

The Sun

**It's time for a community court**

**New York idea: General Assembly must approve judge to try city misdemeanors.**

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THE CHIEF OF Maryland's district courts has reiterated her opposition to placing a district judge inside the Central Booking and Intake Center in Baltimore.

The decision by Chief Judge Martha F. Rasin increases the need for a misdemeanors community court, one of the best ideas brought back from New York in 1996 by a City Council delegation pushing hard for "zero tolerance" police tactics.

Misdemeanor cases clog the system at Central Booking. A circuit judge sets up shop at the facility once a week to handle felonies, but that is only 20 percent of the caseload. Yet Judge Rasin and Mary T. Ellen Rinehardt, administrative judge of the Baltimore District Court, have consistently opposed placing inside the facility a district judge who could immediately dispose of misdemeanor cases.

Judge Rinehardt has said it "trivializes" the judiciary to locate a court in a jail. Judge Rasin says money and time could be saved by installing a video system that links the booking center to the courthouse. A judge seen by television monitor could make bail reviews, docket assignments and home-detention sentences.

Her idea should be tried. If it doesn't work, she must reconsider locating a district judge at Central Booking.

Yet the misdemeanor caseload could be reduced by setting up a community court. Planning is well under way. The state provided a \$60,000 grant last year for a project coordinator. In September, the Abell Foundation awarded \$275,000 to buy a downtown building for a community court.

The next step is to obtain operating funds -- \$450,000 a year. It is one of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke's stated priorities in the General Assembly session that begins on Wednesday.

That expenditure may be opposed by Joseph H. H. Kaplan, administrative judge of the Baltimore Circuit Court. He wants a judge handling misdemeanors, but in the booking center.

A separate and distinct community court, though, might work best. Its model, the Midtown Manhattan Community Court in New York, gets high marks in the clean-up of the Times Square district. Prostitutes and vagrants arrested for petty crimes have their cases decided in 24 hours and are given immediate community-service sentences that have them cleaning the streets they roamed.

Such swift justice would do Baltimore good

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