



Citizens Jury Project Report March 2008

Summary

In March of 2008, the Citizens Jury Project (CJP) of the Fund for Modern Courts operated Ombudservice booths in nine (9) 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 March, 481 jurors approached the booths with 506 questions or comments.

This report identifies common questions asked and comments made to CJP at each site, along with suggestions for improvement where appropriate, and a set of general recommendations.

Inquiries about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse were the most common juror questions at seven (7) CJP sites in March of 2008.² At an eighth site, questions about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do were the most frequently asked. At the ninth location, computer questions were the most common.

General Recommendation and Note:

Recommendation: Notifying Manhattan Jurors of Two-Day Minimum

Commitment – Interns operating booths in Manhattan relate that jurors frequently say that they were unaware that they would be required to serve for at least two days. Providing this information (or making it more prominent) on the summons and nyjuror.gov website would help to alert jurors about what to expect before arriving at the courthouse.

Recommendation: Notification about the Availability of Wifi – OCA and the courts have done an excellent job in providing Wifi access for jurors. However, as revealed by the recent CJP Wifi survey, many jurors do not know of this valuable service before coming to the courthouse, and so cannot avail themselves of it. Therefore, providing this information (or making it more prominent) on the summons and the nyjuror.gov website would be very useful.

Recommendation: “Red Light – Green Light” System – A juror suggested—and many others who heard the idea enthusiastically agreed—that placing a red light/green light in hallways outside juror assembly rooms would benefit jurors. The purpose would be to alert jurors via a green light when they must return to the assembly room if they are outside the assembly room. If the red light is on, jurors would know they could remain outside the assembly room. A single colored “Green Light” System could play the same role; when lit, jurors would be required to reenter the assembly room. Either system would provide an alternative where speakers are needed, but are not available.

Recommendation: Computer Instructions - Some jurors need instruction about how to fully utilize the computers (i.e. changing webpages from OCA to another web site, etc.) CJP would be happy to prepare brief instructions that could be displayed near computers.

Recommendation: Bicycle Racks – With the improving weather, courthouses should consider whether additional bicycle racks can be made available for jurors. Signs should clearly indicate where racks are located, and jurors should be made aware before coming to serve.

Note: Procedure – Many questions that interns are asked concern procedure and what jurors can and are required to do.³ As the questions do not vary greatly from location to location, or from month to month, CJP will not set out examples by courthouse in this report.

New York County

60 Centre Street: During March, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 54 jurors with 58 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (20 inquiries). Thirteen (13) jurors asked questions regarding procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

100 Centre Street: During March, 55 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 60 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (31). Additionally there were seven (7) complaints⁴ and five (5) appreciative comments.⁵ In addition, one intern observed that computers are slow, and that some of the keys stick (so that if someone presses the letter “j” it might appear as “jjjjjjjjjjjj”).

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During March, 44 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 44 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (27).

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During March, the CJP Ombudservice booth addressed comments from 42 jurors, who approached with 43 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (20). There were also seven (7) questions concerning procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During March, 32 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 32 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (15). The next most commonly asked questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (5).

360 Adams Street: During March, 52 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 55 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (19). The next most common questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (18). In addition, interns observed that a number of the computers are frozen or otherwise not working. CJP has learned that a planned computer upgrade will eliminate the problem. Meanwhile, periodic announcements are made to the jurors with curative instructions, and signs are on order. Interns have noted that the assembly room is sometimes uncomfortably warm. Court personnel are aware, and CJP believes all available steps are being taken to keep jurors comfortable.⁶

Bronx County

During March, 153 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 159 questions and comments. The most common questions (98) concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. There were thirteen (13) questions regarding procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. In addition, one intern involved in the facility review project reported that of forty plus computers available for jurors, only twelve were working. He said that in the TV room/lounge, the seats are ripped, and the TV reception is poor, though jurors were still watching. The intern also mentioned that while monitors do show the orientation video, nothing else was shown after that. **Recommendations:** Because the computer room was recently reopened, the cause(s) of any computer problems is unclear and should be examined. More working computers should be made available. Court personnel should consider showing movies on monitors after the orientation, as is done in at least one other jury assembly room. Seating and the TV should be repaired or replaced.

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During March, CJP interns recorded 33 questions and comments from 29 jurors. The most common questions (16) concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse.

Jamaica: During March, CJP interns recorded 22 questions and comments from 20 jurors. Questions about computers were the most frequently asked question at this location (10). Three (3) appreciative comments were received.⁷

¹ Booths are generally in operation from 9 a.m. to 12 noon, three days per week; the Bronx booth is operated two days per week.

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?” Because the questions do not vary greatly from location to location, or from month to month, CJP will not set out examples by courthouse in this report.

³ Questions regarding procedure and what jurors can and are required to do often 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?”

⁴ Complaints included the following: “The security [personnel] downstairs are rude. Seen this occur often, should be treated with respect. I felt like a criminal.” The other complaints were not related to the specific courthouse, or to courthouse personnel. *Note:* CJP interns state that they have not observed or experienced rude behavior while going through security.

⁵ Appreciative comments included: “Clerks at 100 Centre are very nice. Make a real difference. Real patient. They do the best they can.”; “Great to have wifi. Really nice so far.”; “I very much appreciate being told what to expect - ie length of possible time of service, etc. Larry does a great job of explaining the process. I also appreciate that we are called for 2 days up to 5- not an open ended unknown - thanks.”; “Excellent staff, very organized and informative. Great job on the part of all”; and “I just had jury duty at 100 Centre st. and the people there are great -clear, professional, and easy-going.”

⁶ CJP was told that the building engineers are alerted as needed. They are attentive, and the problem is corrected promptly. Temperature is a function of the weather and number of people in the large assembly room, and is variable. However, the Kings County Clerk's Office staff is helpful, and with the cooperation of the engineers, appropriate adjustments are accomplished.

⁷ Appreciative comments included: “This courthouse is very clean and beautiful.”, and “I think that the court officer was very informative of what to expect of jury duty service. I really enjoy the fact that this court has a lounge, where we can eat and read.”