



SEASON 4 EPISODE 2

Curing “Petty, Everyday Injustice” in Cook County

The saying goes that “justice delayed is justice denied.” One part of Illinois’ judicial system has had an outsized role in delaying justice for decades: the Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court. Home to Chicago, Cook County’s court system is massive, with more than a dozen courthouses generating millions of records. And in the records disarray, residents were mired in years-long delays that cost them time and opportunities. Reported by Mark Betancourt.

Sound of a car door opening and a person getting out of the car.

Mitzi Miller: I’m Mitzi Miller, and this is *70 Million*.

A few miles west of downtown Chicago, there’s a warehouse. It looks like the distribution center for some big box store—huge, flat, and beige. But instead of being full of merchandise, it’s full of records. Important records. Court documents.

Mark Betancourt: Wow, so this building takes up basically a whole city block, it's massive. It looks like it's, what, three or four stories high.

Miller: That’s reporter Mark Betancourt.

Betancourt: You can see white banker's boxes stacked up inside.

Miller: Behind the doors is a three dimensional maze of shelving, floor to ceiling, held up by yellow scaffolding. On the shelves: more than half a million boxes of court files. Mark went to see the warehouse because it’s the main storage site of the Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court. The clerk isn’t exactly a high-profile office, but it’s actually the administrative heart of the legal system. It keeps track of every court record, every court decision, every petition filed—from criminal case records to divorce papers to evictions to traffic tickets. The Cook County court system is huge, with more than a dozen courthouses and hundreds of judges spread out around the county.

Betancourt: This building is meant to house up to two million boxes of records, with 43,000 new boxes generated by the court every year.

Miller: Those records are not just paper. Every one of them represents an event in somebody’s life, sometimes a big one: losing custody of a child, getting convicted of a crime, getting exonerated.

And a lot can go wrong if court documents get messed up.

In Mississippi, a woman went to jail after a court employee mistakenly thought she had missed a hearing. Defendants in Louisville, Kentucky weren't getting notices of their hearing date until after it had passed. A Pennsylvania man stayed in prison an extra 17 months past his release date after his file was mixed up with another prison inmate with the same last name. All clerical errors. And they were happening in Cook County, too—all the time.

We often think about justice reform in terms of big social movements with a lot of protests and community organizing. But sometimes there are opportunities for reform hidden in plain sight. In the case of the circuit court clerk's office, so much hinges on just electing the right person to lead it. For a long time, the machinery of record-keeping in Cook County was broken, and it amounted to a constant, widespread miscarriage of justice. But it was just quiet enough that most people—including many of the voters who kept it going—didn't even notice.

Here's Mark.

Adam Kaney: Hey, Mark.

Betancourt: Hey!

Kaney: Nice to meet you.

Betancourt: I meet Adam Kaney at his office in downtown Chicago. It's narrow and full of cubicles, but it's tidy, and dead quiet. Almost everyone works from home because of the pandemic.

Betancourt: This is Cabrini Green Legal Aid. It's a [non-profit](#) that represents people who can't afford a lawyer. Adam leads the criminal defense team.

Kaney: We focus on all clients who have criminal backgrounds, whether they're facing a current criminal issue in court right now with a pending case or if it's collateral consequences that happened afterwards, whether it be family, clearing their record, of course.

Betancourt: You can see collateral consequences in all the ways the legal system can impact someone's life even if they're never convicted of a crime: time in jail or on house arrest, waiting for a trial. People miss a lot of work, and can lose their jobs, just waiting for their day in court. Some wait years in prison for the chance to prove they're innocent. Resolving legal issues takes time, and the more time it takes, the more likely the collateral consequences.

Kaney: When the system works at a turtle's pace, of course, you're going to get cynical about it. As an attorney, I get cynical about it because I, you know, I feel for the clients that we serve.

Betancourt: I interviewed several lawyers in Cook County for this story, and they all talked about this cynicism--like they feel they have to spend a lot of time and energy propping up a broken legal system, instead of ensuring their clients get justice. And it's demoralizing. Adam says that's especially true with expungement. People can get certain kinds of arrests or cases removed from their public record, so they can do things like apply for jobs or housing or get custody of their kids. For years, that process has been especially slow-moving in Cook County.

Kaney: They were filing their petitions and we were telling them that they're going to be waiting

six months to nearly a year for their day in court. They need to work now. You know, they need housing now. They need, you know, access to their children now.

