ORDER ON MOTION

SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY

APPELLATE DIVISION

STATE OF NEW JERSEY DOCKET NO. AM-000053-20T4

V MOTION NO. M-000563-20

WILDEMAR A. DANGCIL BEFORE PART B

JUDGES: DOUGLAS M. FASCIALE

JESSICA R. MAYER RONALD SUSSWEIN

MOTION FILED: 09/29/2020 BY: WILDEMAR A. DANGCIL

ANSWERS FILED: 10/06/2020 BY: STATE OF NEW JERSEY

10/07/2020 BY: ASSOCIATION OF CRIMINAL DEFENSE

LAWYERS (AMICUS CURIAE)

10/07/2020 BY: OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC

DEFENDER/ACLU (AMICUS CURIAE)

10/07/2020 BY: NEW JERSEY STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

(AMICUS CURIAE)

10/07/2020 BY: BERGEN COUNTY JURY MANAGEMENT &

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE

COURTS

SUBMITTED TO COURT: October 07, 2020

ORDER

THIS MATTER HAVING BEEN DULY PRESENTED TO THE COURT, IT IS, ON THIS 12th day of October, 2020, HEREBY ORDERED AS FOLLOWS:

MOTION BY DEFENDANT

MOTION FOR LEAVE TO

APPEAL 9/28/20 ORDER GRANTED AND OTHER

MOTION FOR STAY OF TRIAL DENIED AND OTHER

SUPPLEMENTAL:

On leave granted, defendant appeals from a September 28, 2020 order entered by Judge Robert M. Vinci denying defendant's order to show cause (OTSC) seeking to postpone the trial and challenge the jury array under Rule 1:8-3(b) (addressing challenges in the array and stating "[a] challenge to the array shall be decided before any individual juror is examined"). As part of the OTSC, defense counsel speculated that the selection process was non-random, lacked transparency, and limited demographic groups from participating in jury service. Defense counsel

sought discovery related to the pre-screening of jurors and requested permission to cross-examine the jury manager. Judge Vinci correctly concluded the OTSC was untimely—since it was filed after thirteen jurors had been examined—and he thoroughly rejected defendant's contentions on the merits. Due to the significance of the issues presented, we temporarily stayed the trial, invited amici to participate, and have agreed to review the appeal expeditiously.

The jury selection utilized here comported with statutory authority for pre-screening jurors; and it complied with Supreme Court orders approving an interim plan (the Plan) for resumption of jury trials, which reflected months of research and analysis by the judiciary, stakeholders, and others. Having reviewed the entire record against the applicable law, we grant leave to appeal, summarily affirm, lift the temporary stay, and remand for continued trial.

I.

The suggestion that the jury selection process lacked transparency is unsupported on this record and inconsistent with the Plan. The COVID-19 pandemic has directly impacted civil and criminal jury trials in the State of New Jersey. That is beyond debate. In March 2020, jury trials discontinued, which substantially impacted the administration of justice in our courts. The parties and amici acknowledge the interruption, the crisis that faced our criminal justice system, and—applicable to this appeal—the importance of resuming trials utilizing fair and impartial juries.

To resolve this dilemma, judicial committees and multiple stakeholders invested substantial time and effort devising an interim solution. After considerable study, two things happened on July 22, 2020: the Supreme Court of New Jersey entered a comprehensive order authorizing jury trials to resume incrementally, which had been suspended for more than four months due to the pandemic by that time; and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) issued a Notice to the Bar entitled "COVID-19 - Criminal and Civil Jury Trials to Resume Incrementally Using a Hybrid Process with Virtual (Video) Jury Selection and Socially Distanced In-Person Trials."

