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Court Reporters Have Front-Row Seat to Secretive Grand Juries

By [Corinne Ramey](#)



Manhattan Criminal Courthouse building on Tuesday. SHANNON STAPLETON/REUTERS

Grand juries, like the one that indicted Donald Trump, work in secret. Prosecutors put on a case without the scrutiny of a judge, defense attorneys or even a court officer.

But court reporters, who make an official transcript of the proceedings, have a front-row seat.

“It’s just the prosecutor going into the grand jury with the court reporter and presenting their case,” said Karen Santucci, who worked as a grand jury court reporter in Queens for more than a decade, and now directs Plaza College’s court reporting program. Unlike during a trial, only the prosecutors question witnesses, without cross examination by defense attorneys.

Court reporters who work in the grand jury take special precautions to ensure secrecy, Ms. Santucci said. They must use equipment that doesn’t take audio, and prepare the transcripts at the courthouse, not at home. After an arraignment, that transcript is typically handed to the defense attorneys as part of required evidence, but isn’t made public.

In the Trump case, a grand jury in Manhattan heard evidence related to hush-money payments from late January through late last month. The panel, which sat several days a week in an office building in lower Manhattan, heard from the major players involved in the payment and its aftermath, including former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen. Mr. Trump declined an offer to testify, according to people familiar with the matter.

Defendants rarely testify in the grand jury, Ms. Santucci said.

Linda Bahley, who is a Plaza College instructor who also worked as a court reporter in Queens, said that on the rare times when defendants would testify, the proceedings could go on for days, with the panel asking questions. The deliberations could get more contentious.

“Sometimes when the grand jury would go to vote we’d hear yelling and arguing,” she said.

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