

# A caring kind of justice

## At community court, many get a second chance to make good

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Here's the lineup: A young man wearing a U.S. Army uniform and a middle-aged, suit-and-tie professional - both charged with drunken driving. A homeless man caught panhandling and a fashionably dressed young lady accused of driving without a license. Welcome to community court, a loud, crowded venue in the District's Superior Court where Magistrate Judge Richard Ringell offers a second chance to miscreants from all walks of life and from the four quadrants of the city.

Ringell presides over the District's community court - one of the first in the region - where defendants jam-pack the court's pew-like benches.

Ringell handles everything from traffic violations to city misdemeanors such as disorderly conduct, panhandling, possessing an open container of alcohol and urinating in public.

"It's not murders," Ringell said, "but it affects a lot of people in every walk of life."

### Improving quality of life

Rather than simply imposing jail time or fines, community court aims to improve the quality of life for the offender and for the city, and to link defendants to social services.

Defendants without driver's permits, for example, are told how to apply for them; those with substance abuse problems are offered treatment; individuals with mental health problems get counseling.

"I try to resolve matters in a way that makes sense. ... We try to see if we can close the case out in a non-conventional manner," said Ringell, who has overseen the court since its launch in 2002.

### Patient to a point

Those who know Ringell said the 60-year-old Bronx, N.Y., native is a perfect fit.

"You can't have a better judge sitting up there than him," said Dwayne Jenkins, Ringell's courtroom clerk. Jenkins said Ringell is patient and fair, but if offenders appear a second time without doing what they were told, "they get hell."

That's especially true for those who repeatedly return to court for driving without a license - the offense Ringell deals with most.

Of the more than 10,600 community court cases in Washington in 2004, 70 percent were traffic-related. Of those, more than half were permit-related.

Before community court, driving without a license was punished with a fine and offenders were back on the roads illegally.

Now if someone comes to court for driving without a license, Ringell gives them a chance to go to the DMV and obtain a permit. "It's very simple. If you want to drive in D.C., get a permit. ... It's not rocket science," he said Thursday to one defendant, who nodded as if being disciplined by a parent. Ringell gave the man until May 4, noting "this still can end favorably."

One young woman, Ringell recalled, had to take the test 10 times before she passed. When she came into court with her permit "it was like she was wearing her best dress," he said. "For some people it's like the first victory they've had."

Some first-time DWI offenders who come before Ringell are offered classes dealing with alcohol abuse and drunken driving. If they complete the program, the charges are often dropped.

But Ringell warned one first-time DWI offender who appeared before him Thursday that if he returns to court he will be prosecuted vigorously.

"Unlike some businesses, we don't want to see you again. ... We don't like repeat customers," he said before wishing the defendant good luck.

### **Respect from the bench**

When it comes to dealing with what Ringell calls "quality of life" issues such as panhandling and public intoxication, he said it's important to help people and hold them accountable.

"I'm trying to have them see a person in a position of authority talk to them in a way that's not condescending and tell them they have a responsibility, but then help them fix it," he said. "You want to be able to say you tried to help before you come down on them."

One success, Ringell recalled with a smile, was the rehabilitation of a man who repeatedly came to court for panhandling and possessing an open container. He finally accepted the social services offered and now works as a cashier at a corner store where Ringell occasionally stops in to say hello.

But not everyone is ready to accept help. In one case, Ringell offered a man 30 days in jail or probation in conjunction with mental health and alcohol counseling.

The man chose jail.

"When you have someone ... who's really in bad shape we say, 'We are here because we care about you.' Even if he fails, at least he knows someone does care about him," Ringell said.

That caring is exhibited in Ringell's sentences, some of which are more creative than others. Ringell recently ordered a young lady arrested for yelling expletives at a Metro Police officer to write a 1,000-word essay about respect in exchange for dropping the charge.

Some defendants initially think Ringell is "a tough son of a bitch," he said, but that view usually changes. The key to his courtroom, he said, is treating people with respect, discipline and a bit of humor.

Ringell said his intense days in court are exhausting, but worth it.

"You see so many tragedies [that] when you see the successes it just makes you feel good," he said. "You just want to see more people touched and helped."

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