

■ JUDICIARY

Heller to Replace Kaplan as Baltimore's Circuit Administrative Judge

BY STACEY WINAKUR

Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer

Judge Ellen M. Heller will be the next judge to manage the state's busiest trial court, taking over from Judge Joseph H. H. Kaplan as administrative judge for the Baltimore City Circuit Court when he steps down from that post in September.

"I'm really impressed by the work she's done in the civil area," said Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell, who announced her appointment yesterday. "She's got the respect of the other judges on the bench."

Heller did not lobby for the position, but saw it as her obligation to accept when Bell offered it to her.

"I don't have blinders on," she said in reference to highly publicized problems with the criminal docket, including trial delays and discovery failures resulting in dismissed charges. "I know that it's a challenge."

"We have significant problems that people have read about, but we also have dockets that are doing outstanding," she said, specifically citing both the civil and domestic dockets.

Heller, who was appointed to the Circuit Court in 1986, has served as the judge in charge of the civil docket since 1993. "As a result of Judge Heller's leadership, the civil litigation process in Baltimore has been revolutionized," Bell said.

Before Heller took charge of the civil docket, it took over two years to get a civil case to trial because resources were shifted to handle the overwhelming number of felony criminal and drug trials. Now, most civil cases go to trial within a year of filing, according to Bell.

Bell declined to discuss published reports that he essentially forced Kaplan, 62, out of the administrative post he has held for nearly 15 years. "I'm really not getting into that," he said. "I don't play in that kind of innuendo."

Kaplan, who plans to return to hearing cases full time, was on vacation and could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Bell, however, did praise Kaplan in a news release announcing Heller's appointment.

"The people of Baltimore City and the State of Maryland owe Judge Kaplan a huge debt of gratitude for the administrative responsibilities he undertook over and above his duties as a judge of the [C]ircuit [C]ourt."

Bell also thanked Kaplan for suggesting a list of possible replacements, although he declined to say how

many judges he considered, noting that "everybody [on the bench] was eligible."

Judge David B. Mitchell, who was touted as a replacement for Kaplan, was not interested in the job, Bell confirmed. Mitchell serves as the judge in charge of the criminal docket as well as chairman of a multi-agency committee trying to reform the city's criminal justice system.

Heller, 58, graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law in 1977, serving as a state assistant

attorney general for nine years before becoming a judge.

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Chief Judge
Robert M. Bell



FILE PHOTO

Ellen M. Heller, above, says she knows running the city system will be a challenge.