



Citizens Jury Project Report August 2008

Summary

In August of 2008, 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 August, 296 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 316 questions or comments.

This report identifies common questions asked and comments made to CJP 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 August of 2008.² At one (1) site, questions about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do were the most frequently asked. Because these 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

New York County

60 Centre Street: During August, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 31 jurors with 34 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (17). Five (5) juror questions concerned postponements and difficulty in serving. Three (3) concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There was also an appreciative comment.⁴

100 Centre Street: During August, 102 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 105 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (62). Twenty (20) juror questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were also two (2) appreciative comments.⁵

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During August, 41 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 42 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). Twelve (12) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There was also an appreciative comment.⁶

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During August, 32 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 36 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (14). Eight (8) questions had to do with the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. There were three (3) appreciative comments.⁷

360 Adams Street: During August, 28 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 29 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (9). Five (5) questions were in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Five (5) questions were asked about computer usage, and another five (5) came from late jurors.

Bronx County

During August, 30 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 32 questions and comments. The most common questions (25) concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Three (3) questions were in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

While a booth is not operated at the Bronx Hall of Justice, CJP's virtual ombudservice received an email from a very thoughtful juror offering many comments, both in regard to this facility, and the one at 851 Grand Concourse.⁸

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During August, CJP interns recorded 27 questions and comments from 24 jurors. The most common questions (21) concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. There were four (4) questions concerning procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

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 pm. Additionally, interns occasionally report that jurors have been discharged early, meaning, of course, that there is no one left to approach them. The assembly room at 111 Centre, 11th Fl. was closed for the summer. The booth in Jamaica was closed, indefinitely. Finally, due to the small number of jurors called, all the booths were closed for the last week of August.

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 has not reported examples by courthouse in this report.

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 The juror said, “Jury duty has gone so smoothly so far, Im glad to see its not such a bad process.”

⁵ One juror said, “I think that it has improved so much. It's a lot more organized. I have served 3 times before, and I don't even think there was a jury lounge or vending machines. Thank you.”

⁶ The juror wrote:

Dear Judge Kaye:

I was called to serve recently, but was not selected to serve on a jury. This note is to provide positive feedback. I was consistently impressed throughout my two days of waiting to be selected:

- a) the 111 Centre Street courthouse was clean and well-maintained;
- b) the jury-room staff were efficient, courteous, and good-humored. They ran everything in a professional and orderly manner.

Thank you, Judge Kaye, for your effective management of this important judicial office.

⁷ The appreciative comments included, “These chairs are very comfortable, they're good for my back.”; “The WiFi in here is great.”; and “I enjoy the internet service.”

⁸ The juror shared the following with CJP:

I would like to share some of my experiences serving as a juror at the Bronx Hall of Justice (265 East 161st Street) as well as at 851 Grand Concourse.

I was called for jury duty in mid-July and asked to report to the Bronx Hall of Justice. The jury room there is beautiful and modern; it is well-ventilated, well lit and filled with comfortable seating. The PA address system works well and the clerks run the room very efficiently.

I found only 2 problems with the jury room. First, the juror lounge is way too small vis-a-vis the number of jurors called. Second, the reading room is a decent size but there are no computers available for juror use. On my second day of service, about 50 jurors were transferred to 851 Grand Concourse. The old jury room appears rather downtrodden by comparison and all of the computers were not working (internet access was down.) As I understand it, the computers almost never work.

After 3 days of service, I was selected for a civil case involving a construction accident. The case took more than 2 weeks and was extremely interesting. We heard from 7 witnesses, 2 of which were medical experts. We deliberated for a day and a half before reaching a verdict.

Being on a jury was a real learning experience. All of the jurors were engaged in listening to and analyzing all of the evidence. Every juror gave 100% and we were able to reach a unanimous verdict. It was quite rewarding and I would be happy to serve again. However, one of the reasons why I was able to serve without any true inconvenience was due to the fact that my employer paid me my regular salary while I served. Several of my fellow jurors were not so lucky, so they made real financial sacrifices to participate in jury service.

I would like to make a recommendation that the clerks screen potential jurors for language difficulties before they send them up to the courtrooms. I was called to 3 different panels before being selected; at each panel, there were jurors who could not comprehend English. It slowed down the entire process while the attorneys tried to weed out the people who were unable to meaningfully participate due to a language issue. The clerks at both the new and old jury rooms do not screen at all, claiming it is too time-consuming and that most people who claim a language difficulty are just trying to get out of jury service. These clerks may be saving time in the jury room, but this translates into delays in the courtrooms as the attorneys and court personnel try to straighten out these issues as jury selection proceeds.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts about jury service.