
I-Jury

The impaneling
of jurors—through
the Internet—
has reduced the barriers
to civic participation

By David G. Halpern

David Halpern is an assistant attorney general in Austin and a member of the Austin chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates. He serves on the **VOIR DIRE** Editorial Board and is a past contributor to **VOIR DIRE**, "One Juror's Determination To Serve" (*Summer 2008*).

If necessity is the mother of invention, then the citizens of Travis County Texas owe a debt of thanks to its largest city, Austin. It was back in 1998 that the fathers of the Capitol City decided to tear down the Coliseum, a well situated, but out-of-date, facility located on an urban green space along the shores of Town Lake.

The (Good?) Old Days

Because the Travis County Courthouse, a relic in its own right, has no jury assembly rooms, the County scattered multiple impaneling sessions in some of its larger courtrooms. That's the way it was for many years and as recently as 20 years ago. It was in 1994 that the leaders of the city and county put their heads and their courts together, agreeing to consolidate the municipal, justice, county, and district courts under one jury management system. The move was motivated by efficiencies and economies of scale. The

move also necessitated a move to bigger environs which could accommodate mass impanelings. Enter the era of the Coliseum, home to regular music concerts, pro wrestling events, citywide garage sales and craft shows, and Austin version of Rio's storied Carnival.

TRAVIS COUNTY
Home | Departments | Government | Business | Living | Index | Search | Wednesday, January 30, 2008

District Clerk
Travis County
Amalia Rodriguez-Mendoza

E-Filing is Here!
The Travis County District Civil Courts are now accepting documents submitted via electronic filing. For more information visit the [Texas Online Website](#).

[Local Rules Concerning E-Filing for the Travis County District Civil Courts\(pdf\)](#)
[2007 Court Order Regarding E-filing \(pdf\)](#)

Travis County Courthouse
1000 Guadalupe St., 3rd Floor
Austin, TX 78701
Phone: (512) 854-9457
Fax: (512) 854-9549

TRAVIS COUNTY
Home | Departments | Government | Business | Living | Index | Search | Wednesday, January 30, 2008

District Clerk
I-Jury Online Impaneling

Welcome to the Travis County Online Impaneling, an award-winning program that allows you to answer your summons online. Whether you need to impanel, be excused, tell us about schedule conflicts, or let us know that you are no longer qualified for jury service in Travis County, I-Jury can handle it.

Thanks to feedback from jurors like you, we have a brand new version of I-Jury online that makes the impaneling process even easier. After using the system, you'll have an opportunity to give us your suggestions for our continuing improvement.

Amalia Rodriguez-Mendoza
District Clerk

[Proceed to impaneling.](#)

For more than fifteen years, the Coliseum played host to impaneling sessions which brought as many as 2,000 county residents to downtown Austin every other week. Citizens could expect to devote between 1½ and 2 hours to the

process, not including travel time. The 1998 decision to demolish the Coliseum was part of a long range plan to revitalize and invigorate one of Austin's most beautiful and prized urban spaces. It also necessitated a change in where our jurors would be qualified and impaneled. It was that necessity that gave birth to one of the best-recognized innovations in the modern era of America's justice system.

Faced with the imminent loss of the Coliseum, Travis County's

jury managers were forced to consider options, among them was going electronic, an idea credited to Travis County Chief Deputy District Clerk, Michelle Brinkman. Back in the days of the last millennium, Brinkman's idea may have sounded

down right revolutionary in some quarters. But, not in the quarters of Brinkman's boss, District Clerk, Amalia Rodriguez-Mendoza. "Austin is a city that prides itself on marching to its own beat. It is also a city that nurtures and values innovation. I figured, let's give it a try."

In 2000, Rodriguez -Mendoza surveyed jurors, informing them that the days of mass impanelings at the Coliseum were nearing

an end. Jurors were also asked how they felt about the prospect of taking the process online. A remarkable 85% voted to go online. Perhaps more remarkable was the survey result showing that 90% of the pro-onliners had access to the Internet at home or work.

Armed with this data, Travis County set about the task of developing a pilot program that was launched March 1, 2002. The system's first test came quickly; within an hour, Travis County had recorded its first online registration. Citizens continued to receive their summons by mail, only now, they were also given the option of responding online, as well as in person. A citizen opting to go online was directed through a series of screen prompts, first to collect identifying information to confirm the citizen's name, juror number, date of birth, and home and email addresses. Next came a series of prompts to confirm the juror's qualifications and any exemptions that may apply. Jurors were also given an option to list schedule conflict dates on which they needed to avoid jury duty. Finally, the registrant was informed that she would receive an email within six days. This email provided



a date range within which the juror would be assigned to a specific court; the date range was selected to fit within the juror's schedule.

Five years later, came what may be the system's most prized innovation, a set of screen prompts enabling jurors to input information about scheduling conflicts. Now, citizens using I-Jury can register, qualify, assert exemptions, and

provide schedule conflicts in less than twenty minutes, but not before I-Jury issues a specific day, time, and court assignment. Jurors are provided a telephone contact number just in case. They receive a follow-up email confirmation. And, if need be, jurors can double check their assignments through I-Jury.

