



Citizens Jury Project Report September 2008

Summary

In September of 2008, 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 September, 588 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 622 questions or comments.

This report identifies common questions asked and comments made to CJP at each site. It also includes two 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 six (6) CJP sites in September of 2008.² At the remaining two (2) sites, 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

General Recommendations

1. Best Practices

a. In Brooklyn, jurors are addressed in multiple languages during orientation.⁴ CJP wants to call attention to this procedure, and suggests that it should be emulated in other courthouses which serve large non-English speaking populations. For instance, the Bronx courts call upon such a large Spanish speaking population that it would be helpful to address jurors, even briefly, in Spanish.

b. Additionally, CJP would like to note that the new Criminal Court in the Bronx has signage in Spanish. While this signage is limited, we believe it is very advantageous to many who visit the facility. CJP recommends that this practice be expanded in the Bronx, and followed in all other courthouses where the population is diverse and there is a legitimate need.

2. “Court User Comment Cards”, which provide a good opportunity for jurors and others to express their comments and opinions regarding their experiences at the courthouses, are often

unavailable for jurors. CJP recommends that more of these useful cards be placed where jurors will have access to them.

New York County

60 Centre Street: During September, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 105 jurors with 110 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (70). Fifteen (15) concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Twelve (12) juror questions concerned postponements and difficulty in serving.

100 Centre Street: During September, 106 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 113 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (74). Eighteen (18) juror questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were also three (3) appreciative comments.⁵

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During September, 27 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 (13). Five (5) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During September, 54 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 58 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). Twenty-one (21) questions concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do.

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During September, 47 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 53 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (20). There were nine (9) complaints, none attributable to court personnel. The only “complaints” CJP deems worth recording here can also be interpreted as “suggestions”⁶. Seven (7) jurors asked about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. There were four (4) appreciative comments.⁷

360 Adams Street: During September, 55 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 60 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (17). Fifteen (15) late jurors⁸ approached interns, and ten (10) jurors asked about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. There were four (4) appreciative comments.⁹

Bronx County

851 Grand Concourse: During September, 140 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 142 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (64). Twenty-

two (22) questions were in regard to procedure and what jurors could/were required to do, and another twenty-two (22) concerned postponement and difficulty with jury service. There were three (3) complaints.¹⁰

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During September, CJP interns recorded 56 questions and comments from 53 jurors. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (38). There were seven (7) questions concerning procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There was one (1) appreciative comment concerning the provision of internet service.¹¹

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.

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 A senior clerk told CJP that an announcement is made in Spanish, Russian and Chinese, as well as in English, letting jurors know that if they don't think their English is adequate, they should assemble near the podium. Once these jurors are assembled, "we proceed as a group to one of the impaneling rooms. I conduct the interviews, assisted, again by staff members who speak Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Each juror is interviewed individually, one at a time. The process usually takes between 30 and 40 minutes."

⁵ Appreciative comments included, "It is awesome that you have Wi-Fi. You should have more plugs on the back walls."; and "Things look better now than 10 years ago."

⁶ Complaints included, "I used to work for the D.A's office and should not have been called into criminal court. It is a waste of time for me because I won't be picked to sit on the case. They should have a check box on the questionnaire to automatically assign me to civil court."; and, "Seems to me that if you a person connected in any way to law enforcement, like myself, then you are automatically not picked. I think if this is the case, then they should ask that on the questionnaire beforehand so that I do not waste my time."

⁷ The appreciative comments came from a juror who said, "I like jury duty and the new eight year system, and that we only have to be here for one day if we don't get called. I also like the orientation. The clerk was very funny."

⁸ All of the late jurors asked either "Where do I go?" or "What do I do?"

⁹ Someone new to jury service commented appreciatively, "This is great so far. My first time and everything is running smoothly." Another juror noted the remarkable improvement from how she remembers the jury room from twenty years ago. She was particularly struck by the changes from benches to chairs, and the flat-screen TV's.

¹⁰ One juror complained that she had gone into room 212 and asked chief clerk/staff for information regarding postponement of her service; reported that office personnel would not tell her this information, and were rude to her.

¹¹ An appreciative juror said, “It is nice to see the court house provide internet service.”