

## **Janet Tupper Testimony**

My name is Janet Tupper and I am a court watcher with Courtwatch PG. I am also a concerned Maryland resident and constituent. I am writing today in support of the virtual access bill.

Until recently, I lived in Prince George's County for over 34 years. I have always appreciated the diversity in my neighborhood, which is quite unlike where I grew up in a suburb of Detroit. Over the years, however, I have realized that the experiences of my Black and Brown neighbors are quite different from my own, sometimes due to the way our criminal justice system works.

I have voted for Prince George's County elected leaders and county officials who claim a desire to change the disparities in the criminal justice system. But real change has been painfully slow, in part I feel, because the public—and even our elected officials—are unaware of what goes on in our courts. I believe citizen involvement is a crucial part of achieving our goals as it helps to keep those in power accountable for their actions. The silver lining of the pandemic is that it has led to new ways of connecting virtually. Keeping our courts accessible virtually could be a powerful tool for us to bring about real change. That is why I am supporting this critical legislation.

I am also in support of virtual court watch because it gives family members and victims the opportunity to have access to court proceedings and have their perspectives taken into account. During bond hearings there are often family members and/or victims who wish to be heard concerning bond impacting the community member brought before a judge. For those who wish to participate, the lack of affordable and accessible public transit options for visiting the Prince George's County Courthouse in Upper Marlboro makes it functionally impossible for many County residents to attend court proceedings in person. Indeed, for many community members, a roundtrip visit to the Upper Marlboro Courthouse via public transit could take several hours. Our community members should not have to undertake such a heavy burden to exercise their constitutional right to attend or observe public court proceedings.

I believe that our elected leaders, judges, law enforcement personnel, and our county officials want to have a just, efficient, non-corrupt criminal legal system. While I believe the system is better than it has been in the past, that is hardly a high bar given our racist history. We have a long way to go and having community members involved in the effort to ensure both public safety AND fair and

equitable treatment of those accused of crimes, should be a high priority. While it may not always be comfortable to hear where there are failures, it should be welcome. I hope this governing body will see the value of the public being part of reaching the goal of just and equitable treatment of every Prince Georges County community member and support this bill. Thank you for your consideration.