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Everyday Justice in the District

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As a result of the tragic events in Boston, Massachusetts and Aurora, Colorado, the national media has fixated on the efforts of ordinary jurors involved in extraordinary cases. But, outside the headlines, the work of everyday justice continues in local courts. In Washington D.C., over 30,000 D.C. residents report to jury duty in D.C. Superior Court every year. This week marks Juror Appreciation Week in the courthouse honoring the contribution of ordinary citizens to the courts and the community.

Because the District of Columbia is a large urban center with a relatively limited geographic area from which to select jurors, many more D.C. residents have the experience of being summoned to jury duty during their lifetimes. The existing "one day, one trial" system requires a constant flow of civic energy and involvement. For some citizens this means service every two years or so.

In terms of sheer numbers, because each juror serves at least one day, and many serve several days or weeks, the court receives approximately a quarter million hours of service each year. While hours waiting in the courthouse may not seem like traditional community service, this is a valuable form of community involvement. Without jurors there would be no jury trials, and without jury trials, we would lose an effective and fair way to seek justice and hold members of the community accountable.

Beyond a quantitative contribution, the qualitative effort of jurors to sacrifice time from their busy schedules, to rearrange child care or business meetings, and to re-order a host of other life activities deserves to be celebrated. Every day, the hundreds of citizens who sit in the jurors' lounge have expended real and valuable energy just to be a part of the justice system. The jurors' lounge is probably the most diverse space in the nation's capital where everybody, no matter one's background comes together as equals, in shared sacrifice, to undertake a common responsibility.

And, once selected for a jury, citizens contribute in one of the purist forms of democratic activity in America. One person, one vote means something on a jury. Anyone who has served on a jury knows the humbling power of having to decide the fate of another human being or to resolve a complicated legal dispute. Jurors also know the reward that comes from deliberating with fellow citizens to solve a contested legal problem. Easy cases rarely make it to the jury, leaving jurors to do the hard work. Every working day, jurors make life-altering decisions for members of our community, and many jurors comment that jury service turned out to be one of the most meaningful experiences in their own lives.

Jurors deserve an appreciation week. But, the jury system itself deserves some respect. Every year, D.C. Superior Court is required to summon thousands more people than necessary because many fellow citizens ignore the initial summons. Such civic neglect wastes time, money, and energy and adds to the burden of others to fill their place in the jury box. The jurors who show up this week represent a rebuke to this apathy. This week, and every week, the jurors who walk through the door of D.C. Superior Court symbolize citizen control over the legal disputes in our community. Being a juror is a duty, a responsibility, and an honor. And, your effort deserves our thanks.

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