

Baltimore's court system boasts of making major improvements last year

Number awaiting trial cut by more than half, Bell tells General Assembly

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Baltimore's Circuit Court showed "dramatic" improvements last year in its efforts to address "serious institutional and systemic problems," Maryland's chief judge told the General Assembly yesterday.

During his annual State of the Judiciary address, Judge Robert M. Bell appeared to be making a case for lawmakers to release millions of dollars they have withheld from the court system. Skeptical legislators have kept the money to force the court to make needed improvements.

"You should be aware of, and the record should reflect, the dramatic results the Circuit Court for Baltimore City has achieved," Bell said.

He noted that the court reduced the number of defendants awaiting trial by 58 percent last year. The court also cut the number of postponements, implemented a discovery docket and, for the first time since 1995, disposed of more cases than were filed by the state's attorney's office.

Bell applauded the court for addressing some of the problems that brought on a crisis in Baltimore's judicial system. Last January, four suspects saw their murder charges dismissed because of chronic delays in bringing their cases to trial. The charges have since been reinstated after an appeals court overturned the dismissal.

"I think part of the problem has been a lack of work ethic that has become ingrained," Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said afterward. "I think the General Assembly is going to monitor closely the progress in Baltimore City and determine if more resources can alleviate the condition."

In November, positive reports about the court system prompted the legislature to release half of the \$17.8 million it had withheld from the city's criminal justice agencies. This week's snowstorm postponed a hearing that might have led to the rest of the money being released.

"We look forward to sharing Judge Bell's enthusiasm for the turnaround, but we'll have to wait until the presentation," said Del. Howard P. Rawlings, a Baltimore Democrat and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "I think the judge is correct that these problems have been exacerbated by the need for resources by the Circuit Court and the lack of communication."

Any decision on releasing the money will be made after the hearing, Rawlings said.

Bell also told legislators that he is pushing the city court system to further cut the postponement rate and to better manage its criminal caseload.

In statewide initiatives, Bell is asking the General Assembly to approve adding a judge in each of Maryland's five largest jurisdictions and to authorize 10 additional judges to handle family law. He also repeated his stand against any state takeover of local courts.

"There ought to be a shared responsibility," he said. "It shouldn't be that the state will take it over and that will be the end of it."