

# Civil Grand Jury of Sonoma County

## Superior Court of California



The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) is an independent institution with the principal function of overseeing all aspects of county, special districts and city governments in the County to ensure that the best interests of its residents are being served. The 19 Grand Jury members are selected annually from applications submitted by County residents to serve a one-year term.

### Why Become a Civil Grand Juror?

The ability to act as a community watchdog overseeing fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and honesty provides a public forum for accountability by departments, agencies, and elected officials. The privilege of serving on the County CGJ provides the opportunity for a county resident to learn more about the administration and operation of the government in Sonoma County.

### History

Since 1850, the California Constitution has mandated that one or more CGJs shall be drawn and summoned at least once a year in each county. Currently there are 58 counties in the state.

### Qualifications to Serve

The County CGJ is supervised by the Presiding Judge of the California Superior Court and funded by the County's General Fund. By law, a Civil Grand Juror must be a U.S. citizen; at least 18 years of age; a resident of Sonoma County for a minimum of one year; have sufficient knowledge of the English language to attend meetings, take notes, and write reports; and have no convictions for malfeasance in office or any felony or high crime. In addition to meeting the statutory requirements, a Civil Grand Juror should:

- Be able to serve a one - year term from July 1 to June 30 and to commit 10 - 25 hours a week to Jury business.
- Have the ability to work with others and be tolerant of their views.
- Have a genuine interest in community affairs.
- Have investigative skills and an ability to write reports.
- Have an email account and basic knowledge of a word processing program.

### Applications

Applications for the new CGJ are solicited from the public in the Spring. Sonoma County Superior Court judges interview and nominate prospective Grand Jurors from the submitted applications. Application forms may be obtained at the Sonoma County Court or online at <https://sonoma.courts.courts.ca.gov/general-information/grand-jury>.

### Selection

Prospective jurors are summoned to appear before the Presiding Judge in a public session in late June. The Judge selects a few members of the existing CGJ to serve an additional one - year term to provide institutional continuity. The court clerk draws individual names at random from the pool until a 19 - member plenary is reached. This body constitutes the CGJ for the next fiscal year. All 19 members take the oath of office and are "charged" by the Presiding Judge concerning their duties and responsibilities.

### Orientation

An orientation and training program is provided each year for the new jury. The training includes the techniques of investigative procedures and report writing. Visits to various county and city facilities may also be scheduled.

### Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

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<https://sonoma.courts.courts.ca.gov/general-information/grand-jury>

## Secrecy

Grand Jurors take an oath of confidentiality which prohibits them from disclosing evidence obtained in their investigations and from revealing the names of complainants or witnesses. Witnesses are required to sign a confidentiality admonishment which prohibits the disclosure of any CGJ proceedings until a final report is made public or an authorization is issued by the court to disclose such matters.

## Investigations

The CGJ conducts investigations based on citizen requests and on its own initiative. A minimum of 12 members of the plenary must authorize an investigation. In conducting its inquiry, the Grand Jury is authorized to:

- Inspect and audit the financial expenditures of county and city departments and special districts to ensure that public funds are properly accounted for and legally spent.
- Inquire into conditions of jails and the treatment of inmates.
- Inquire into the performance of any county, city, or special- district public official or employee.

## Request for Investigative Review

A written review request can be filed with the Sonoma County CGJ by any individual who believes that any agency, or any agency officer or employee thereof, is acting improperly or inefficiently. The review requests are held in strict confidence.

## Final Reports

The results of selected CGJ investigations are contained in Final Reports that set forth findings and recommendations. The content of the reports must be approved by a minimum of 12 members of the plenary. All reports are reviewed by County Counsel and the Presiding Judge for compliance with the law before being released to the public.

Copies of the Final Report summaries are published as an insert in The Press Democrat at the end of the Grand Jury's term in June. Additional insert copies are available at the Grand Jury office. The full Final Reports are available online at the Superior Court website and copies are sent to the Sonoma County Regional libraries.

## Guidance

The Civil Grand Jury may call upon the following officials for advice and guidance in discharging its responsibilities:

- The Presiding Judge of the Superior Court for any advice and counsel it deems necessary for its efficient functioning.
- The County Counsel in connection with its operation and the rights, duties, and obligations of civil grand jurors generally.
- The District Attorney in connection with possible criminal conduct uncovered in the course of an investigation.

## Committees

The CGJ four investigative standing committees are:

- Cities and Special Districts
- Law and Justice
- Human Services
- County

Committees carry out authorized investigations under the supervision of the plenary. They evaluate the procedures, methods, and systems used by the various agencies to determine if their operations are fair, efficient, economical, and legal. Ad hoc committees are created as circumstances warrant.

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