

Honorable Sheila R. Tillerson Adams

Chief and Administrative Judge  
Circuit Court for Prince George's County and the  
Seventh Judicial Circuit of Maryland

Circuit Court  
14735 Main Street  
Upper Marlboro, Maryland

Honorable Chief Judge Tillerson Adams,

We commend you on your efforts to ensure that the public has virtual access to court hearings during the pandemic and respectfully urge you to make this virtual access permanent.

Public access to judicial proceedings is a hallmark of democratic government and serves to promote accountability within the legal system. The pandemic has highlighted the importance—and feasibility—of providing the public with access to court proceedings virtually, including via telephonic and videoconferencing technologies. Preserving virtual access for the public should remain a top priority for court officials in Prince George's County. Even as COVID transmission rates begin to subside contracting the virus remains a threat, particularly as new variants emerge, and herd immunity remains out of reach. Moreover, in addition to these ongoing public health concerns, the lack of affordable and accessible public transit options for visiting the Prince George's County Courthouse makes it functionally impossible for many County residents to attend court proceedings in person. Indeed, for Hyattsville residents, a roundtrip visit to the Upper Marlboro Courthouse via public transit would take more than four hours. People should not have to undertake such a heavy burden to exercise their constitutional right to attend or observe public court proceedings.

We urge you to make virtual access a permanent feature of the Prince George's County court system. In making this request, we recognize that judges would maintain the ability, in consultation with counsel, to close individual, sensitive proceedings to the public by following the same processes that exist for closing in-person court proceedings. Specifically, we ask you to make permanent the current system of telephonic access and restore the system of video access that existed for the first several months of the pandemic. Maryland law empowers local administrative judges to provide virtual access to the public. We encourage you to exercise that authority and commit, on a permanent basis, to providing the public with virtual access to all judicial proceedings that are publicly accessible in person.

Thank you,

City of Hyattsville.