



# Full Court Press



Newsletter of the District of Columbia Courts

March 2019

## DC Superior Court and DC Bar Co-hosted the Annual Youth Law Fair

On Saturday, March 16, 2019, the DC Superior Court and the DC Bar co-hosted the Youth Law Fair (YLF) which took place at the Moultrie Courthouse. This year marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day-long event, where local youth can come and gain familiarity with careers in law. Every year YLF picks a topic related to the law that is also relevant to local youth. In



At the beginning of the day, the youth were able to walk around to different tables, sponsored by organizations ranging from non-profits to the Justice Department, with information about various aspects of the law and legal system. Then

years past, YLF themes have included: bullying, drugs, alcohol, and truancy, and the dangers of social media. This year's theme was "Snatch, You Lose," which centered on issues such as robbery, conspiracy, and fare evasion. Students attending were able to explore these themes through a mock-trial and discussion.

students got a tour of courtrooms and talked to judges and asked them questions about their job.

The opening Speak Out Session began in the Jurors' Lounge where DC Superior Court Chief Judge

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## 2019 District of Columbia Judicial and Bar Conference

The 2019 Judicial and Bar Conference will take place on Friday, April 12 at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center. The conference will kick-off with State of the Judiciary remarks by DC Courts of Appeals Chief Judge Anna Blackburne-Rigsby, Chair of the Joint Committee on Judicial Administration, and by DC Superior Court Chief Judge Robert Morin, providing an overview of activities at the DC Courts. DC Bar President Esther Lim will also deliver remarks on the State of the Bar.



*Chief Judge Blackburne-Rigsby*

This year's conference theme is 'Children and the Law: Protecting the Future,' which will allow attendees to explore the important topic of protecting children and adolescents through the administration of justice and the practice of law in the District of Columbia. DC Attorney General Karl Racine will be the moderator

of the morning plenary session entitled "the New

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***Open To All Trusted By All Justice For All***

## DC Courts Celebrate Black History Month

In response to the government shutdown, the 2019 Black History Month Committee decided to stick with this year's theme and migrate the Black History celebrations to February 15<sup>th</sup>-March 15<sup>th</sup>. This year's theme 'Black Migrations: A Spatial, Social and Transcendent Journey', focused on the movement of those of African descent to new destinations and subsequently to new social realities.

The first event took place in the Board of Judges conference room on Friday, February 22, as judges and court staff from an array of different divisions came together to watch a video of a TED Talk by Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She spoke of all that African Americans endured under slavery and then under the systems of sharecropping and Jim Crow and the myriad of other forms of oppression and discrimination that followed emancipation. She also spoke of the Great Migration north and westward as a way of people escaping Jim Crow and lynching and redlining and legalized discrimination. Her book tells the story of a number of people who moved from the South to the North, Midwest and California to start their lives anew in places where there was less formalized discrimination.

After watching the talk, several members of the Black History Month Committee went in character as one of the people in the book and told a bit of their story. The attendees then formed small groups and discussed



questions the Committee had drafted to spark discussion. The dialogues were lively and informative.

The celebration of Black History Month came to a conclusion on Friday, March 15<sup>th</sup> with a 'Night at the Museum'. The event featured different tables with a range of themes, and artifacts from various court employees' families. Joseph Goings and CeLillianne Greene performed spoken word, each wowing the crowd with the power of their message. Chief Judge Anna Blackburne Rigsby spoke of her family's migration - South to North and Caribbean to North, then to Washington and back North - and how she recreated it by leaving New York to go to college in North Carolina, then to law school and her career in DC.

Chief Judge Robert Morin closed out the event saying how moved he was by the spoken word and by employees sharing their families stories, records and artifacts. He spoke of his work with death row defendants in the South, and how with each defendant, he had them create a family tree. Food and refreshments were served, but the program and the fellowship were what all the participants enjoyed the most!



