

The GW Hatchet

Local court to judge small crimes

by Jacqueline Drayer
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Students facing drug charges from the city court might see their cases dismissed if they complete community service, after the opening of a neighborhood-focused courtroom in January.

The D.C. Superior Court will designate a community court for the Second District – which includes Foggy Bottom – offering an alternative channel to settle low-level, non-violent criminal offenses like public drinking or urination, driving violations, drug charges and prostitution, Judge Russell Canan said Wednesday.

Cases within the community court's jurisdiction would be considered "quality-of-life" cases that could be resolved through social services and community service, Canan said at a Citizens Advisory Council meeting at the Metropolitan Police Department's Second District station. The meetings offer a forum for police officers and residents to discuss safety-related issues.

Common punishments through community courts can include community service or mandatory rehabilitation through a social service agency, depending on an individual's offense.

George Corey, the chair of the council, said University students facing court charges for drug use, for example, could complete community service to then have their cases dismissed. Charges stemming from the Metropolitan Police Department and D.C. Superior Court are separate from University charges and judicial procedures.

Following the introduction of community courts for other areas of the city, criminal recidivism rates dropped, Canan said, prompting the court to create additional branches across other police districts.

The District's two existing community courts were created in 2002. One hears cases related to traffic and misdemeanors like aggressive panhandling, while the other serves East of the River areas.

Senior Judge Truman Morrison, who would act as the presiding judge at the community court, said he is confident the community court will have positive results and "resolve disputes fairly, promptly, correctly."

"Low-level crime takes away resources and time from dealing with meaningful crime," he said, explaining the need for a community court.

The system makes residents feel good about their communities, Raymond Norko, the presiding judge at the Hartford Community Court, said. Since the program began in Hartford, Conn. in 1998, defendants have completed thousands of hours of service, he said.

“If everyone thought about it, no major community would be without [community courts],” Norko said.