

FALL 1997 ISSUE

NEW YORK STATE *Jury Pool* NEWS

*In the
Spirit and
Exercise of
Democracy*

Message from the Chief Judge

For the past few years, the New York State court system has been working hard to improve the jury experience, from fairer summoning procedures, to better accommodations, to efficiencies that will shorten the intrusion on jurors' lives.

While we know that we still have a way to go, we trust that returning jurors will see and feel some improvement, and that all of you will have a positive experience here. Jury service is not only essential to our justice system but also a privilege we enjoy as citizens of this great democracy. The court system is trying to change the adjectives routinely used to describe jury service from "burden" and "responsibility" to "positive" and "privilege."

This newsletter is another innovation in our reform program. In fact, you are now reading the very first issue of what we hope will be a regular court publication. There are several motivations behind it.

A Down-Time Diversion

First and foremost, we know there will be "down time"—time you spend sitting around in juror assembly rooms waiting to be called for panels, or in deliberation

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An Up Close and Personal Look at Jury Service



Beatrix Gruber, CBS News associate producer and recent juror, is ready to sign up for a second term.

When Beatrix Gruber arrived in court last January with her jury summons in hand, she thought she knew what to expect. After all, she had been called twice before and the routine had been the same: stand in line, present the summons, wait for hours for her name to be called, answer a few questions posed by the attorneys, and be dismissed. While Gruber was willing—if not eager—to actually sit on a jury, she had scant hope that this time would be different.

But Gruber began to sense change in the air soon after she settled into the juror assembly room with the page-turner she brought along to kill time. Instead of the anticipated hours of uninterrupted reading, a judge walked in, welcomed those present and explained the process of jury service. Within two hours, Gruber joined 20 others in the selection room. By the end of the day, a jury had been impaneled. And for the first

time, Beatrix Gruber would actually serve as a juror. “I don’t know what happened,” she says. “In the past, as soon as the lawyers found out I was a journalist, they immediately dismissed me.”

What happened was a change in the law that helped to generate new attitudes about jury selection. Before January 1, 1996, New York State had 21 juror exemptions—the highest number in the nation. For the most part, the automatic exemptions targeted professionals—doctors, lawyers, dentists, physical therapists, pharmacists—although a few non-professional categories were also exempt. But since 1996, all exemptions have been abolished, adding to the jury pool an estimated one million more New Yorkers and encouraging an attitudinal shift on the part of attorneys involved in selecting potential jurors. Whereas in the past, attorneys might have summarily dismissed the rare professional who showed up for jury service, attorneys now have become more accustomed and receptive to impaneling a diversity of jurors.

Although initially pleased to have been selected, Gruber began to have cold feet when she recalled the horror stories of friends and relatives previously summoned who complained about “inconveniences” of jury duty and “ending up on a trial and getting stuck there for weeks.” Fortunately, in her own case, Gruber found the process highly efficient. “From the beginning, things just kept moving,” she reported.

For the next two weeks, Gruber’s page-turner was, if not shelved, largely unopened as the trial advanced from courtroom to deliberation room on a steady nine-to-five schedule. The only interruption to the consistent pace was when a juror needed to keep a doctor’s appointment, and the judge rearranged the trial’s schedule to accommodate the absence. “The judge always seemed sensitive to our stress and discomfort,” said Gruber, noting that several times during the course of the trial, the judge ordered short breaks to provide relief from erratic temperature changes created by the courtroom’s quirky ventilation system.

Sensitivity to the jurors was also exhibited by the attorneys, according to Gruber. In the personal injury case for which she was eventually selected, the attorneys had to question potential jurors about their medical histories since the plaintiff’s physical condition was a critical factor in the case. Gruber said she appreciated the fact that the attorneys discussed all medically related questions privately outside the impaneling room to avoid possibly embarrassing the jurors.