As the Court's July 22, 2020 order and the AOC notice state, the Plan incorporated recommendations of the Judiciary Post-Planning Committee on Resuming Jury Trials, as refined and supplemented by the Judiciary Post-Pandemic Stakeholder Committee, which included representatives from the Attorney General's Office, the Office of the Public Defender (OPD), the County Prosecutors Association of New Jersey, the New Jersey State Bar Association (NJSBA), and the New Jersey Department of Health. Additionally, the Court received comments from other leaders in the community, the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers of New Jersey (ACDL-NJ), the New Jersey Association of Justice, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

As reflected in the July 22, 2020 order, the Plan maintains core components of pre-pandemic jury operations, as modified to protect the health and safety of jurors, attorneys, parties, and court users. As to the jury array, the order provides in part that judiciary staff would prescreen qualified jurors for technological capacity to participate in virtual jury selection; that jurors could participate in virtual selection using a laptop, tablet, smartphone, or other comparable device with a reliable Internet connection and functioning web camera; and that the judiciary is to provide restricted-use devices (laptops or tablets) and related support (including broadband capacity as necessary), configured and administered solely by the judiciary. See July 22, 2020 Order, \$1(a-d).

The order included the requirements that summonsing jurors be consistent with standard practices, statutory criteria, statewide protocols, and Supreme Court guidelines on screening jurors. The Plan replicated—to the greatest extent possible—standard pre-COVID-19 processes for the issuance of summonses to prospective jurors, the availability of online and hard copy options for qualification, the resolution by staff of certain statutory pre-reporting excuses, and the general pre-screening of qualified jurors for availability for the trial schedule.

On August 14, 2020, the AOC provided further information about the resumption of jury trials. The AOC explained that resuming jury trials was "necessary" and "urgent," and that "[t]he suspension of new jury trials for nearly four months jeopardizes the rights of criminal defendants, including those who are detained [like defendant.]" New Jersey Courts, Plan for Resuming Jury Trials, 5 (Aug. 14, 2020). The AOC addressed the summonsing, qualification, pre-screening, and excusals of prospective jurors.

The selection of jurors is governed by statute. ¹ In general, and in this case, eligible people for jury service are selected from a list containing registered voters, licensed drivers, filers of State personal income tax returns, and applicants for property tax relief. N.J.S.A. 2B:20-2(a). The Assignment Judge for each county receives the lists. Ibid. "The lists are combined using uniform procedures that identify duplicate records so that each person whose name is on one of the lists specified in the statute is represented once on the final source list." New Jersey Bench Manual on Jury Selection, §2.1 (Dec. 4, 2014) (Bench Memo).

New Jersey has a settled process for randomly selecting jurors. "Jurors are randomly selected by using computer programming that provides every eligible name with the same opportunity to be selected." Bench Memo at 3. Before each court session, the Assignment Judge provides for the drawing of names from the juror source list of persons to be summoned for

¹ N.J.S.A. 2B:20-1 to -18.

service as grand and petit jurors and sets forth the number of names to be drawn for a four-month session. N.J.S.A. 2B:20-4(a), (b); Bench Memo at 3. The list of names randomly selected from the juror source list are filed and publicly posted in the office of the County Clerk, and the Assignment Judge certifies that the process specified for the selection of jurors has been followed. N.J.S.A. 2B:20-5. Once selected,

[a] summoned juror is mailed a letter style summons which contains the juror's summons information and which provides an online site at which the juror can complete his or her qualification questionnaire. Jurors who do not, or cannot, respond online are mailed a print summons questionnaire which also contains the relevant summons information (directing the juror to report on a certain date, to a specified location, at a specified time, for service as a particular juror type). N.J.S.A. 2B:20-3. The juror must complete and return the qualification questionnaire section of the form.

[Bench Memo at §2.2.]

"The Judiciary randomly selects jurors for voir dire from among those available in the jury selection pool using its Jury Automated System (JAS). N.J.S.A. 2B:23-2(c). When a voir dire panel is selected using JAS, jury management personnel will print lists of jurors for use by the trial judge and counsel." Bench Memo at $\S 2.6.^2$

Consistent with the practice prior to the pandemic, and as per the Plan, vicinage jury managers were authorized by their assignment judges, under N.J.S.A. 2B:20-9(a), to evaluate whether prospective jurors were qualified to serve based on statutory criteria, whether they have substantiated a basis for potential excusal for statutory hardship grounds under N.J.S.A. 2B:20-10, and whether they should be rescheduled. Under the Plan, prospective jurors who substantiated that they should avoid inperson gatherings based on current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines (over sixty-five years of age and certain medical conditions), were rescheduled to a future date. The procedures and forms for addressing financial hardship and childcare excuses remained the same.

