

The Citizen Court Academy Promotes Public Trust and Confidence in the Court System

by The Honorable Colleen Kearns Killilea

For eight years a group of law-related professionals in Williamsburg has come together to present a community outreach program designed to improve the public's understanding of, and hopefully appreciation for, the court system.

The program, titled "Citizen Court Academy," debuted in the fall of 2004 and has been presented annually since then. It is based on a similar one that Hampton Commonwealth's Attorney Linda Curtis implemented a few years earlier. The primary goal of the Citizen Court Academy is to provide the public with a better understanding of what the court system does and how it operates.

Why is this important? Why should we as lawyers and judges be concerned about what the public thinks of us and of the courts?

It's important, and we should be concerned, because studies have identified a number of issues that affect the public's trust and confidence in the court system. A lack of understanding of the court system and its role and function was one of those issues. The better understanding people have of the judicial system, the more appreciation they will have for that system. Understanding and education are critical keys to strengthening the public's faith in, and support of, the system.

So, how does the Citizen Court Academy come into play? Unfortunately, many people now obtain their knowledge of the judicial system from television, where there is a plethora of law-related shows. While shows such as "Judge Judy," "People's Court," "Night Court," and "Ally McBeal" are entertaining, they do not depict law enforcement, courtroom procedure, or the judicial system entirely accurately.

The Citizen Court Academy is an effort to re-shape that perception (or misperception) to give the public a better understanding of Virginia courts, and in particular, Virginia's general district courts, where the public, at some point in their lives, might become involved.

Once a week, for three weeks, people come to the courthouse, walk through the metal detectors, and enter the general district courtroom. In the first week of the program, the participants hear from me, as the local general district court judge, Sheriff Bob Deeds, and our chief magistrate. They also are taken on a tour of the courthouse, to include the lock-up facility and control room.

The second week the participants see a video arraignment and bond hearing conducted from our local jail, and then hear from our commonwealth's attorney, Nate Green, and attorney Tom Turbeville. The victim-witness coordinator and the director of the Community Corrections Department also discuss their offices, explaining their roles and their functions.

The last week, attorney Michael Heikes discusses the civil part of district court. His presentation is followed by one dealing with traffic matters where two police officers discuss their cases and bring in a preliminary breath test, a radar gun, and an LIDAR gun so that the participants can observe some of the items that the police use and rely on. And finally, although clearly not associated with district court, Chief Judge Walter Felton from the court of appeals discusses that court.

Along the way, the participants are encouraged to ask questions—and they do. The program's success is based in part on the public's participation, enthusiasm, and interest.

If the program is successful in increasing public awareness, trust, and understanding of what the courts do and how they protect and preserve both society and its citizens, then the public will have more faith and confidence in the court system. Sandra Day O'Connor said at the National Conference of Public Trust and Confidence in 1999, "As judges, court administrators, and attorneys, we all rely on public confidence and trust to give the courts' decisions their force. We don't have standing armies to enforce opinions; we rely on the confidence of the public in the correctness of those decisions. That's why we have to be aware of public opinions and of attitudes toward our system of justice, and is why we must try to keep and build that trust."

I hope our Citizen Court Academy helps keep and build that trust.



The Honorable Colleen Kearns Killilea is a General District Court Judge in the 9th Judicial District. She previously served in the commonwealth's attorney's office in Hampton and was in private practice as a sole practitioner and with Jones, Blechman, Woltz and Kelly. She earned her law degree from Marshall-Wythe School of Law and her bachelor's degree from The College of William and Mary. She founded the Citizen Court Academy, which held its first class in September 2004.