

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am a resident of MD District 21. I am a white 71 year old woman with some vision and hearing problems. I am also a member of Showing Up for Racial Justice Annapolis and Anne Arundel County and am committed to equity and transparency. **I am testifying in support of Senate Bill 469.**

This bill requires that each court in the state provide remote audio-visual access to all public court proceedings, unless a proceeding is deemed closed, confidential, or restricted by federal or State law; and authorizing a presiding judge to limit certain broadcasts.

As an elderly person, I know how difficult it can be to get around. Vision issues have limited my driving at times. And I strain to hear when I attend public meetings and proceedings. Then I think about those who are more disabled or homebound. Shouldn't they be able to access public court proceedings? Even just being able to turn up the volume on one's home computer allows the hard of hearing an advantage that being physically present in a courtroom does not.

During the pandemic, Maryland adopted virtual court access to protect the health of courtroom participants. This remote access has not only reduced public health risk, but also improved access for community members and increased transparency. As the pandemic has continued, some counties, like Baltimore County, have returned to in person hearings with no virtual access. As we know, the pandemic is hardly over. Not only do courtroom participants deserve continued safety as the uncertainty of the pandemic continues, but easier access provides many additional benefits to our society and should become the standard.

Incarcerated people deserve the support of their loved ones and community. Virtual access allows community participation and family support for people who are locked up. For example, the Prince Georges County court is in a remote location that can take a long time to reach on public transportation; it is often impossible for people to take off work, get childcare and transportation to come to court. Virtual access allows easier access for all community members. Removing these barriers to access ensures that not only wealthier folks with greater access to transportation and flexibility to take off from work at will are able to support their loved ones.

Court access creates transparency and accountability; without it there is no public oversight. Public access ensures that any errors, oversights, and injustices are visible to the public. Two tools that provide public accountability are courtwatch programs and the media. The PG County Courtwatch has been operating with virtual access over the last few years. Courtwatch programs like these are vital because they gather real-time, objective data about the court system and they hold officials accountable who have been shown to misuse their position within the courtroom. Virtual court access also makes attending easier for the press. Local news sources are already struggling and sending a reporter to the courthouse to wait for a trial is a challenge. Virtual access makes local coverage of the courts more attainable. Taking away virtual access to the courts undermines their integrity and undercuts the public's confidence in the judicial process, which is the cornerstone of our judiciary. Enabling public access elevates our justice system to the highest standard of accuracy and integrity.

The pandemic has shown us that virtual access is possible. Increasing access for journalists, courtwatch programs, family, and community members of varying levels of ability will build a more trustworthy, equitable, and accessible court system. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of House Bill 647.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Linda Girdner
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