



Citizens Jury Project Report July 2009

Summary

In July 2009, the Citizens Jury Project (CJP) of The Fund for Modern Courts operated Ombudservice booths in seven (7) courthouse locations in New York City for six to twelve hours per week.¹ The primary goal of CJP interns is to provide assistance to jurors and improve the juror experience. In July 1109 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 1161 questions or comments.

This report identified common questions asked and comments made to interns at each site. Inquiries of a particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse were the most common juror questions at four (4) CJP sites in July 2009.² At three (3) sites, the greatest number of questions concerned procedure.

Note on Late Jurors: Late jurors, almost without exception, ask interns the following questions – “Where do I go?” and/or “What do I do?” Even so, CJP counts late jurors who approach interns separately from other jurors who ask “Location” and “Procedural” questions.³

New York County

60 Centre Street: During July, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 86 jurors with 94 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (45). Thirty (30) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Ten (10) questions had to do with postponement or difficulty with jury service.

A juror requested that on the summons, the two-day serving period for Manhattan should be included so people can make better decisions about whether or not they want to postpone. Another juror suggested that, “*They should make a better system; instead of making jurors wait around, they should call them or something to let them know if they're needed.*” Two (2) jurors complained about the temperature in the assembly room.

100 Centre Street: During July, 194 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 203 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (114). Thirty-one (31) questions were asked regarding procedure/what jurors could/were required to do. Fifteen (15) questions had to do with postponement or difficulty with jury service. Nine (9) late jurors approached interns.

There were eight (8) appreciative comments, including:

- I think it works pretty well, all things considered. I am pretty tolerant of old buildings with no air conditioning in the hall. I think it is the most efficiently run government office and I'm very happy they got rid of exemptions so that they have such a large jury pool;
- Kevin (a clerk) is really great and funny! The juror selection process is fascinating - the lawyers ask so many questions, a little much but very thorough;
- I like jury duty;
- It's a very pleasant experience [and] I like the computers. . . ."

Six (6) jurors asked about qualifications to serve. There were five (5) juror complaints, including, "*It's a lot of sitting around and wasting time.*"; "*There's no water left in the water fountain.*" and,

They shouldn't call jurors who are here for the 1st day for a trial when I'm here the 2nd day. I don't want to be here for 2 days for no reason, it should be 1st come, 1st serve. I don't think the system works.

Suggestions included: "*Update the video - I saw it 6 years ago.*"; "*You shouldn't have to serve if it's your birthday.*"; and,

There should be professional juries - it would help society, help the unemployment rate, prevent people who are uninformed about jury and criminal proceedings by training . . . and prevent people from getting upset about being here.

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During July, 268 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 282 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (121). Sixty-four (64) questions were in regard to the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Twenty-five (25) late jurors approached interns. Sixteen (16) questions had to do with postponements or difficulty serving. Eleven (11) jurors asked about qualifications to serve. Five (5) questions concerned the use of computers.

There were twelve (12) suggestions, including that:

- They should give us the juror booklet [in advance?] and inform us that jury duty is two days, because the summons only tells us that it's one day;
- If they found a way for someone to volunteer to do jury duty instead of calling everyone off their job, it would be better;
- They should get professional jurors;
- The jurors should have a choice between community service and being on jury duty;
- The notice should say that you're going to be here for two days; the summons doesn't say that;
- When the lawyers asked questions [during the voir dire process] the jurors should have been questioned in private: and,
- [Court personnel should] have people read informational packets instead of having a clerk explain everything (from a juror who found orientation repetitive.)

A juror shared the appreciative comment that, "*The clerk, Jim, was really good. He was very informative, personable, and he set a good tone for the jury duty.*"

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During July, 141 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 150 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (67). Twenty-five (25) questions were in regard to the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Fourteen (14) questions had to do with postponements or difficulty serving, and fourteen (14) questions involved qualifications to serve. Eight (8) questions came from jurors who arrived late. Two (2) jurors commented that they were unable to hear announcements in the men's restroom.

