most judges, themselves former prosecutors and defense attorneys, usually accept the lawyers' statements at face value. Opposing attorneys rarely question them either, instead agreeing to push the case back again.

The case is then given what's called a continuance, typically for another status hearing, in four to six weeks.

Defendants are returned to their cells, still with no firm idea of when their fates will be decided, in a process some described as near soul-crushing.

The Tribune reached out through the jail to 23 pretrial detainees who'd been locked up at least four years, and often much longer. More than a dozen agreed to be interviewed about the sluggish pace of their cases. Saying they were eager to talk, they each expressed frustration and said they felt powerless over the numerous continuances sought by attorneys.

One detainee who wanted to talk was Michael Laster, who at the time had been to court 82 times without resolution to his case.

"Honestly, it gets tiresome to go out every month, or two months, and not have any results, or any new updates," Laster told the Tribune in September.

By then, he was waiting for his second trial. The first one, which concluded more than four years after his arrest, was later nullified because of an error -- the judge forgot to swear in the jury.

Laster's 83rd appearance came one Monday in October. Around 7 a.m. he began his handcuffed journey to the

courtroom from the massive jail complex, a half-mile walk that snaked through underground tunnels.

In all, going to court took roughly three hours. He spent most of that time in holding cells: in the jail before entering the tunnels, then in the courthouse basement, then behind the courtroom. It was all for a hearing that quickly led to another continuance.

Laster eventually cut a plea deal -- at his 86th court appearance -- and admitted helping kill two men in a parking lot dispute in 2015. His sentence meant he will likely spend a decade in state prison, on top of the seven years he was in jail before the plea.

Some cases end with little seemingly accomplished other than a lot of time and money spent, such as the 2013 case of Koman Willis.

Willis was accused of fatally shooting a 6-month-old baby as she sat on her dad's lap in a minivan in Woodlawn, in a case that sparked citywide outrage.

In Willis' widely reported first hearing, prosecutors described a pile of evidence against him.

In a separate, packed news conference, then-police Superintendent Garry McCarthy said detectives had needed 2 1/2 months to nail down enough evidence to show Willis' guilt "in a court of law."

Ultimately, nothing was ever shown.

In a review of dozens of court transcripts, the Tribune found years of delays while prosecutors gathered all the evidence, then years of delays in assembling it all for a rotation of private defense attorneys and public defenders, who made their own requests for more records to be gathered.

Along the way, two key prosecution witnesses died: one by gunshot, the other in a car crash. Another recanted his story.

In June 2020, Willis got a new attorney -- his sixth, and the third one he'd privately hired. The attorney, Jed Stone, soon began prodding prosecutors to provide records for a trial.

Records show the prosecutors' office began trying to track down any potentially helpful remaining witnesses, with little success.

Soon prosecutors dropped all charges, at an anticlimactic hearing, telling the judge that "the evidence in this case is in a different posture" than it was in 2013.

That was in December 2020 -- at the case's 76th court hearing, or 2,760 days after Willis had been arrested.

Another way to look at it: By then, the 6-month-old he was accused of killing would have been in second grade, had she survived.

When reached by the Tribune this year, Willis said he'd moved on and declined to comment further.

Recalling the case two years later, his final attorney, Stone, said it reflected a court system indifferent to the people who are forced to endure it, victims and suspects alike, most of them poor and nonwhite.

"Everybody was expendable. Nobody cared," he said. "Nobody cared."

VICTIMS' PAIN

For victims' families, the seemingly endless continuances are inconvenient, wearisome, arduous and, ultimately, agonizing.

There's the ordeal of traveling to a courthouse that's a half-mile walk from the nearest CTA rail station and, if they drive, has no free public parking.

Then they must pass through an airport-style security station whose line can snake out the door to a concrete walkway exposed to Chicago weather. If they brought a cellphone, it must be stowed in a front entrance locker; civilians aren't allowed to have them inside the building.

Then they need to find the right courtroom out of three dozen spread over seven floors. Then they have to wait for what's often a late start to the morning session. And then it can be another hour or so for their loved one's case to be called -- only to learn that another month or two has passed with little progress in the prosecution.

Many victims' families simply avoid most hearings. Among them is Vanessa Sulieman, who has endured a seven-year lesson on how slowly the system works.

In March 2016, her college sweetheart, Mutasim Sulieman, saw a murder in his Humboldt Park cellphone store.

