



CGJA Journal

Vol. 27, No. 6, December 2025

Greetings!

SUCCESSFUL ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Keynote: Understanding Artificial Intelligence

Keynote speaker, **Professor Foaad Khosmood** (Forbes Endowed Professor of Computer Engineering Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo) explained that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been around in various forms since its introduction by Alan Turing in the 1950s.

Khosmood began by describing the "Era of Logic" – the development of computer coding.

The computer program ELIZA was based on logic and simulated a Rogerian psychotherapist. It was the first time a machine talked like a human. *Photo by John Bradley.* [Read more.](#)

Report from the President

"We want this conference to be engaging. We want you to be excited; we want you to be involved. I want everyone here to feel that they can talk with anyone in here about an idea, a suggestion, about any way that our organization can become better."

- Through training, CGJA had a presence in 93% of the counties statewide (54 of the 58 counties).
 - Thirty-eight well qualified active trainers (including eleven attorneys) representing twenty-four counties.
 - In 2024 we trained 73 forepersons and pro tems at our foreperson workshops. This year we've trained 108, an increase of 48%.
 - In 2024, we trained 325 civil grand jurors in our report writing workshops. This year we trained 840 jurors, an increase of 158%.
- 
- President, Gary Cooper
Photo by Lew Jones.
- Thank you to 147 members of CGJA who have already renewed your membership this year.
 - Social media has seen an increase of regular followers to 575, an increase of 150 followers over last year.
 - CGJA website achieved its highest number of visitors, over 1,800, in July 2025.

New Board of Directors Sworn In



From left to right: Gary Cooper, John Tonsing, Karen Michael, Lou Panetta, Bob Finlayson, Karen Jahr, Larry Herbst, Lori Macdonald, Dan Freeman, Barbara Sommer and Jim Glover.
Photo by John Bradley.

Best Grand Jury Report 2021-22 San Joaquin County Civil Grand Jury

For recognizing that the Stockton Unified School District was headed toward a 30 million dollar deficit by fiscal year 2024-25. They found that the district's management and board of trustees demonstrated poor business practices, along with inadequate duty of care by the administration, and a lack of board and public transparency, all potentially risking the district's solvency.

The report titled ***Stockton Unified School District: A Failing Grade in Public Trust*** recommended an extensive list of steps to address the problems.



Receiving the award for the grand jury were **San Joaquin chapter members** Chrystena Rockett, Denise Snider, Nancy Moll, Fran Block, Bruce Frank (with Barbara Sommer, EIR subcommittee chair) and Gary Cooper. *Photo by John Bradley.*

Conference Breakout Sessions

Attendees were given the opportunity to participate in multiple breakout sessions on five topics of interest, chaired by knowledgeable members. Click on each to read details.

Strategies for Recruiting Grand Jury Members Juliana Jones (Mono)

Harnessing Social Media Lou Panetta, (Monterey)

Writing Effective Press Releases and Op-Eds Molly Schneider (Shasta)

What's Your Chapter's Purpose? Nancy Welts (San Luis Obispo) and Tom Mastre (Monterey)

Ask the Trainer Live! Session 1, Marsha Caranci (Shasta) and Jon Tonsing (Yuba); Session 2, Karen Jahr (Shasta)






New ‘Talking Points’ Tool Debuts

Annual Conference attendees were the first recipients of **Talking Points** a new CGJA tool for use by anyone who interacts with the public about civil grand juries. Created by the Public Relations Committee, it standardizes, simplifies, enhances and facilitates in-person public outreach, including recruitment of both potential jurors and new chapter members.

The one, double-sided sheet allows users to instantly launch into effectively speaking about what civil grand juries are, how they work, and the good that they provide. Whenever and wherever a public speaking opportunity arises – whether for five minutes or fifty, whether to an audience of one or one hundred – **Talking Points** fits the bill.

The creators chose ‘bullets’ in many places, often over the use of complete sentences, as a reminder (and an encouragement) to each speaker to personalize and share their own county jury experiences with their audiences to the greatest extent possible. This personalization makes **Talking Points** special, and helps audiences to remember the message. It is easily tailored to a specific county by adding local success stories. Download it [here](#).



Major Service Award Goes to Michael Hofman

The Civil Grand Jurors’ Association of California

Proudly Presents the

Angelo Rolando Service Award

To

Michael Hofman

Mike has exhibited outstanding leadership in a range of areas. He is the Chair of the Membership and Chapter Relations Committee, has chaired the Public Relations Committee, manages the Association’s member database, has been a trainer since 2022, and provided invaluable assistance to the Finance Committee during the conversion from Quickbooks Online to QuickBooks Enterprise. His efficiency and attitude are phenomenal.

Hofman was not present to receive the award, as he was in the Western Pacific on one of his frequent dive trips.

