

Jurors honored for role in democracy

From westernmost Upper Peninsula to Michigan's southeast corner, state courts will observe July 2007 as "Juror Appreciation Month."

Chief Justice Clifford W. Taylor explained that the event is aimed at educating the public about the importance of jury service. "Next to voting, there is no more important democratic function than jury service," he said. "We hope that this event helps the public understand how essential jurors are to the justice system."

Earlier this week, the Supreme Court approved a pilot project to test jury reform proposals aimed at enhancing juries' truth-seeking function. The Court began studying the proposed reforms in 2006 and is now arranging for courts to test the proposals in small, controlled situations, Taylor noted. Potential changes include allowing the jury to request a view of a crime scene or other "material event" in a case. Other proposals concern jurors taking notes, asking questions of witnesses, and having "case notebooks" that include exhibits, jury instructions and other documents.

Bills have recently been introduced in the state Legislature to expand the sources from which lists of jurors can be drawn, including registered voters and state taxpayers. Taylor said the Court supports the goal of having more representative juries and a larger pool of potential jurors. "Lack of response to jury questionnaires and summonses is a chronic problem throughout the state," he said. "We hope that Juror Appreciation Month encourages more people to respond willingly to the call for jury service."

Forty-one courts in 28 counties will participate, including 54-A District Court, Lansing

Q & A: Jury service

Here are a few frequently asked questions and answers on jury service:

Who gets called? U.S. citizens at least 18 years old who are residents of the court district to which they are summoned. The jury pool for each court comes from a list of licensed drivers and state ID card holders in the court's district. Those who have been convicted of felony crimes are not eligible for jury service.

Are there exemptions? People over 70 may request an age exemption from jury service. While you can be called for duty more than once, you cannot serve on a jury more than once in a 12-month period.

What's required? Jurors must "be able to communicate in the English language" and "be physically and mentally able to carry out the functions of a juror."

What does it pay? Under Michigan law, jurors receive not less than \$25 per day and \$12.50

per half day for the first day of service. For each day after that, jurors receive not less than \$40 per day and \$20 per half day. Jurors also get 10 cents a mile for their trips to and from court. If you report for duty but do not get on a jury, you are paid for the day.

What if I don't show up? You can be held in contempt of court, fined, or even jailed.

What about work? By law, an employer cannot fire or discipline or threaten such action against an employee who is summoned for jury duty or chosen to serve on a jury, even for a long trial. Nor can employers force a worker to go beyond normal hours to make up for time spent on jury service. An employer who takes these actions could be guilty of a misdemeanor or held in contempt of court.

What's an acceptable reason to be excused from jury service? That's up to the court, but there are a number of

grounds for excusing a person from jury service or postponing the service. "Hardship" is one, and that could include lack of transportation, excessive travel, extreme financial burden, undue risk to physical property, and being over 70. "Hardship" also includes situations where your absence from your normal routine would affect another's care or pose a risk to public health or safety. A request for a medical-related exemption requires a letter from a doctor. A full-time student who believes that jury service will conflict with his or her classes must submit a copy of the class schedule.

If I serve on a jury, can I talk about the case afterwards? Once the judge discharges you from service, you may discuss the case with others, although you don't have to talk. Attorneys in the case often find it helpful to talk to the jurors afterwards. In a high-profile case, the media will also want to talk to jurors.