# Jury service preserves democracy

BY VICTORIA COX
EDITOR



File photo

Residents throughout Hodgenville and LaRue County should keep an eye on their mail for the next few weeks — a jury summons may just be in the mailbox. To ensure the public understands the role and significance of being a juror, The LaRue County Herald News sat down with LaRue County Circuit Clerk Emily Ernst to get some background.

First, everyone must understand the selection process. Each year, Ernst informs the Administrative Office of the Courts in Frankfort of how many jurors she needs for both district and circuit court. The AOC then utilizes a master list comprised of all individuals who file a Kentucky resident individual tax return, are registered voters or have a valid driver's license or state ID to select the designated number of people. Jury summonses for circuit court will be sent in October; the next round of jury summonses for district court are expected to be sent in November.

If chosen as a juror, the notification letter will include multiple pages: a letter from Ernst explaining your selection, general information about jury service, including orientation report date and time, and a juror qualification form. Only the final document must be filled out and returned to the Circuit Clerk's Office by mail, email or in person within five days.

While the information requested may seem invasive — such as asking for the name, relation and age of all household members — Ernst assured that the information is kept confidential and only utilized and seen by the court and case attorneys. Furthermore, attorneys are only provided with the front page to aid them in their trial jury selection.

After returning the form, individuals may be disqualified from serving based on certain attributes. Reasons for this include not being a U.S. citizen or county resident, being under the age of 18, not speaking or understanding English, being under indictment, being convicted of a felony without being pardoned/restored of civil rights/case expunged or having served on a jury within the last 24 months. Individuals aged 70 or older may also request to be excused based on their age.

Although being disqualified or exempted from service is possible — and sometimes necessary — Ernst emphasized the importance of participation: jury service is one of the most important responsibilities for a Kentuckian and American, and the privilege allows persons to serve their country, state, community and fellow citizens and contribute to the state's judicial system.

"Consider yourself as the defendant," she said. "You would want a jury full of qualified, thoughtful, attentive jurors who will accept responsibility to determine the outcome."

Ernst also highlighted that it's possible to be excused for specific sessions, instead of the entire service.

Persons who are present for roll call — even if they're not selected to sit on the final jury panel — are paid $12.50 per day.

Selected individuals will be required to attend an orientation, which explains the basics of being a juror and the expectations of the court going forward. While the quantity and duration of reports vary based on jury type, Ernst said none normally lasts more than one day. Additionally, jurors should not fear adverse action by their employer due to state law requiring the release of someone who has been summoned to jury service.

Jurors are encouraged to monitor the LaRue County Circuit Court Clerk's Office's Facebook page or call the jury line for updates on when to report for jury duty. The court will follow LaRue County Schools' schedule for any inclement weather closures.

Citing the prospect of jury scams, Ernst emphasized the fact that individuals will never be asked for payment, bank or credit card information or their social security number due to failing to appear for jury service. If this occurs, or if anyone is concerned regarding a jury summons letter, contact Ernst.

A trial by a jury of one's peers is a sacred right held by every American and the cornerstone of the U.S. judicial system. Anyone selected for this vital duty should perform the service with pride and the knowledge that they are ensuring the democratic, constitutional rights of their fellow man continue.

For questions or more information, contact Ernst at 270-358-3421 or by email at EmilyErnst@kycourts.net.

# 500+ local children benefit from Imagination Library

BY VICTORIA COX
EDITOR

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, two-thirds of American children cannot read fluently. Students who cannot read proficiently by the third grade are four times likelier to drop out of school, and two-thirds of students who cannot read by the end of the fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare.

To combat this, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library works tirelessly to gift free, high-quality books to children monthly from birth to age five, no matter their family's income. Over time, this creates a personal library of over 60 books that can help form the foundation of a child's early reading experience.

The Blue Ribbon Selection Committee, a specially selected panel of early childhood literacy experts, is tasked with reviewing hundreds of potential titles for inclusion into Dolly's library. Books are chosen with great care to meet the different needs of children as they progress in age.

The program, which launched in 1995, mails three million books monthly and has gifted over 244 million books total. More than 500 children currently receive books through the Friends of LaRue County Public Library's affiliation, and more than 133,000 in Kentucky.

Local families interested in signing up for the program can register online at imaginationlibrary.com; by mail by printing the registration page from the website and mailing it to Friends of LaRue County Public Library, 215 Lincoln Dr., Hodgenville, KY 42748; or in person by visiting the LaRue County Public Library, located at 215 Lincoln Dr., Hodgenville.