Thus, as a bit of a gag, Lou Panetta, a prior recipient of the same award in 2023, received the award for him drolly deadpanning. "Last time anyone did this, it was Sacheen Littlefeather, accepting the (Academy Award) for Marlon Brando!"



Scroll Through the *Conference Banquet Photos*
Thank you, photographer John Bradley

Successful Silent Auction



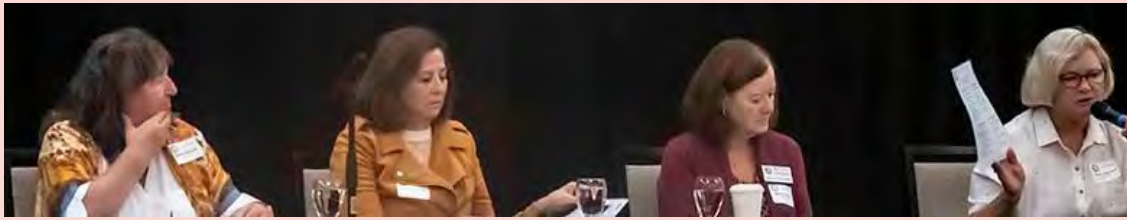
The auction was a huge success. We made \$3,502, thanks to Gwen Usher and her helpers, and to all who so generously contributed items. The earnings will be used to defray the cost of registration at next year's conference in Sacramento.

Beverly Bell and Dan Freeman took care of the finances.

See *photos* of successful auction bidders.



Chapter Relations: Growing Stronger Together



Member and Chapter Relations Committee panelists (from the left): Debbie Wallman (Sonoma), Martha Saldaña-Wolf (Solano), Marsha Caranci (Shasta), and Sharon DeBenedetti (Sonoma), leader.

From DeBenedetti, "We want you to get familiar with us and our work, because what we do, basically, is support you out there, and the chapters." Those efforts include:

- Shepherding chapters through change;
- Providing chapters with a direct contact within CGJA;
- Hosting multi-chapter officers' meetings three times per year; and
- Providing updates and spotlights for the *CGJA Journal* and 'Chapter Connections.'

The panel reviewed the findings of the recent successes and challenges survey of chapters, publicized available resources, and offered specific suggestions for strengthening chapters. [Read more.](#)

Roving Reporter, Panetta, Solicited Committee Updates



Please contact the following for further information on these committees.

John Bradley, **Public Relations Committee**, pitched that serving on the committee was interesting and fun. dbindowney@gmail.com

Herbst told us about the **Bylaws and Policy Review Committee**, along with a description of his role as CGJA webmaster. larryherbst488@gmail.com

Karen Jahr pointed out that the **Legal and Legislative Resources Committee** was only fun for lawyers as that is what you must be in order to join. She briefed us on upcoming ADA accessibility requirements for grand jury reports. karen.jahr@sbcglobal.net



Sommer said the **Awards Committee** is looking for vibrant leadership to carry the committee forward in the next years. basommer@ucdavis.edu



Bob Finlayson said the **Grand Jury Effectiveness Workgroup** is looking for people to test out their grand jury report templates for use by counties for report and response submission to the State Archivist. finlaysonrobert@yahoo.com



Lloyd Bell indicated that the **Annual Conference Committee** is seeking people with connections to influential speakers (for next conference). Also, he needs an understudy. lloyd.bell@comcast.net



Speaking for the **Member and Chapter Relations Committee**, Marsha Caranci said the committee needs an understudy with database experience. membership@cgja.org



Dan Freeman said that goal of the **Finance Committee** is to preserve CGJA into the future. It needs members with backgrounds in finance, accounting, investments, and QuickBooks experience. dfreeman678@gmail.com



Marsha Caranci, **Training Committee**, said they are fully staffed at present, with 36 trainers from 23 counties. They are always looking for replacements, especially from the southern and far north regions, and legal trainers (lawyers). caranci@aol.com

Panetta says the **Tech Committee** has fun and that they need help. lpantetta@yahoo.com

Additional photos from the 2025 Annual Conference and dinner can be found [here](#).

Ask the Trainer



This regular column allows the CGJA training team to share with Journal readers our responses to questions we receive from grand jurors. Please remember: Do not take any responses as legal advice and contact your local legal advisors to answer any question that might divulge confidential information.

Please submit your questions to cgjatraining@cgja.org. Our response to your edited or redacted question might appear in a future edition of the Journal.



Questions

Our investigation committee has recently begun its investigation. What tools on your website can help us plan, organize, and complete our investigation and report?

What is the best way for the report writers on our investigation committee to get started?

[Read the answers.](#)

Chapter Officers' Meeting



The Chapter Relations Subcommittee (CRS) of the Member and Chapter Relations Committee held its third Chapter Officers' meeting of 2025 on November 19. Thirty participants, representing seventeen active and one potential chapter, attended. *[Read more.](#)*

News and Views from Around the State

Read **Trainer Bob Phibbs'** *op-ed* published in the *Daily Democrat* (Yolo County), November 27 2025.

