

Management, Not More Judges, Key to Solving Backlog — Bell

BY MARK R. CHESHIRE

Daily Record Legal Affairs Writer

The Baltimore City court system, plagued by a case backlog so bad that four murder suspects recently walked free without trials, needs better management — not additional judges — to clear the docket, Maryland's chief judge said during the biannual state of the judiciary speech in Annapolis yesterday.

Although criminal and felony cases in Baltimore City Circuit Court are each up 70 percent during the last 10 years, the system has a sufficient number of judges to handle the work, Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell told a joint session of the General Assembly.

What is needed to solve the caseload crisis, he said, is better case management and more cooperation from prosecutors, public defenders, and others in public safety positions.

"The criminal justice system is just that, a system, which cannot perform optimally until all of its components are in sync," Bell said.

Earlier this month, the city's clogged courts attracted unwanted attention when four murder suspects were dismissed because they did not receive a trial within a reasonable period.

"I was pleased that it wasn't purely resources he was asking for," said Del. Ann Marie Doory, D-Balto. City. "I believe we've gotten our fair share of judges."

To clear the backlog, all members of the justice system must do a better job of communicating and collaborating, said Doory, vice chairwoman of the House Judiciary Committee.

'Inexcusable failure'

Although he appeared to be in the minority shortly after the speech yesterday, Sen. Alexander X. Mooney, R-Washington, said he was not satisfied with Chief Judge Bell's comments.

"Allowing people charged with murder to be set free because of a backlog is simply an inexcusable failure of the system," Mooney said.

While commending Bell for at least discussing the problem, Mooney added: "I'd like to see a quick and stern solution, and I didn't hear one" yesterday.

The head of Baltimore City Circuit Court, Administrative Judge Joseph H.H. Kaplan, said he did not request additional judges this year.

"The backlog is not caused by a lack of judges," Kaplan said from his office. Instead, it's the lack of defense counsel, assistant state's attorneys and courtroom personnel.

Baltimore City currently has 30 Circuit Court judgeships, and they are assisted by four retired judges.

The court has already begun implementing procedural improvements, Bell told legislators, including the centralization of arraignments in felony cases, a stricter postponement policy, and the use of retired judges to resolve the oldest cases first.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, D-Prince George's, commended Bell for moving quickly to reduce delays. He said the chief judge was correct in not asking for more city judges because they already have the third lightest workload in the state.

"What they need is people who are going to work," Miller said. "I think over the years, the work ethic has begun to lapse. A fire needs to be lit."

Bell did request two new district court judges yesterday, one for Frederick County, the other for Prince George's County.

In other areas of the judiciary, Bell said the state is making progress in the areas of family law and alternative dispute resolution. Special commissions are working on both issues, and definitive recommendations are in the offing, Bell said.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.