

A Year on the Civil Grand Jury: Little Changes--But Lasting Results

Like clockwork, our nation's election cycle ignites impassioned conversations about transforming government: There are calls for sweeping change and demands for greater transparency. However, once the ballots are cast, most folks resume their routines.

Yet one group of citizens--the San Joaquin County Civil Grand Jury--toils all year to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of local government. Most of the time, they function unheralded and unknown until their Final Report is published in June. Even then, much of their labor goes unnoticed.

Every year nineteen citizens volunteer to serve for twelve months, frequently working up to twenty-hours per week. They conduct investigations and submit their recommendations to governmental agencies in an effort to remedy shortcomings, correct oversights or rectify negligence.

Their contributions initiate changes most citizens benefit from but often cannot readily observe e.g. vital changes were made to the policies governing the management and inspection of the county's group homes as a result of a recent grand jury investigation. In fact, their state budget allocation received increased funding in large measure due to this report.

Recently the Stockton Unified School District was the focus of a grand jury investigation regarding ineffective background checks for individuals assigned to its after school programs (potentially placing children at risk). In addition, the SUSD police department was not in compliance with required background verification for their interim police chief; each corrective recommendation was adopted.

An informational GJ report on the Manteca Fire Department regarding their reliance on maps to locate addresses during emergencies was cited as influential in obtaining sufficient funds to install on-board GPS to expedite response times. Other investigations have included the sale of surplus property, special districts and Brown Act violations.

On February 10, 2016, *The Record* cited Supervisor Kathy Miller, County Board of Supervisors, as saying last year's grand jury report directly impacted the development of the board's code of ethics (adopted in August of 2015).

All Final Reports are on-line at sjcourts.org. Just click on *Grand Jury* to read them, learn how to submit a complaint or discover how to volunteer.

Jurors receive training from the California Grand Jurors' Association (CGJA) and representatives from various government agencies throughout the year. In addition, jurors ride along with local law enforcement and tour various city and county departments to observe first-hand the demands of providing services to over 700,000 county citizens.

Perhaps more challenging than working to achieve these successes is the struggle to find volunteers to serve on the jury. Particularly from under represented populations. Indeed, the principle strength of the grand jury system is having individuals who are diverse in every way i.e. their cultures, careers, socio-economic status, educational backgrounds and as importantly, their wealth of life's experiences.

It is this richness of varied views that allow a jury to fully discuss the issues, research problems and achieve the best outcomes to benefit the citizens of our communities.

I call on the faithful leadership of our churches, mosques and temples to promote greater involvement in civil discourse. I urge the committed executives in our civic, social and professional organizations to do the same. And lastly, I highly recommend that any qualified citizen review the requirements for civil grand jury service and volunteer to serve: The deadline for volunteering is March 30, 2016.

The San Joaquin County Chapter of the CGJA will speak free of charge to organizations throughout the county to answer all questions regarding what the civil grand jury does and how it operates. Please contact us at mathewsdcm@gmail.com to schedule a speaker.

Now, I want to address the elected and appointed officials of the seven cities and our County Board of Supervisors: As a tax payer, a father and grandfather I appreciate your contributions to make my family's life enjoyable. As a former civil grand juror I have learned firsthand that your formidable task is demanding. And, like the difficult duties of grand jurors, much of what you do goes unseen.

However, for those of you who read the Final Reports and write the responses, please know each finding and recommendation has been researched, the information has been triangulated and juries intentions are always to improve the quality of life for our citizens. I ask for your support to reach the proper decisions.

Each year grand jurors work collectively, contributing almost 20,000 hours of service, to improve San Joaquin County. Often their recommendations make lasting changes to our community. Like all others who have served, I was privileged and proud to be a small part of that process.

John Britto was a member of the 2012-2013 San Joaquin County Civil Grand Jury. He is currently the Chairperson of the Education Committee for the local Chapter of the California Grand Jurors' Association.