Letters

My year of service on the Placer County grand jury expired back on June 30th and it was a fantastic experience. I can't thank the CGJA staff enough on how well they did with our training. They are absolutely sharp as tacks, so please pass along my appreciation for their dedication, high energy plus wonderful learning information and the experience.

The training was excellent and then the report writing class that I took online with you was excellent. I just think the report writing class with reference manual needs to come closer to the actual report writing time as it was a little early in our work period still doing inquiry, investigation and interview processes. Other than that, what a fantastic group you have assembled, so please make sure everyone knows my feelings and especially those who provided training for us in Auburn last year.

Jim Ratliff



El Dorado: Hitting on All Cylinders!

The chapter kicked off the fiscal year in July with a dozen new members from the last two sitting grand juries, along with three or four veteran holdovers from prior years.



Chili Cook-off Booth. From the left: Gary Kinghorn (current chapter President), Gina Posey (current chapter Treasurer), David Hulme, Tom Murphy (last year's chapter President).

The last two grand juries were highly productive and produced a number of impactful reports. Our members from those years bring a lot of enthusiasm to continue to evangelize the impact of the grand jury, educate the community on how to leverage and support the Grand Jury, and increase recruiting efforts. [Read more.](#)

new MEMBERS

Name

Mark Peters
Gary Kinghorn
Ken Pauley
Gordon Seyffert
Margaret Woodard
Kelly Harms
Frances Wilson
Laurie Sopwith
Dameda Scott
Sunanda Bhargava
James Barrett
Cynthia Kilian
Mary Alice Susca
Mike Brady
Wendy Roberts
Debbie Chakarun
Vicki Gilson

County

Contra Costa
El Dorado
El Dorado
Los Angeles
Napa
Orange
Orange
Sacramento
San Bernardino
Santa Barbara
Santa Clara
Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz
Sonoma
Sonoma
Tehama
Tulare

Recent Board Actions - [click here](#)



Happy Holidays!

End-of-Year *Message* from CGJA

President Cooper

Keep us Posted

Format articles in Word and send as email attachments to Barbara Sommer, editor@cgja.org. For more details see [How to submit an article](#).

DEADLINE for submitting media for publication in the next issue.

January 26, 2026

Please [update](#) your contact information (if needed).

Join/Renew your membership

Serve on a committee - see the [committee descriptions](#).

The mission of the CGJA is to promote, preserve, and support the grand jury system through training, education, and outreach.

Contacts: ***Officers and directors***, chapter and association ***presidents***.

STAY CONNECTED



Visit our website

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Keynote: Understanding Artificial Intelligence

The "Era of Logic" was followed by the "Era of Statistics" from the late 1980's to about 2012-15. In the late 1980s the explosion of personal computers generated lots of data. Computers became faster and had much more memory. It was a period of machine learning and neural nets.

Then came the "Era of LLMs (Large Learning Models)". These provide a snapshot of all the text available. Elements (e.g., words) are put together in a model that retains relationships among all of the elements. LLMs work by prediction (e.g., using the probability) of a particular word ("token" is the technical term) following another word, and the probability of two words following a particular word, three words following ... on up to hundreds of sets of words following.

Figuring out these probabilities takes a lot of computation and is very expensive. In addition to the processing demands (e.g., speed and memory), fine tuning requires human participation in evaluating the output.

He described the LLM as a "stochastic parrot" – providing output based solely on probabilities. Output can be distorted and misleading, depending upon how many or how few erroneous responses the LLM already contains at any point in time. The model sometimes makes up facts in that it must make choices about inclusion and can conflate facts that do not belong together.



Professor Khosmood highlighted a critical difference between AI and human thought. Here are some direct quotes:

AI does not 'think'; it only does what it has been programmed to do: scan masses of data in fractions of seconds, and calculate probabilities based on what it finds.

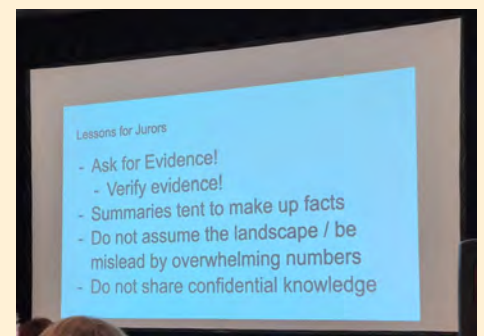
It's just a very good search engine, which, instead of giving you individual sources, it amalgamates all possible sources and then generates the most probable solution.

You're going to get really good, coherent sentences. But are these sentences actually the answers to your questions? Technically, no. What they are is a collection of the words that most-frequently show up (in the company's database) after that question. But does it actually think? Absolutely not.

