



Citizens Jury Project Report September 2009

Summary

In September 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 September, 928 jurors approached the booths (or used the virtual ombudservice online), with 962 questions or comments.

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 September 2009.² At two (2) sites, the greatest number of questions concerned procedure.³

General Recommendation #1: Many of the comments CJP receives are like the ones below. CJP understands that *a great deal of information is provided to jurors*. All the same, CJP recommends that personnel consider whether further explanations and updates would be worthwhile in their particular facility.

CJP believes it is useful to let jurors know why they are waiting. In addition, it may be beneficial for someone (possibly even a judge) to clearly explain to jurors that regardless of whether they hear a case, their presence may lead the parties to settle, thereby saving the courts and litigants time and resources.

Admittedly, some jurors will never “buy” that their service is important. But, for others, additional updates and explanations may make a very positive difference in how they feel about serving.

The following are some typical juror comments:

There needs to be a better system. Are there any other states that do it differently? You'd think they'd know what trials are on the docket. Yesterday was the same. It's doubtful that they'll call anyone after lunch.

I believe that the jury selection should be limited only to the unemployed.

This is a waste of time and such an inconvenience. Why don't they just keep a database of unemployed people and use them as jurors, they have nothing to do all day and they can use the money.

I don't get it. We sit here all day! Jury service should be shorter. Don't you think?

General Recommendation #2: With flu season upon us, CJP recommends that courthouses take the simple and inexpensive measure of purchasing and placing soap dispensers in numerous and busy locations. As frequent washing is one of the most effective ways to reduce the chance of contracting a virus,⁴ this uncomplicated step would likely reduce the number of sick days by court personnel, jurors, and others.

Further, according to the *New York Times*, “[s]imple reminders . . . , hung over the entrance to a public restroom . . . , seem to increase the odds that people will wash their hands with soap and water.”⁵ CJP recommends consideration of adding signs in, and at the entrance to restrooms.

General Recommendation #3: Clocks should be installed in juror assembly rooms that do not already have them.

New York County

60 Centre Street: During September, the CJP Ombudservice booth was approached by 107 jurors with 111 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (50). Twenty-one (21) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Twenty (20) questions had to do with postponement or difficulty with jury service. Nine (9) late jurors approached interns, and six (6) juror questions were related to qualifications to serve.

100 Centre Street: During September, 157 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 164 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (93). Thirty (30) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Sixteen (16) questions had to do with postponement or difficulty with jury service. Appreciative comments included:

- [T]he jury staff, headed by Supervisor Larry was as helpful, patient and courteous as it is possible to be. At every stage of the process they made sure we understood fully what was going on, what we were entitled to, and what was expected of us, and every effort was made to make sure we were comfortable and provided for. Kudos and congratulations to all involved. Well done!
- I was a juror a few years ago and everything now is excellent. The two clerks are very clear and provide good directions to jurors.
- Larry: He's got good style and makes me want to be here. I don't feel bad about being of service. Previously it felt like a real inconvenience.

Suggestions included:

- I have three suggestions. One- they should serve coffee and breakfast for free in the mornings. Two- we don't get our payment check for six weeks after service and some people who have taken off from work need that money earlier. And, three- I think the court system should pay transportation costs, because a lot of people can't pay this extra money to get to jury duty.
- There are no translators during the orientation or all day. There should be multilingual directions, videos, or papers. There should be excusal for people with disability conditions. (The person making this statement said that she is a disability advocate who was accompanying her client [who has a heart condition and diabetes and could not speak English.])
- We have to make a living [and] can't be here all day. They should call one set of jurors from 9-1 and the next set from 1-5 so we don't have to take a full day off from work.

111 Centre Street, 3rd floor: During September, 79 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 (49). Eighteen (18) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Four (4) questions had to do with postponement or difficulty with jury service.

A juror complained that he had *“to walk all the way here just to turn around to go back there [to 60 Centre, to ask for a postponement].”* He suggested that, *“They should mention this on the summons.”* Another juror offered that, *“They should fix the computers. There's internet, but computers don't work. There should be [a better] explanation of the summons, and have alternate channels [showing on the TVs].”*

111 Centre Street, 11th floor: During September, 78 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 80 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (29). Thirteen (13) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. Eight (8) questions had to do with postponements or difficulty serving. Seven (7) late jurors approached interns. Appreciative comments included that, *“The staff is great, everything was great.”* Another juror expressed appreciation for being released at 11:00 a.m. on her second day of service. Jurors suggested that, *“The summons should inform the juror to expect to serve for a minimum of two days,”* and *“Increase juror pay above \$40 to avoid deferrals.”*

Kings County

320 Jay Street: During September, 95 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth and raised 99 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (46). Seventeen (17) questions were about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Ten (10) late jurors approached interns, and there were four (4) questions about qualifications to serve.

360 Adams Street: During September, 54 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 57 questions and comments. The questions most frequently asked concerned procedure and what jurors could/were required to do (23). Thirteen (13) questions were asked about the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse. Six (6) late jurors approached interns.

Juror complaints included, “*The phones in the lounge don’t work.*” A juror said that she had served two weeks before, but didn’t get her dismissal form [proof of service?] because court personnel couldn’t find her card. [The intern and juror approached a clerk, who resolved the matter very quickly.] A third juror said that, “*They need to clarify signs at security that state ‘No Food or Drink.’*” The juror had thrown out his food prior to going through security. He suggested that the sign say, “*No Food or Drink Except for Jurors.*”

Bronx County

215 East 161st Street: During September, 306 jurors approached the CJP Ombudservice booth with 312 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (114). One hundred and eleven (111) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do. There were thirty-two (32) questions concerning postponements or difficulty in serving, and eighteen (18) questions about qualifications to serve. Nine (9) late jurors approached interns.

A juror said, “*Jury duty is great.*” Another juror expressed frustration that the summons he had received said that jurors shouldn’t bring phones to the courthouse. He complied, later finding that there were no pay phones to use. Court officials told an intern that they are aware of the confusion and have taken steps to correct it.

Queens County

Kew Gardens: During September, 47 jurors approached interns with 51 questions and comments. The most common questions concerned the location of particular places and/or amenities/facilities inside and outside of the courthouse (24). Ten (10) questions were asked about procedure and what jurors could/were required to do, and there were (4) computer questions. A juror suggested that there should be additional and more accessible outlets in the assembly area.

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 “It sounds so simple as to be innocuous, a throwaway line in public-health warnings about swine flu. But one of the most powerful weapons against the new H1N1 virus is summed up in a three-word phrase you first heard from your mother: wash your hands.” Parker-Pope, T. (2009, September 14). With Soap and Water or Sanitizer, a Cleaning that Can Stave Off the Flu. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/15/health/15well.html>

⁵ Rabin, R. (2009, October 15). Awareness: Prodding People to Wash Their Hands in Restrooms. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/health/research/20awar.html>