Police arrested two men, and authorities considered Sulieman a key witness to testify at their future trials.

One year passed with no trial. Two years. Then three.

During that wait, Vanessa and Mutasim got married. Had a baby. Got pregnant with another. Then -- one night in May 2019 -- he was late for dinner.

When she called his cellphone, a stranger answered and handed the phone to a police officer. Vanessa learned her husband had been murdered outside his store and the gunman got away.

It took more than two years for police and prosecutors to make arrests and lay out what they believe happened:

Sulieman's murder was arranged by one of the jailed defendants that Sulieman was to testify against.

That man, Terran Scott, was charged with Sulieman's murder, as was Scott's girlfriend, his brother and the alleged triggerman, Kyrell Pittmon. All have pleaded not guilty, starting a new cycle of hearings that is separate from the cycle of hearings that continues for the 2016 murder Sulieman witnessed.

Vanessa Sulieman doesn't go to the hearings for the people accused of killing her husband, she said, because she knows how little gets accomplished.

"I don't want it to keep taking my energy," she told the Tribune in an interview, fighting back tears. "I'm a single mom now. I can't keep leaving my kids to go to court."

It's a common frustration, say victims' advocates.

"It's very difficult because emotionally they're preparing themselves to face what they believe is one step closer to closure," said JaShawn Hill, who runs the nonprofit Chicago Survivors, for families of homicide victims.

"And when the court proceeding is brief and abrupt, and it really feels like nothing is happening in the lane of progress, it's almost another defeating moment for those families."

COST OF DELAYS

Besides the agony for victims' families, there is a more literal cost to housing detainees far longer than the court's two-year goal.

First-degree murder defendants rarely are granted bond or able to post it. So the vast majority must wait out the process behind bars.

Using jail data, the Tribune identified nearly 2,000 people who were charged with first-degree murder in the past decade and had each spent more than two years behind bars awaiting trial. As of Sept. 1, the most recent data available, those defendants had collectively been jailed an extra 1.4 million days beyond the court's goal. With the jail's estimated daily cost per inmate rising from \$137 to \$240 over the past decade, that means taxpayers paid an additional \$315 million to house them.

For many of those defendants, their cases have lingered so long that the money spent to house them could have bought each a house on the outside. Sometimes, more than one.

Gene Lewis has spent 11 1/2 years awaiting trial on charges he helped kill two men during a Harvey robbery. The extra 9 1/2 years behind bars equates to more than \$700,000 in additional costs to taxpayers.

"I don't believe that the average citizen knows what their tax dollars are going to," Lewis told the Tribune last year.

"They're paying a lot of money for this system."

For defendants who are found guilty, the time they spent in Cook County Jail is counted toward their prison sentence. That reduces the time they serve in state prison, the costs of which are split among all Illinois taxpayers.

So county residents, who fund the jail, wind up paying far more than they should to keep those people locked up.

Then there is a cost -- far beyond money -- for those who hadn't actually killed anyone.

In the past decade, a fifth of murder defendants in Cook County -- more than 350 -- were not found guilty of anything before being released, prosecutors' data shows, whether authorities determined they were innocent, they won at trial or a case otherwise was dropped.

Even if they avoided conviction, they still paid a steep price: years of lost freedom, separation from family and friends, suffering the deaths of loved ones to whom they never got to say goodbye.

After their release, they must rebuild lives while coping with the memories of being locked away for years, bunking on thin mattresses with relative strangers -- many of them also accused of serious crimes -- in small spaces that

defendants complain are chilly in the winter and sweaty in the summer.

Innocent or guilty, the longer that cases drag on with no end in sight, the likelier it is that detainees experience a decline in mental health and engage in more misbehavior -- a trend noted by the Cook County sheriff's office.

"When you're in this unending loop of hell, where ... you're here forever, and no one knows when you're going to get out, it creates all these other issues," Dart said.

TWO SIDES OF DESPAIR

Zeron Moody has been jailed since June 2017. It has been nearly six years since police said he stole a car, then teamed up with another man to spray at least 16 bullets at a group in a West Side park, killing one and wounding another.

As Moody's case has lingered, his jail disciplinary citations rose from a combined eight in 2018 and 2019, to 11 each in 2020 and 2021, to 30 last year.

That includes allegations Moody repeatedly exposed himself to female jail workers in the past two years, leading to five misdemeanor charges on top of his murder case. He's denied the charges but now must wear a specially constructed green jumpsuit that restricts access to his groin.