Its primary concern is to generate the *right sentence*, *not* to answer the question. So you can't trust every answer that comes out of AI.

Professor Khosmood recommended the following guidelines when using AI-generated texts:

- Ask for evidence (sources).
- Verify the evidence, e.g., follow up to make sure citations are real and from trusted sources.
- Do not be misled by seemingly overwhelming support. It might be an artifact of input.
- Do not believe it if it tells you the process it went through to generate your answer.
- Look up specific information individually rather than in a general sense.
- Most importantly, do not share confidential knowledge, including unpublished grand jury investigation information or reports; *everything* you 'ask' is recorded and used in the AI company's permanent database.



The AI companies are extremely interested in data; it is extremely valuable. They've already got text that's on the internet. Now they are transcribing YouTube videos, movies, and TV shows, adding the transcripts to their databases. More data increases the probability that the most-frequent responses will be factually correct. AI companies keep their data secret because it may violate copyright law.

Asked about future directions, Professor Khosmood said it would be Generative AI – controlling things, doing mundane tasks. This is already happening but he feels the hype will die down. Some jobs will be lost but it is not as bad as thought. He felt that overreach into private data and other violations would be best controlled by liability legislation. The threat of lawsuits keeps the tech companies in line.

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Strategies For Recruiting Grand Jury Members

It boils down to three general topics:

1. **Create Awareness:** Who is the grand jury? How is it different? What does it do? How is it effective?
2. **Have (5) examples:** tell them why the grand jury is important and what it does for people living in the county.
3. **Be credible** – ask the judge who oversees the grand jury to write an OP-ED to lend credibility to the reports produced by the grand jury.



Other specific public outreach ideas:

- Give a talk during a real estate group's monthly meeting (agents have much more flexible schedules, and you'll perhaps have younger people/potential jurors);
- Contact people who do have the time – primarily seniors – for jury service at senior centers in your communities; do a presentation explaining how seniors can still have relevance, can still be important, and serve their community;
- Have a grand jury booth at public events (public street fairs, farmers' markets, 5K Runs, etc.) with grand jury members on hand;
- Post fliers and brochures at local community centers, public libraries, coffee shops, community bulletin boards, waiting rooms (especially for petit juries), shops where you get your tires replaced, etc.;
- Encourage county Board of Supervisors to recognize sitting grand jury during 'Grand Jury Awareness Month' (FebMar);
- Write editorials, Letters to the Editor.

Additional suggestions can be found on the CGJA **website**.

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Harnessing Social Media

- Facebook was identified as the most relevant for the desired juror demographic;
- To reach additional demographics, focus on other platforms such as Tik-Tok;
- Anything you put out on social media will probably be picked up one way or another by other Facebook pages;
- Recommend that chapters open their own Facebook pages (not by sitting jurors) to promote things that the jury is doing;
- On your Facebook page, use 'search terms' to locate specific demographic groups, including 'civic watch dogs,' 'civic engagement with your county,' and 'California local;'
- In counties where chapters actually do the jury recruiting for the next year, use LinkedIn, podcasts.
- See the [media guides](#) on the CGJA website.

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Writing Effective Press Releases and Op-Eds

- Always include an 'embargo date' (tells media when to release it), and a 'headline' (tells what is captured, what the lead paragraph should say – who, what, when, how and why);
- Focus: How can we help the journalist capture the public's attention?
- In the press release, try and anticipate the questions journalists/public may ask;

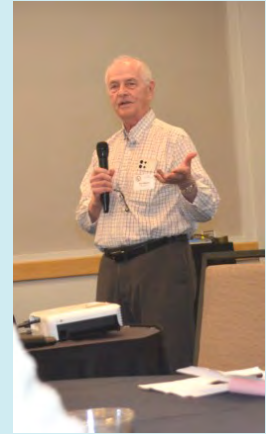


- Conclude with a boilerplate section about the grand jury's role in the county, including: How can you access it? How you can become a member of the grand jury?
- Include the date when any responses are due from investigated agencies – adds pressure and reason for reporters to follow-up;
- Identify a contact person for follow-up interviews ("Send me your questions in writing");
- Proofread all press releases carefully!
- Send 'follow-up' press releases, with quotes from judges, supervisors, etc., to reinforce impact of original press release;
- Become friends with the local press;
- Op-Eds: keep them strong; 750 words or less; tell readers why they should care; avoid jargon;
- Try to obtain Op-Eds from younger jurors about their experiences as a juror; their perspectives will reach others of their demographic.

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What's Your Chapter's Purpose?