Betancourt: Expungements are all about paperwork, which means the clerk's office is [especially important](#) to the process.

Kaney: I equate the clerk's office to like a referee in a sports game. You know that they're doing a good job when you don't really even notice that they're there. Right? So if I don't need to deal with the clerk, then they're doing their job.

Betancourt: Though it may sound like a single person works there, the clerk's office is a sprawling organization, with more than 1,100 employees. There's a big headquarters in downtown Chicago, and then there are clerks in every courthouse in the county. That's where they store current records. That massive warehouse, that's where they store records from older cases. None of that geography would matter to Adam if he didn't have to file paperwork in person.

Kaney: I can't tell you how many hours I'd spend on the road in a given year, which is time that I could have been sitting at my desk doing the work.

Betancourt: He's done so much driving because for years Cook County [had no way to file or access](#) criminal court documents online.

Kaney: You have to go to court with six copies, because there has to be copy that's stamped and they give it back to the attorney, and then there's going to be a copy in the court filing, a copy for the state's attorney, and then one for the clerk is, you know. There's just that kind of nonsense. How many trees do we have to kill for just a very simple six page petition?

Betancourt: We're talking about a system with [more than a million cases](#) filed every year. With all that paper getting shuffled around, things get mixed up. Adam told me about one expungement case that should have been simple.

Kaney: I went to the courthouse and they said that the file was not at their office.

Betancourt: To even start on this case, Adam needed its case file: the official record of the case's existence, and what had been done in court so far.

Kaney: And I've been practicing for the better part of ten years, and this is one where it was kind of unique, where I had to sort of file a motion without a court file to refer to or for the judge to refer to.

Darnell Higgins: The physical file wasn't wasn't there.

Betancourt: This is Darnell Higgins. This was his case. And that missing file was from a life he'd left behind a long time ago.

Higgins: I had a very eventful childhood coming up far as with the law.

Betancourt: Darnell grew up on Chicago's south side. Now he lives in Blue Island, a southern suburb, on a quiet block. We talked on his back deck under one of those screened-in tents. Inside, he set up a TV and comfy patio furniture.

Higgins: In the '70s, early '80s, the neighborhoods were just flooded with drugs and stuff like that

and gang violence and stuff like that. And you become a part of that. And that's what happened. I got into drugs--the gangs I didn't do, but the drugs started me to do criminal activities, and one thing led to another. I had several arrests.

Betancourt: He says most of the arrests were for theft. Something small here and there, something he could sell to get money for drugs.

Higgins: After I got into trouble, did a little time, the judge offered me treatment. I told him *well you know, I know I got a problem*. So he offered me treatment. I took it. And I haven't used or broken the law since.

Betancourt: After he got clean, Darnell worked in construction, laying asphalt. A few years ago, he retired from that job. Now he spends a lot of time sitting in the backyard. He set up a big projector screen against the back fence, and he likes to have friends over to watch TV on it. Also, he and his wife are ballroom dancers.

Higgins: I've been ballroom dancing for over 40 years, almost 50 years actually.

Betancourt: But retirement isn't quite cutting it for him. He wants a job.

Higgins: Just trying to do something, you know, just not sit here and watch TV all day.

And actually, I did put in one or two applications somewhere, and it didn't pan out. And I think I got a letter saying that I didn't pass the background screening, so I quit looking after that.

Betancourt: When he says background screening, he means someone from the employers he was applying to went down to the clerk's office and typed Darnell's name into a computer. That's how they found out about his criminal record from three decades ago. But the law allows old arrests like Darnell's to be wiped from that public record. Depending on the case, each one can either be expunged, which means the record is actually destroyed, or sealed, which means it's removed from public view. Darnell found out he could do this in 2018. He thought it would take maybe a few months.

Higgins: That process started two and a half years ago. Crazy.

Betancourt: The problem started with one particular charge from Darnell's past.

Higgins: I found out I had a warrant for my arrest from 1994 that was still active. It was for theft. And I had no knowledge of it, you know, because I hadn't been in trouble with the police or anything like that.

Kaney: He was going through his rap sheet and we noticed a warrant.

Betancourt: Here's Adam again. He says the warrant was actually from 1993.

Kaney: And this is this is the only thing that's prohibiting us from being able to file his petition to seal and expunge his record, because you can't file with an active case pending.

