



CALL OF DUTY

Texas celebrates its inaugural Jury Appreciation Week.

BY **AMY STARNES**

A poster created by the American Bar Association in honor of Juror Appreciation Week features actor Harrison Ford with the slogan: “In real life the jury decides the ending.” Perhaps Ford’s beloved character Han Solo would have met a different fate in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* if the decision had been left in the hands of a jury.

The poster drives home this point: In the United States, it’s often a jury of ordinary citizens that holds the ability to exact justice and right wrongs—as much as they can be.

Texas will celebrate its inaugural Jury Appreciation Week during the first week of May. Created by Senate Bill 565, which was authored by Sen. Royce West and sponsored by Sen. John Smithee, the week is dedicated to honoring those who give of their time to participate in the American judicial system. The bill was passed by the 84th Texas Legislature and later signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott on June 16, 2015.

Several states have adopted legislation establishing Juror Appreciation Week, which coincides with Law Day on May 1.

The Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to a trial by jury, but this wouldn’t be possible if citizens weren’t willing to serve as jurors and decide the case of one of their peers.

“Jury service is vital to our civil justice system and criminal justice system,” said Nicondra Chargois-Allen, chair of

the State Bar of Texas’s Jury Service Committee. “Without those everyday people who come in and serve as jurors, our justice system would grind to a halt.”

Chargois-Allen said the State Bar committee is sending packets of stickers and jury service toolkits to all county, district, and federal court clerks in Texas. The stickers are to be given to jurors who serve during Jury Appreciation Week.

The American Bar Association offers posters, certificates, outreach activities, and other ideas for judges, courts, and state and local bar associations to use as they seek to reinforce the notion that serving as a juror is an honor and that individuals who give of their time to participate should be commended.

In Hidalgo County, District Clerk Laura Hinojosa has made it a tradition to hold open houses, inviting the public into her office to see how their tax dollars are spent. This year, she is working to have the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court approve a proclamation honoring Jury Appreciation Week that mirrors the state’s. She also wants to hold her annual open house during the week.

Chargois-Allen points out that many times, people who are called to jury service show up, wait for hours, aren’t selected for a jury, and are dismissed without observing the full process.

“They don’t see anything come of it, and they leave feeling unimportant, and they’ve missed a day of work,” Chargois-Allen said, adding that this perception couldn’t be further from the reality of jury service.

Hinojosa notes that impaneling a jury is a difficult process all around. There’s a lot of waiting and wrangling, and defendants may agree to a plea bargain when they realize, at the last minute, that a jury is waiting to judge them.

Hinojosa understands it’s a hardship on the jurors, but adds, “We have people out on the front lines that are dying to protect our freedoms, and I think the least we can do is serve on a jury.”

The State Bar’s committee wants to reinforce the value of the public’s service. Chargois-Allen hopes that, ultimately, through small, consistent acts of appreciation, the negative feelings that come with a jury summons will begin to erode.

West, the bill’s author, added, “The privilege of serving on a jury is something that too many people these days seem to disregard and treat as a nuisance rather than treasure as a responsibility of living in a democracy. So when I was approached by Judge Phyllis Lister Brown last year about recognizing the importance of jurors by acknowledging them in statute, it didn’t take much of a sales job to convince me to file SB 565. Those who serve on juries perform a valuable service that should be held in high regard.” **TBJ**

To learn more about national efforts for Juror Appreciation Week, go to americanbar.org/jury.

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