But despite the efforts of the judge and the attorneys to minimize stress, Gruber found the

responsibility of being a juror—particularly on a case involving several million dollars—daunting. “Any time you have to make a decision that involves a person’s life—whether the victim’s or the accused’s—the responsibility weighs in,” she said. “Things got very emotional at times, and that was stressful for everyone.”

The 30-year old television news producer also wondered how her professional training might affect her performance as a juror.

“Journalists are always looking for the ‘other side,’” Gruber noted. But as the trial progressed, she focused on the testimony and the facts of the case to keep a clear perspective. “It’s different when you’re in the jury box. You have a duty to do, and you’re reminded of that all the time,” explained Gruber, who in the past covered courtroom trials as a reporter.

In just over a day, Gruber and the other five jurors were able to reach a verdict. “There was a lot of discussion, and we worked through those things we disagreed on by listening with an open mind and being willing to entertain other points of view,” she recalled. “It was interesting that we could all come together as strangers—people from different viewpoints and backgrounds—and collaboratively form a decision.”

Summing up her most recent jury experience, Gruber remarked that it gave her a better appreciation for the process and the people within the judicial system. When asked whether she would be willing to serve again, she responded, “Just nine to five, and I could actually go to lunch and make new friends? You bet! I would take the time out again if I could.”

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Research Shows Juror Numbers & Spirits Rising

At the conclusion of case number 1208 at the Hempstead District Court, a court officer hands out a single-page questionnaire to the six jurors. Phil Ferrara, juror number 4, takes a chair, but before clicking his ballpoint pen into action, he surreptitiously looks around the room to catch the reaction of his fellow jurors. His

colleagues read silently, oblivious to his anxious glances. “This is great!” comments one juror. “They actually want to know what I think.” A few smirk but proceed to fill out the form. Phil Ferrara breathes a sigh of relief—because when not serving as juror number 4, Mr. Ferrara works as a research analyst for the state court system and in fact was one of the principal authors of the questionnaire.

In use for nearly three years, the questionnaire is the Unified Court System’s first compre-

hensive effort to conduct a statewide survey of juror satisfaction while tracking recent reform initiatives. After analyzing responses from over 118,000 questionnaires collected between April 1995 and June 1997, the court system compiled a report to gauge the effectiveness of the jury reform program begun in 1993. The news was positive, although a few trouble spots persist.

Particularly impressive is the growth in numbers of first-time jurors, whose turnout rate soared from 32 percent to 53 percent during the survey period. A comparison of 1995 and

THE ROAD TO REFORM

The Unified Court System’s efforts at jury reform span roughly four years—a short period to accomplish the significant gains that have been made. Below are some major highlights:

September 1993: The Jury Project—a blue-ribbon panel of judges, attorneys, business people, jury commissioners and educators—is convened to review New York’s jury system and recommend solutions to jurors’ concerns of inequities and hardships.

March 1994: The Jury Project Report is published, listing 80 recommendations to revamp the jury system. Among its key proposals is a repeal of New York’s entire list of jury service exemptions.

April 1994: The Unified Court System opens to jurors a toll-free phone line, **800-NY-JUROR**, for comments and complaints. In its first year of operation, over 1,400 calls are logged.

July 1994: Legislation is passed expanding the state’s master juror list to include public assistance and unemployment rosters, making it the most comprehensive juror source list in the nation. The fully merged list reaches over 90 percent of the eligible jurors in the state.

July 1995: The Legislature ends overnight sequestration requirements for deliberating jurors in all but the most serious criminal cases, removing a major hardship for jurors while producing savings for the court system.

1997 responses also shows an encouraging four percent rise in the number of jurors who gained a favorable impression of jury service after actually serving. At the same time, attempts at improving courthouse safety and protection of jurors' privacy were recognized by an overwhelming 91 percent of respondents statewide. Treatment by court personnel was given a big thumbs-up by respondents: over 90 percent rated staff as professional and courteous.

