

## 2006: The Year of the Juror

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When Robin Parsons received a summons for jury service from the Hall County District Court, she was filled with dread.

She expected her service would take up entire days, which would be an inconvenience, but she answered the questionnaire and appeared in court for jury selection as required. She was chosen for one jury earlier this year and served for four days. Now she isn't expected back until April and may or may not be selected to serve on another jury.

"It hasn't been that bad," she said of her first time as a juror. "It was a learning experience."

The case Parsons sat in on involved some sensitive information, which was difficult to listen to, and she also missed her granddaughter, who she baby-sits. However, now that she has a better understanding of the judicial system, she wouldn't look at a jury summons with the same dread she did initially.

Hall County District Court Clerk Valorie Bendixen, who is also the county's jury commissioner, said some people are alarmed by a summons.

"We need people to serve," she said. "Some people are unhappy about being called but if they, or someone in their family, were in a similar position in a criminal or civil case, they'd want a fair jury."

To help educate the public on jury duty, Gov. Dave Heineman and Nebraska State Bar Association President William Dittrick have declared 2006 "The Year of the Juror." According to Liz Neeley, director of the Minority Justice Task Force, the proclamation recognizes the important contribution that jurors provide to the justice system. It also launched a statewide campaign to encourage jury service among Nebraska citizens and promotes the representation of people from every ethnicity, race, religion and economic background on Nebraska juries.

According to Neeley, officials hope the campaign will increase juror participation statewide, but the more diverse counties -- Hall, Madison, Scotts Bluff, Dawson, Lancaster and Douglas -- are being targeted.

Hall County District Judge James Livingston said the jury system is a cornerstone of democracy. It gives people the power to make decisions, he said.

Livingston often hears people's concerns about jury service, most commonly that it will be a disruption in their lives. Many people also misunderstand that length of time involved in a trial or the use of sequestration, he said.

It is a privilege and a civic responsibility to participate in a jury when summoned, he said.

According to state statute, anyone who knowingly fails to complete and return a jury questionnaire or who misrepresents facts on the form will be guilty of contempt of court.

Getting called for jury duty is a random process. The jury pool list begins with the names of everyone in the county who is registered to vote or has a driver's license, Bendixen said.

She and the presiding Hall County judge narrow the list down using a key number. Names are then randomly drawn for potential jury pools. Eighty names are selected for district court trials and 40 for county court, she said.

Summonses and questionnaires are sent to each person. The process is started more than a month before a trial because sometimes the questionnaires are returned or the summoned person doesn't mail the form back, she said.

The form includes a section for people to request not to serve. The factors that may eliminate a person include being over age 65 and preferring not to serve or having a physical or mental impairment that would make them incapable of serving. Nursing mothers can also request not to serve.

Jurors must be a U.S. citizen; must reside in the county where they are summoned to serve; must be at least 19 years old; and must read, speak and understand English, Bendixen said.

Jury lists aren't public information, although people's names are said aloud in open court during jury selection. Jurors are also not

required to speak to anyone about their service after a trial, she said.

"I've been approached by people who've said they had a positive experience serving on a jury," Bendixen said. "Some people learn a lot."

Data gathered by Nebraska's Minority and Justice Task Force in 2001 suggests the state's juries aren't always representative of their communities. Information collected by the task force shows that minorities are underrepresented due, in part, to a general distrust of and unfamiliarity with the justice system, according to Neeley.

In response, the task force has partnered with district court clerks, jury commissioners and minority community leaders for the "Year of the Juror" campaign. Additional information is also being sought on jury summons questionnaires to determine why juries aren't representative of certain communities, according to Neeley.

Bendixen said a confidential juror information section has been added to Hall County questionnaires with questions about race and ethnicity.

Hall County Judge Philip Martin said the Hall County Court averaged 1.5 trials per month last year. In 2005, there were a total of 61 juries in county and district court that involved about 640 potential jurors, he said. County court juries consist of six people and district courts have 12 jurors. District courts also often impanel alternate jurors because the trials tend to be longer, he said.

Bendixen said it's important for people to remember that anyone can find themselves in need of a jury. Not all trials are for criminal cases. There are a number of civil trials in Hall County that are the result of accidents, contact disputes or work-related injuries, she said. She also encouraged anyone who receives a summons to call her office if they have questions about jury service.

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