360 Adams Street: During July, 110 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 116 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (46). Nineteen (19) questions were asked in regard to the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Fourteen (14) questions came from jurors who arrived late. There were eight (8) computer questions.

Three (3) jurors complained that the assembly room was too cold. A juror was upset about there not being a machine to make change, and because s/he had lost money in the vending machine. A different juror asked, "*Can they put in a change machine near the vending machine?*" Another juror complained about the lack of a smoking section, and suggested longer breaks to go outside, saying that ten minutes is not enough time. Someone commented that "*kids listening to iPods loudly are frustrating*" and that this "*should be monitored.*"

Appreciative comments included: two (2) juror compliments on the pictures in the courthouse, and how much the jurors liked them; and, “*Great read* (referring to petit juror handbook). *I’d recommend it to anyone.*”

Bronx County

215 East 161st Street: During July, 144 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 148 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (52). There were twenty-six (26) questions concerning postponements and difficulty in serving, and twenty-six (26) late jurors approached interns. Twenty-one (21) questions were asked in regard to procedure/what jurors could/were required to do.

Complaints included, “*I have a very negative attitude about jury duty and don't think I should have to do it. My nephew is currently serving twenty years and he's innocent--I hate the judicial system.*”, and, “*It's too cold in there* (the jury assembly room).”

Appreciative comments included, “*This building is really nice.*”, and, “*I would like to compliment the clerk on how she is doing a good job in keeping us informed.*” A juror suggested that the unemployment list should be the first one drawn from for jury pools, since the unemployed need the money and have the time to serve.

Grand Jury - Bronx: A grand juror, serving his or her final week, stated that, “*There needs to be a clearer discussion on how to vote; what factors lead to an indictment versus a dismissal, in plain language and [with] a number of real examples. There's confusion on the panel as to how to vote.*”

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During July, 161 jurors approached interns with 167 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (80). Thirty-nine (39) questions related to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were eleven (11) complaints, among them that the air conditioning wasn’t working very well; there were no cups by the water; there wasn’t any water; and, “*The machine didn’t give me back my change.*” Another juror commented:

Jury selection is inaccurate. Not enough is known about jurors. Jury system is really stupid because people can’t make proper judgments. It is a waste of peoples’ time. Jurors come to the decision because they want to go home and not lose money, rather than really making an accurate judgment. Eyewitnesses are not reliable. Jurors don’t realize their power of possibly sending someone to jail. There are prejudices and police corruption and profiling. Judges or law students should make jury decisions because there should be some kind of education behind jurors.

There were eight (8) questions concerning the use of computers.

Additionally, there were eight (8) appreciative comments, including,

- The woman (at the desk) deserves recognition. She has said 'please' to every person who comes up to her;
- The clerk and the older gentleman security guard both have big smiles on their faces the whole time. Makes a big difference;
- I like jury duty. The new chairs are great and it's nice and cool in here. There's nothing I would improve;
- So far, so good; and
- The improvements are great.

Still another juror said that she "loved" the way she was treated, and that the court officials "were really kind and pleasant."

Recommendation: Commendations should be considered for court personnel.

¹ While Booths are generally in operation from 9 a.m. to 12 noon, three days per week, there are exceptions. In the Bronx, jurors are called twice each week and so the booth there is operated two days per week. In Brooklyn, interns arrive after the court's orientation (as requested by court personnel). Interns work until lunch time, when most or all jurors leave the courthouse. Lunchtime varies, but often begins before 1 p.m. Additionally, interns occasionally report that jurors have been discharged early, meaning of course, that there is no one left to approach them.

² Examples of questions about location include: "Where can I get lunch/coffee/a newspaper?"; "Where are the restrooms/water fountains/elevators?"; and "Where is the subway/post office?"

³ CJP maintains a separate category for late jurors; that is to say, these questions from late jurors are in addition to the questions recorded in other categories. The purpose of having this separate category is to be open to the possibility that there *may* be court-related matter contributing to jurors arriving late, for instance, not enough security personnel available at peak times. However, in the past, when jurors have given a reason for arriving late, they indicated that they, themselves, are responsible.