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Opinion

Jurors are valued part of justice system

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Guest Opinion

You've just picked up the mail and there, among the Macy's circulars, the coupons and the bills, is something that looks unfamiliar, but scary.

Your hand shakes as you open it and realize that you have been called for jury service at the Oakland County Circuit Court.

You experience all the normal emotions — anger, denial and, finally, acceptance. Your initial anger (How did I get picked? Why me?) turns for a moment to exhilaration (Maybe I'll be on "Court TV." Maybe Geoff Feiger will pick me. Will I really see 1-800 Call Sam?).

July is Juror Appreciation Month. It gives judges throughout the state an opportunity to personally thank our fellow citizens who give of themselves to ensure that our justice system continues to operate as the best in the world.

My former colleague, Judge Fred Mester, the expert on the history of the jury system, would talk about the antecedents of the system existing as far back as Athens in ancient Greece. It began to take the form we recognize in 12th century England, under the reign of Henry II.

Today, more than 17,000 of our Oakland County friends and neighbors are called for jury duty annually.

I'd like to dispel a few myths about jury service. Unlike TV juries, most cases are heard in one to two days. In our county, jurors are asked to serve for one day or one trial. While 17,000 are called, only about 20 percent of those are actually seated.

We try more than 300 cases a year, and many of those are civil cases (personal injury, contract or business disputes) that only have six jurors.

Jurors are normally not "sequestered" or required to live away from their families. This happens only on very high-publicity cases, where the danger of jurors hearing about the case, or being harassed, is extreme. We have not sequestered a jury in Oakland County in years.

"CSI" is a TV show, and not real life. While we all wish there would be exciting scientific evidence and glamorous detectives (OK, some really are), most cases do not allow for the extensive discovery seen on the screen.

Unlike Perry Mason, very few confessions come from the witness stand.

And, in all but five of our courtrooms, you won't even see a court reporter, as we have entered the 21st century with digitally recorded transcripts.

If there is a real conflict regarding your date of service, don't call your friend, the lawyer, to see if you can "get out" of serving. Let the jury office know and they will be happy to reschedule you. We can't let you out of serving, but can make it more convenient.

Understand, however, that we can only reschedule once, so make sure that the need to adjourn is real and there will be no more adjournments.

My colleagues understand that jury service is an imposition. But, in a democracy, we have responsibilities that are the cost of the rights we hold dear. One of those responsibilities is being a juror.

Most of those who serve find sitting on a jury to be a positive experience. Jurors get a behind-the-scenes and firsthand view of the justice system.

And, it's an opportunity to get some first-class treatment. After all, everyone in the courtroom stands when the jury enters and exits.

So, when you receive your notice of jury service, don't tremble. Look at it as a new and exciting opportunity to participate.

And, please, accept our sincere thanks for doing your part to allow our system to continue to operate.

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