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Editorial viewpoint

Jury Service: It's a Privilege

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There are more than 80,000 jury trials in this country every year, at which nearly a million people serve as jurors. The jury system is vital to America's justice system: few activities in our civic life involve as many people, have as great an effect, or give citizens such direct involvement with our democracy as jury service.

Americans believe in and support jury service. A recent public opinion poll by Harris Interactive for the American Bar Association showed that, contrary to popular portrayals of jury service as burdensome, most people (75 percent of those surveyed) believe strongly that jury service is important regardless of inconveniences; and 58 percent view jury duty as a privilege, one they look forward to having. Meanwhile, 75 percent want their case to be heard by a jury if they are ever involved in a trial.

Despite this enthusiasm, courts across the country report low response rates to jury summonses. Americans must understand that the system they so respect works only when they are actively involved. To help bridge this gap, the ABA Commission on the American Jury is working to encourage people to serve on a jury when summoned and selected, and to help the legal profession and the courts improve jurors' experiences. The commission offers several tips to prepare you for when you are summoned, and makes suggestions about what to do and expect if you are selected to sit on a trial.

When you receive your jury summons . . .

Tell your employer right away that you've been called to serve.

Dress respectfully when you go to the courthouse.

Be prepared to fill some down time — bring something to read, crossword puzzles, etc.

Answer all questions you are asked — honestly and completely.

If there is something you don't understand, ask the judge or other court personnel.

When you sit on a trial . . .

Use only the evidence you are given — don't do your own "research."

If you have questions, ask the court.

Follow the court's instructions.

During deliberations, respect each person's opinions.

Jury service is every citizen's responsibility. Those of us who've had the privilege of serving overwhelmingly report it as a rewarding experience. Educating yourself about your role as a juror is the best way to ensure that yours is, too.

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