There were also major reductions to celebrate in the frequency and length of jury service. New Yorkers now are summoned once every four years rather than every two

years as was previously the norm. (The exceptions are the Bronx and Manhattan, where massive caseloads create a heavy demand for jurors. Here jurors have at least a two-year break between summoning.) Moreover, the average number of days served has declined significantly in the last two years from approximately 3.2 days to 2.0 days, and the drop is even more dramatic when compared to the 5.2-day average in 1993.

These numbers reflect the fact that 58 out of the 62 counties in New York have adopted a one-trial/one-day policy, in which jurors are on call for one week and either serve on a trial or complete their service if they are not

selected (or in the process of selection) on the day they report to court. For those selected, a telephone notification system is available so that jurors on cases waiting to go to trial can call to find out whether they should report to court the next day.

Even in localities where the one-trial/one-day policy is not feasible due to persistent juror shortages, the survey data reveals substantial progress. In Brooklyn, for example, where the annual number of jury trials reaches 2,600 or more, the average number of days served has fallen from 5.1 to 2.7. Other notable records include Queens and Manhattan, which have reduced their 4.2-day average

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September 1995: Automatic exemptions for over 20 occupations (such as doctors, lawyers, embalmers and podiatrists) are repealed by the State Legislature, adding a million new names to the juror source list while increasing representation from a broader array of economic and social backgrounds.

January 1996: The court system institutes an automatic postponement policy. New Yorkers are now offered a one-time opportunity to reschedule jury duty by telephone to a more convenient time.

New rules designed to speed the civil voir dire process go into effect, cutting the length of time in civil jury selection proceedings by over 25 percent in one year.

November 1996: The New York State court system celebrates its first "Juror Appreciation Week."

February 1997: Compensation for eligible jurors increases from \$15 to \$27.50 per day, with an additional increase to \$40 due in February 1998.

October 1997: The Administrative Board of the Courts approves for public comment proposed court rules aimed at improving jurors' comprehension. Under the proposed rules, judges may offer deliberating jurors written copies of their charges in civil cases and grant jurors note-taking privileges during trials.

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length of service to 1.8 and 2.6 days, respectively. The achievement in these two boroughs is more striking when contrasted with their 1993 average of 6 days.

Questionnaire responses indicate that overall impressions of the jury system are inextricably linked to serving on a jury and rendering a verdict. In 1996, 85 percent of those jurors who served to verdict thought jury service was a worthwhile experience while only half as many of those who did not complete a trial were similarly satisfied.

The survey results have given court administrators a bird's-eye view into the effectiveness of jury reforms around the state and have uncovered disparities among courts in terms of juror utilization, hardships, treatment by court personnel and accommodations. "The exit questionnaire is a fine-tuning instrument for us," explains Ferrara. "It allows us to pinpoint problems jurors may be having in specific areas so that we can work to resolve them." The Unified Court System thus plans to keep distributing the questionnaires and using the feedback to further improve the system.

SOURCE LISTS EXPAND RANDOM JURY SELECTION

By Chester Mount

The air is crisp, and the leaves on the trees are bursting with fall colors. You decide to take a rare but much deserved lunch break. As you stroll along the courthouse grounds, lost in the thought that you should get out more often, a man in a uniform approaches.

"Excuse me," he says. "Are you a resident of this county?"

"I've lived here all my life," you reply.

"Ever been convicted of a crime?"

"Nothing more than a few parking tickets. Is there something wrong?"

"Good, then come with me, please. The judge needs you as a juror for a trial that starts after lunch."

"But I have to get back to work. I only have an hour for lunch."

"We'll let you call your employer from the courthouse. Please come with me," the uniformed man insists.

In the old days, the above scenario was a common occurrence. A juror selected from among the court's bystanders in this manner was called a *talesman*. In the more recent past, jury commissioners collected names of potential jurors from schools, churches and community groups. But today a sophisticated system of master lists and automated selection ensures a more comprehensive and impartial, albeit less personal, system of summoning.