# Access to Justice in the District of Columbia

## A Brief Overview

*By Kailey Johnson*

If you are charged with a crime, you have a right to an attorney. But what if you are being sued or need to sue someone over injuries due to a traffic accident? In 2004, the DC Court of Appeals created the Access to Justice Commission due to the demand of lawyers in the District for people with low to moderate incomes. Back in the early 2000s the DC Court of Appeals had three goals to achieve access to justice for all DC-area residents: 1. To increase funding and resources for attorneys so as to ensure access to justice; 2. To improve planning and coordination of legal services delivery; 3. To reduce barriers to justice.

In its 2006 annual report, the DC Access to Justice Commission outlined an array of issues that presented barriers for people to access justice along with recommendations to address the issue. Today, the DC Courts along with stakeholders work to advance the goals and strategies first identified (in addition to overcoming barriers that hadn't been previously identified) in the early 2000s.

This continuous effort to ensure low-and moderate-income residents in DC have access to legal assistance is a central piece of guaranteeing equal access to justice for all. This article will look at the efforts the Courts have made in the areas of language access, pro bono and *pro se* parties, from the time the Access to Justice Commission was created, along with initiatives in place today.

### Language Access

In 2003, the DC Bar Foundation conducted a study which concluded that one of the main reasons people weren't receiving the legal help they needed was because of a language barrier. In a civil or criminal court, it is important for a client to be able to communicate with their lawyer. After a roundtable discussion, the study concluded that it was necessary for the DC Courts to identify funding so interpreters could be made available to those who would benefit from language interpretation services.

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### DC Judicial and Bar Conference—continued from front cover



*Chief Judge Morin*

Juvenile Justice Challenge: Recognizing and Responding to Traumatized Children and Adolescents." The luncheon keynote speech will be given by Ms. Vanita Gupta, President and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. In the afternoon, those attending will be able to sit-in on different seminars that cover the topics of: roles of a parent and child, racism in the era of social media, supporting LGBTQ youth, and immigrant children and navigating the law, among other issues.

Those interested in attending the conference, should register by **clicking here** (If viewing online). For a full schedule of the day's events, please **click here**. You may also check this link on the DC Bar website for information: <https://www.dcb.org/about-the-bar/annual-events/judicial-and-bar-conference.cfm>

## An Overview of Access to Justice in DC

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Since 2003, the number of individuals in the District for whom English is a second language has increased. In response, the DC Courts' Office of Court Interpreting Services provides foreign and sign language interpretation for all in-court proceedings and in 2018, provided language interpretations in over 6,000 court events. Information and forms for both the Court of Appeals and the Superior Court are being produced in multiple languages, and court forms and documents are available online in multiple languages.

In addition to language barriers, the Courts have also worked to reduced cultural barriers since residents from other countries might have different experiences or expectations about how the judicial system works. The DC Courts are continuing to recognize cultural differences, and ensure court procedures are clear and easy to navigate.

### Pro Bono

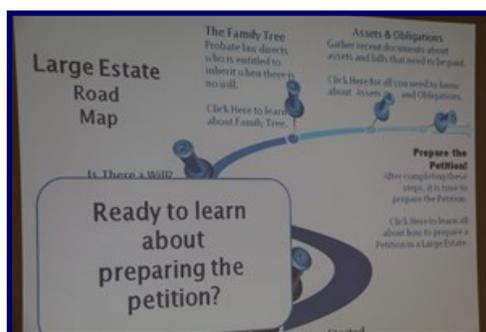
When the Access to Justice Commission first met to discuss changes, one of the issues was the lack of lawyers available to help those who could not afford legal services. Back then only a small percentage of attorneys made a living working full time taking clients who were low-and-moderate income residents. The goal was to find a way to increase the number of available legal services and lawyers for the residents who could not afford to hire an attorney.

The Commission suggested annual funding for civil legal services. This would fund legal service providers and enable them to partner with social services agencies and other community groups. It would also enable nonprofit legal service providers to hire more lawyers to represent clients in housing-related matters, which was one of the most pressing needs. There are attorneys though who don't work for nonprofit legal services, but offer their services *pro bono* in a certain number of cases.

Since 2011, the DC Courts have recognized attorneys who contribute fifty or more hours of *pro bono* work for those who cannot afford legal counsel. Those who are recognized have their name on the Capital Pro Bono Honor Roll. Today there is still a need for additional legal services in the District, so the DC Courts continue to work with the DC Bar, law firms, and other organizations to identify unmet needs and to expand the availability of free, *pro bono*, or low-cost civil legal assistance in the District.