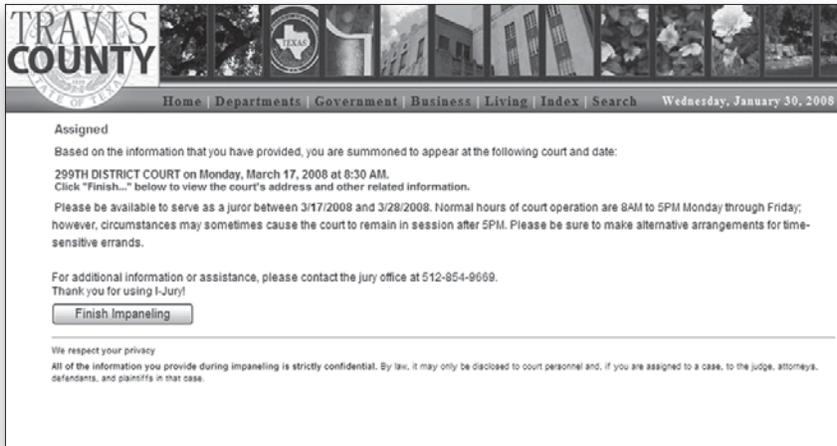
Having worked out its

technical bugs, large questions loomed. Would Travis County citizens embrace I-Jury and, if so, who would these people be?

Fair Cross Section or Select Strata?

Jury panels were scrutinized for demographics, as well as total response rates, which were impressive. In its first year, 70% of the county's jurors accessed computers and came to court through I-Jury. That number has grown to 95%, today. Still, the question remained; how truly wired were the people of Austin and Travis County? Skeptics of I-Jury feared that a new electronic jury panel might yield "the haves" of the computer age, persons whose income, education, or background put them closer to the leading edge of the technology curve. If so, I-Jury, for all its convenience, might undermine a fundamental tenet of our jury system, an individual's right to a jury of his peers; something insured by impaneling a fair and representative cross section of the community.

Jury panel composition before and after I-Jury was the focus of a recent study by Mary R. Rose, an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Law at the University of Texas at Austin. In collaboration with Chief Deputy District Clerk, Brinkman, Rose published *Crossing the Digital Divide: Using the Internet to Impanel Jurors in Travis County, Texas*. 6 Journal of Court Innovation [1:1], 2008. Rose and Brinkman looked at the racial composition of Travis County juries in 2002, the first year in which data of this kind was systematically recorded. This period, reflecting pre-I-Jury data, was compared with jury panel data for the I-Jury



years 2005 and 2006. More than 20,000 jury questionnaires were reviewed. The study confirmed different I-Jury utilization rates existed among distinct racial groups, with Whites recording a rate of 87%; Asians 86%; Hispanics 75%; and African Americans 69%. At the same time, and of critical importance, the data demonstrated that post-I-Jury panels reflected an increase in racial diversity over pre-I-Jury

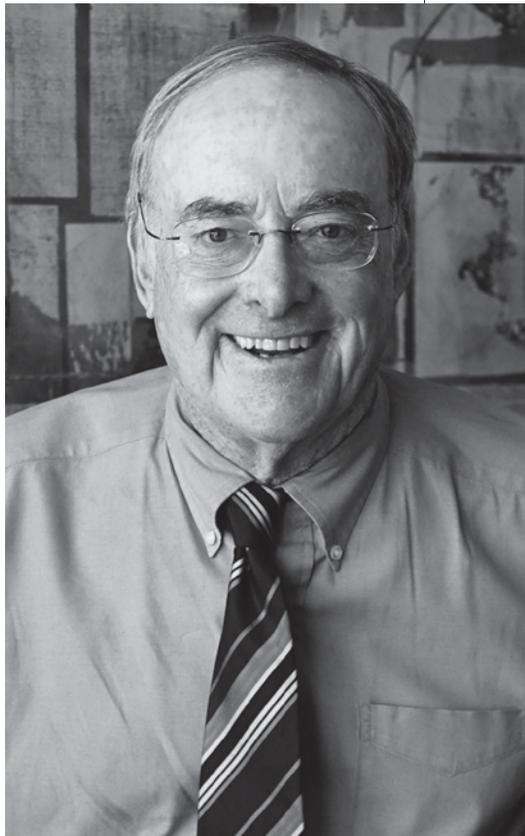
panels. Unwilling to assert that I-Jury actually improved racial representation on Travis County juries, Rose and Brinkman concluded that it couldn't hurt.

Today

I-Jury is now well established in Travis County, Texas, and word is getting around. Having received statewide and national recognition, I-Jury has become

a model for others. (See sidebar article from *Macomb Daily, Michigan*, "County Clerk finds jury tracking software for a sawbuck".) It has reduced the County's administrative expenses. It has given the judiciary greater flexibility in planning dockets because I-Jury enables judges to assign jurors to trials up to 60 days in advance, while also providing access to additional jurors within hours of a request. But, most importantly, it has reduced the barriers to civic participation. I-Jury has simplified and streamlined the empaneling process, giving back to its citizens hundreds of thousands of hours of their time. In the process, I-Jury has eliminated nearly 70,000 round-trips to downtown Austin, annually. That's not only good for the environment it's good for the legal climate.

Sometimes a little necessity goes a long way.



JACK IS BACK!

He is back to work at JUDICATE WEST

For mediations and arbitrations please call **800-488-8805** and ask for Jack Daniels

Thanks for your support and prayers