- Chapters differ in many, many ways;
- Commonalities: How they serve their chapter members (social events, recruitment activities, having a speaker's bureau, having info about services, how they support the sitting grand jurors);
- Some chapters meet frequently with the sitting grand jury, are very involved with answering questions; some don't;
- Some chapters support and educate the public about what grand juries do; some don't;
- Some chapters interface with their county superior court; some don't;
- Some chapters are very involved with the application, recruitment and interview processes for their counties; some aren't;
- CGJA is very supportive in helping counties who want to form chapters;
- A caution was given about chapters forming 'shadow juries' (i.e., looking back at responses to prior reports and taking on the role of the sitting jury);
- Grand Jury Effectiveness Group: tracks the implementation of report recommendations state-wide (and whether they were followed through or not).



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Ask the Trainer Live! – (2 sessions) (answers were not provided)

- The scope of confidentiality: What is confidential and what is not;
- Recusals: What constitutes a recusal to a reasonable person; determining if a recusal is needed or not;
- Handling citizen complaints, and if the jury assistant can act as a gate keeper as far as which complaints should go to the grand jury and which should not;
- Recording interviews, and how almost all grand juries do that;



- Getting sued: can the grand jury and individual jurors be sued by somebody for defamation or some other cause of action, such as bias? If so, what happens when a grand jury does get sued? Are jurors entitled to a defense and indemnity by the county? And how to avoid getting sued;
- What happens if an agency tells the grand jury that they're not going to give them information on something that's within the grand jury's jurisdiction?
- What happens if factions of a grand jury – holdovers, perhaps – bully and push around the new jurors who are new to the system? How to get the jury to work more collegially?
- Are surveys legally allowed as part of investigations, and if so, how would you do them? Do juries need the approval of their jury administrator before doing so?
- How to determine the right person to interview?
- Can a foreperson serve on an investigative committee?
- Can an interviewee have an attorney present?

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Photos courtesy of John Bradley.

Live-auction winners,
Jim Wolf and Martha
Saldaña-Wolf.

MCRC panel: Chapter Relations and Chapters – Growing Stronger Together

In reviewing the successes and challenges survey made of the chapters, the single most challenge is growing and retaining membership. If chapters do not grow, they die. There needs to be a replacement cycle, particularly as there is a limited source of members (former civil grand jurors).

The two things that contribute to success are 1) a good relationship with the seated foreperson, and 2) activities members can take part in. There needs to be more than one to suit the desires of various members.

Pointers from the survey:

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings.
- Make them convenient to attend, both place and time.
- If meeting for lunch, have inexpensive options available.
- invite speakers.
- Separate out long general business meetings.
- Find effective ways of communicating.
- Communicate regularly – perhaps with a newsletter (monthly or quarterly), or on a website.
- Establish a working relationship with the sitting grand jury – very important, needs to be wall of confidentiality.

What can the CGJA and subcommittee do for you?

See Chapter Resource Documents on the CGJA [website](#).

There is a chapter officers meeting on November 19 on Zoom. Meetings are held three times a year. Contact [Sharon DeBenedetti](#).

CGJA actively encourages the courts to recognize chapters. During each training session we encourage the court to recognize the value of chapters, for assistance, especially with recruitment. The training committee invites a chapter member to attend training sessions.

On reaching out and forging relationships with the court:

- Invite the judge and/or the court administrative officer to a meeting.
- Meet with the foreperson, offer support, and go over the role of the chapter.
- Schedule follow-up meetings.
- Attend the CGJA training sessions.
- Invite the sitting jury to a guest speaker program.
- Coordinate a grand jury awareness event.
- Schedule an appreciation luncheon or dinner, or a welcome event.
- Recruit a liaison (from the sitting jury to sit in on chapter meetings).
- Provide a catered lunch during the training session.
- Have a social event at the end of a Report Writing Workshop.
- Personally contact past jurors in cohort and encourage them to attend a meeting.

An additional awareness suggestion was to make a presentation to the board of supervisors. There are generally reporters present. The clear overall emphasis was on the importance and value of personal contact.

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Ask the Trainer

Q. Our investigation committee has recently begun its investigation. What tools on your website can help us plan, organize, and complete our investigation and report?

A. Two forms on CGJA's website can help your investigation committee plan and manage your investigation until your report is released to the public.

The first is the Report Logic Matrix. You can find it under Jury Resources/Sample Documents/Investigations or click here: [Sample Documents – Civil Grand Jurors' Association](#). The three columns on this form allow you to track and logically connect your facts, findings, and recommendations. As you learn facts from your research, interviews, and observations, list each fact along with its source in the Facts column. It is okay to list interviewees by name on this document since it is solely for internal use. Make sure that you have more than one source for each fact—as many as it takes for you to be certain that it's really a fact.

The Findings column can be filled out when in your judgment two or more related facts lead to an issue or problem. You can finalize the wording of the facts and findings later, so just use a few words or phrases at this step. Finally, the Recommendations column is where you will list your suggested solutions for fixing each problem identified in your Findings.

Members of the investigation committee should all contribute to the Report Logic Matrix as the investigation continues. It will be a crucial resource for your report writers as they begin drafting the report.

