



KANSAS

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

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The following is a column by Governor Kathleen Sebelius:

Civic Duty

My week started a little differently than most as I reported for jury duty in Shawnee County along with 148 other community members, first thing Monday morning.

Here in Kansas, someone is eligible for jury duty by registering to vote. I was pleased at the possibility of being chosen to serve. I had only been called one other time, years ago, and was excused after being questioned because of my friendly relationship with lawyers involved with one side of the case.

When we reported this week, we watched a short film on the importance and value of jury duty, and we were then split into different groups and sent to courtrooms for jury selection. In the case which my fellow potential jury members and I were involved, the lawyers began with a questionnaire for all to fill out, to be reviewed as part of the selection process. We were then dismissed and asked to report back in the afternoon.

So, we did. The first group of 18 names were randomly selected from our group, and asked to take a seat in the jury box, and the judge and attorneys began to ask questions about medical conditions and scheduling conflicts which would make it impossible to serve on a jury for a trial that was likely to last for the entire week. Then attention was turned to views of jurors on the various aspects of the case, to determine whether potential jurors had biased opinions which would make it difficult to start with an open mind and fairly evaluate the facts. The rest of us were asked to listen to the questions and the discussion, because as potential jurors were disqualified, others could be called from the pool.

Late in the day it was my turn to go to the jury box. I have to admit I was pleased that my name was finally called, and hoped I'd have a chance to serve. After a few questions from the judge, however, I was dismissed. Though I believe I could have remained impartial, I was removed because I knew the attorneys well who were working on the case and I am married to a federal magistrate judge. (I also appoint judges as part of my job as governor – though I did not appoint the judge on this case.)

While I'm disappointed I was not selected to serve, I'm glad I was given the opportunity to participate. I strongly support our three co-equal branches of government, and know that the jury system is a critical component of the justice system. It is the opportunity for all citizens to participate with an equal voice, regardless of economic status, education or community connections. Each juror has the same vote and voice as everyone else, and while service may cause some minor inconveniences, participation is essential so that our fellow citizens have jurors of their peers to decide guilt or innocence in criminal cases, and give citizens an opportunity to seek remedies in civil cases.

I believe our democracy only works when all of us show up. Whether it's serving on a jury or voting on Election Day, democracy is not a spectator sport. It's up to each of us to take an active part in our community, our society and our country.

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