On September 11, 2020, Judge Glenn A. Grant, J.A.D., Acting Administrative Director of the Courts, updated the bar providing further guidance on resuming jury trials. See Notice to the Bar COVID-19-Update on Resumption of Criminal and Civil Jury Trials; Next Steps, 1 (Sept. 11, 2020) (Notice to the Bar COVID-19-Update). He explained the judiciary

To be qualified as a juror in New Jersey, a person must be eighteen years of age or older, able to read and understand the English language, a citizen of the United States, and a resident of the county in which the person is summoned, and shall not have been convicted of any indictable offense or have any mental or physical disability which will prevent the person from properly serving as a juror. N.J.S.A. 2B:20-1.

would continue to summon, qualify, and excuse jurors by following the statutory and pre-COVID-19 practices. In addition, under the Plan, modified juror summonses had been issued for petit trial jury selections, which informed "prospective jurors of the virtual aspects of jury service, noting that the Judiciary will provide electronic devices (with internet capacity as necessary) and assistance to jurors who require technology in order to participate." Ibid. Judge Grant reported that "[c]onsistent with pre-COVID-19 trends, more than [seventy percent] of responding jurors thus far have qualified using the online option. Early data suggests a juror yield similar to pre-pandemic jury pools." Ibid. The notice stated that "[c]onsistent with N.J.S.A. 2B:20-9 and pre-COVID-19 practices, pre-reporting excusals are handled by the Assignment Judge or designee." Id.

On September 17, 2020, Judge Grant explained that the resumption of jury trials "is necessary to protect the rights of criminal defendants, including more than 2,500 indicted defendants who are detained awaiting See Notice to the Bar, COVID-19-First New Jury Trials-Additional Information on Statewide Schedule, Selection of Cases, Options for Virtual Trials, (Sept. 17, 2020) (Notice to the Bar COVID-19 Additional Information). In a September 17, 2020 order, the Court also pointed out that since July 22, 2020, "a great deal of preparation has taken place in the counties," and that as of September 17, 2020, jurors in several counties had received summonses, and had completed qualification, pre-screening, and onboarding for participation in virtual jury selection. The order specified that "[a]ttorneys may request and receive copies of the supplemental COVID-19 questionnaire completed by jurors who report for selection on the condition that those completed questionnaires shall be kept confidential and viewed only by the attorney and the client." Ibid. The virtual jury selection here was scheduled to begin September 21, 2020.

We therefore conclude that the jury selection process under the Plan was indeed transparent.

II.

Defendant's trial is the first to utilize the Plan's hybrid virtual procedure. On August 31 and September 2, 2020, defense counsel advised the judge he was ready to try the case, and jury selection began as scheduled on September 21, 2020, without objection by defendant. Two hours into the process and after thirteen jurors had been interviewed, defendant filed the OTSC. The judge scheduled oral argument and continued

In August 2019, a grand jury indicted defendant for second-degree eluding an officer, N.J.S.A. 2C:29-2(b); fourth-degree violation of a domestic violence restraining order, N.J.S.A. 2C:29-9(b); third-degree terroristic threats, N.J.S.A. 2C:5-3(a); second-degree attempted arson, N.J.S.A. 2C:5-1(a); and first-degree attempted murder, N.J.S.A. 2C:5-1 and N.J.S.A. 2C:11-3. Defendant was detained pending trial.

jury selection. Over the next three days, from September 21 to September 24, 2020, the judge and counsel virtually examined 178 prospective jurors. Sixty-three jurors were selected to return for the in-person phase of jury selection, which was scheduled for September 29, 2020. By late morning on September 29, the parties indicated that they were satisfied with the panel of sixteen jurors.

