

NAWJ 2023 Midyear Meeting Panel Discussion Introduction

Problem Solving Courts

Introduction by Hon. Julia B. Weatherly

Circuit Court for Prince George's County (Ret.)

Somewhere back in the 1990's I found myself at a conference room with my administrative judge and other more experienced judges, talking about what assistance the court should give to a new challenge in our family law courtroom, Pro-Se Litigants.

Parents who had custody dispute often called the police, who told them they needed a custody order. So they came to the Court, specifically to the Clerk's office, and asked for help. Told the Clerk of the Court could not give legal advice, the parent was sent to our law library, where they were referred to the Maryland Code and Rules of Civil Procedure, which was not particularly helpful. Now the law librarian was meeting with the judges, asking for more help for people, especially people who could not afford an attorney, but could not access any free legal representation.

The conversation that day started with the judges' reluctance to provide any direct assistance, concerned about giving any legal advice or even information about legal procedures, and a lot of grouching that it was not the job of the court to provide social services for litigants. It was our job to "call the balls and strikes" and preside over trials.

Today Prince George's County Courts have a hard working paralegal unit that is available to litigants to assist in filing the correct forms and understanding the steps needed to get a case into court before a judicial officer. Upstairs, we have a Family Law Self Representation Clinic, which is staffed by an outside non-profit organization and lawyers who can give legal advice to parties. In between those two floors, we have a Legal Advice Clinic staffed by Legal Aid, directed to help District Court litigants in their matters before the court.

Our County has also opened a Family Justice Center, which houses all the services for domestic violence victims in one location. They can file a petition for protection from domestic violence, get an attorney to represent them in court, file criminal complaints, and obtain housing and counselling services for the victim and their children. One Stop Shop. And the Court took the lead in getting the Center opened.



While the family courts were expanding their definition of providing justice for all, the criminal and juvenile courts were also going beyond “calling balls and strikes” and working to resolve underlying conditions which keep defendants coming back into the criminal court system over and over.

Problem Solving Courts are working with their partners to provide the services needed to keep individuals from a life of recidivism. We have with us today three judges from the Prince George’s Courts who have presided over specialized courts. They can tell us about the needs for the specialized court, who they serve, what they do and what they are accomplishing. For those of you who do not have these programs in your court, I am sure you want to hear how it is funded, staffed, and partnered.

First: Hon. Larry Hill - Re-entry court

Second: Hon. Patrice Lewis - Mental Health Court

Third : Hon. Beverly Woodward Drug Court and Veteran’s Court