

**TESTIMONY in Support of SB469**  
**Courts – Remote Public Access**

**TO:** Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee  
**FROM:** Samantha Blau on behalf of Baltimore Action Legal Team

My name is Samantha Blau, I am the Policy Director of Baltimore Action Legal Team (BALT). I submit this testimony in favor of Senate Bill 469. BALT is a legal collective that was founded in response to community calls for legal support during the protests following Freddie Gray’s murder. Since 2015 we remain committed to educating community members about their rights and ensuring access to public records like police misconduct investigations.

Before becoming a member of Baltimore Action Legal Team, I spent a summer volunteering for the Baltimore City Office of the Public Defender as a court watcher for bail review hearings. It was an enlightening experience. I went into that process believing that I was a well informed member of the public; someone who understood the process between arrest and bail, and what happened in a courtroom. Walking into that courtroom for the first time I received an education. I learned that the defendant was not allowed to attend their own bail review in person. I also learned that judges sometimes take into account a defendant’s status within their community when setting pretrial terms. I saw that family members often waited in the audience hoping that the judge would give them a moment to explain how the defendant had a community of support, hoping at least that the judge would note their presence. With the unprecedented changes the pandemic has brought to our society, we saw these courtrooms go virtual and it was one of the very few positive outcomes from an otherwise tragic experience. Clients that BALT was prepared to support with bond and electronic monitoring funding now had more family members who could attend hearings. A defendant's parent who would have had to miss work to attend a hearing could instead do so during a work break. A defendant’s partner, caring for a young child, would no longer have to arrange child care in order to show their support. Increasing access to bail review hearings is an important way to ensure that judges know the defendant has a community.

Maintaining remote access to our courts means transparency for how our judiciary works. Being able to dial in to a court hearing means that families can be present to support their loved one and know what is happening in their case. Remote access is the right thing to do, and I urge a favorable report on SB469 from this committee.