According to research done by the Virginia-based National Center for State Courts, New York courts lead the nation in the drive to create a more inclusive jury system. The state's master list of potential jurors is compiled from five separate source lists: registered voters, licensed drivers, state income taxpayers, and, added just a few years ago, welfare and unemployment recipients. "New York State law says that all litigants have a right to a jury selected from a fair cross-section of the community," says Chief Administrative Judge Jonathan Lippman. "We take that requirement very seriously." The expanded master source list distributes more evenly both the opportunity and burden of jury service, as well as allows the court system to reduce terms and frequency of service while meeting the demands of a growing number of trials.

The New York Unified Court System has made great strides in building a jury selection process that is as broadly inclusive as possible. Nevertheless, some eligible names may still be missing from our master list. Persons who have not been called but who wish to serve as a juror can contact their local jury commissioner, or call **800-NY-JUROR** to request a qualification questionnaire for jury service.

Chester Mount is the coordinator of Jury Data Services for the Office of Court Administration.

Courts Kick Off Week-Long Salute To Jurors

For too long, jurors have been the unsung heroes of the judicial system. But come November 24, 1997, the court system will attempt to remedy this lack of recognition, as it kicks off its second annual Juror Appreciation Week. Across the state, courts are planning a variety of activities to honor jurors, including serving up breakfasts, commemorative pens and mugs, complimentary newspapers and certificates of appreciation.

Ulster County local businesses are donating more than 20 prizes, including framed pictures of the Ulster County courthouse and gift certificates for meals and merchandise, to a week-long raffle for jurors. "It's wonderful that in New York we have an opportunity once a year to reflect on the value of jurors and to spread that message around our community," said Ulster County Commissioner of Jurors Richard Mathews, who organized the raffle.

In Livingston County, the Board of Supervisors has designated by official proclamation the week of November 24 as Juror Appreciation Week. Livingston County Commissioner of Jurors James Culberston said that the local proclamation "represents both an acknowledgment of the importance of the jury system and of those citizens who give

of their time and energy to serve as jurors."

In Manhattan, Commissioner of Jurors Norman Goodman reports that he has invited local celebrities who have served on jury duty to speak about their experiences during a morning program. Last year, he said, appearances by television news anchor Dan Rather, performer Liza Minnelli and others "showed how everyone is now sharing the burdens of this important civic duty."

Chief Judge Kaye, who herself reported for jury duty in August 1996, will greet jurors in Manhattan and the Bronx on Monday, November 24th. Jury Commissioner Hector Diaz remarked, "This is our opportunity to say 'thank you' to all the jurors," noting that jurors in the Bronx will be treated to breakfast and will receive commemorative keepsakes.

As the court system's feting of jurors proceeds throughout the week, court officials say they

recognize that improvement of New York's jury system will be the ultimate expression of gratitude. "For our part, we plan to demonstrate the court system's commitment to jurors by continuing in efforts to improve the experience of service," Chief Judge Kaye said.



Former jurors Liza Minnelli and Dan Rather joined in the 1996 celebration at the Manhattan Supreme Court.

