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## Judges Court Community

By Queshonda Moore  
 WI Contributing Writer  
 Thursday, September 28, 2006

When D.C. Superior Court conducted a Community Courts' Forum at Savoy Elementary School in Southeast last week, several judges were on hand to engage the community and answer residents' questions.

Judge Harold L. Cushenberry, Jr., Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division; Judge Ann O'Regan Kary, Presiding Judge of the East of the River; Judge Michael McCarthy, Presiding Judge in D.C. and the Traffic Community Court; and Judge Milton C. Lee of Family Court answered questions and addressed concerns.

The audience was given automated survey tools to show the judges how residents feel about the Community Court System. According to the survey, 31 percent of those polled strongly disagreed with the fact the Courts officials know what is going on in the community; 49 percent said that all races and ethnic groups were not treated equally.

Judge Cushenberry expressed his empathy with the audience. "We understand your problems. We want to give you the tools to help yourself. It is about caring," he said. "We want to turn the people into a community with a whole and better sense of self."

In 2002, Community Courts was designed to bring together new partners and resources that will assist in responding to crime and public safety in innovative ways. In doing this they strive to strengthen the link between the court system and the community. Ultimately they plan to improve neighborhood daily life and the public's confidence in the criminal justice system.

The East of the River Community Court was created in September 2002. It handles all U.S. misdemeanor cases. For example, in Wards 7 and 8 Judge Keary hears all prostitution cases, some drug offense cases, unlawful entry cases, and cases involving simple assault, and illegal dumping in Wards 7 and 8. Many defendants that appear before her have substance abuse problems and lack job skills and education.

"Some people need help in getting a job," she said. "We are proud to say 9,500 hundred hours of community service has been served. Many people come back and say they get a job after community service. In courtroom 214 I aim at helping the offender to get back on their feet."

This Court makes sure that defendants, who have harmed the community through criminal activities, perform community service that will benefit the community harmed. Thelma, President of Fair Lawn Association, had a concern with how defendants reimburse the community.

"How would the criminal reimburse the community if they are unemployed or unemployable when they get out of jail?" she asked.

The judge seeks to administer justice that is balanced between punishment and community restitution, and seeks to provide services that the defendant may need, such as drug treatment or job training.

"We want everybody to know that we do care. Nobody leaves the courtroom not knowing that," said Judge McCarthy.

Judges explained how courts work. The Family Court is divided into six components - the Family Court Central Intake Center, a Domestic Relations division, a Juvenile and Neglect division, and divisions for Paternity and Child Support, Mental Health and Mental Retardation, Counsel for Child Abuse and Neglect, Family Court and Self Help Center, the Family Treatment Court, and the Marriage Bureau.

"Much of what we try to do is resolve the problems that lead to cases. Drug usage and abuse is mostly the problem," said Judge Lee. "Family Court is designed to help families stay together."

Karen Bell, a mother, D.C. public school teacher, and native Washingtonian said she understands how the courts work, but she believes parents must take more responsibility.

"We want to put the responsibilities on the schools and courts. We have to learn to teach our children to obey rules as young children," she said. "If they don't, as an adult they grow up and they break the rules. It is very important that parents get back to being parents."

