



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 0469:

Courts - Remote Public Access

TO: Hon. William C. Smith, Chair, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Caleb Jasso, Policy Advocate

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The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that advocates for better jobs, skills training, and wages for low-income workers and job seekers in Maryland. We are also working in collaboration with Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore (SURJ), Out for Justice, and Life After Release. JOTF supports **Senate Bill 469** as a means to require each court in the State to provide remote audio-visual access to all public court proceedings.

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.

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 PG 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

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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 will build a more trustworthy, equitable court system. For these reasons, JOTF urges a favorable vote on **Senate Bill 469**.

For more information, contact:

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