



Citizens Jury Project Report June 2009

Summary

In June of 2009, the Citizens Jury Project (CJP) of the Fund for Modern Courts operated Ombudservice booths in eight (8) 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 June, 1278 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 1336 questions or comments.²

This report identifies common questions asked and comments made to interns at each site. Inquiries about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse were the most common juror questions at six (6) CJP sites in June 2009.³ At two (2) sites, the greatest number of questions concerned procedure.⁴

New York County

60 Centre Street: During June, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 98 jurors with 103 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (51). Twenty-seven (27) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Sixteen (16) questions had to do with postponement/difficulty with jury service.

100 Centre Street: During June, 215 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 232 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (127). Thirty-one (31) questions were asked in regard to procedure/what jurors could/were required to do.

There were twelve (12) suggestions, including:

- *“The summons should be more explanatory; I wasn't aware that I have to be here a minimum of two days. It should include a letter explaining everything that the*

clerk says. Also it should highlight that this is a criminal court so that there would be more incentive for people to come to jury duty.”

- “Make jury duty one day.”
- “This whole process should be more efficient. If I live or work nearby I shouldn't have to sit here all day. They should text me. The technology exists. Also questionnaires should be done in advance. People should be pre-screened. Some people like lawyers obviously will never get picked. They shouldn't have to come.”

Other suggestions included:

- giving out free water bottles or snacks like granola bars;
- that to serve, jurors should be required to have a certain level of education; and,
- again, that the exemption for lawyers should be reinstated because lawyers are never picked anyway (from a juror who identified himself as a lawyer who would like to be chosen).

Eleven (11) questions had to do with postponements and difficulty serving.

There were ten (10) appreciative comments, including:

- “I hear so many people complaining, but I come from Egypt, and in other countries if you're arrested, you don't have access to juries let alone a fair system. The prisons here are like country clubs. People forget that. . . .”;
- “Jury duty is fun, and I like the clerk (Larry). Very good instructions; Larry is an excellent clerk. Also, the seating is fine.”;
- “Jury duty is much better than it was five years ago (at 111 Centre Street). The computers are good, the chairs are good, the clerk's instructions are better.”;
- “Larry is great!”; “Larry runs a tight ship - great job!”; and,
- “My experience has been good; I'm only upset that I haven't been put on a case . I've been called four times for jury duty and have never been put on a case. The system works. It may not be perfect, but the judges and clerks do a great job.”
- Another juror mentioned how the clerk (Larry) is really nice and how great a different clerk (Walter) is.

Eight (8) questions came from jurors who arrived late.

A juror complained that, “There are a lot of outdated signs. For example “TELEPHONES” where there are none, and “NO FOOD OR DRINKS ON THE FLOOR” even though we can eat in the hallways (where the signs are located).” Two (2) jurors told interns that they lost money in the vending machine.

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During June, 281 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 298 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (144). Sixty-nine (69) questions were asked in regard to procedure/what jurors could/were required to do.

Eighteen (18) questions related to qualifications to serve, and seventeen (17) had to do with postponements and difficulty serving. Nine (9) questions came from jurors who arrived late.

There were five (5) appreciative comments, including that a juror was having a positive experience, the process is very considerate of time and scheduling, directions and expectations are clear, the jury duty experience ran very smoothly and efficiently, and everyone is professional.

There were four juror suggestions:

- *“It would be nice if they could write on the jury summons that you’re going to be here for a minimum of two days.”;*
- *“Orientation is too long, especially for people who have served before. Maybe split up first-timers from everyone else.”;*
- *“They shouldn’t make lawyers serve as jurors.”; and,*
- *“Should invite Starbucks to have a concession stand downstairs.”*

A juror complained of the room being stuffy. Another said, *“I was selected for jury duty yesterday and was told to report back at 2pm today by the judge. The clerk however told us to come in at 10am. It’s noon - -why hasn’t our case been called? What’s with the rumor we’ve been hearing that there is no judge selected yet?”* (Two other jurors offered similar comments.)

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During June, 177 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 183 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (68). Fifty-eight (58) questions were in regard to the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Twenty (20) questions had to do with postponements and difficulty serving, and sixteen (16) questions came from jurors who arrived late.

A juror told an intern that the clerks do a very good job and were very informative. Another said, *“I like the fact that sodas are still seventy-five cents in the vending machine.”*

Complaints included:

- That it is outrageous that jurors only get paid \$40 a day, especially with all that they go through, and that pay needs to be raised.
- *“This process is not very organized. The court officer did not give us enough instruction as to where to go. Furthermore, the court officers and judges are not in sync with each other, or with the information. The judge had informed me that the trial would go on beyond the amount of time I was free. I spoke to the judge, and he told me I was excused. The officer however was initially unsure of exactly what to do. Then, I was told to “go back.” Not knowing exactly where to go, I just came back here. This process should be more organized with better specific instructions.”*

320 Jay Street: During June, 131 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 136 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (62). Seventeen (17) questions were in regard to the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. (12) questions had to do with postponements and difficulty serving, and twelve (12) questions came from jurors who arrived late. Complaints included that, *“The bathroom speakers aren't working.”* Another juror complained of having lost money in a vending machine.

