

Copyright 1997 The Daily Record Co.

The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD.)

September 10, 1997, Wednesday

SECTION: Pg. 17

LENGTH: 562 words

HEADLINE: Grand Jury Eyes Nuisance Crimes Probe Could Pave the Way For Speedy Community Courts

BYLINE: By Alexis Ariano; Daily Record Business Writer

BODY:

Hoping to get a community court established in Baltimore City, Circuit Court Judge Evelyn Omega Cannon has charged a grand jury to recommend more efficient methods to handle zero tolerance crimes.

The grand jury will examine the potential advantages of community courts to deal with nuisance crimes in a speedier fashion than the district court process, which can take up to 90 days.

The panel will also decide if community courts could better ensure that the responsible parties are held accountable for their crimes within the community.

Canon's request stems from a growing protest in Baltimore and other cities over nuisance crimes that greatly detract from the quality of urban life, but often go unpunished because the courts are overloaded with more serious offenses.

"In going to community meetings, I hear people say again and again that they would like the system to move more quickly," Cannon said. "The victims often feel they are the ones being punished by the amount of times they have to go to court."

Prosecuting nuisance crimes more often than not is a nuisance in itself. Going through a district court, the criminal justice system could take as many as 90 days to bring a case to court. Victims are also forced to lose work days to testify.

In comparison, community courts can shorten the process to as few as one or two days.

The jury will evaluate the way the prosecution and court system deal with nuisance crimes, and the effectiveness of delayed punishment.

"We as a society have to be more responsive," Cannon said "I am hoping they will come up with suggestions of what we can do as a system to move more efficiently, so we can have as many of the aspects of zero tolerance and community courts in our society."

The last grand jury study comes on the heels of a report released last week on the city's education system.

The Grand Jury stressed the importance of family commitment to education and recommended the establishment of mentoring programs. In the May term, the jury addressed another problem facing Baltimore City -- the education system. Because Baltimore City school children have the lowest test scores in the state, the Education Committee advocated stronger family support, character education and student responsibility in the education process.

The report called for the establishment of a city-wide mentoring resource office to provide guidance for students who have no responsible family members to encourage their schooling.

"Often, the absence of strong adult support to children means complete failure in education," said Court Judge John Carroll Byrnes, who charged the jury to study the school system.

The jury also called for the expansion of an existing character education program, which serves 154 schools within the Baltimore City Public School system.

"While preparing our children intellectually we must also prepare them morally," the jury wrote, and recommended the establishment of a specific course to these ends.

But while the report stated that schools must be active in teaching students, it also focused on the students' responsibility to "actively learn."

"They asked the school administration to recognize the seriousness of these important issues," Judge Byrnes said. "This comes at the perfect time as the school system reinvents itself under new management and funds."

LOAD-DATE: September 15, 1997