

J. Sheffield Testimony

Thank you for your time today. I am writing in support of virtual court access and urge you to pass this bill.

I courtwatch, and I am supporting this legislation to keep courts virtual because what happens to loved ones in the PG County courthouse could happen to any Black or Brown person in my life in any courtroom across this country. I courtwatch because bureaucratic loopholes prevent loved ones from speaking to their attorneys. I courtwatch because someone's life shouldn't depend on a prosecutor or judge's mood that day. I courtwatch because what is happening in those courts is being done in our name. I courtwatch because I believe a different world is possible and required.

Court watchers such as myself as well as family and friends of loved ones behind bars need to have virtual access -- it is often not possible to take off work and get childcare and transportation. Personally, I would not be able to civically engage, educate myself, and courtwatch without virtual access. I am not able to give this testimony in person, for example, due to work and transportation.

Court watching highlights the horrific criminalization of Black and Brown homelessness, mental health, disability, immigration status, and family matters in a system that offers no protection for anyone other than white European descendants like myself. Court watching is an essential part of educating ourselves, our families, and our communities to disrupt this intentional cycle so that we can face the truth, and build a future based on community care. The courts have shown they have the technological means to stay up with the technological times. There is no reason to go back; in fact, it is imperative that courts keep up with the times to ensure fairness and transparency and guarantee the public their constitutional right to open access to court proceedings. No one should have to jeopardize their health and/or job to come to court.

The current system just keeps returning people to jail and keeping them in jail. Maryland has the opportunity, and it is an opportunity, to be a leader in the U.S. court system and cut down on failure to appear (FTA's), which will then also means fewer people being

held pre-trial due to their FTA's. It will mean fewer people will lose their jobs, and fewer people will become homeless. It will also mean that folks facing jail time will be able to have virtual support and to be held by, and accountable to, their families and friends watching. It will mean our communities can be safer and more supportive. I urge you to support this legislation because isn't that what we all want?