The second form that is critical to your committee's progress is the Project Management Plan. It can be downloaded here: [Sample Documents – Civil Grand Jurors' Association](#). Modify as appropriate for your investigation. If you haven't started a plan yet, do it now. Plans do change, but you need a plan to begin with. The plan should be discussed and updated at each investigation committee meeting to track your progress. This form is the best way to ensure that your investigation and report drafting process stay on track so that you are able to finish your work on time.

Q. What is the best way for the report writers on our investigation committee to get started?

A. Before the writers begin the report's first draft, they should review all the material in the investigation file, including interview notes, online research, records obtained from the entity, and notes from observations – and especially the Report Logic Matrix.

We recommend that the writers use these resources to make a list of the major facts, findings, and recommendations. They should share the list with the full investigation committee and then, with the committee's agreement, share it with the full panel to make sure that the entire jury approves. This should ideally be completed by about mid-term.

As the investigation continues, the writers will draft the other sections of the report. They should make sure the Discussion section includes all the facts that lead to findings and that the report contains a recommendation for every problem identified in the findings. The Report Logic Matrix is a valuable tool for this, allowing the writers to read backward from recommendation, to findings, to facts to ensure that the report contains these necessary components.

The report tasks on the Project Management Plan should include the target dates for editorial committee reviews, legal advisor reviews, exit interviews, possible additional investigation and rewrites, and plenty of time for court approval, all in addition to the investigation committee and full panel approvals.

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Chapter Officers' Meeting November 19, 2025

It was a dynamic meeting with multiple presentations by Chapter Relations Subcommittee (CRS) members and active participation from the attendees. Topics covered included:

The CRS team: Sharon DeBenedetti, the co-chair, introduced members of the subcommittee and called for additional members to join.

Annual Conference highlights: Attendees provided comments about the annual conference, the presentation by the CRS, and the main speaker. Everyone agreed that the conference was a success.

CGJA Website updates: CRS has been working diligently to update sections of the website that relate to chapters. Marsha Caranci provided a demonstration of these website pages and encouraged chapters to send in materials, videos, agreements with courts, and other resources that might benefit other chapters. The documents can be submitted to membership@cgja.org for possible inclusion in the chapter resources webpage. The Member and Chapter Relations Committee (MCRC) will continue to update other relevant webpages on CGJA's website in the months to come.

Combined Membership program: Mike Hofman presented updates on the combined membership program, which has ten chapters participating and eleven members who signed up for both CGJA and their chapter membership. More chapters are welcome to join, and several at the meeting indicated interest.

Chapter Connections: Dar Swenson brought attention to this section of the *Journal*, in which chapters can present their successes and activities to provide other chapters with ideas that may benefit them. She will reach out to chapters for inclusion in future *Journal* articles. Chapters interested in being featured should reach out to membership@cgja.org.

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OP-ED

Making local government more effective — a chance to do your part

By Bob Phibbs

Special to The Democrat

In 1972, fresh back from my second tour in Vietnam as a military police K-9 handler, I returned to civilian law enforcement as a sheriff's deputy in Tuolumne County. Heading out for the midnight shift, my sergeant told me I would have a civilian ride-along.

As the fellow settled into the patrol car, my curiosity peaked as to what would bring him out on a cold fall night. He explained that he was a member of the civil grand jury and asked how the sheriff's office functioned.

Three years later, I joined the Yolo County Sheriff's Office. There, I heard stories of past sheriffs and how things were changing for the better in Yolo County. A couple of years earlier, James Cameron had been elected sheriff. I heard the civil grand jury had written a report critical of the previous sheriff, making recommendations needed to modernize the office. Reportedly, Cameron adopted the jury's recommendations as his election platform and later implemented many of them during his two terms.

Being inquisitive by nature, I learned that in California, the Civil Grand Jury serves as the public's "watchdog," providing oversight by investigating and reporting on the operations of local government. This is very different from a criminal grand jury, which issues indictments. Considering that the jury is composed of 19 local citizens who volunteer their time, could they really make a difference in how a local government provides services to residents?

An injury ended my law enforcement career after I had finished law school. I opened my practice in Woodland, representing city and county employees in their labor relations. My practice expanded, and I was engaged with elected and local government officials across the northern and central parts of California and Nevada for the next 35 years. This experience showed me the positive impact of grand juries in many cities, counties, and special districts that adopted their recommendations, thereby improving services for their residents.

My opportunity to actually serve on a civil grand jury came when my wife and I retired to Humboldt County, where I served on the 2021-2022 jury. I was among 19 jurors pulled from across the county to serve a one-year term. Our job was to conduct confidential investigations into local governments we selected, then write a report with findings and recommendations for how each government could improve its operations.

It proved to be a challenging but very rewarding experience. How do 19 strangers organize themselves into an effective group that can produce a report that leads to meaningful change?