Betancourt: Adam knew there was no way the state could successfully prosecute a decades-old petty theft case. He planned to ask a judge to quash, or invalidate the warrant, and dismiss the case, so the whole thing could be expunged from Darnell's record. First, he'd need to

show the judge the case file, from back in the day. And for that, he'd need the clerk's office.

Kaney: So I had to put in an order for them to have the file sent back to the courthouse from the big warehouse where they keep all the old files before they get destroyed.

Some time goes by and they're not able to find this file.

Betancourt: Two months go by, then three months.

Kaney: Darnell is getting impatient and I don't blame him for that. So I start pressing to find the file...

Betancourt: Sitting at a desk in his office, Adam shuffles through this big stack of printed emails between him and one of the deputy clerks. He dug them up to jog his memory while he tells me this story.

Kaney: And I follow up with him, asking him if he's heard anything, if the files come in. He replies right away, apologizing for the delay.

Betancourt: It's now month four of waiting...

Kaney: He responds back to me and, you know, he says, *I wish I could build a time machine to go back to 1993 and get this file for you.* He really was a nice guy and really helpful. And then eventually, finally]

Betancourt: Month six.

Kaney: He sends me a very apologetic email. He says that the clerk's office had failed miserably and he's truly sorry. I really appreciated his candor in this. But he said at this point, he considers the file to be lost.

Betancourt: Seven months after Adam asked for the file, the deputy clerk broke the news—it wasn't just lost in the warehouse, it had probably been destroyed by accident. The judge agreed to quash the warrant, even without a case file. Adam showed him the stack of emails with the deputy clerk.

Now, Adam could finally start working on Darnell's actual expungement. But then, the pandemic hit. Most of the courts closed, and everyone had to work from home. And without the ability to operate efficiently online, the records system run by the clerk's office was basically paralyzed. Darnell's case was stuck. Again.

Higgins: I'm sixty five, okay? If the courts, slow as they're moving, pretty soon I don't want to work anymore.

Betancourt: To be fair, the clerk's office is not the only problem area. There's a lot in the legal system that works slowly and poorly. Not just in Cook County, but everywhere in the U.S.

I talked to a lot of lawyers and reform advocates about the clerk's office here, and they all had more or less the same take. Fixing the problems with the records system doesn't require a big societal change, like solving institutional racism. It just requires one official, the person leading the clerk's office, to do her job well. For 20 years, that person was Dorothy Brown.

Brown was a former accountant who worked her way up from humble beginnings in Louisiana to the political scene in Chicago. She was a Democrat, like most officials in Cook County. She was elected clerk of the circuit court in 2000. Over the next two decades, her administration became synonymous with a court system that didn't work the way it was supposed to.

Sarah Staudt: You know, her name is on everything, so I saw Dorothy Brown's name everywhere.

Betancourt: Sarah Staudt is a criminal defense attorney turned reform advocate.

Staudt: The story I always tell is I learned to use carbon paper for the first time when I became a lawyer in the Cook County courts. I am too young to have ever used carbon paper in any other context.

Our totally antiquated court system meant that people's court orders get lost. People can't read their court orders because it turns out carbon paper doesn't copy very well. I mean, this is a very, very basic problem. And it hadn't been solved for 20 years.

Betancourt: Sarah's a senior policy analyst and staff attorney at a nonprofit called the Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts. She knows a LOT about the Cook County legal system. So I asked her, if Dorothy Brown wasn't fixing these basic problems, how did she keep getting reelected?

Staudt: It is definitely one of those boxes on a ballot that people check and have absolutely no idea what this person does, myself included, before I became a lawyer.

Betancourt: There are names like this on ballots all over the country every year— eight out of ten counties nationwide elect their court record keepers. Sarah says Cook County is an object lesson in how that can go wrong.

Staudt: No one was even asking any questions about what she did, let alone, you know, what her office even did, let alone whether she was doing it well.

Betancourt: Election after election, Brown had the backing of the county Democratic party in the primaries. And Cook County is so overwhelmingly Democratic, elections are basically decided in the primaries. Voters who supported a straight Democratic ticket in the general ended up voting for Brown by default.

Staudt: It also didn't help that Dorothy Brown was consistently mired in various patronage scandals. So there were a lot more interesting things about her for the press to talk about, I think, than whether or not she was doing her job.

Betancourt: Those scandals are a whole other story, but suffice it to say, Brown was accused of selling jobs in her office. She was never charged, but some of her staff were convicted of lying to a federal grand jury during the investigation. This seems like a good time to mention that I asked Dorothy Brown for an interview, but she politely declined.

