

JUDICIARY

Chief Judge Bell Seeks to Put Human Face on Maryland's Court System

BY TOM STUCKEY

Associated Press

Many evenings after work, you will find Maryland's chief judge out among the people, visiting a neighborhood watch meeting or talking to members of a Rotary Club.

Judge Robert M. Bell has long been concerned that many people do not understand what judges do and why they do it. Surveys show many people don't have a lot of confidence and trust in the court system.

"We fall well below postal workers," Bell said. "I'm not satisfied that we rank above politicians."

That's why three years ago, when he became chief judge of the Court of Appeals, the state's highest court, Bell made it a priority to try to demystify the judicial system and dispel the shroud of secrecy surrounding the bench.

During his tenure, the courts have set up an information office, surveyed Marylanders to find out their views on the court system and offered courses for judges on better ways to run their courtrooms.

Perhaps most importantly, Bell has urged his fellow judges to get out among the people. He felt so strongly about the need to increase public understanding of the judicial system that he gives judges up to three days of administrative leave a year to talk to community, business and school groups.

And he has set the example by giving frequent talks to community groups.

"It was my view we had to do something about it, go out in the community, not to glad hand but to talk about what we do," Bell said.

Bell set up the Committee on Public Awareness for the Maryland Judicial Conference, which includes judges of the district, circuit and appellate courts, to help educate the public about the judicial system and help judges relate to the public.

For example, it has offered training on how to deal with the public and accommodate the needs of the media, especially in high profile cases.

The speakers bureau, a key element of the program, is getting numerous requests for talks by judges, and most are willing to take part, said Baltimore Circuit Judge Edward J. Angeletti, who is chairman of the committee.

"Too often, judges have been looked on as too aloof," he said. "We have been working to demystify the court, to open us up to the light of day."

Sally Rankin, the court information officer, said some judges were reluctant in the past to speak outside the courtroom because of legitimate questions about judicial ethics.

"The code of judicial conduct limits the types of groups to which a judge can speak, limits the parameters of what they can talk about," she said.

It would be improper, for example, to talk about a pending case.

Giving guidance

To give some guidance to judges, the Judicial Conference has developed outlines on more than a dozen topics mentioned by groups interested in having judges as speakers.

Some of the most popular topics have been juvenile crime, juries and criminal sentencing, especially how sentences relate to time served.

When judges go out to speak, Angeletti said, they can face some tough questions:

"How do you feel about verdicts that jurors render in cases where you think the verdict ought to be different than it is?"

"How can you sleep at night knowing you've made a decision to release somebody for a technicality?"

Bell realizes that no matter how successful he is in putting a human face on the court system, judges will always have to make decisions that many people will not like.

"We can't control the outcome of our cases, and we shouldn't be concerned about making sure everybody likes us," he said. "But we should be concerned about making sure everyone feels they got a fair deal."



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Chief Judge Robert M. Bell, above, wants to demystify the judicial system.