Jury Service for the Disabled: A Work In Progress

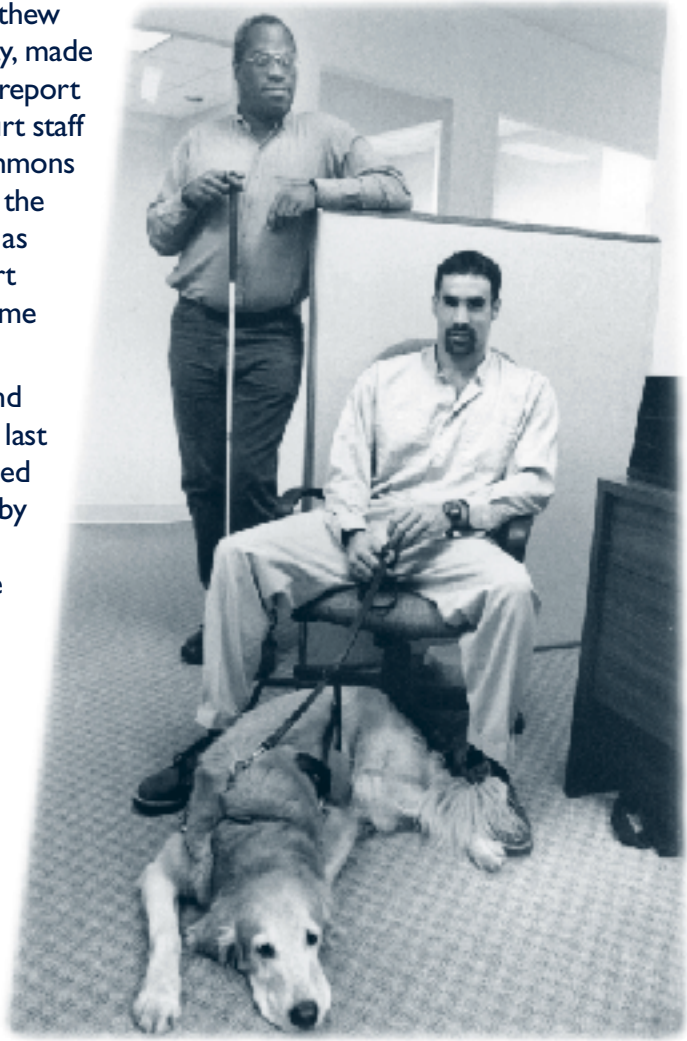
One Monday morning in September, Matthew Sapolin, accompanied by his seeing-eye dog Jay, made his way to the Manhattan Supreme Court to report for jury service. Once at the courthouse, court staff guided him and assisted in completing his summons card, while a fellow juror offered to read him the voir dire questionnaire and fill in the answers as Sapolin dictated. For the first two days, a court officer even stayed by his side as Sapolin became acclimated to his surroundings.

In comparison, when Sapolin's partially blind co-worker Phil Dyson reported for jury duty last February, the special accommodations provided by a single court officer were overshadowed by less sensitive treatment by other court employees. Particularly disappointing was the clerk who kept Dyson waiting while he called his supervisor for instructions on handling a blind juror. "I felt they overreacted," he says. "Like, 'Oh my God, here's this blind guy—what do I do now?'"

Patricia Bucklin, the coordinator of ADA programs for New York's court system, says the disparity between Dyson's experience in February and Sapolin's in September is not surprising. She notes several factors that could account for the differences, including an expanded jury pool that has resulted in an increase in disabled persons entering the courts, newly instituted ADA training for court employees, and recent jury reform efforts. Like many institutions, the courts' understanding of the needs of the disabled was greatly enhanced by passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. But with only seven years to "fix" a court system that spans 62 counties and includes over 300 courthouses, Bucklin points out that there is still plenty of ground to cover.

To that end, the Committee for Access to the Courts for People With Disabilities was formed to improve services to the disabled in New York courts. While its focus is on all disabled users of the courts, the committee's first commitment is to improve conditions for disabled jurors.

Still in its infancy, the committee is focusing its efforts on raising awareness at the managerial level. In September, ADA training was conducted for all commissioners of jurors throughout the



Phil Dyson (left) and Matthew Sapolin at CIDNY'S headquarters. Golden retriever Jay, the reluctant celebrity, slights the camera.

state, and the committee now is planning an awareness program for judges and training for court personnel. "Like most people in society, court personnel's baseline knowledge on disability issues is low," says Acting Supreme Court Justice Rosalyn Richter, chair of the committee. "We need to get them to understand the resources and to think creatively about solutions."