Last year, he filed two federal lawsuits claiming deputies assaulted him. One was dismissed; the other is still pending.

In September his attorney, Matt McQuaid, told the judge that Moody's mental health had "deteriorated" with county doctors from Cermak Health Services "drugging him, sticking him back in (the jail) and leaving him alone."

Two days after that hearing, Moody spoke with the Tribune. In an interview from jail, Moody said he had worsening depression after being jailed so long without resolution to his case. He said others with long waits deal with similar struggles.

"I'm around mostly people that's fighting the type of case that I'm fighting. So a lot of the guys lose their mind, lose their cool. It's all part of the depression of being held here, held captive for so long," he told a reporter.

In mid-October, jail records show, a handcuffed Moody pulled away from a deputy, went limp and fell down a flight of stairs. He was taken away on a stretcher.

After returning from Cermak's jail clinic, Moody wrote on a jail disciplinary sheet: "I throw myself down the stairs. It was self harm."

Moody and a co-defendant are accused of killing college student Fontaine Sanders just a few days before Sanders turned 20. Sanders had just finished a game of pickup basketball at Franklin Park in North Lawndale; he called his mom, Bornds, to say he was coming home.

Two men leaped out of a nearby Pontiac and started firing into the crowded park. Sanders, who was about to graduate from college, was shot in the head. He was taken off life support the next day, Bornds said.

Police and prosecutors said Sanders had no gang ties but was in a group walking in an area controlled by the "Fly Boys" gang, which at the time was feuding with Moody's "Cali Boys" gang.

Bornds said she still has no idea why her only child was shot.

She's been left with grief invading her life in ways she couldn't have imagined.

She's channeled some of her pain for good: donating money she used to spend on her son's birthday for scholarships for neighborhood kids, starting a support group for grieving families and holding a memorial basketball game every April in the park where her son was killed.

But the hair stylist still can't work a full day like she used to do -- not without risking a panic attack. She doesn't drive far anymore, because her concentration drifts; her mind goes blank out of nowhere.

Despite all that, she goes to court as often as she can to keep tabs on her son's case: "I have to be the face of my baby."

LONG-STALLED CASE

Her hope for justice seemed promising in the months after her son's killing. In a city where detectives have struggled more than most to solve murders, police made arrests -- first Moody, then another accused shooter six months later. At a handful of more substantive hearings sprinkled throughout the case, prosecutors laid out a string of evidence

they said they had: Three witnesses identifying Moody as one of the two shooters. Two other witnesses, a fingerprint and DNA tying him to the stolen car used in the shooting.

But it took more than two years for all the evidence to be assembled, court records show. By then, the case had a new judge -- the first one was voted out of office -- and a new defense attorney.

The second judge set a trial date but got busy with another case; then COVID hit, halting all jury trials for about a year.

In January 2021, as courtrooms were preparing to reopen for jury trials, the judge scheduled a hearing two months later to talk about holding a jury trial: "You're in the top three, top two of the cases that I'm looking to get tried and disposed of."

But, after ruling on one pretrial motion, the judge put off hearing arguments on another defense motion until after a trial date was set -- "just because things are crazy here as far as trying to get things done."

Things did get crazier.

The case stalled amid late-emerging questions about whether a prosecutor had unfairly pressured a grand jury witness, and then because the judge got removed from the bench over his own allegations of misconduct.

As the case limped along last year with fill-in judges, the case's lead prosecutor left the office, leaving his replacement to get up to speed as Moody continued his wait in the jail's Division 9.

One of the judges who used to fill in, Judge Laura Ayala-Gonzalez, officially took over the case in recent months.

One morning in late March, she was set to hear multiple lingering pretrial motions, one pending for more than a year. But during a lull between cases that morning, a prosecutor told Ayala-Gonzalez they wouldn't be able to argue their side that day.

"Well, that's unbelievable. I'm ready," Ayala-Gonzalez said in a stern voice, before it quickly softened.

"I'm kidding!" she clarified, and the courtroom's more easygoing vibe was restored. Moments later, when the case was formally called over Zoom, she scheduled another hearing at which the parties would decide when to argue the motions.

As of early April, no trial date had been set.

Bornds -- now a more seasoned veteran of the courthouse -- continues to wait.

She used to mentally blank out every time she saw the two defendants paraded into hearings, she said. Her brain would stop processing the words being said in court. Time would freeze.