On September 28, 2020, the judge conducted oral argument on the OTSC at which the ACDL-NJ participated. He considered certifications from the statewide manager of jury programs and the jury manager in Bergen County. Using the jury management system (JMS) in the same manner as it had been used pre-pandemic, the Bergen County jury manger summoned 800 jurors. 164 confirmed service using the online that pool of 800 jurors: questionnaire and forty-three returned a hard copy; 178 substantiated that they did not meet the qualifications set forth in N.J.S.A. 2B:20-1; ninety jurors were excused under N.J.S.A. 2B:20-10; fifty-eight jurors were deferred to a future service date due to calendaring conflicts; seventy jurors' summonses were returned marked "undeliverable"; and 197 jurors did not respond. Consistent with the Plan, prospective jurors completed supplemental questionnaires addressing potential exposure to COVID-19. 232 jurors from the pool completed the COVID-19 questionnaire, and the responses were compiled in a spreadsheet and provided to the judge in the form approved by the AOC. Only two of the 800 jurors summoned indicated they needed technology to participate in the virtual jury selection. judiciary provided one of the jurors with a tablet, and the other juror, who did not want the judiciary device, was re-scheduled for jury service. Importantly, the September 2020 juror yield of 22.38 percent in Bergen County was remarkably close to the county's pre-pandemic February 2020 juror yield of 28.37 percent.

Judge Vinci rendered a comprehensive and thoughtful oral opinion, which we need not repeat at length. Suffice to say, the judge found the jury selection process complied with the relevant statutes, the Plan, and all pertinent statewide protocols and guidelines. He concluded that no evidence existed demonstrating exclusion of any group of people from the array. The judge found that jury management handled requests for disqualification in the same manner as it did before the pandemic. He concluded defense counsel's arguments were unfounded. Indeed, defense counsel had conceded the process itself was not defective.

III.

On appeal, defendant argues the jury selection procedure here failed to produce a random pool of jurors, afford transparency in the selection process, and ensure a pool that represents a fair cross-section of the community. Without pointing to any concrete evidence in this record, defense counsel contends—like he did before the judge—that the pool was "extremely limited," which in his view amplified defects "in the jury array and create[d] a disparate impact." Defendant seeks a further postponement of the trial and urges us to permit discovery on the array

and remand for an evidentiary hearing at which he would cross-examine the jury manager.

First, the judge correctly concluded defendant's challenge under Rule 1:8-3(b) was untimely and that relaxation of the obligation to challenge an array before individual jurors were examined could be done only upon a showing of actual prejudice. Indeed, "[r]elaxation of the rule should be granted only where there is a prima facie showing of actual prejudice to defendant's right to a fair and impartial jury." State v. Simon, 161 N.J. 416, 481 (1999); see also State v. Butler, 155 N.J. Super. 270, 271 (App. Div. 1978) (same). "As a result, time limitations are 'strictly enforced' because to do otherwise would 'impede the orderly administration of [the] criminal justice system.'" Simon, 161 N.J. at 481 (alteration in original) (quoting State v. Gerald, 113 N.J. 40, 128 (1988)). Contrary to defendant's argument, he must show actual prejudice, not good cause. A showing of "good cause" applies to the timeliness of challenging an individual juror for cause, Rule 1:8-3(b), and for challenging a grand jury array, Rule 3:6-2 (challenge shall be made within thirty days of service of the complaint), but not a challenge to a petit jury array. Simon, 161 N.J. at 481; R. 1:8-3(b). Defendant offered no explanation for waiting until thirteen jurors were examined before filing his OTSC. conclude defendant cannot show actual prejudice or, for that matter, good cause, to relax Rule 1:8-3(b). As the judge pointed out, defendant's argument that he was denied his right to an impartial jury was purely speculative.

Second, even if defendant established good cause for enlarging the time to challenge the array—which is not the case—on the merits, there has been no prima facie showing or evidence on this record demonstrating the jury pool was non-random, not representative, or deficient.

A trial court's decision regarding the constitutionality of a jury selection process is reviewed de novo. See State v. Coyle, 119 N.J. 194, 213 (1990) (examining record in challenge to jury selection). The jury selection process is presumed valid and the party challenging the process bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the process is deficient to the degree that it substantially undermines the randomness of the jury selection process. State v. Long, 204 N.J. Super. 469, 485 (Law Div. 1985); see also State v. Long, 119 N.J. 439, 468 (1990) (agreeing with the Atlantic County Assignment Judge on a renewed challenge to the jury selection process after an earlier successful challenge in Long, 204 N.J. Super. at 485).