[Music transition.]

In the 2016 election, the Democratic party decided not to endorse Brown. They said the scandals were a threat to other candidates. She won anyway.

Dorothy Brown: Hi I'm Dorothy Brown, your current clerk of the circuit court of Cook County, and I need your vote to reelect me...

Betancourt: This is a campaign video from that election in 2016, her fifth.

Brown: In my next term, I plan to bring in a state of the arts case management system. I want all of the courtrooms to be electronic courtrooms...

Betancourt: That's the thing about Dorothy Brown. Every election, she would talk like a reformer who wanted to come in and clean up the mess her predecessor had made. But her predecessor... was her. And being her own worst enemy—that was kind of Brown's power.

Staudt: She's never going to lose an election. Until her job is threatened, she has no incentive to talk to any reformers or really anybody. And so we're just going to have to live with this level of petty, everyday injustice and sort of lack of reliability that makes the whole system so much less procedurally fair.

Betancourt: Petty, everyday injustice. What that looked like, on the ground was a million little mistakes in the clerk's office. A lost file here, a delay there. And it all added up.

Staudt: I mean, this involves people's freedom. Like, I had clerks write down the wrong number of days of credit on people's paperwork when they went to prison, and they showed up and they were told their prison sentences were longer than they should be.

Betancourt: Sarah says it's one thing for this to happen when you have a lawyer to catch it and help fix it. People who represent themselves may not even know there's been a mistake.

Brown's office was also notorious for slowing down the process of appealing a conviction or sentence. In order to hear that appeal, the appellate court first needs a complete record of the case.

Staudt: And so, we have people literally waiting, some of them waiting for exonerations, some of them just waiting to see what's going to happen in their cases, right? And they're waiting on just basically an office, having the wherewithal and logistical skill to print a clear version of the court file and send it to the appeals court on time.

Betancourt: Sarah says some defendants have waited more than a year for that file.

Staudt: Justice delayed is justice denied. When we appeal something, it's because there's an issue that we need solved. There's a constitutional right that we think has been violated. There's an injustice that we think happened and timely resolution of appeals matters.

Betancourt: It turns out, correcting injustice is really hard without the clerk's office. That's partly because the office controls an important resource for reformers like Sarah—data.

Staudt: They're the ones who actually have information, for example, about how often a violation of bail bond is filed, or how often or how much bail each person is given for each case, or what judge sets what bail—all of these different things. They're the ones who really have the granular information about how the courts work.

Betancourt: The Freedom of Information Act, which each state has its own version of, legally compels

government agencies to share public records—including things like internal databases and reports—with the public. But in Illinois, the law doesn't apply to the Circuit Court Clerk's Office.

Staudt: Calling the clerk's office for data was like was like, you know, throwing something into a black hole. And so, if you have absolutely no way to request or look at any of that information, if they aren't even issuing reports, you can't even start.

There was just reform that we couldn't do.

Betancourt: Even when policies *did* actually change for the better, the clerk's office could still be a barrier.

Staudt: You can be working on reform and you can get all the way to the finish line and you can get the system to go along with you and do it, do the reform. But if the clerk's office doesn't execute it, if they don't actually change what happens about how justice is administered, it didn't happen at all.

Betancourt: Darnell's case ended up being an example of just that. Earlier this year, he got a notice that most of his arrests had finally been wiped from his record, but some of them were still showing up in the system, visible to the public, until Adam's boss got the clerk's office to fix it.

Darnell's lucky, and not just because he has Adam and Adam's boss in his corner. If he can't get his record cleared and get a job, it's not the end of the world—he's retired. But he recognizes there are others out there who don't have years to just sit and wait on the system.

Higgins: You know, for a young guy, 22 years old, you go to jail, you do four or five years in jail. He's got a felony on him, and now he's get out. He's still a young man, a baby. Okay? Now, he wants to make a career. He wants to get to something where he can get a career, and then he gets slapped every time he put an application--his background is what's holding him back. He turns to the streets again.

I've seen it. I've lived it.

Betancourt: And Darnell has strong feelings about having his record cleared.

Higgins: People make mistakes and people get addicted and do things that's out of their character, you know, that's a proven fact. Okay, but after 30 some years of not going to jail and not doing any alcohol or drugs or anything like that, wipe his background or seal it.

But, you know, I guess they don't see it that way. Once a criminal, always a criminal.

Sound of car door closing in a parking lot.

