

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

Achieving and Maintaining Diversity of Membership

Summary

The sitting Grand Jury is concerned that

- the make-up of the Grand Jury does not adequately reflect the diverse population of Sonoma County.
- that many citizens of Sonoma County do not know about, nor understand the function of the Grand Jury and how it can help make County government better.
- that the citizens of Sonoma County are not using their Grand Jury to the best advantage.

Background

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury is a “watchdog” organization, which exists to ensure that the county government is operating in a fair and efficient manner. The Jury is composed of citizens selected at random from qualified applicants who normally serve a term of one year, although several jurors may serve a second year to provide continuity for the next Grand Jury. It is the responsibility of the citizens of Sonoma County, and the members of the Grand Jury to be vigilant and concerned about local government in Sonoma County. Although the Grand Jury is an arm of the Superior Court it functions independently with little oversight by the Court other than the selection of jurors and the approval of reports.

The Grand Jury is an all-volunteer organization consisting of 19 Jurors and several alternates picked at random from the entire pool of qualified applicants. To qualify, an applicant must be 18 years of age, a citizen of the United States, a resident of Sonoma County for at least one year, have a working understanding of the English language, and not have a criminal record.

Despite the recruiting efforts of the Superior Court, in recent years there has been a drop-off in the number of applicants for seats on the Grand Jury, and of these applicants, very few have been members of minority communities. The vast majority of Grand Jurors in past years have been Caucasian, over the age of fifty, with little minority representation.

A pool of 70-80 people is considered necessary for the selection process to be successful. Unfortunately, last year the Superior Court received less than 40 applications, fewer than 10% of which represented any ethnic group other than Caucasian.

Process

In the fall of 2008, two focus groups were held with citizens representing different ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural groups of the County. These discussions centered on ways to make the Grand Jury more representative of the County's population, to inform citizens of the functions of the Grand Jury, and to encourage citizens to use the Grand Jury. The Jury appreciates the participation of those who took part in the focus groups, and hopes to implement many of their valuable suggestions.

Findings

Through these focus groups the Grand Jury found that residents of Sonoma County are not aware:

F1 Of the need for qualified applicants to serve on the sitting Grand Jury and that citizens from all cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic sectors of the County need to be encouraged to apply to serve on the Jury.

F2 That applications to become a Juror are available online, or by calling the Grand Jury office at 565-6330. The Grand Jury website can be accessed at sonomagrandjury.org.

F3 Of the opportunity, which the Grand Jury provides for the airing and resolution of problems, which may exist in our local government.

F4 That any citizen may file a complaint concerning the operation of an agency of local government by submitting a complaint form. Forms are available on line at the website address above, or through the Grand Jury Office at the phone number above.

F5 That Grand Jury proceedings are strictly confidential and the identity of persons filing complaints is never revealed.

F6 That there are many means and opportunities available to reach out to the community with its diverse ethnic groups. Outreach in English or other languages may be used to attract qualified people to become Jurors and to inform and educate citizens about how to utilize the Grand Jury.

Recommendations

R1 That future Grand Juries and the Superior Court use the media to bring its concerns about diversity to the citizens of Sonoma County. Radio, television and print media should be used to inform citizens about the existence and scope of the Grand Jury's duties, and for the need for citizen participation. The information must be delivered in the languages of the targeted communities whenever possible.

R2 That the Grand Jury website be kept current at all times. New material should be posted within 72 hours of release.

R3 That representatives of the Grand Jury make themselves available to speak to community organizations and attend community events to inform the public regarding the function of the Grand Jury.

R4 That the Court and the Grand Jury use the media to inform the public when a report is published.

R5 That the Superior Court continue to work with the Grand Jury to drive a continuous program for citizen awareness, and encourage citizen use of the Grand Jury.

Recommended Responses

Sonoma County 2009-2010 Civil Grand Jury: RI, R2, R3, R4, R5

Superior Court: R1, R2, R4, R5