

## What to do about Palm Beach County jury service no-shows? Group tackles issue

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WEST PALM BEACH - When thousands of people are summoned for jury duty each year, Palm Beach County courts officials know less than a fourth will show up.

In hopes of getting more of the 173,000 county residents who receive jury summons annually to take their civic duty seriously, a group of judges, lawyers and former jurors met Friday to discuss ways of addressing the problem.

"Think about what we can do to improve the yield," said Chief Judge Krista Marx, using a term more often associated with farming than justice.

The forum, organized by Circuit Judge Meenu Sasser as part of the Civil Jury Project at New York University School of Law, was to analyze not only why people are skipping jury service, but also to address the growing decline in the number of jury trials held to decide civil lawsuits.

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"If we don't do something then public dispute resolution will disappear," said Texas attorney Stephen Susman, who is heading up the NYU jury project. "The statistics are terrible nationwide."

Palm Beach County seems to be doing better than the rest of the nation in the number of people who respond to calls to serve on juries. Nationally, only 20 percent of people who are summoned show up compared to 23 percent here, he said.

Likewise, while Susman grimaced at the number, more jury trials are held in state and federal courts in Florida than elsewhere in the country. Still, he said, statistics shows less than one-half of 1 percent of civil lawsuits are decided by juries in Florida's state courts.

The number of civil jury trials in federal courts have fallen to record lows, Susman said. On average, federal judges conduct less than three civil jury trials a year compared with more than 15 roughly 40 years ago.

Judges on the panel said the jury system is thriving locally. Circuit Judge Edward Artau said the drop could be because more cases are resolved at mandatory mediation. "I don't think that's a bad thing," he said. "The right to a trial by jury is alive and well."

U.S. District Judge Kenneth Marra suggested that the skyrocketing cost of litigation could spur many to settle cases before trial. "The prospect of spending the money to get to trial rather than settling early on is a determining factor," he said, adding that he regularly presides over civil jury trials in West Palm Beach.

The former jurors at Friday's presentation, like their counterparts elsewhere in the nation, said they enjoyed settling civil disputes. The trials were interesting, they got to meet new people and, while one complained about the capability of one of the lawyers in her trial, overall they said they were impressed by the justice system.

One suggestion two agreed on: More comfortable chairs.

To learn more about the project, can go to [www.CivilJuryProject.law.nyu.edu](http://www.CivilJuryProject.law.nyu.edu).

Jurors, who often stumble onto the site while researching how to get out of jury service, can learn more at [www.WethePeopleWetheJury.com](http://www.WethePeopleWetheJury.com).