

# Judges courting the public

■ **Image:** *As citizens become increasingly critical of them, judges have increased their public appearances to change perceptions and to explain law.*

By CAITLIN FRANCKE  
SUN STAFF

Judge Audrey Carrion's usual audience is attorneys, defendants and bailiffs. But one recent morning the walls of the Baltimore district judge's courtroom expanded.

Carrion was on a Wheaton radio station answering questions — in Spanish — for the station's Hispanic audience, explaining how judges sentence criminals and what factors they consider when granting bail.

A judge on the radio?

Soon, that may not seem so surprising. Faced with a public growing increasingly skeptical of the once-hallowed halls of justice, members of the judiciary are taking their act on the road.

"The image of the judiciary is not what it ought to be," said Maryland's Chief Judge Robert M. Bell. "If you have an image problem, you better do something about it."

Across the country, judges are



FERRY THORSVIR/SUN STAFF

speaking in schools and banquet halls and working on strategies to regain public confidence. The system's image has been damaged by the rise of televised trials that lead viewers to question judicial decisions the way they bicker about a baseball umpire's call.

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," said Bell, head of the Court of Appeals. "Judges ought to be out

there defining what they do."

Bell has created a speaker's bureau — one of more than 1,000 projects across the country over the past few years to reform the courts and improve relationships with the communities that use them, according to the American Bar Association.

Maryland's 257 judges are being encouraged to speak to local groups about the legal sys- [See Judge, 9B]

**Speakers:** Maryland's Chief Judge Robert M. Bell (right) talks with Frederick County Circuit Judge John Tisdale during a Rotary Club meeting in Frederick on May 13, where Bell spoke about issues that jurists face. Bell has created a speaker's bureau to help improve relations between the courts and citizens.

# Judges are in motion to improve their image

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system. Bell has signed an order giving each judge three days a year to devote to public education.

Judges have always been free to talk to the public, but the speaker's bureau seeks to institutionalize public outreach — like other projects nationwide.

In Louisiana, Judge W. Ross Foote has adopted a high school in Alexandria, La. For the past year, Foote has eaten lunch at the school twice a month, taught civics classes on law and designed a scavenger hunt for students in the courthouse.

In California, Judge Veronica S.



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McBeth headed a task force this year that traveled around the state to collect data on local court systems and to hear from the public. She sponsored a conference this month with delegates from the 58 counties to develop strategies for involving the community in improving the court system.

### 'User-friendly' courts

In Maryland, Bell traveled to a Frederick Holiday Inn near the Interstate 70 truck stop May 13, waiting through the announcement of an upcoming jamboree before addressing about 80 members of the Rotary Club about various reforms under way to make the courts more "user-friendly" and other issues the judiciary faces.

The way jurists and legal experts view it, the image of the judiciary has declined in recent years mainly because people don't understand how it works. The system has been criticized as cumbersome, slow and biased toward the rich.

But the televised age has brought *motion-to-motion* coverage of celebrity trials and other high-profile cases into people's living rooms. The trials made armchair experts out of many Americans, jurists say.

"People are getting a pretty shallow look at the courts," said

**At the podium:** Maryland's Chief Judge Robert M. Bell speaks at a Rotary Club meeting in Frederick. The public appearance was just one effort judges are undertaking to change their images.

Roger K. Warren, a former judge of California's Superior Court in Sacramento. "The law is technical and in order to understand what's going on, you need a college degree and three years of law school."

"What they [nonlawyers] don't appreciate is that decision-making in the courts is unlike any decision we make in our own everyday life," said Warren, president of the National Center for State Courts.

Warren's center, the American Bar Association, the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators will hold a conference on the issue in Washington next spring.

### National plan

The chief judge in every state has agreed to lead a team that will analyze issues affecting public confidence and outline a strategy for improvement, Warren said. At next year's conference, the states will produce a national plan.

The general consensus, however, is that the answer to waning public confidence lies in the court of public perception.

Twenty-two states have conducted opinion polls and surveys asking citizens about the judiciary — most since 1993, according to

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**Robert M. Bell, Maryland's chief judge**

the ABA. Those surveys have indicated a skeptical, dissatisfied public.

Bell said Maryland will conduct one soon.

This effort seems odd for an institution that is expected to be unmoved by public opinion. But jurists and legal experts say public confidence is critical because the court's authority comes from the respect of the citizens.

"In the last quarter of the century a lot of people who were revered ... have been shown to be mortal," said Byron Warnken, a law professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law. "All of those groups that need to work with the public because they are public-service oriented, need more [public relations]."

Or as Bell told the Frederick County Rotary Club, "The only real resource we can tap is the respect of the people."

When Bell finished his talk, two people asked questions. What did Bell think of television in courts? (He has reservations.) What did Bell think about elections for cir-

cuit judges? (He has supported them.)

"It was great to have him out here," said Charlie Smith, an air-conditioning and heating contractor. "Judges have always been set apart, placed on a pedestal ... This brings us more into focus with them. We can interact with them."

Community outreach and public speaking can have their perils, judges say. Sometimes judges have to say they simply can't answer a question because they are bound by strict ethics.

Warren said judges do not have to be isolated to be fair.

"The idea was to build a cocoon around the judge," Warren said. Now judges "realize they don't have to be that removed to protect their independence," he said.

### Ethical guide

McBeth's task force plans to produce an ethical guide for judges who speak to outside groups, advising them what they can discuss: Don't talk about pending cases. Don't talk to community groups that discriminate on gender or color. Explain the law, not your opinions.

If the Rotary Club lunch is a guide, judges could soon be a common sight to people with neither law degrees nor handcuffs.

"I looked at the faces of people here today and you can see the interest there," said Robert Gearinger, a past president of the club and retired bank executive. "Sometimes you can look at people and know their minds are wandering."