



## **UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE**

Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse  
900 Georgia Avenue  
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

### **ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

This month we celebrated Independence Day, our nation's birthday. The Fourth of July holiday reminds us of the founders' tremendous civic activism and engagement in forming a new nation. In the years leading up to the decision to separate from England in 1776, they engaged in debates, arguments, assemblies, and public appeals on the pros and cons of separation. They agreed to serve in colonial assemblies and in the Continental Congresses. Publicly advocating for separation from England was viewed as treason, yet they did so at considerable personal risk to their lives, families, futures, and property. All of this for what was a mere dream in 1776. And they did not stop in 1776. Through the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and after, they remained engaged in debating and developing the form of self-government we enjoy today.

Their strenuous efforts to bring this republic into existence are an example of active citizenship. Through their public engagement, they brought forth a new nation in which the ordinary citizen would take on the great responsibility of self-government. Self-government requires being informed about candidates, issues, policies, and legislation; supporting candidates or running for public office; serving in public office; voting; and making their voices heard by their representatives and other citizens. In short, they assumed we would be a well-informed and active citizenry.

### **ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP TODAY.**

How might we be active citizens today? We are not called on to make the monumental decisions and sacrifices the founders made, nor do we face the risks they faced. But our modern times still call for active citizenship, and even some sacrifice.

To begin, it is as important today as it was then for us to be well-informed. Becoming well informed requires effort on our part. We have to sacrifice some of our time to learn about important issues and policies under consideration, both nationally and locally. Much information is available on the internet and television, which means we do not have to be physically present at government meetings to be informed. But, second, it is important to get to know local officials and inform them of our positions and concerns. Otherwise, they may hear only one side of important issues. Third, voting is as important now as it was during the founders' time. To cast our votes we may have to sacrifice some of our time to obtain identification, visit our local voter registration office, and stay apprised of our local voting precinct. Even standing in line to vote can take a sacrifice of time. Finally, for those who are raising children, we have an obligation to pass down our civics

knowledge, teach them how our government operates, and inform them of current issues. These are all examples of active citizenship as the founders envisioned it.

## **COURT INVOLVEMENT.**

Often overlooked in discussing our government is the third branch of government, the judiciary. The courts are your courts. The courts, both federal and state, are important parts of self-government, and citizens should be informed about their function and operations.

The very best way to learn about the courts and serve the community at the same time is through jury service. Only a few citizens are asked to serve, but if you are asked, please do not say no. Like other aspects of active citizenship, jury service involves a sacrifice of time, and maybe even some loss of income. But jury trials are our primary method for resolving civil disputes and protecting the rights of those accused of committing crimes. Jury trials simply cannot happen without the voluntary service of ordinary citizens as jurors.

Another way to learn about the courts is to learn about local judges. State judges must run for office, so learning about them informs your decisions in judicial elections. Federal judges are not elected, but appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Learning about federal judges and nominees equips citizens to make their voices heard during the selection process.

You also can see for yourself how the courts function by attending court hearings, most of which are open to the public. You can learn how civil and criminal cases make their way through the court system. Most courts are also happy to provide tours of their courthouses for schools, church groups, senior citizen groups, veterans groups, and other organizations. Many judges and other court personnel are also happy to visit schools, churches, clubs, and organizations to discuss the courts and their role and function in our society.

Finally, for readers in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, or Michigan, there are two outstanding websites that will both provide information on the federal courts and assist you in connecting with the courts: <https://connections.tned.uscourts.gov/> and <https://connections.ca6.uscourts.gov/>.

Active citizenship will always be necessary for our self-government to function. While we are not called on to make the kinds of extreme sacrifices the founders made, some sacrifice is still called for and still worthwhile. Through our civic activism and engagement today, we can carry forward the pledge the founders made to each other: “We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Curtis L. Collier  
United States District Judge  
Chair, Eastern District of Tennessee Civics and Outreach Committee

Carrie Brown Stefaniak  
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier  
Immediate Past President, Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association

Eliza L. Taylor  
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier