

D.C.'s top judge: Betts murder has been politicized

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WASHINGTON - The Chief Judge for the District of Columbia says politicians have been using the murder of a popular D.C. principal for political gain and maintains the juvenile justice system is not broken.

Appearing on [WTOP's Ask The Judges program](#) Monday, D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield dismissed calls for an independent commission to review the breakdowns in the system that have resulted in seven teenagers - who were under the supervision of the juvenile justice system - being arrested for various murders this year.

Three of those [teenagers were arrested](#) in connection with the murder of Shaw at Garnet-Patterson Middle School Principal Brian Betts, who was found murdered in his Silver Spring home on April 15.

Satterfield also responded to comments made by D.C. Councilmember Phil Mendelson, who called the system a "mess" and complained that there is not enough coordination between the various agencies.

"I don't agree with that," Satterfield says. "I know that all the people involved in the branches of government meet regularly. It's not as if we operate in silos."

"Unfortunately we're in a political election season and the decibel level is going up and I think we need to stop pointing fingers at each other."

Satterfield admits there are improvements that need to be made, but doesn't think another commission needs to be created.

Satterfield and D.C. Superior Court District Family Court Judge William Jackson agreed there is one major improvement they would like to see: Giving judges more power when it comes to sentencing juveniles.

"We would certainly want more control, more decision making, as to how long a juvenile is confined, as well as their placement," Jackson says.



D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield, left, and D.C. Superior Court District Family Court Judge William Jackson, right, appear on WTOP's Ask the Judge program Tuesday morning. (WTOP)

Under D.C. law, once a judge sentences a juvenile to be committed to a detention facility, it then becomes the decision of District Youth and Rehabilitation Services to decide if the teen is sent to a prison-like facility, a half-way-house, or if they are released into the community.

DYRS currently oversees about 920 juveniles. Officials say about 80 of those who are supposed to be under DYRS supervision are missing. But juveniles who have walked away from court ordered supervision is not limited to DYRS.

The courts oversee juveniles who are placed on probation. They are monitored by the Court Social Services department.

CSS has between 1,750 and 1,800 teens under their supervision and about 4 percent of those are unaccounted for at any given time, and many do commit more crimes, Jackson says.

Satterfield says part of the problem is the entire system is over worked.

"We've had a 67 percent increase in juvenile filings since 2003," Satterfield says.

He points out the District does not have the capacity to lock up all the youth offenders who are sentenced.

"There are not enough beds," Satterfield says. "We're concerned about that and we've expressed that on occasions."

The District closed the Oak Hill facility, which housed about 130 teens. The replacement facility, which opened this year, only has 60 beds.

Justin Karp contributed to this report.

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