

Miami-Dade judges leave bench to join former judge's firm

Two veteran Miami-Dade Circuit judges are stepping down from the bench and joining former Judge Israel Reyes' law firm, along with television judge Alex Ferrer.

Ellen Leesfield, a 20-year judge, and Victoria Platzer, an 18-year judge, are the latest judges to depart the bench, citing an exploding workload with thousands of foreclosure cases.

The judges have informed Chief Circuit Judge Joel Brown but have not yet sent letters of resignation to Governor Rick Scott. They plan to leave the bench in late January after they finish two major cases.

The latest departures come on the heels of a handful of other Miami-Dade judges who left recently to join JAMS, a national mediation firm that opened a Miami office earlier this year.

"We are really having a brain drain lately," said Ervin Gonzalez, a partner with Colson Hicks Eidson in Coral Gables. "I always hate to lose good judges, and they are all outstanding, bright, hard-working and ethical judges. But I believe in the system, and I'm certain the judiciary will find a way to maintain its high caliber."

Reyes, who left the bench last year, said he was thrilled to hire the judges and boost the alternative dispute resolution group at the Reyes Law Firm. He, Platzer and Ferrer are all former police officers.

"They will do mediations, arbitrations, special magistrates and

insurance umpires," Reyes said. "It's a different chapter for us all."

Both Leesfield, 61, and Platzer, 59, said they loved being judges but have been feeling overwhelmed by the exploding foreclosure docket. Both said they wanted to leave before burnout set in.

Leesfield, who sat in the criminal, family and civil divisions, called her time on the bench "the greatest experience of my life."



Ellen Leesfield

"I've been a happy judge and an appreciative judge," she said. "But the courts are so jammed and overwhelmed that I find it's much more difficult for me to deliver quality services to the public. This was not a snap decision."

Leesfield said she was intrigued by the opportunity to still work with some of her colleagues and act as a private judge.

Platzer said she, too, has felt overwhelmed with foreclosures taking up 95 percent of her caseload

these days. Her decision was not motivated by money, she added.

"When I started in civil, I had 1,600 cases," she said. "Now civil judges have 6,000 cases. The judges in the civil division are overworked and underappreciated. The situation is untenable. They need to hire more judges."

She said she did not think nonjudicial foreclosures is the solution.

"I want to leave while I still feel good about what I'm doing, so I can be patient and thoughtful and the best possible judge," Platzer added. "I feel like it's time for a change."

Leesfield does not want to start her new job until after a civil trial in January involving LeBron James' mother. She also wants to wait to ensure her bailiff can land a job with an incoming judge.

Platzer wants to wait until January so she can retry a long-delayed Ford rollover case.

Ferrer, who left the bench in 2005, will start at the Reyes Law Firm next month. He will continue to tape his popular television show Judge Alex which films in Los Angeles for an eight-week period every year. The show is in its eighth season. He also serves as a legal news commentator.

"It's a good home to join," Ferrer said. "Izzy is a great lawyer. I think the world of him."