

Valley & State

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Jury duty seeing changes

New postponement rules, pay raises coming into effect

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EDINBURG — Attention: You have been summoned for jury duty.

Now, before that loud groan creeps out and the frantic list of creative excuses begins to roll, here's the good news: Lawmakers, judges and court administrators are finding ways to make civic duty feel less like an annoying obligation and more like a free society's privilege.

For starters, legislation took effect this month that allows potential

jurors to postpone their service for up to six months, state Rep.

Veronica Gonzales, D - McAllen, explained at a recent meeting of the Hidalgo County Jury Service Committee.

The committee is headed by 398th state District Judge Aida Salinas Flores, who is a member of the Texas State Bar committee on jury service.

The first postponement is auto-



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matic. If you are called for service, you can contact the county district clerk and ask to postpone your service for a six-month period. The second postponement is for emergency situations only, and providing false information can result in a \$1,000 fine, Gonzales said.

The postponements are part of two bills affecting jury service that Gonzales helped pass during the 79th Legislative session, which aimed to make jury duty more fun and fair. Defendants are entitled to a jury of their peers, but statistics show minorities are underrepresented in jury pools

due to the low pay jury service provides, Gonzales said, because minorities tend to make less money in hourly-rate jobs and must claim hardship when facing the prospect of only making \$16 a day on jury duty.

"We have to get people excited about serving on juries," she said.

The second bill Gonzales co-sponsored gives Texas jurors their first pay raise in 50 years, from \$16 to \$40 a day, effective Jan. 1, though jurors still receive \$16 on the first day they report to a summons, she said.

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Until now, Texas has not contributed money to help counties compensate jurors fairly, whereas many states pay as much as \$50 a day. The bill requires the state to reimburse counties \$36 a day for each juror. The county will file a reimbursement with the state comptroller quarterly to receive their money back.

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service will come from the defendant, in an extra \$4 fee added to their court costs. Counties are allowed to pay jurors more, up to \$10 more a day.

Also making jury service eas-

ier is the district clerk's new automated telephone system aimed at sifting out unqualified jurors. Registered voters receive a card in the mail directing them to call a number. The automated system asks the caller a series of questions to determine if the person is eligible to serve on a jury.

Since the office implemented the system earlier this year, they have reduced the number of jury summonses from 2,200 to 700 a month, saving the county postage expenses, said District Clerk Omar Guerrero.

It also means people who aren't qualified to serve on a jury — such as those who don't speak or understand English — don't have to make a trip to the courthouse.

About 3,000 people a week receive the card and are directed to call the number. Those who say they are qualified are then entered into the jury pool.