

Alameda and Contra Costa County Civil Grand Juries

Frustrated with government? You can do something about it

If you've found cause to complain about our government recently, congratulations, you're like most Americans. But how great would it be if you could be one of the few who could do something about it?

You could simply by volunteering to serve on your county's civil grand jury. Alameda and Contra Costa counties are seeking grand jury members for the 2022-23 fiscal year, which begins July 1. The deadline for applications is March 18 for Contra Costa and April 15 for Alameda County.

Serving on a civil grand jury is nothing like being a trial juror or serving on a criminal grand jury, which brings indictments in cases referred to it by the local district attorney or state attorney general.

Civil grand juries investigate the operations of city and county government agencies, school districts and other regional authorities responsible for such activities as fire protection, water supplies, public transportation and health care. Grand jurors conduct independent research, visit work locations and interview government workers and the people they serve.

Civil grand juries publish reports on their findings, including recommendations for improving operating practices and efficiency. Jurors have complete autonomy to decide what they investigate, and the agencies they probe are legally required to respond in writing to their findings and recommendations.

And they get results. Some recent civil grand jury investigations in the Bay Area have produced these outcomes:

- The Contra Costa Health Department agreed to work toward expanding and improving its delivery of psychiatric emergency service to county residents.
- The Oakland Unified School District agreed to take steps to modernize its financial management practices and realign its spending priorities to focus more on student needs and less on administration.

- The cities of Richmond, El Cerrito and Pinole agreed to update their wildfire evacuation plans and seek funding for new fire-detection technology.
- City fire departments in San Jose, Palo Alto and Mountain View agreed to take steps to improve recruitment and accommodations for female firefighters.

There are benefits to grand jury service beyond the impact of the investigations. Grand jurors learn about the inner workings of their local governments.

They spend quality time discussing and analyzing critical issues with other concerned citizens. They learn to collaborate and work productively with individuals whose perspective and opinions might differ from their own.

And when their work is done, grand jurors tend to come away from the experience proud of what they were able to accomplish, frustrated that they couldn't do more, and good friends with people they might otherwise never have met. Some even volunteer for another year of service.

Every county in California has a civil grand jury, which functions as an arm of the Superior Court. Grand jurors must be U.S. citizens, at least 18 years old, residents of their county for at least one year and able to devote about 20-30 hours a week to grand jury service during their one-year term.

If you're a concerned citizen interested in pursuing this unique opportunity to help your local government improve the way it supports us all, you can get an application at the following sites:

- For Alameda County residents: <https://grandjury.acgov.org/join-us.page?>
- For Contra Costa County residents: www.cc-courts.org/civil/grand-jury.aspx This is an opportunity to not just grumble about your local government but also effect change.

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By Jim Fiedler and Scott Law

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Jim Fiedler served on the Contra Costa civil grand jury of 2018-19 and currently chairs the Contra Costa chapter of the California Grand Jurors Association. Scott Law served on the Alameda County grand jury from 2015-17 and currently chairs the Alameda County chapter of the association.