### Representing Yourself

In civil cases the government does not appoint an attorney if you cannot afford one. Many low and moderate income residents of the District represent themselves in civil matters and they often face an opposing party who was able to afford legal representation. Although the Courts are working to pro-



vide low-and no-cost options for legal services, many users still represent themselves in court.

Working with the DC Bar, non-profit legal services providers and charitable organizations, the DC Courts have created self-help centers where those representing themselves can find information. The DC Superior Court has several Resource and Self-Help Centers. The DC Superior Court continues to expand the number of these centers and the services they provide. The DC Courts expanded their electronic filing program to allow self-represented litigants to e-file cases. In the DC Court of Appeals there is now a mediation program for all but criminal cases. The DC Courts are also planning to expand informational and self-guided materials on important court processes to assist users in navigating the Courts.

## New Initiatives

The impact of these new initiatives is already felt, for example, in the Landlord-Tenant and Small Claims Branches in the Superior Court's Civil Division. In 2018, the DC Courts launched the Court Navigator Program, designed to assist *pro se* parties in navigating the court campus and get to the appropriate building and room. Navigators also provide assistance for people to determine what offices can best help them and which forms they need to fill out **[see the Court Navigator flyer in back cover]**. Another example is Forms Help Online (FHO), an online program for *pro se* parties that asks users questions and uses the answers to fill out any necessary forms. The program is currently available for appeals, family and domestic violence cases, and will soon expand to other cases.

The availability of court information and services online will reduce the need for in-person visits to the courthouse. Efforts to expand hours and reduce the need for in-person visits help people who work regular business hours and might have to forego pay to come to court during standard operating hours. The DC Courts are working to reduce the amount of time people have to spend in the courthouses on those occasions they have to come to Judiciary Square in person. The Courts are assessing wait times in clerks' offices and courtrooms, and initiate new business processes and case scheduling practices to reduce wait time.

Along with reducing wait time the courts are also expanding online information services. Applications are being developed so court users can access information about how to file documents and cases online. The DC Courts' goal is to expand current applications to enable people to make



payments as well as to access even more case information, although people can already access case docket information.

## Serving all populations

Although the DC Courts are continuing to assist those District residents who cannot afford legal representation, they are also strengthening their services to those segments of the population who may be vulnerable. This includes the elderly, veterans, and the District's youth. For the elderly and veterans, both have needs that must be met in a certain manner, especially the elderly who may require guardianship and relief from elder abuse and neglect. Since 2018, the Superior Court has been working on developing integrated approaches to make sure that their cases are handled efficiently.

To address the needs of the youth under probation in the District, the Superior Court's Social Services Division continues to provide innovative services, collaborating with local juvenile and criminal justice, child welfare, behavioral health, and education stakeholders. The Balanced and Restorative Justice Centers, which are community-based, will continue to provide a safe space for juveniles to engage in constructive social activities. In the future, the Courts will seek to expand programs such as the Juvenile Behavioral Division Program, which serves court-involved youth with mental health challenges.

In addition, the Superior Court is also working with community partners to continue efforts to ensure that persons with mental illness who are involved or at risk of becoming involved in the justice system are being identified, assessed, and are connected with appropriate services.

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## 2019 Youth Law Fair

*From front cover*

Robert Morin introduced the new name of the Youth Law Fair. Starting in 2020, the event will be called the Melvin Wright Youth Law Fair, named after Judge Melvin Wright who created the event in 1999. Judge Wright returns every year to take part in the event. The keynote speaker was DC Attorney General Karl Racine, who gave an inspiring talk about his hero, Charles Hamilton Houston, a mentor to Justice Thurgood Marshall.