Impartial juries are paramount to dispensing justice. "Our State and Federal Constitutions guarantee the right to trial by an impartial jury." State v. Fortin, 178 N.J. 540, 575 (2004) (citing $\underline{\text{U.S. Const.}}$ amends. VI, XIV and $\underline{\text{N.J. Const.}}$ art. I, \P 10). That is clear. Likewise, "'[a]n impartial jury is a necessary condition to a fair trial' in our constitutional framework." $\underline{\text{Ibid.}}$ (quoting $\underline{\text{State v. Williams}}$, 113 N.J. 393, 409 (1988)). Consequently, jurors "must be 'as nearly impartial as

the lot of humanity will admit.'" <u>Ibid.</u> (quoting <u>State v. Williams</u>, 93 N.J. 39, 60 (1983)).

Along these lines, we fully understand the importance of jury selection, which is an "integral part of the process to which every criminal defendant is entitled." State v. Singletary, 80 N.J. 55, 62 (1979); see also State v. Wagner, 180 N.J. Super. 564, 567 (App. Div. 1981); Long, 204 N.J. Super. at 483. Jury selection is critical. Selecting a fair and impartial jury, one "that is as fair and impartial as our procedures permit[,] starts with the random selection of citizens[.]" State v. Tinnes, 379 N.J. Super. 179, 184 (App. Div. 2005).

Other cases involving jury array challenges provide guidance on the presumption of validity and the burden of demonstrating that the jury selection process has been substantially undermined. Admittedly, this jurisprudence is pre-pandemic, but remains instructive on both the presumption and burden.

In Long, the trial court found that the cumbersome procedure employed in Atlantic County in providing jurors to the court "render[ed] the process decidedly non-random." 204 N.J. Super at 485. In that case, unlike here, there existed specific evidence that the process in selecting jurors for summonses, which was "peculiar to Atlantic County," was improper because it double counted certain individuals and ignored others, and thus tended to "skew the panel against a true cross[-]section of the community." Id. at 479-80. The court determined that "[t]he system did not rise to the task of providing juries that were representative of a fair cross-section of the community in which all had an equal chance of selection." Id. at 490. There exists no such evidence here.

In <u>State v. Geral</u>d, 113 N.J. 40, 130-33 (1988), the Court addressed another challenge to the Atlantic County jury selection process. Court did not reiterate all the defects in the jury selection process, which had been done in Long. Id. at 130 (citing Long, 204 N.J. Super. at 474-80). Rather, the Court considered the same contentions about the selection process as it did in Long and concluded the deficiencies, which were not purposeful or ill-intentioned, failed to demonstrate exclusion of any cognizable class or that the defendant had been prejudiced. Id. at 131 (citing Long, 204 N.J. Super. at 486-88). As in Long, the Court found "there was no evidence the panel as composed was not representative." <u>Ibid.</u> (emphasis in original). Indeed, there is no such evidence here, which supports the parties' satisfaction after they empaneled sixteen jurors in the jury box. Recognizing the presumption of validity that attaches to the jury selection process, on this record, there is no prima facie showing that the selection process has been undermined, let alone substantially undermined.

Similarly, in $\underline{\text{Long}}$, 119 N.J. at 468, the Court addressed a renewed challenge to the Atlantic County selection process. The Court found that, as in $\underline{\text{Gerald}}$, there was no evidence that jury panels "were not

representative of the community, nor was there any suggestion that the independence of the . . . jury was compromised." <u>Id.</u> at 469. "The methods used reflected a commitment to improve the juror-selection process rather than an attempt to undermine or to inject invidious discrimination into randomness." Ibid.

In this case, there has been no showing, technical or otherwise, to rebut the presumption of validity, or any evidence to suggest that the selection was non-random or that any constitutionally cognizable group was excluded from the array. As the certifications demonstrate, the judiciary continued utilizing the same statewide jury selection procedure as prepandemic, except:

(1) juror summons documents have been modified to inform jurors of the additional requirement of reporting in a virtual format, including notice that the Judiciary will provide technology if and as necessary to enable participation; (2) the self-deferral option has been temporarily disabled so that jurors seeking to be rescheduled must communicate with jury management to process that request; and (3) additional standardized communications have been added regarding C[OVID]-19 questions, including the supplemental C[OVID]-19 questionnaire[.]