Now that she's more used to the courthouse, the players, the routine, that numbness has been replaced by a deeper, burning frustration at the system itself, lumbering along, month after month, with little progress.

She offers one word to describe the process: disgusting. Then she elaborates: Every time the courthouse players meet and do little, her emotional wound reopens.

"You continue to squeeze my sore. You continue to make what hurts, hurt worse," she said.

"You went to school to do a job that was supposed to bring justice and fairness and all this," she said. "But when you drag a family through this for these amount of years, you're not doing your job."

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Part 2: Wednesday: The root causes of delays

Part 3: April 16: Judges choose their own pace

Part 4: April 17: Long-ignored solution

CAPTION: Photo: Above: Sitting in a holding cell at the Leighton Criminal Court Building in Chicago, Michael Laster waits for the 83rd court appearance in his case, held in October. Laster opted to cut a plea deal at his 86th appearance. ; Photo: Timothy Evans ; Photo: Zeron Moody waits in a basement holding cell at Cook County Jail before walking to the Leighton Criminal Court Building in October. ; Photo: Corniki Bornds, right, has donated money for scholarships in honor of her son, Fontaine Sanders, who was killed in 2017 at age 19. Here, she is attending an award ceremony in 2021. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE ; Photo: The Leighton Criminal Court

Building is commonly known as "26th Street" or "26th and Cal" for its location on California Avenue. ; Photo: The gallery inside Courtroom 201, one of the smaller "fishbowl" courtrooms at Leighton, is separated from the action by thick tinted glass. Audio is piped in through speakers. ; Photo: Detainee Michael Laster goes through a security scan at Cook County Jail before heading to a court appearance in October. ; Photo: "Honestly, it gets tiresome to go out every month, or two months, and not have any results, or any new updates," Laster told the Tribune in September. ; Photo: People wait in a security line at the Leighton Criminal Court Building in January. ; Photo: Zeron Moody walks to the Leighton Criminal Court Building for an October hearing that wound up being postponed. ; Photo: Detainees look outside from a recreation area in Cook County Jail's Division 9 in October. ; Photos by Brian Cassella, Chicago Tribune\ ; Graphic: MEDIAN YEARS TO RESOLVE A MURDER CASE, BY YEAR COMPLETED ; Even before the pandemic, Cook County saw a notable increase in the median number of years it took to complete murder cases. But delays worsened during the pandemic. ; 2011: 2.9 ; 2012: 3.0 ; 2013: 3.5 ; 2014: 3.3 ; 2015: 3.1 ; 2016: 3.5 ; 2017: 3.4 ; 2018: 3.6 ; 2019: 3.7 ; 2020: Pandemic: 3.8 ; 2021: Pandemic: 4.2 ; 2022: Pandemic: 4.7 ; Median means that half of cases took more time and half took less. Murder category does not include some homicides categorized as lesser felonies, such as second-degree murder or conspiracy to commit murder. ; Chart: Joe Mahr | Source: Tribune analysis of Cook County state's attorney data ; Created with Datawrapper\ ; Graphic: COOK COUNTY LAGS ON HOMICIDE CASES ; A 2020 study found larger court systems completed up to 71% of homicide cases within a year. Cook County did not participate in the research, but a Tribune analysis found the system rarely hit that mark. ; Milwaukee WI: 71 ; Colorado Springs (El Paso): 66 ; Minneapolis MN (Hennepin): 62 ; St. Louis (city) MO: 60 ; Tacoma WA (Pierce): 51 ; Louisville KY (Jefferson): 41 ; Manhattan (NYC borough): 38 ; Pittsburgh PA (Allegheny): 38 ; Phoenix AZ (Maricopa): 37 ; Palm Beach FL: 32 ; Kansas City MO (Jackson): 32 ; Seattle WA (King): 32 ; Bronx (NYC borough): 29 ; Queens (NYC borough): 29 ; Brooklyn (NYC borough): 19 ; Philadelphia PA: 15 ; Cook County: 5 ; Court systems included in the study by the National Center for State Courts had reported handling at least 50 homicide cases. Cook County data obtained by the Tribune is from 2019, the last complete year before the study was published. While similar, homicide cases are more broadly defined than murder cases. ; Chart: Joe Mahr | Source: Tribune analysis of NCSC and Cook County state's attorney data | Created with Datawrapper

CREDIT: Story by Joe Mahr and Megan Crepeau | Photos by Brian Cassella, Chicago Tribune

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