

Chief judge: Courts need more money

By SARA MARSH
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Confronted by an increasing and more complicated caseload, Maryland's courts need more judges and more money, the head of the state's highest court said yesterday.

In a State of the Judiciary address delivered to a joint session of the General Assembly in Annapolis, Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell asked legislators to approve \$6.7 million in next year's budget for five family court judges, one each in Baltimore and the state's four largest counties, including Anne Arundel.

Judge Bell also said there is a need for seven other additional judges but asked for just one more, for the Worcester County Circuit Court.

However, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. has filed legislation that would add six Circuit Court judges, one each in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Montgomery, Prince George's and Worcester counties and Baltimore. The bill also would add a District Court judge in Southern Maryland.

Mr. Miller based his legislation directly on a report from the courts outlining the need for additional judges, especially in Circuit Courts, because of an increasing caseload and more complicated cases that require more time to adjudicate, said Mr. Miller, D-Prince George's.

If approved, his bill — which hasn't been scheduled for a hearing yet — would take effect July 1.

Circuit Court judges have an especially heavy workload in Anne Arundel County, in part because of cases that result from state facilities, including prisons, that are in the county, said state Sen. Philip C. Jimeno.

"We're certainly in need of (another) Circuit Court judge," the Brooklyn Park Democrat said.

In an 18-minute speech, Judge Bell praised judges and prosecutors for making dramatic progress in bringing order to Baltimore's troubled criminal justice sys-

tem.

He said the progress in clearing away a huge backlog of untried cases is "a testament to the dedication and hard work of the judges of that bench, who though unjustifiably maligned, never faltered in the quest to dispose of cases and in the process, do justice."

Baltimore's judges and prosecutors cut the number of cases that had to be postponed by 32 percent between 1998 and 1999, Judge Bell said. The number of defendants awaiting trial was reduced 58 percent and the number of cases awaiting trial was reduced 51 percent, he said.

Baltimore's Circuit Court system came under intense criticism last year after several highly publicized cases in which appellate courts dismissed murder or burglary charges because of delays.

Addressing other needs of state courts, Judge Bell also asked the legislature for funding for pilot projects in schools, courts and state and local governments that would encourage people to settle conflicts outside state courtrooms.

"The administration of our court system is hampered by a 'culture of conflict.' It strains our court system, overcrowds our prisons and creates fear in our neighborhoods and schools," he said.

"Left unattended, some conflict situations will fester and grow and, far too often, explode into violence."