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Daily News Opinion

COMPASS: *Other points of view*

Thanks, Alaska jurors, we can't ensure justice without you

By JUDGE BEVERLY CUTLER

For 31 years I've been a trial court judge in Alaska — first in Anchorage and now in the Mat-Su area. Over the years I've been asked: "Why do we still have jurors? Why do we still have jury duty when everything else in this world seems to be figured out online or over the phone, or worse, by 10-second sound bites?"

No technology in the world can replace what dedicated jurors provide to our justice system: open minds ready to patiently listen and decide the often-wrenching human dilemmas that fill our courtrooms each day.

In Alaska, our jury lists are composed of adults who apply for the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend. During jury selection, we sometimes say jokingly that jury service is an opportunity to earn this gift from the government.



Most Alaskans agree that it's worth a little of their time to make sure that court decisions reflect the conscience and judgment of "we, the people."

But the people of Alaska get much more than the value of a PFD when people serve on jury duty. You get common sense and objectivity. You get people from all walks of life judging what testimony can be believed and what can't. You get people of diverse heritage and background focusing a "reasonable person's eyes" to view what went wrong, or what didn't.

Most of all — you get a more just society. Jurors learn that the presumption of innocence exists for a reason, that even a seemingly unim-

portant person can have an important point to make in court, and that a government that respects the rule of law is the best kind of government to have. Jurors are among the strongest supporters of our justice system because they know how high the stakes are for all of us.

Alaskans are good about being jurors. Sure, many people ask to be excused from jury duty — sometimes even after trial begins. I've had jurors in tears apologizing that they would not be able to deliberate because a crisis came up in their family,

or their livelihood was jeopardized, or they found the entire situation presented at trial just too emotional. Some citizens are not at a point in their life when they can spare even a few days to listen to other people's problems. But most can. And most will. Thankfully, most Alaskans agree that it's worth a little of their time to make sure that court decisions reflect the conscience and judgment of "we, the people."

And what do jurors get? Some would say "not much." But that's not how most jurors see it. Jurors see up close and personal the real life dramas of our lives playing out. They see the importance and poignancy of the problems we encounter, and our need for help in solving them. They see that their perspectives are valued and their efforts are useful. It's an enriching experience, and they take pride in it.

As a judge, I'm reminded every

day that jurors are the backbone of our justice system. Without them, our courts simply could not function as they do, and the constitutional right to trial by a jury of one's peers could not be fulfilled.

I'm glad that most jurors find the experience rewarding and meaningful, and I'm pleased that they serve their fellow citizens with a sense of civic pride. But I hope they also know that their fellow Alaskans are very grateful to them for the sacrifices they make.

So today thank those in your life who have reported for jury service. And to every juror who has served in my courtroom or those of my colleagues across the state: We appreciate you. Your open minds and good hearts keep our system of justice alive.

Judge Beverly Cutler serves on Superior Court in Palmer. This week is Juror Appreciation Week.