It sounds impossible, but it works. Year after year, counties across California produce civil grand jury reports that make a lasting impact. In Humboldt County, we produced six impactful reports that received extensive media coverage.

A key to our success was the training provided by the Civil Grand Jurors Association (CGJA) of

California, a statewide nonprofit organization composed of current and former civil grand jurors. They taught us how to conduct investigations, interview witnesses and write reports. We spoke with elected officials, administrators, and other government employees, as well as ordinary citizens. We pored through documents and websites and observed government operations and board meetings. It was busy and highly informative, and it gave us all a healthy respect for our local governments and the people who work to serve us.

While some community interests in Yolo County are quite different from those in Humboldt County, for example, cannabis cultivation and sea level rise, there are issues that are common to all local governments. Homelessness is a prime example.

Each jury picks its own topics, usually from a combination of ideas stemming from media reports, jurors' personal interests, and investigation requests made by citizens.

Juries must release at least one report looking into some aspect of county government. Often, jurors produce 3 to 12 reports a year, examining operations in cities, schools, special districts, and other government entities. Typically, Yolo County juries release 4-6 reports each year. When juries find there are problems, they are required to recommend reasonable solutions for fixing them.

Since 2022, I have had the opportunity to help train juries throughout Northern and Central California as a CGJA trainer, including each year in Yolo County. My interest in Yolo is personal, not just because of my past, but since I returned to Woodland almost three years ago, it has again become my home. Helping the Civil Grand Jury make meaningful recommendations to improve local government enhances the quality of life we enjoy in Yolo County.

So, which governments can the grand jury investigate? In Yolo County, there are over 90 local governments, including the county itself, the cities of Davis, West Sacramento, Winters, and Woodland, 66 special districts, five school districts, 14 joint powers agencies, and the housing authority. The Yolo County Civil Grand Jury has a lot of governments to choose from.

Any person who is at least 18, a U.S. citizen, and has lived in Yolo County for at least a year can apply to serve on the Yolo County Civil Grand Jury. Jurors must possess ordinary intelligence, sound judgment, and good character, and demonstrate proficiency in English.

Serving on the civil grand jury is both a privilege and an opportunity to enhance our community. In return, jurors gain a deeper understanding of local government and contribute meaningfully to its improvement.

The Yolo County Superior Court will begin recruitment for the 2026-2027 grand jury in early 2026. Applications can be found on the Superior Court's website.

Bob Phibbs is a former Yolo County Deputy Sheriff and retired attorney. As a past civil grand juror, he is a member of and a trainer with the Civil Grand Jurors' Association of California, which trains new civil grand jurors throughout California.

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Our activities and accomplishments so far in 2025:

Recruiting Video: Gina Posey (2022-23 Pro-Tem) and Gary Kinghorn (2023-25 Foreperson) produced a recruiting video with the Presiding Judge that was shown on local community television and [YouTube](#). The local community cable channel produced this for us for free, and it's been a great education and recruiting aid.

Chili Cook-off Recruiting: Every February, the first responder organizations of the county, including select neighboring county agencies, get together for a chili cook-off competition. It's a great way to reach out to the community and provide visibility to the different agencies. The CGJA chapter took advantage by hosting an education and recruiting booth where we shared the latest reports and talked about the benefits of joining the Grand Jury.

Board of Supervisors Display Case: The local chapter arranged for a Grand Jury-focused display case outside the Board of Supervisors' room to highlight the history of the Grand Jury in the county and highlight the most recent reports and accomplishments. This has been very well-received and has fostered a lot of public awareness and follow-up. Center bottom is a copy of the first county grand jury report from 1853, noting a \$3 accounting discrepancy and the fine condition of the county jail!



Gina Posey (left) and Mary Chan Crowley

Social Media Presence: The local chapter has enhanced our online social media presence with a new Facebook group and a Nextdoor group. We use the [Facebook](#) group to promote the release of new reports, responses to reports, and to inform the public as the county agencies implement the Grand Jury recommendations (or, in some cases, if they don't or fall behind). Even though this is a private group, we accept nearly all requests to join and cross-post to other public El Dorado County community groups. The profile photo for our Facebook page features our newly designed chapter logo for this year, and a photo of the County Grand Jury room.



Podcasts and Media Outreach: Last year's Foreperson and current chapter President, Gary Kinghorn, has taken the opportunity to appear on the local El Dorado news podcast ([Patriots of El Dorado County](#)) to speak about last year's reports, county responses, and progress on the recommendations, as well as evangelize the benefits of joining the Grand Jury. In different podcasts, we covered:

- The grand jury process ([Apple Podcast](#))
- The grand jury reports on Election Integrity and the county response ([YouTube](#))
- The grand jury report on financial irregularities in the county's water district ([YouTube](#))

Focus on Training and Local Orientation: Two Grand Jurors from the prior two years, and now both members of the local chapter, have been having a blast as CGJA trainers, traveling the central valley and Northern California. Kudos to CJ Neustadter (GJ member 2023-2024, also recently married this year) and Michael Galane (GJ member 2024-2025)! Michael Galane has been working on the CGJA Technology Committee looking at how AI tools can and should be used to make Grand Juries more efficient within legal guidelines. He has also been working with the Superior Court to update state archival procedures for grand jury reports.

