

# Judge Bell takes court system to public

## He says his goal is to 'demystify' it

By JACKIE POWDER  
SUN STAFF

Maryland's top judge says that the state's judges should spend more time out of their robes and "among the people" to give the public a better understanding of the judicial process.

"Folk do not know much about the court system," Judge Robert M. Bell said last night at a meeting of Annapolis Neighborhood Watch, a citizens group that works with the Police Department to improve safety in communities.

Since he became chief judge of the Court of Appeals in 1996, Bell said, he has made it his mission to "demystify" the judicial system.

Citizens "know about the system from bad experiences, and there are some problems in the system. But they really don't understand what judges do, how they do it and why they do it," Bell told about 50 Annapolis Neighborhood Watch block captains and coordinators at the group's monthly meeting.

Bell gave the group an introductory course on Maryland's court system and answered questions on topics ranging from routine traffic cases in Anne Arundel County District

Court to lofty legal issues.

Lt. Robert E. Beans, who coordinates the Neighborhood Watch program for the Police Department, said Bell jumped at the chance to address the group, which represents more than 4,000 residents in various neighborhoods.

"Once I told him what this program was all about, he immediately, without hesitation, said yes," Beans recalled.

Bell reviewed judicial facts and figures at last night's meeting.

Maryland's court system has a \$220 million budget and 271 judges at four levels, on all of which Bell has served during his 23-year judicial career.

He explained each level of the system — District Court, Circuit Court, Court of Special Appeals and Court of Appeals — and the cases they handle.

"In the Circuit Court, you have your jury trials," Bell said. "That's where the citizenry participates to its fullest extent."

Shortly after becoming chief judge, Bell said, he started a speakers bureau of judges to make them more accessible to the public. He said judges who agree to participate receive "public outreach leave."

"You want to hear about traffic court, you can call up. You want to hear about divorce, you can call up," Bell said.

After his talk, Bell took questions.

A man who said he was a defendant in a traffic case wanted to know why he hadn't received notification of his court date.

"That should never happen. It really slows the process down," said Bell, who offered to bring the matter to the attention of the chief judge of Anne Arundel District Court.

Another man asked, "How does a person become a judge? Who picks a judge?"

Generally, Bell said, the governor selects judges from names presented to him by local judicial nominating commissions.

Another questioner challenged the state's top judge on sentencing guidelines.

Bell said that when he was appointed to the bench in 1975, sentencing guidelines didn't exist.

He said the purpose of guidelines is to make "fairer the sentencing process."

"Are they perfect? No," Bell said. "As long as you've got the human factor involved, you're going to have some disparity."

In response to a question about speeding up the workings of the court system, Bell said the severe backlog of cases in Baltimore Circuit Court has significantly improved over the past few months.

"Judges have started to take a harder look at postponements," he said. "Just because you ask for a postponement doesn't mean you get it."