

Jury duty: Lousy pay or just an inconvenience?

By [Lisa Patterson](#) - Daily World writer

Monday, January 16, 2006 10:54 AM PST

MONTESANO — When Louise Kehn of Aberdeen opened her mailbox and saw a jury summons, she cringed.

She wholeheartedly believes in jury duty as a civic responsibility, but she wasn't looking forward to having to sit for a long time, aching from arthritis.

Nevertheless, she did her duty. She went to Grays Harbor Superior Court last week, jumped into the jury pool and was chosen. The trial lasted a day, and she was proud to help.

But it was clear from the kibitzing she heard that "a lot of people were not too pleased to be called to jury service," said Kehn, who is 61. "A lot of people said they couldn't afford to stay."

Most Washington counties still pay jurors only \$10 a day, the same rate set in 1959. Grays Harbor is generous by comparison, paying \$15 a day.

The state Board for Judicial Administration wants to see if paying jurors minimum wage — about \$61 a day — will make jury service more palatable and help draw a more diverse group of people willing to serve.

"That \$10 (in 1959) is equal to about \$70 today," says Jeff Hall, executive director of the Board for Judicial Administration, so the proposal isn't exactly a real raise.

The board asked the Legislature to test the idea in three courts yet to be chosen. If



DAILY WORLD / [KATHY QUIGG](#) County Clerk Cheryl Brown, foreground, and jury clerk Sharon Chestnut display a jury summons.

approved, the test would cost an estimated \$900,000, Hall said.

Earlier efforts to increase juror pay have failed, in part because some lawmakers weren't convinced it would have any real impact.

But Hall says the only way to know is to try.

"In Washington, depending on where you live, it could actually end up costing you money to serve jury duty," Hall said. "With the price of parking and lunch in downtown Seattle, \$10 doesn't cover it."

"I haven't heard anyone argue that jurors shouldn't get paid more," says Grays Harbor Prosecutor Stew Menefee. "That's a non-debate. It's really about 'Where is the money going to come from?'"

Last year, jurors in Grays Harbor Superior and District courts were paid a total of \$42,065. If they had been paid \$61 a day, it would have cost the county about \$129,000 more.

Menefee doesn't think paying jurors minimum wage would make much of a difference in filling the "pool."

"It may sway a few people, but in reality, the lack of money is not why people don't show up," Menefee said. "It's not so much about the money, it's that they're busy. Jury duty is an inconvenience.

"Somewhere along the way, civic responsibility lessons have been forgotten," the prosecutor said. "People always talk about their rights, but never talk about their responsibilities that are just as important."

Last year, Grays Harbor clerks sent out 17,618 initial jury summonses for Superior and District Court trials. Only 5,841 people returned the jury questionnaire forms inside.

"Some people think if they don't return the questionnaire, they won't be called for service. That's not true," said Cheryl Brown, the Grays Harbor County clerk. "If we only called on the people who returned the questionnaires, we wouldn't have enough jurors."

Last year, 7,761 potential jurors were called in. If they didn't fill out their questionnaires in advance, they filled them out when they got there.

Of those people, 2,359 were chosen to serve at trials.

"Sometimes we end up short jurors, and we've had mistrials because we haven't had enough jurors," Brown said.

People who intentionally fail to show up for jury service could be fined or arrested. The warning is stated in red ink on their summons forms, but that's rarely enforced, Menefee said.

Employers are required to allow workers to report to jury duty, but they aren't

required to pay them for the work they miss, although some do.

"Some research is out that suggests the more you make, the more likely it is that your employer covers your costs or pays your salary," said Hall, the director of the Board for Judicial Administration. "Our belief is that the lower socio-economic classes are under-represented on juries and our hypothesis is that if jury duty was not such a financial burden, more would be able to serve."

Brown says the entire legal system makes a lot of people nervous, and that's why they don't show up, or they get squeamish when they do.

"They think they're not qualified to serve. They feel they don't want to judge others or they aren't able to do this," the county clerk said.

The most important first step is to report to service if you're called, she said.

"Once a lot of jurors get here, they enjoy it and find it very interesting," she said.

Brown has served on three juries herself.

"It's a part of being an American and something that I have always felt is a patriotic thing to do," she said. "I think it's a very important thing — making a decision that has a consequence on someone else's life. It's a responsibility and an honor at the same time.

"Not everyone is even called to do it," the county clerk added. "It could be considered a privilege."

Copyright © 2006 The Daily World.

This content may not be archived, retransmitted, saved in a database, or used for any commercial purpose without the express written permission of The Daily World.