CJ has been working with a small subcommittee in our chapter to improve our local chapter's augmented training program for new Grand Jurors, educating them on the structure of the county agencies, the various special districts, logistics of our local Grand Jury, and who's who in the zoo. We expect to have a 2-3 hour local orientation program ready for the new jury selection next June, to be delivered the day of the impaneling ceremony in 2026.

Chapter Members Running for Local Office: Proving that there is a career path and life after the Grand Jury term ends, two chapter members have taken on the challenge of running for local office, to go the next step and implement change from the inside. Gary Kinghorn, chapter President, was elected to the El Dorado Hills Community Services District Board in a special election this month on November 4, defeating a prior General Manager of the district and a multi-term board member ([read article](#)).

Gina Posey, chapter Treasurer, is running for the Board of Supervisors from El Dorado County district 4 in the election to be held next June ([read article](#)). (continued)

Media Coverage: The local chapter submitted Sacramento CBS 13 news coverage of the GJ's 2023-2024 report on the Georgetown Airport as Media Coverage of the year award for the annual CGJA conference this month in Monterey. In fact, we were the only county to submit a report for media coverage of the year. Unfortunately, we did not win the award because the coverage was a one-time newscast and not ongoing coverage of the GJ process or follow-up activities. This was an exceptionally interesting and rewarding report and outcome as the GJ helped the county cut through the red tape, cut down tree hazards that closed the airport for night operations, and got the airport back in full operation, as well as moving airport management to the county CAO office, where it has more visibility to the BOS ([read article](#)).

Evangelizing Grand Jury Report Aftermath in the News: The local chapter takes an active role in promoting newsworthy events that follow on from prior Grand Jury reports. This helps show the impact the reports can have on the community, even if the news is a year or two later. In the aftermath of three Grand Jury reports, recent news in just the last month or two that hit the wires included:

- Former General Manager of the El Dorado Hills CSD was indicted on three felony counts and three misdemeanors ([news](#), [GJ report](#)).
- County water district responds publicly to financial issues uncovered by the GJ ([news](#), [GJ report](#)).
- The county announced it has identified a final set of candidates for the newly created Chief Information Officer (CIO) role defined by the GJ, to replace the open vacancy of an IT Director ([GJ report](#)).

Ongoing Recruiting Efforts: Throughout the year, the local chapter reaches out to the various Rotary Clubs, Homeowners Associations, and other volunteer groups to recruit new Grand Jury members, as well as encouraging participation in the Grand Jury process by submitting complaints, reading reports, and following county progress on responses and recommendations.



From left, Mary Chan Crowley, Gina Posey, and Gary Kinghorn appeared at the Cameron Park Rotary Club.

Don't hesitate to let us know how we can help support your local chapter. We've just started collaborating more with Amador County, for example, just to the south! Reach out to us through our chapter President, Gary Kinghorn, gkinghorn@gmail.com.

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Recent Board Actions

10-26-25

Appointed Richard Rogers as Treasurer.

Appointed Barbara Sommer as 13th CGJA Board Member.

Ratified President's Appointment of Lou Panetta as At-Large member of the Executive Committee.

10-07-25 (Executive Committee Action)

Approved MCRC implementation of combining payments for CGJA and chapter dues.

11-25-25

Approved the 2026 Budget.

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To the membership and supporters of CGJA,

As we move closer to turning the calendar to welcome in a new year, I would like to take a moment to thank everyone for a very memorable 2025. In the past year we reached an incredible number of milestones. This could not have been possible without our collective commitment. One of the most important things we all have in common is our commitment and support for the civil grand jury. We stand tall and proud among state-wide, not for profit organizations that are made up of a dedicated team of volunteers. We are in a very unique position, as few other organizations, if any, has earned recognition from superior courts, county councils, district attorneys, court support staff, and civil grand jurors statewide.

In our effort to promote, preserve, and support the civil grand jury system, we have all taken an active part in the magnificent transformation of this association. What began as a small, single county association in 1981 has grown to become an institution within itself. We should all have a deep feeling of satisfaction for not just our history and the current state of the association, but for the promise the future will bring. Because of the strength of our membership, we have the potential to grow even more as we go forward. The future of CGJA can be as bright as our imagination and our ingenuity can take us. I'm looking forward to what tomorrow will bring.

Thank you all for your contribution the Civil Grand Jurors' Association of California.

Please have a wonderful holiday season!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gary Cooper" followed by a horizontal flourish.

Gary Cooper,
President, CGJA

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