Kaney: *Good timing.*

Betancourt: *How's it going?*

Betancourt: One morning this past June, I met Adam in the parking lot of the courthouse in Maywood,

a western suburb. He has one more case to expunge before Darnell can start applying for jobs, and he invited me to tag along. The case is that theft from 1993, the one the clerk's office lost the file for. Adam's got to file his six paper copies of the expungement petition here, in person, because Maywood is where Darnell got arrested. And already, there's a problem.

Kaney: Um. Oh, this is so fun, I was so excited to tell you this, I looked up his case...

Betancourt: He tells me the case is still showing as active on Darnell's record. Even though Adam got it dismissed two years ago.

So this is that same warrant...

Kaney: Uh huh.

Betancourt: That same case.

Kaney: Yeah.

Betancourt: That you went through all that trouble to quash.

Kaney: So when I'm in there, I'm going to tell them you need to correct this, because I don't want to deal with this. When I go to court to file a petition, when I go to have this heard and them saying, well, it doesn't show in here that is being dismissed. So, yeah.

Betancourt: The courthouse looks like a typical suburban office building, a few stories tall, with dark glass windows. We go through security and up an escalator to the second floor where the clerk's office is. It looks a lot like the DMV. There's a long counter, with plexiglass barriers to protect the staff from coronavirus germs. We walk up and we're greeted by an employee named Alex Devine.

Kaney: I'm just filing a petition to expunge for my client.

Alex Devine: How many cases?

Kaney: It's just one.

Devine: Oh, OK, cool.

Kaney: Yeah. And can you look this up in the system? I have six copies here. And I came to--in April of 2019...

Betancourt: Adam explains the whole ordeal with Darnell's file, and then Alex says something that I think might make Adam just fall on the floor with exasperation.

Devine: Well, the problem is this file is so old we would have to dig it up from the basement cause it's an old file?

Kaney: Yeah.

Devine: So we would have to see if it's in the basement or possibly in the warehouse.

Kaney: Right...

Betancourt: The warehouse. Alex says she'll work on it, and asks us to wait out in the hall. Adam is surprisingly optimistic.

Kaney: You know, just as we as we're here, um, in the last five minutes, I think this place is looking nice and efficient and clean and organized. And, uh, it looks different from what I remember, to be honest. So.

Betancourt: Wow, it's interesting. That it's like visibly more efficient.

Kaney: Yes. Yeah, it is. So I'm pleased. I like what I see.

Betancourt: In a way, Adam is testing the waters right now. He's looking for some sign that the records system is getting better. That's because in 2020, something changed at the clerk's office. Dorothy Brown [did not run for reelection](#).

Betancourt: She ran instead for mayor of Chicago, but was disqualified for not filing the right paperwork. So, with four other Democrats running for circuit court clerk, the primary became about who could turn the office around.

Forum moderator: Senator Martinez.

Iris Martinez: Thank you, good morning everyone.

Betancourt: This is from a candidates forum in early 2020.

Martinez: My intentions are first day when I get there is to call for an audit of the complete system, the whole Cook County clerk's office. I think it's important that we get to see...

Betancourt: Iris Martinez was the underdog in the primary. The Democratic Party backed another candidate, who also raised the most money. Martinez had been a state senator for years, but she was the only candidate who wasn't a lawyer. She had heard about problems in the clerk's office through her constituents.

Martinez: I was close to thinking, well, maybe I'm going to retire. But, the more I worked in the community, the more as a senator, the more people that walked into my office and talk about the lack of transparency. And there was a big black cloud over this office from my predecessor. I decided, you know, I'm going to run, see what chances I can take. I had decided, at this point, time for me to press it on.

Betancourt: And she won. She says voters knew her from her years serving as a senator, and she thinks it helped that she was the only woman running. Once she was sworn in, she had her work cut out for her, starting with the main downtown clerk's office. One of her staff showed me a long hallway that was littered with boxes when Martinez first got there.

Patrick Hanlon: Before even taken the oath of office, boatload of pallets of boxes were sent to the warehouse. And it was still crowded and problematic.

Betancourt: I met up with Martinez in her corner office overlooking downtown Chicago. When I walked in, she reached across her giant desk, bracelets jangling, to shake my hand. I asked her about her first day on the job.

Martinez: I had to be, you know, to come into a workplace where not– I went from having three

employees, basically the last 20 or even almost 40 years of my life, to now having almost fifteen hundred employees coming into a pandemic, what all the you know, all these things that were right there that we had to deal with, you know, we came into the perfect storm.

