

**Office of Communications and Public Affairs
Maryland Judiciary
2011D Commerce Park Drive
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
(410) 260-1488**

[Press Release
homepage](#)

For Immediate Release

CONTACT: Angelita
Plemmer
Darrell S.
Pressley
(410) 260-1488

**Maryland's Courts Schedule "Listening Events" to
Hear How to Improve Access for All**

(BALTIMORE, Md. — June 18, 2009) When courts speak, people listen. But now, Maryland's courts are doing the listening. A new commission, created to improve access to justice in Maryland, is holding a series of 'listening events,' beginning in Baltimore on June 23, to hear from citizens about their experiences when they come to court, and how Maryland's courts can improve services to citizens.

The Maryland Access to Justice Commission, appointed by Chief Judge Robert M. Bell, is a coalition of representatives from Maryland courts, executive branch agencies, legislators, attorneys, social services and faith groups, and legal service providers. Its mission is to recommend and implement changes to improve the ability of all Marylanders to use the courts effectively and to obtain legal help when they need it. It will focus primarily on expanding access to the state's civil justice system, which includes landlord-tenant cases, divorce, child custody issues, small claims and debt collection, domestic violence and other non-criminal case types.

"We hope to enhance the quality of justice for people who encounter barriers when they are dealing with the courts," said retired Court of Appeals Judge Irma S. Raker, who chairs the Commission.

These barriers include the challenges faced by people who represent themselves in court. Each year, the state's courts handle more than two million cases.

"Marylanders are appearing in court on their own, without a lawyer, in record numbers," Judge Raker said. Other barriers include language or literacy issues, challenges due to varying physical abilities, or a lack of understanding of the civil justice system in Maryland and the resources available.

One of the Maryland Access to Justice Commission's first efforts is a series of listening events to learn from citizens about the issues they think the Commission should address. The first event will be held Tuesday, June 23, 6-8 p.m., at the Sheppard Pratt Conference Center, 6501 N. Charles St., Baltimore.

More than 400 advocacy organizations have been invited to attend these regional events and to bring clients with them who have a story to tell that can inform the Commission's work.

"Many Marylanders are forfeiting critical rights because they do not have access to representation or because they face critical barriers in exercising their rights," said Chief

Judge Ben C. Clyburn of the District Court of Maryland, vice chair of the Commission. “These forums are a vital way to help us learn what challenges people face when they access our court system.”

“Many Marylanders are surprised to learn that, unlike in criminal matters where low-income defendants are entitled to have a lawyer appointed to help them, you do not have a right to a lawyer if you cannot afford one in most civil matters,” noted Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, the Commission’s executive director. “What does it feel like to enter the courthouse alone and unaided? Are Maryland’s residents able to find legal help when they need it? What improvements can courts and their justice system partners make to ensure all Marylanders benefit from the rights and protections provided to them under the law? The listening events are intended to help provide answers to these and other questions.”

The listening event on June 23 is free and open to the public. Registration is required. All are invited to provide written testimony. For information on providing written testimony or to register for an event go to www.mdcourts.gov/mdatjc/. Registered participants will be invited to speak, time permitting.

#####

The Maryland Access to Justice Commission was created to improve and expand all people’s access to the state’s civil justice system. The goal of the Commission is to enhance the quality of justice in civil legal matters for persons who encounter barriers when dealing with the courts or trying to solve legal problems.

Editor’s note: A message from retired Court of Appeals Judge Irma S. Raker, chair of the Maryland Access to Justice Commission, is available online: www.mdcourts.gov/mdatjc/.