In no area is this more important than in devising accommodations for the disabled in courthouses. Court officials are often constrained in their ability to address deficiencies because the legal responsibility to build and maintain courthouses lies with the local governments, rather than with the courts themselves. While transformation into a completely ADA-friendly system cannot be made overnight, improvements are steadily being made. By the year 2000, close to 90 percent of New York courts will have met the requirement of housing at least one wheelchair-accessible jury box. Newer courthouses like the ones built in Niagara, Wayne, and Genesee Counties already provide full access to disabled jurors, and all major renovations completed since the ADA have been designed to be in compliance.

While accommodation is important, it is not the rallying point for many disabled individuals—selection for jury panels is. "I understand this is not a test or anything, but I was disappointed when I wasn't picked," said Sapolin during a conversation at the Center for Independence of the Disabled in New York (CIDNY) headquarters in Manhattan. CIDNY campaigns for changes to ensure that individuals with disabilities are given equal opportunities to participate fully in society. A CIDNY advocate for three years now, Sapolin finds it hard to accept the regularity with which the disabled are judged incapable to sit on juries.

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"No one tries to understand the nature of your disability. If they did, they might find out we would make good jurors regardless of our disabilities," says Dyson. He began questioning the fairness of selection the last time he showed up for jury duty and was asked by the judge presiding over the selection process whether he wanted to be dismissed. While he accepts the offer as well intended, Dyson thinks it was yet another example of the public's misperception of the limitations of disabled persons.

Despite the apparent need to further educate the public, disabled individuals have served on juries prior to and after ADA, although the frequency is low and not representative of the overall count of those eligible to serve. But monitoring the situation to ensure fairness is difficult in a system where lawyers are not required to explain grounds for peremptory challenges. Because the ADA is so new, says Richter, its application to jury duty can be overlooked,

and it is not always clear whether the law offers redress with regard to jury selection. This is a problem with which New York, like many other states, must grapple.

In the meantime, the court system continues to chip away at systemic misconceptions. Through its ADA coordination office in Albany, it has embarked on several awareness programs for employees and has distributed statewide training literature on communicating with disabled persons. Technological developments such as computerized transcription for the hearing impaired are also being made available in many courts throughout the state. "We have taken several steps to address ADA-related issues systemwide," says Richter. "I think the fact that we now have a committee reflects the courts' commitment to finding solutions."

Overhaul of Court System Proposed

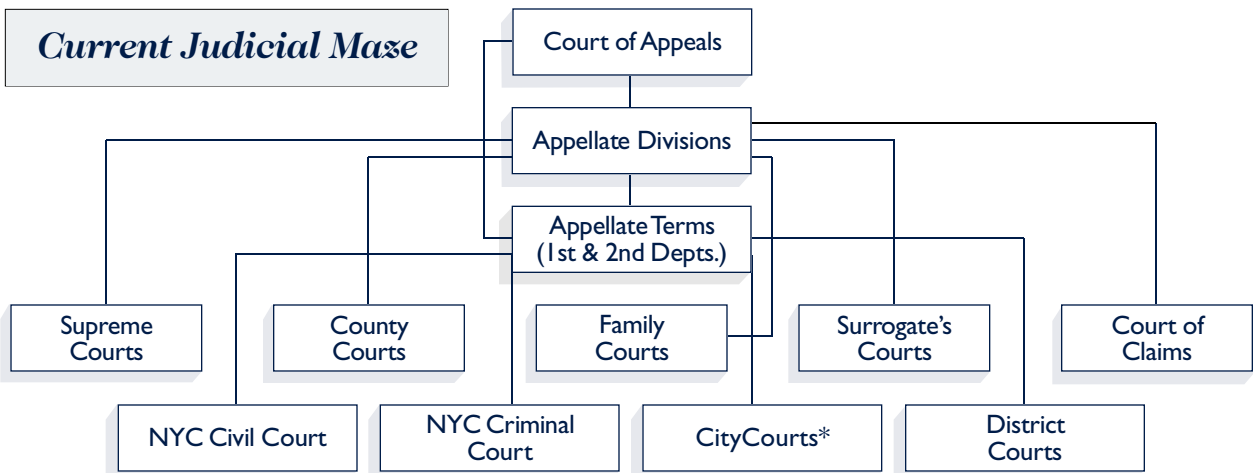
Come 1999, New Yorkers could be asked to cast their ballots for a constitutional amendment dismantling the state's convoluted, nine-tier trial court system and replacing it with a straightforward two-tier structure. Chief Judge Judith Kaye noted, "The average citizen needs a road map to navigate New York's court system, which is the most complex in the nation. Our antiquated trial court structure does not serve the people of New York as well as it should, and we are committed to the creation of a system that is easy to understand and use."