And, you know, here I am six months into this job, and it's been a real eye opener. It's been on-the-job training, but feeling really good about making those changes of the things that I heard when I was a senator.

Betancourt: Even though she didn't work in the system, Martinez seems to understand why the clerk's office was causing so much hardship.

Martinez: It's somebody's life in your hands when you have that paperwork. And to me, it's very important that we treat that as if it's our own, one of our own. We have to.

Betancourt: So far, Martinez says she's mostly focused on hiring enough people, and the right people, to make the office work properly. She acknowledges she and her team are still trying to get their bearings. Sarah Staudt and other advocates in town are trying to help with that.

Staudt: We're now in a place where we can say, oh, wait, *if this actually worked, justice could be so much more efficient, justice could be so much fairer.* And we could fix so many things with just one change in one office.

Betancourt: A coalition of advocacy organizations Sarah works with has put together a detailed report on everything Martinez could do to fix the clerk's office. One big priority on that list? Public access to data.

During her campaign, Martinez promised to pass a bill in the state legislature making the clerk's office subject to FOIA—the Freedom of Information Act—partly to make it possible for the public to keep tabs on how the office works. Martinez hasn't been able to get the FOIA bill passed, but Sarah says she could share the data anyway.

Staudt: We are relying on sort of the the good graces of whoever the clerk is to really be transparent, and be not just transparent about what her office does, but be a partner in transparency about the justice system, about the substance of what's in those computers, what's happening. It's just a huge opportunity for her to to really be a partner with advocates and make the system better.

Betancourt: For now, Martinez is not willing to say she'll voluntarily share all that data.

Martinez: That's something I have to still continue to look at, you know, and something that I am not going to subject myself to a lawsuit or anything because we gave information out that we should not have. Again, we're the records keeper. You know what I mean? And there is, I will share whatever needs to be shared if it is permitted by the law.

I am about opening this office to transparency. But there are certain things legally that you have to be very careful with.

Betancourt: As for getting the system working efficiently again, Martinez says she's working on it. For one thing, she's setting up a dedicated call center so people can ask questions about their cases. That had not existed before.

Martinez: We're setting the future for any future clerks down the road, if it's not me, the next person,

but making sure that we're setting the groundwork, the ground rules of what an office of the clerk should really be like.

Betancourt: Do you feel like part of your job coming into this role is to make this office accountable to the voters for its functionality? And that sort of touches on the transparency question...

Martinez: Exactly. My name is on every document out there. People will talk about their experience in any of the government's office.

Betancourt: They're not going to be quiet about it.

Martinez: They're not going to be quiet about it.

Devine: *OK. sorry for the delay.*

Kaney: *No, it's OK. So what'd we find?*

Devine: *Officially set.*

Betancourt: Back in the clerk's office in Maywood, there's some evidence that Martinez is already making a difference.

Devine: *...and you're good for yourself, and a copy showing you that it's a no fee.*

Betancourt: Alex, the staff member who's helping with Darnell's case file—she was able to sort out the confusion.

Devine: *And you're all set.*

Kaney: *Thanks a lot.*

Devine: *You're welcome. Have a good day.*

Kaney: That was a day in the life, right? I mean, we came in here for a pretty routine thing, and it ended up taking us about an hour or so. This is kind of my experience. Now in defense of the nice people who are working here today, they're fixing the sins of the past, right? So, all this confusion was done with the prior administration and the prior staff that was at this courthouse. But they were able to find it, got it done. And we're all set. So I'm pleased with that.

Betancourt: Sarah is also hopeful that Iris Martinez will stay true to her word, and make the clerk's office functional again.

Staudt: If she really does turn around some of these things, she will be helping so many people, and she'll never know how many people she helped because so many of them will just be the people who managed to walk into her office or walk into a help desk, get what they needed and walk out. They'll never say anything about the fact that it went well, but they won't have walked out not knowing what the heck to do and just deciding, screw it, the courts don't work.

Betancourt: If Martinez can pull that off, she may start the clerk's office, and the whole legal system, on a new path. After that, it'll be up to the voters of Cook County to keep it going.

Miller: Thanks to Mark Betancourt for that story.

After more than a year, the courts in Cook County have begun to open up again. And this time, electronic filing is up and running. As for Darnell, he's almost done with his expungement process, he just has to wait for one more court date—in November.

[Music transition]

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