The process for submitting eligibility (which can be submitted online or by hard copy) and for excusal from service for childcare or work conflicts did not change. Defendant's speculation that the Plan limited people of a lower socioeconomic status is belied by the record. of the 800 people summoned, only one requested and received a tablet. There is no indication that disabling the self-deferral option reduced the pool; in fact, as the AOC points out, it would logically increase the jury Nor is there any indication that requiring potential jurors complete COVID-19 questionnaires affected the randomness of the jury selection process. Even in the midst of the pandemic, 533 of the 800 jurors (or sixty-six percent), responded to the summons, and the juror yield for this pool in defendant's case was 22.38 percent, similar to the average pre-pandemic yield of 28.37 percent. There is no evidence that the changes to the process have affected the randomness of the jury selection. Therefore, defendant provided no basis for continued stay of the trial, discovery, or cross-examination of the jury manager at an evidentiary hearing.

IV.

On this appeal, amici, which comprise some of the stakeholders who provided input leading to the Court-approved interim Plan, have made several recommendations that they believe are warranted and pertinent to the resumption of jury trials in our State.

In their combined amicus brief, the OPD and ACLU recognize that the resumption of jury trials is "essential" because "[t]he rapidly increasing

number of pretrial detainees facing indefinite excludable time represents a real crisis for our criminal justice system." Indeed, the OPD and ACLU "endorse the Judiciary's efforts to resume trials with largely virtual jury selection" and they recognize "the need to screen jurors for COVID-19 related grounds for excusal." However, they propose amending the Plan with "two procedural safeguards" to address "the disproportionate impact the virus has had on people of color, urban residents and others whose socio-economic status has resulted in subpar access to health care[.]" They make these proposals to "minimize the risk that a criminal defendant's right to a jury drawn from a fair cross-section of the community will be compromised." First, they contend that all COVID-19 related excusals and deferrals should be heard by a judge in the presence of the parties; not handled by the jury manager. Second, they maintain that the judiciary should "collect and provide" to the defense "demographic data that would allow for an assessment of whether there has been a disparate impact on the representation of a cognizable class in the jury pool." The OPD and ACLU did not raise these "procedural safeguards" before the judge as they did not participate during the trial court proceedings.

The ACDL-NJ, which participated during oral argument on defendant's OTSC, also makes recommendations. First, it contends that "the hybrid jury selection process should only proceed with a defendant's informed consent and knowing waiver." Second, it argues that data should be maintained and available for defendants "to determine if the jury represents a fair cross-section of the community." The ACDL-NJ reminds the court that after the AOC notified the bar about the Plan, it responded with a formal written counterproposal suggesting several modifications. Although the ACDL-NJ urges us to invalidate the Plan, it recognizes "that there are some defendants who are languishing in jail while they await trial." Accordingly, the ACDL-NJ asserts "defendants should have the option to consent to the [Plan] for reasons best known to those defendants and their attorneys." Therefore, it argues "the hybrid jury selection process should only proceed with a defendant's informed consent and knowing waiver."

The NJSBA, which petitioned this court to appear as amicus, applauded many steps taken to "adapt the jury selection process to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic," indicating that those steps have been "appropriate, constructive, and even admirable." But the NJSBA expressed concerns about the parties' inability to "evaluate for themselves the sincerity and reasonableness of any juror's request" for excusal from service. Although recognizing the importance of resuming jury trials after months of suspension during COVID-19, the NJSBA requests that we "invalidate the process utilized here" and allow defendant a trial "at which requests for excuses, as part of the voir dire process, occur on the record and in the presence of counsel."

It is well established that generally, amicus curiae must accept the case before the court as presented by the parties and cannot raise issues

that were not raised by the parties. State v. Lazo, 209 N.J. 9, 25 (2012). Amici have largely proposed changing the Plan to accommodate their earlier positions and advance new proposals. As an intermediary appellate court, we lack authority to alter orders issued by the Supreme Court, including those approving the Plan. This is especially true based on the careful and conscientious efforts of the Court, in conjunction with the stakeholders and others, including amici in this case, to create a Plan that would best facilitate the interests of justice.

We therefore summarily affirm the order under review, lift the temporary stay, and remand for resumption of the trial.

FOR THE COURT:

DOUGLAS M. FASCIALE, P.J.A.D.

19-08-01020-I BERGEN
ORDER - REGULAR MOTION
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