

Summary of the Achievements of the Senior Courts of Belize in 2025

Introduction

On 19 January 2026, the Senior Courts of Belize formally opened the 2026 Legal Year with an Ecumenical Church Service and a special sitting of the Senior Courts, held under the theme “**Digitalisation, Strengthening our Resources in Pursuit of Excellence.**” The Honourable Chief Justice, Madame Louise Esther Blenman, presented the Annual Report highlighting the significant achievements of the Senior Courts of Belize during 2025 which has resulted in an improved access to effective and efficient justice. A summary of the achievements have been itemised below.

High Court Civil Division

- Significant reduction in civil case backlog despite the limited complement of six civil judges.
- Elimination of long-standing cases with the maximum age of extant matters reduced from nine years to three years.
- Implementation of a zero-tolerance approach to delays in delivering reserved judgment, with the strict adherence to of a six-month benchmark.
- Improved certainty and predictability in judgment delivery, strengthening public confidence in the civil justice system.

High Court Criminal Division

- Continued prioritisation of the criminal justice reform through the collaborative approach of the Criminal Justice Board adopted from the Needham’s Point Declaration.
- Significant reduction in criminal case backlog from 10 years to 1-2 years.
- Significant increase in criminal case disposition rates, with judges averaging 32 disposed cases out of 224 total matters filed.
- Increased culture shift toward more reliance on plea resolution mechanisms, with 40% of disposed matters being resolved through guilty pleas, including 65 cases resolved through plea discussions under the Criminal Procedure (Plea Discussion and Plea Agreement) Act, 2024 – with no appeals arising from these pleas.
- Elimination of long-standing cases, with the average age of extant matters reduced to one to two years. Judges are now hearing cases involving alleged offences committed in 2025.
- Pilot Criminal Mediation Project

Court of Appeal

- Implementation of targeted strategies to address delays in appellate justice, including the adoption of a robust transcript production project to facilitate the reconstruction of records of appeal.
- Strengthening of appellate case management systems to reduce the average age of appeals to approximately four years.

Practice Directions and Sentencing Guidelines

- Issuance of 19 Practice Directions in 2025 to enhance clarity, structure and consistency in judicial proceedings, including guidance on civil restraint orders, interim applications, pre-action protocols, written submissions, judicial settlement conferences and the ethical use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Court Proceedings.
- Issuance of 11 Sentencing Guidelines covering offences such as homicide, sexual offences, firearms, drugs, gang activity, human trafficking, dishonesty, money laundering and general sentencing principles.

Judicial Education and Capacity Building

- Delivery of extensive judicial education and training programmes by the Judicial Education Institute of Belize (JEI) in collaboration with various justice sector stakeholders including the EU/UNDP PACE Justice, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Government of Belize.
- Capacity-building for judges, magistrates, registrars, judicial assistants, Crown Counsel, defence attorneys, and administrative staff through seminars and workshops on civil procedure reforms, sentencing guidelines, judgment writing, evidence, case management, judicial ethics, and information technology.

Strengthening Judicial Support

- Recruitment of six Judicial Assistants to strengthen the institutional capacity and to support enhanced judicial productivity.

Judicial Settlement Conferences and Alternative Dispute Resolution

- Introduction of Judicial Settlement Conference as a court sanctioned alternative dispute resolution mechanism to conserve judicial resources and expedite case resolution.
- Appointment and swearing in ten eminent Senior Counsel as Settlement Officers on a pro-bono basis to support the Judicial Settlement process.

Looking Ahead to 2026

- The enhanced digitalisation of the judiciary including the acquisition of speech to text technology for five courts in the Criminal Division of the High Court and five Magistrates' Courts.
- Revision of the decades old Non-Contentious Probate and Estate Rules and the Criminal Procedure Rules, 2016.
- JEI training on Settlement Conferences, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Criminal Litigation and the Revised Senior Courts of Belize Civil Procedure Rules 2025.
- Appointment of more Court-connected Mediators.
- Operationalisation of Criminal Mediation in the Senior Courts and Magistrates' Court.