After the opening Speak Out Session, the students went into different courtrooms to start the mock trials. The trials involved a hypothetical case of three young people -- Amiro, Justin, and Carla -- who were riding the metro and ran off the car they were riding on. As they did this, a woman started yelling that someone had taken her cellphone. Several law enforcement officers were on duty near the exit, saw the students running and stopped them as one of them jumped the turnstile. The officers began questioning the students about why they were running and why one of them had jumped the turnstile. The officers then realized that the students were on the same train as the woman who had her phone stolen, and that she had noticed it just as the three students were exiting the car. Even though none of the youth had a phone in their possession as they spoke with law enforcement, the officers arrested all three for conspiracy and robbery, and charged Amiro, the student who had jumped the turnstile, with fare evasion.

In the courtroom, the students chose whether they wanted to take the role of one of the three student defendants, the prosecutor, the witnesses, members of the jury, or the judge. Alongside the youth were volunteer attorneys, to help them know what to say and when, as well as what type of legal language should be used. In addition, a judge was present in each courtroom to advise the student who was playing the role of the judge in the mock trial. After closing arguments, the students who were jurors in each courtroom decided whether or not the defendants were guilty of the charges brought against them. Afterwards, the judges led a discussion about why the jurors came to the conclusion they did and if those in the audience, or those playing a different role, agreed. The day ended with a catered lunch and a closing Speak Out Session at which raffle winners were announced.

The Youth Law Fair is an engaging experience for youth of all ages, allowing them to consider a career in the legal or justice system, but more importantly to think about how the legal system impacts them. Attendees asked engaging questions and answered difficult questions. They grasped the range of issues present in the mock trial and understood the charges brought against the fictional characters and why some of them were found not guilty and why others were not. The attendees – students, lawyers, judges and others – had an engaging and informative day. The 2019 Youth Law Fair was a success. We look forward to **the 2020 Melvin Wright Youth Law Fair**, which **will take place March 21, 2020** and focus on the theme of poverty and hunger. **Mark your calendars!**

### **Access to Justice Overview—continued from page 5**

When the Access to Justice Commission was established in 2004, it outlined multiple areas to assist low- and moderate-income DC residents. The main issues the Commission wanted to address at the time were primarily related to language access and increasing access to services. Today these goals are still in place, and, though great progress has been made, the DC Courts continue to work to enhance access to justice for all residents, addressing existing and emerging needs.

# DC Courts Employee Appreciation

The month of January was a challenging month for the DC Courts. While some employees were furloughed due to the government shutdown, others were required to remain on the job during that time. Letters of appreciation from the DC Courts' Chief Judges and the Executive Team capture the spirit of solidarity, kindness and service that was shown during this challenging period, while expressing appreciation to all employees for their commitment to public service.

According to the E-Team (Acting Executive Officer **Cheryl Bailey**; Acting Deputy Executive Officer **Herb Rouson**; DCCA Clerk of Court **Julio Castillo**; DCSC Acting Clerk of Court **Zabrina Dempson**), it was inspiring to "observe court employees' work ethic, professionalism, and commitment to living our values, despite missing paychecks." They also highlighted "the compassion demonstrated within the Court community, how staff supported one another and made things work." Finally: "The past five weeks tested our strength both individually and collectively as a Court family. We are incredibly proud to be part of a team that is so compassionate, resilient and strong." *The letter from the chief judges is printed in full below.*



We want to express our appreciation to you for your patience and dedication these past five weeks. During a time of financial strain and insecurity, DC Courts employees who were required to work kept focused on their job and our values, and showed true professionalism.

We also appreciate there was uncertainty and frustration for the furloughed employees, many of whom wanted to be here and contribute. The phrase 'public servant' is often used to describe your roles as public employees; the past five weeks showed us just how accurate that phrase is when referring to court staff. We appreciate your continued patience through these final few days of financial hardship. We are also grateful for the many acts of kindness and caring that were displayed within our organization and throughout the community.

The DC Courts are a great place to work because of each of you and your commitment to excellence and service. Thank you!

Anna Blackburne-Rigsby, Chief Judge, DC Court of Appeals  
Robert Morin, Chief Judge, DC Superior Court



# NEED HELP? ASK US!

MON - FRI (8:30 AM - 5:00 PM)  
BUILDING B, ROOM #115

## A COURT NAVIGATOR CAN :

- Explain the court process and what to expect in court.
- Describe your options for completing your court business.
- Help you understand court forms.
- Give you information about legal service organizations.
- Refer you to other helpful services.