

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

In the spring of 1989 I was a juror in a drug-related murder trial in Stockton. We listened to evidence daily for almost three weeks, then came back from a lunch break to discover that a deal had been made and our deliberations would not be required. One witness hadn't said as much as the prosecution had hoped, but had said more than the defendant wanted. It was a reasonable deal, and I think everyone went their way satisfied that the demands of justice had been met.

Since then, I have been summoned to jury selection a dozen or more times, and have often been struck by the complex process and just how badly most people want to avoid taking part in it.

The Chief Justice of California, the Honorable Tani Cantil-Sakauye, has said that "Trial by jury is one of the fundamental ideals of American democracy; serving as jurors reminds us that these ideals exist only as long as individual citizens are willing to uphold them."

While I believe that's true, when I responded to a summons a few weeks ago, I found myself surrounded by people who seemed to prefer those ideals be upheld by someone else. Of 103 who appeared, 85 found that they had some critical reason why they couldn't possibly serve. As they were dismissed, the room was regaled with comments such as, "Dodged that bullet!" or "I'm out of here, suckers!" A few maintained enough dignity to look embarrassed as they slipped out. And there were probably some, five or even fifteen, who legitimately could not serve because of their schedule or health issues.

The eighteen of us who were left were quickly told that we were going to be part of a jury pool. At this point one younger man leapt to his feet and shouted an obscenity before running from the room.

What do you think all those people were afraid of?

Later I would find out that over a thousand potential jurors excused themselves from serving before the court was able to get to a large enough pool to begin seating people for this trial.

Statistics about jury duty are hard to come by, but it appears that almost half of those who receive a summons never appear and only one in four people in the US will ever serve on any

kind of jury. I get it – we're busy and we hate to let anyone or anything tell us how to use our time. But our legal system is built on the notion of juries, so if we all cut out, what happens?

You can postpone your service to a more convenient day. My original summons was for December – the busiest month of my year! I postponed it to January, but I could have signed up for almost any day until mid-June, six months from the first date. No one's job is ever in danger when they report for service. The law protects you, and many employers will even pay you for your time off.

Here in California, we have a one-day or one-trial rule. You will most likely serve for a few hours on a single day, then be released for at least a year. The most uncomfortable part of serving is the waiting, but the chairs are comfortable, there's free wi-fi, and it seemed every single one of those 85 people who skipped out of my initial jury room left with a free cup of coffee.

Your decision to be a juror matters. For the system to work, we need to each take part. Please help bring justice to a world which often lacks it.

Grace and peace to you. This has been Lt. Roger McCort for the KINS Community Comment.