Funding shared by Dolly, local community partners and donations makes this free of charge for receiving families. To mail a book to a child costs $2.60 per month or $31.20 per year. To donate, visit donate.imaginationlibrary.com. To specifically donate to the LCPL affiliate, use code KYLARUE.

For questions or more information, call the LCPL at 270-358-3851.

# LaRue advocating for LaRue: CASA seeking local volunteers

BY VICTORIA COX
EDITOR

Thousands of children are placed under petition for dependency, neglect or abuse in the Commonwealth of Kentucky each year; in 2025, 64 of these petitions were filed for LaRue County children. To ensure the voice and best interests of these children are observed, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of the Heartland works diligently to advocate for the county's most vulnerable — but they need your help to continue this mission.

Organized in Hardin County nearly two decades ago, CASA accomplishes its mission by recruiting, training and supporting a network of volunteers who act as advocates for abused and neglected children under the protection of the LaRue County Family Court system. With their vision, every child in need is provided with a compassionate, caring and qualified volunteer advocate — and, ultimately, a safe, permanent, loving home where they can thrive.

"Volunteers are vital in making sure that those children have a support system, that they have someone advocating solely for their best interests," said Michelle Kail, Executive Director of CASA of the Heartland. "There are a lot of other moving parts in those court cases — we have social workers, we have attorneys — and everybody is focused on something different or a larger picture, whereas the CASA volunteer is solely focused on what is in the best interest for that child or the children involved in the case."

In 2025, CASA served 18 local children. They also had seven children whose cases were closed, meaning that the child was able to achieve permanency, whether that be through parent reunification, adoption or independent living. This was completed with nine total volunteers, two of whom joined last year.

When the court has appointed a CASA volunteer to a case, but there are not enough volunteers to serve them, the children are placed on a waitlist. Kail stressed the need for help from the local community to ensure this does not occur.

"We're relying very heavily right now on advocates from other counties — we have advocates from Nelson, Hardin, Green and Hart Counties right now advocating for children in LaRue," she said. "We want to get more LaRue County individuals advocating for LaRue County children."

According to CASA, the benefits children reap from advocacy are priceless. Studies show that many foster children will change homes three or more times, and, on average, spends nearly two years in foster care. A child with a CASA volunteer, however, is more likely to find a safe, permanent home; is half as likely to re-enter the foster care system; and more likely to succeed in school and beyond. The organization also provides a financial benefit, as one year of CASA advocacy costs less than one month of foster care.

To be eligible to volunteer, individuals must be 21 or older, have at least a high school diploma or GED, have dependable personal transportation with state-mandated insurance coverage, and be able to pass an extensive background check. From there, volunteers complete a five-week training to learn how to be a CASA and how to advocate for children in need.

Responsibilities of a volunteer include contacting and visiting the child(ren) at least once a month; attending court hearings, foster care reviews, family, team and case planning meetings; submitting recommendations concerning the case; and reporting any new incidents of child abuse or neglect. Advocates spend roughly 2-5 hours per month volunteering and are offered mileage reimbursement if travel is required.

"We want to break down as many barriers as possible to our local community members being able to serve as a CASA volunteer," Kail said. "Every child deserves a happy, healthy childhood and a safe and permanent home."

For those who would like to support the cause but cannot volunteer, consider the Friends of CASA Program.

"If you are passionate about the mission but maybe don't have the capacity or the time or the family dynamic [to advocate], you can serve as a Friend," Kail said. "Here, you will do an interview with us and find your niche — do you like event planning? Do you like fundraising? Do you like clerical work? [We'll find] something that you feel good about doing and can dedicate a certain amount of time to."

Overall, the biggest way to help support CASA, Kail said, is keeping the cause in mind. Whether it's a stranger looking for volunteer opportunities or a friend who has extraordinary talents, spread the word about CASA and its mission.

For questions, to get involved or to submit your volunteer application, visit casaheartland.org or call 270-982-2274.

## FLAG DISPOSAL AVAILABLE AT COURTHOUSE

**The American flag has been a symbol of liberty, justice, freedom, love of country and national purpose for centuries. It has flown far and wide, overseeing America through times of war and peace. As such, when the time comes to retire or dispose of an American flag, it carries great significance and should be done in a respectable manner. An official U.S. flag disposal box can be found inside the LaRue County Courthouse, located at 209 W. High St., Hodgenville, near the front entrance. Open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, citizens can deposit their old flags inside to ensure proper respect is given.**



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