

US judge arrested after allegedly obstructing immigration agents



Reuters

Federal agents arrested a Wisconsin judge and charged her with obstruction for allegedly trying to help an undocumented immigrant evade arrest.

Announcing her arrest, FBI director Kash Patel accused Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Hannah Dugan of "intentionally misdirecting" immigration agents away from a Mexican man they were trying to arrest last week.

"Thankfully our agents chased down the perp on foot and he's been in custody since, but the Judge's obstruction created increased danger to the public," Patel wrote on X.

During a preliminary court hearing on Friday, Dugan's lawyer said she "wholeheartedly regrets and protests her arrest. It was not made in the interest of public safety".

The judge has been charged with obstruction and concealing an individual to avoid arrest, and faces a maximum of six years in prison if convicted on both charges.

Dugan was released on her own recognisance pending a hearing on 15 May.

The charges stem from events that played out in Dugan's courtroom last week.

On 17 April, an immigration judge issued a warrant for the arrest of Eduardo Flores-Ruiz, a Mexican national facing three misdemeanour battery counts stemming from a domestic fight, according to court documents filed in the case by the FBI.

The following day, Flores-Ruiz appeared in the Milwaukee court for a scheduled hearing, and six officers from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice), the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Agency arrived at the courthouse to make the arrest.

The agents identified themselves to court officials and waited outside Dugan's courtroom, but according to the FBI affidavit, the judge became "visibly angry, commented that the situation was 'absurd,' left the bench, and entered chambers" when she learned of their presence.

In the hallway outside the court, Dugan and the unnamed agents then argued over the type of arrest warrant that had been issued, before the judge instructed them to report to the office of the county's chief judge.

While several agents were in the office, affidavit says, the judge ushered Flores-Ruiz and his lawyer to a side door meant for jury members leading out of the courtroom.

But two agents remained near the courtroom and spotted Flores-Ruiz attempting to escape, the affidavit says.

Flores-Ruiz, who authorities say had previously been deported from the US in 2013, managed to exit the courthouse but was arrested just minutes later after a short foot chase.

Dugan's arrest came one day after a former judge in New Mexico was taken into custody accused of harbouring an alleged Venezuelan gang member in his home.

"I think some of these judges think they are beyond and above the law and they are not," Attorney General Pam Bondi told Fox News in an interview on Friday.

"And if you are destroying evidence, if you are obstructing justice, when you have victims sitting in a courtroom of domestic violence, and you're escorting a criminal defendant out a back door, it will not be tolerated."

Reaction to the arrest largely split along partisan lines.

Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin, a Democrat, called it a "gravely serious and drastic move".

"Make no mistake, we do not have kings in this country and we are a democracy governed by laws that everyone must abide by," Baldwin said in a statement. "By relentlessly attacking the judicial system, flouting court orders, and arresting a sitting judge, this President is putting those basic democratic values that Wisconsinites hold dear on the line."

Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson also criticised the arrest, calling it "showboating" and warned that it would have a "chilling effect" on court proceedings.

Wisconsin's Republican US Senator, Ron Johnson, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: "I would advise everyone to cooperate with federal law enforcement and not endanger them and the public by obstructing their efforts to arrest criminals and illegal aliens."

Dugan was first elected as a judge in 2016, and was re-elected to a second six-year term in 2022.

Judicial elections in Wisconsin are non-partisan, however Dugan was endorsed by Milwaukee's Democratic mayor.

The obstruction charge carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, while the concealment charges can be punished by up to one year in prison and a \$100,000 fine.

In 2019, during the first Trump administration, a judge in Massachusetts was arrested after she allowed an undocumented immigrant defendant to retrieve property from a lockup in the courtroom. The immigrant then left the courtroom.

Judge Shelley M Richmond Joseph was charged with obstruction, but the charges were dropped in 2022, although she still faces an ongoing ethics complaint stemming from the incident.