360 Adams Street: During June, 94 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 98 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (41). Twenty-nine (29) questions were asked in regard to procedure/what jurors could/were required to do. Ten (10) questions came from jurors who arrived late, and there were six (6) computer questions. Complaints included that the computers were running slowly; that, *“The speaker system in the smaller lounge is not clear enough. I keep having to pop in and out of the main lounge to hear announcements.”* Another juror commented on the computers not working.

Bronx County

215 East 161st Street: During June, 179 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 184 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (97). (29) questions were asked in regard to procedure/what jurors could/were required to do. There were twenty-five (25) questions concerning postponements and difficulty in serving, and (15) fifteen in regard to qualifications to serve.

There were five juror complaints in June. Three jurors complained to an intern that the courthouse was very cold, and the intern heard other jurors voicing the same concern. A juror suggested that, *“They should do juror postponement in here (this building).”* Another juror offered the appreciative comment that he has had an amazing experience serving over the last 30 years. Everyone treats him well and he is happy to do his civic duty.

Grand Jury - Bronx: Someone serving on the grand jury made the following comment: *“I'm on Grand Jury duty and our cases never start until 11:30 am, even though we have to be here at 9:30am, which means we end up staying until 6:30pm or 7pm. Cases aren't getting the proper attention or judgment from us because we're all tired and just want to go home.”* Another grand juror said that s/he loved the fact that there is wireless access, and wondered if there is a spot on the 7th floor (maybe in the law library or in their lounge) where wireless access could be extended to, because there are only fifteen minute breaks, and it is difficult to run down to the jury assembly room in that amount of time.

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During June, 93 jurors approached interns with 97 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (38). Twenty-two (22) questions related to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

There were four (4) appreciative comments, including:

- *“The computers have internet and everything?”* (Said with disbelief);
- *“The central jury room is real nice.”*; and,
- *“I love the improvements. I haven’t been here for awhile, but I like how they have the computers, books, television, . . .”*

There were four (4) suggestions, from two (2) jurors:

- *“I think they should put speakers In the restrooms. [In addition], increase pay; considering the economic status and depending on the case, there should be a \$80 - \$100 a day pay. Believe it or not it is an outdated system.”*; *“They should call us from home and the questionnaire should be online.”*; and,
- That the courthouse should stagger arrival times, so that not everyone comes in at the same time, because it was so crowded.

Complaints included. *“The vending machine doesn't work.”*; and, *“The sound system is horrible; . . . its a little hard to hear the names being called.”* One juror expressed disappointment that there were no change machines.

Location Not Given: One juror who availed him/herself of the CJP virtual ombudservice sent this message: *“While I do think the defendants will receive a fair trial using our current jury system, I am also sure that tens of thousands of other people will have wasted their time while they wait to be screened. I understand it is a system that has served our country for hundreds of years, but isn’t it time to revisit some of the processes? We have developed databases and electronic communication since the 1700’s.”*

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. CJP did not staff the booth in Westchester in June. That location will not be staffed during the summer, and the booth may be moved to another location in the Fall.

² In June, there was a very significant increase in the number of jurors approaching interns, and the comments they made. Because the numbers are so much higher than 'normal', the hard copy forms used by interns to record juror comments were checked twice; these checks confirmed that the data from the computer generated records is correct.

CJP staff has been trying to account for these large numbers. Several factors help to explain them, at least in part:

1) In June, CJP was fully staffed. Since the interns are students, there is a great deal of turnover; even when fully staffed, CJP recruits three (3) times per year. Often, CJP must operate with nine (9) interns, and on occasion with as few as seven, for brief periods. Fully staffed, with eleven interns, CJP can cover courthouses more frequently, for instance for four (4) days per week, rather than three (3).

2) As mentioned in endnote "1", above, the ombudservice booth in White Plains was not operated in June. White Plains generally receives the fewest juror comments. Therefore, in June, not only were eleven interns working, but all of them were working in relatively busier locations.

3) There were no 'major holidays' in June.

4) The weather likely kept jurors inside the courthouses. The average rainfall for the month of June in New York City is 3.84 inches. This past June saw 10.15 inches. (Source: <http://www.weather.com/>, for Manhattan, 10019). Not surprisingly, the number of jurors approaching interns with questions such as "Where are the vending machines?" saw an increase in June. One example: In June, at 100 Centre Street, seventy (70) juror questions were recorded regarding where to go, or where to find things within the courthouse (excluding questions inquiring about restroom locations). In May, by contrast, there were thirteen (13) such questions at 100 Centre Street.

³ 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?"

⁴ Generally, such questions include "Can I leave? Is there a sign-out sheet?"; "When is lunch?"; "Can I use my cell phone/smoke/eat here?"; "How long does jury service last?"; and "Will I get something proving I served?"