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Birmingham, Alabama jurors can use wi-fi while awaiting trial assignments

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Waiting at the courthouse for a jury assignment has become a little less painful for some Jefferson County residents, now that the jury assembly room is a public hot spot.

The free Internet service does not extend to the courtrooms where jurors go once they are assigned to a trial. But while the summoned await jury selection hearings, those with laptops can get some work done - or check out the latest YouTube talker. The Birmingham Bar Foundation donated the Wi-Fi service.

"A lot of the jurors, when they come for trial, were complaining, 'We're up here waiting; we're cut off from the rest of the world; if we had wireless Internet, we might actually be able to get some work done,'" said Crystal McMeekin, the group's executive director.

The foundation, the charitable arm of the Birmingham Bar Association, plans to provide the service for three years in memory of a former board member who died last year at age 48 while exercising. It seemed like an appropriate way to honor attorney Nat Bryan, since he was instrumental in helping jurors when he served on the foundation's board from 2004 to 2006, McMeekin said. The attorney, with Marsh, Rickard & Bryan, developed a handbook for jurors that the foundation continues to fund.

Presiding Circuit Court Judge Scott Vowell said that while he is concerned about jurors doing Internet research, the wireless signal cannot be picked up in the individual jury rooms and courtrooms. And once assigned a case, a juror does not return to the assembly room.

Internet searches by jurors are a concern in courtrooms across the country. Earlier this month, a U.S. district judge in Florida declared a mistrial eight weeks into a drug trial when he learned that nine jurors had researched the case online. A Facebook status post from a juror in Philadelphia and the Twitter feed of a juror from Arkansas have complicated recent cases, too.

Jurors are not allowed to bring outside information into their deliberations. Their verdict must be based on the evidence heard in court.

But Vowell said controlling access is difficult. Jurors can access the Internet on their phones or at home.

"The only way we can really regulate that use is to give them very stern instructions before they start hearing a case," Vowell said.

The Birmingham Bar Foundation is holding a ceremony today in the jury assembly room dedicating a plaque to Bryan. The most recent edition of the Jefferson County juror handbook also has a tribute to the late attorney.

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