New Yorkers involved in litigation are now faced with a mind-boggling system that even lawyers can find daunting. Litigants need to figure out which of nine trial courts—the Court of Claims, Supreme Court, Surrogate's Court, County Court, Family Court, District Court, City Court, New York City Criminal Court or New York City Civil Court—is the correct court to try their case. But the

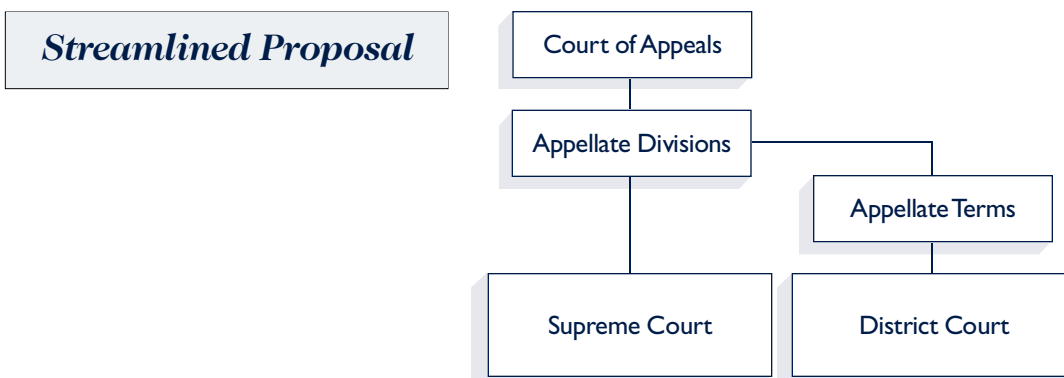
confusion does not stop there. Some litigants find themselves "court hopping"—going to multiple courts for all the necessary legal relief. For example, a divorcing couple with children might have their matrimonial case in Supreme Court and custody and support cases in Family Court.

The system proposed would consist of only two trial courts: Supreme Court and District Court. The Supreme Court would establish special divisions for criminal, commercial, family, public claims and probate matters. The District Court would handle lower level crimes and civil matters under \$50,000.

The court restructuring requires a constitutional amendment, which must be passed by two separately elected Legislatures. If approved, New Yorkers would find the proposal on the 1999 ballot, with restructuring slated to begin on January 1, 2000.



*County Courts hear criminal appeals in the 3rd and 4th Depts.



CourtHelp Is on the Way for Self-Represented Litigants

Throughout New York, growing numbers of self-represented litigants are turning to the courts for assistance on a wide range of matters. Some may only need a simple question answered—like how to obtain a copy of a court file. Others may require more detailed advice—like how to file or defend a lawsuit. The court system is reaching out to these litigants through CourtHelp, a broad program of initiatives designed to make courts more understandable and less intimidating to the self-represented.

Help can be as easy as a telephone call. By dialing the toll-free **800-COURT-NY** number, individuals can speak personally with court reference librarians who can answer questions or provide referrals to appropriate government agencies and legal organizations. For those with Internet access, the Unified Court System's homepage (<http://ucs.ljx.com>) and its linked websites offer a wealth of information about New York's courts, including court rules and users' guides to courts most frequently used by self-represented litigants.

Automated information kiosks in selected courthouses are available to reduce confusion on a litigant's first visit to court. In Manhattan Supreme Court, the interactive kiosk—which is fluent in English, Spanish and braille—provides a complete building directory and answers questions about courthouse services. Additional kiosks are scheduled for installation at the Family Courts in New York and Bronx Counties.

In courts with an especially large number of self-represented litigants, such as Family Court or New York City Housing Court, the “**Students in Partnership with the Courts**” program trains local college students to answer questions about the court and its procedures. In addition, the State Supreme Court in Manhattan has established the **Office of the Self-Represented**, dedicated to helping litigants who do not have lawyers initiate or respond to civil actions. Court clerks who staff the office provide neutral assistance, giving guidance, for example, about the proper forms to fill out or the appropriate lines to wait in, as well as dispensing general information about the court.

For those geographically distant from the courthouse, **Court Satellite Offices** provide a convenient forum for litigants to get answers to



Automated kiosks at courthouses—one of many links to information for self-represented litigants.

procedural questions or to obtain help in filing papers from trained personnel. Also, through computer-video technology, the Satellite Office can link litigants seeking emergency relief to a judge in the central courthouse. A Family Court Satellite Office recently opened in Long Island City, Queens, and expansion is planned in the near future for other locations.

Community Resource Centers provide another avenue for citizens to obtain information about the courts right in their own neighborhoods. Resource Centers will be located in select schools and community centers and have trained staff to assist litigants in identifying appropriate courts and understanding court procedures, as well as to make referrals. The Resource Centers will also serve as the sites for **Community Forums**, featuring topics of special concern to self-represented litigants. Community Forums will be sponsored by the court system in collaboration with local bar associations, law schools and legal services providers.

Enhanced access is necessary if litigants are to be ensured their day in court. The CourtHelp initiatives are a first step to make the courts accessible to all citizens.

Message from the Chief Judge

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rooms as other business proceeds in the courtroom. Please be assured that we are trying to reduce those “idle” periods. To some extent, however, waits are inevitable, and cannot be completely eliminated, because of uncertainties in scheduling trials (especially in a high-volume court system such as ours), because the law often requires that matters be presented outside a jury’s hearing, and because the press of other cases means that trials sometimes have to be interrupted. We hope you find this newsletter an interesting down-time diversion.

A Source of Information

A second motivation for this publication is our desire to share with you what we are trying to do to improve jury service as well as to let you know of other court system reforms.

Regrettably, the third branch of government—the Judiciary—is somewhat removed from the public. You don’t see and hear from us like members of the Executive and Legislative branches, who run for office every two or four years. Part of the distance is necessary. Judges, as neutral arbiters, should keep themselves “out of the fray” and indeed, they are by law prohibited from commenting on pending cases. That’s why you don’t see us in the media, even defending ourselves against unjust criticism.

But some of the distance is unnecessary. We need to, and should, do a better job of informing the citizenry about the important role courts, every day, perform in our society. Hopefully, your jury experience will leave you feeling that the system does indeed work reasonably well, and that the foibles and fumbles

you read about are hardly the whole story. Hopefully also, this newsletter will help to inform you about us.

A Two-Way Street

Third, we see this newsletter as a form of communication between us. Communication, of course, goes both ways. We want to tell you about us, but we’d also like to hear from you—about your jury service, about what you might like to see in a future issue of this newsletter, about any other court-related subject. Many of the improvements you see around you started with suggestions we received from jurors. Please feel free to drop me a line at the address given below. (You can, if you like, leave your comments for me with the Clerk in the Assemblyroom. And if you add your name and address, I’ll try to write back. If you add permission for us to reproduce your message, you may even find yourself in a subsequent issue of *Jury Pool News*.)

Finally, I hope you have already been enthusiastically welcomed and thanked. But I never want to miss an opportunity to do that myself—it’s a message worth repeating again and again. Most sincerely, I hope this important public service you are now performing will be an edifying, interesting, even enjoyable experience for you.

Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye
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