



Citizens Jury Project Report March 2009

Summary

In March of 2009, the Citizens Jury Project (CJP) of the Fund for Modern Courts operated Ombudservice booths in nine (9) courthouse locations in New York City and Westchester 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, 564 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 598 questions or comments.

This report identifies common questions asked and comments made to CJP at each site. It also includes one general recommendation.

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 2009.² At one (1) site, questions about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do were the most frequently asked.³ At the remaining location, the greatest number of questions came from late jurors who approached interns (9).⁴

General Recommendation:

The posting of large, color-coded summonses, outside of courthouses – with directions to other courthouses - should be considered. This step might help to keep jurors from entering (and adding to the length of security lines of) courthouses where they do not need to be.

New York County

60 Centre Street: During March, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 137 jurors with 144 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (75). Forty-one (41) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were nine (9) questions in regard to postponement, and six (6) that concerned qualifications to serve. There were two juror suggestions: “They should put lockers somewhere for jurors.”; and, “On the summons, it only says you are required to report for only that day. You should put that you have to serve for at least two days, on the summons itself.” Two jurors complained of flooding in the men’s room; a clerk was informed, and she promptly called the maintenance staff.

100 Centre Street: During March, 78 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 83 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (47). Twelve (12) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were six (6) questions about qualifications to serve. Four (4) questions concerned postponement of service. Jurors offered three (3) suggestions: “How about offering jurors coffee and maybe even a treat in the morning? It might improve people's attitudes.”; “They should find people that are unemployed to serve.” The last suggestion was in regard to jurors who arrive late; a senior clerk responded to this suggestion. (Due to the length of the comment and response, both appear as an endnote to this report.)⁵ One juror gave the appreciative comments that, “The experience is fine. Larry gives very clear directions and the people are very helpful and friendly.”

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During March, 54 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 57 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (23). There were seventeen (17) questions in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. One (1) juror suggested that, “There needs to be a quieter place to make a phone call.” Another juror said, “I was not aware that this was two days long.”

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During March, 71 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 79 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (22). Twenty (20) questions were in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were twelve (12) questions about qualifications to serve. One juror offered these comments: “The room is hot, the lighting is very low and the room looks dingy. The process is great and the clerks do a great job making the process easy.” A juror complained that all seats were taken in the jury room. Still another juror said, “I normally wouldn't take the time/effort to email but this experience (started this morning) is so much better than expected that I assume you get stuff fixed/improved based on the feedback. . . .” (The full comment appears as an endnote.)⁶

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During March, 17 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 18 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (7). Three (3) questions came from jurors who arrived late. Two jurors complained about a vending machine(s) not working properly. Court personnel have told CJP that such matters are handled as soon as they arise. A juror made the appreciative comment that she was enjoying her experience very much. She said she had served probably a dozen times since 1979 and was losing confidence in the system, but now serving on a jury had pleased her with the overall experience.

360 Adams Street: During March, 31 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 33 questions and comments. Nine (9) questions came from jurors who arrived late. There were eight (8) questions in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Five (5) questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and

outside of the courthouse. One juror commented on vending machines not working in the lounge. A juror suggested that, “The card with potential jurors' social security numbers should be collected in another way [rather than having it passed down the aisle.]” A senior clerk informed CJP regarding this suggestion, as follows: “The swiftness of this process in the presence of jury court personnel and a uniformed court officer virtually eliminates the risk of identity theft. Jurors who express such concerns can opt to personally hand in their completed summons. The alternate method of having hundreds of jurors stand on line to hand in their completed summons is difficult due to the expressed dissatisfaction of jurors concerning standing on line and the delays in proceeding to the jury selection process. On balance, the current system promotes respect for jurors and efficient operation of the jury system.”

Bronx County

215 East 161st Street: During March, 98 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 101 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (59). Fourteen (14) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Five (5) questions concerned qualifications to serve. One juror complained about a lack of payphones in the courthouse, and another about long lines.

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During March, 53 jurors approached interns with 55 questions. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (39). Seven (7) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Juror suggestions included: “The courthouse should place speakers in the restrooms for jurors to hear their names being called”; and, “I think officers should be placed in the deliberation room to keep order.” One juror said that, “I hate jury duty, but what I like and admire is how nice the staff is. They should be rewarded for doing a job well done.”

Westchester

111 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd: During March, 25 jurors approached interns with 26 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (14). There were three (3) questions in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do, and three (3) late jurors approached interns. A juror told an intern that, “This is the best place I have had to serve jury duty.”

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 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?"

⁴ All of the late jurors asked essentially the same questions: "Where do I go?" and/or "What do I do?" Rather than including this data in other categories (location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities, and concerns about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do), 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 the other categories. The purpose of having this separate category is to be open to the possibility that there *may* be court-related matters 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 have indicated that they, themselves, are responsible. Furthermore, in 2008, CJP coordinated with court personnel to examine security lines in Brooklyn over a two-week period, at different times during the day. The security lines were found to be functioning efficiently.

⁵ The juror said, "I would like to suggest a policy for extreme tardiness. I arrived at 8:45a.m., as stated in the juror summons. I expect everyone else who is summoned to adhere by the same punctuality standards. Instead, I saw people walking in at 9:40, 10:30, 11:00, and not one person was turned away, making it obvious that it's quite alright to walk in at whatever time they please. My suggestion is the following: there should be a cut-off time for tardiness. If you are more than thirty minutes late you should be instructed to go back to work if employed and you will receive another summons in the mail in the next couple of weeks. Extreme tardiness is not only unfair but it's a lack of respect and courtesy to everyone else that made an effort to make it on time. I strongly urge to please put some type of policy in place."

A senior clerk informed CJP as follows:

"We do have a general policy regarding lateness; if a juror missed the [juror orientation video] and the [verbal] orientation which would be around 9:30 A.M. we will recall them.

However, there are occasions where we are lenient, for example:

1. A major transit delay.
2. A juror who had a family or personal emergency.
3. A juror who was transferred from another building with a ballot marked "Civil Cases only".
4. A second day juror who is on panel and was told to report to the jury room at a later time.
5. A juror who reported to Room 139 at 60 Centre Street to speak to an interviewer for a possible deferment or postponement which was denied."

In addition, he said, "Having firm policies with regards to this anonymous suggestion may cause [the court] to be criticized for not being sensitive or understanding with respect to occasional juror hardships."

| |
|--|
| Ichabin Apr 20, 2:44 PM Added Text |
| Ichabin Apr 20, 2:45 PM Added: Space |
| Ichabin Apr 20, 2:44 PM Added Text |
| Ichabin Apr 20, 2:46 PM Added: Space |
| Ichabin Apr 20, 2:44 PM Added Text |

⁶ The juror commented:

I normally wouldn't take the time/effort to email but this experience (started this morning) is so much better than expected that I assume you get stuff fixed/improved based on the feedback.

- hooks for coats at the front of the room would be great. I say the front so there wouldn't be any theft since everyone is watching the front.
- it is frustrating (thank goodness for wi-fi) to have to start waiting at 8:45a.m., when it doesn't appear possible to be needed before 10a.m. For people who have served in the past, can there be a second seating - later start?
- the juror letter should highlight some of the amenities (specifically that phones are allowed, and laptops)
- How about a Two-for-One" book swap? People can take a book the first day, but ask them to bring one or two books the following day to keep the library growing.

Thanks for all your help.