

**April 26, 2012**

## **D.C. Judges Present 'State of the Courts' at Bench-Bar Conference**

Despite financial belt-tightening over the past few years, District of Columbia Court of Appeals Judge Eric Washington said today that the local judiciary is "strong" and moving forward with projects to improve court infrastructure, public outreach and the delivery of services.

Washington, along with District of Columbia Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield, delivered reports today on the state of their courts, as well as the system as a whole, at this year's District of Columbia Judicial and Bar Conference. This year marked the 37th annual bench-bar conference.

The event was also a celebration of the D.C. Bar's 40th anniversary and featured an afternoon panel on changes in the legal community since 1972 and how local firms may need to adjust to meet the needs of a more client-centered market.

Washington, who is serving a term as president of the Conference of Chief Justices, said that the local courts system has been "extremely fortunate" when compared to other court systems around the country suffering from severe budget cuts.

He said that the fiscal year 2012 budget approved by Congress and the White House would allow the D.C. courts to avoid "significant" cuts, and was hopeful that would be the case for the fiscal year 2013 budget as well. The D.C. courts system, unlike other state court systems, is funded by the federal government.

Washington touted the court system's progress in renovating older buildings, updating its Web site and developing its next five-year strategic plan. He noted that more than 2,500 members of the public and attorneys participated in court surveys last year, in addition to the thousands of other court "stakeholders" the court has asked for feedback over the past 18 months.

Satterfield said the Superior Court is "thriving," but acknowledged that the court could improve the timeliness of decision-making and scheduling in cases, a major concern among attorneys. He praised the pro bono commitments of local firms but also urged the bar to "do more" to assist the large number of litigants who can't afford an attorney.

Noting the rise in juvenile crimes committed by girls, Satterfield said the court would be looking at whether the juvenile justice system, which was built around the needs of young male offenders, could benefit from any reforms.

D.C. Bar President Darrell Motley spoke about changes within the D.C. Bar since its founding in 1972. In the first year, he said, there were fewer than 11,000 members, but as of last month, the bar had more than 97,000 members and is expecting to hit 100,000 soon.

Other changes Motley highlighted include expanding the bar's continuing legal education programs, creating the client reimbursement fund and having membership in the bar's sections that are larger than total membership in some state bar associations.

"We've come a long way in four decades," he said.

The conference also features presentations from Bruce MacEwen, president of law firm consulting company Adam Smith, Esq., and Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr partner Jamie Gorelick, a past D.C. Bar president and co-chair of the American Bar Association Commission on Ethics 20/20.

MacEwen urged the D.C. legal community to take advantage of being the only jurisdiction nationwide to allow non-lawyer owners and managers at law firms. As an example, he said if a big firm in the United Kingdom that had an office in New York City decided to take advantage of U.K. laws allowing non-lawyer ownership, D.C. should be in a position to convince them to move their office from New York — where non-lawyer ownership is barred — to Washington.

In a post-recession world where lawyer revenues have dropped and it's tougher for firms to make a profit, MacEwen said law firms have to be flexible and more transparent with clients about billing practices and case management. "You can be indignant about this, but that doesn't have a great track record as a way to cope," he said.

Gorelick spoke about the American Bar Association's efforts to reform its legal ethics guidelines, especially on how lawyers use technology to communicate with clients and advertise their services. She said the ABA ethics commission rejected creating national ethics standards, but acknowledged the need for more consistency across state lines.

She said the commission is tackling how firms can better protect client data, how to deal with virtual law firms, what the rules should be for admitting foreign lawyers and when online communications cross the line into prospective attorney-client relationships, among other issues.

There were no resolutions presented during this year's conference, which was attended by local and D.C. federal judges, D.C. Council members and other local officials, and attorneys representing a cross-section of practices in Washington.

Posted by [Zoe Tillman](#) on April 26, 2012 at 03:52 PM