

Joshua Bell Testimony

Hello, my name is Joshua Bell and I am a Maryland resident and constituent. I am writing in support of virtual access to courts. I will keep my testimony brief but I wanted to have my voice heard. Keeping the courts virtual keeps them equitable while the coronavirus pandemic continues to be a public health safety risk, as well as increases transparency and accountability in the criminal justice system. I know many people on multiple sides of the criminal justice system who benefit from the courts being virtual.

I recently saw a document from Courtwatch PG that outlined some benefits of virtual access and I wanted to state them here for the record.

Why pass virtual access:

- **Greater transparency and accountability.** Virtual court access ensures that the public has safe, affordable, and meaningful opportunities to observe their legal system at work. With greater public access to court comes greater transparency and accountability.
- **Accessibility for loved ones and more equitable public participation.** While courts are technically “open” to the public, the challenges of coming to court -- the cost of transportation, the impossibility of taking time off from work, struggle with child care, and disabilities -- erect barriers of entry that disproportionately affect low-income communities. Virtual court access ensures families and loved ones can be present to support defendants, victims, and witnesses in their proceedings.
- **Foster civic engagement.** As city hall proceedings and public meetings become more widely accessible virtually, so too should court proceedings. If the everyday happenings of our government and judiciary are more accessible, the public will be more civically engaged and invested.
- **Foundational Right.** The First Amendment and Sixth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution guarantee open public access to court proceedings. As the world becomes more virtual due to the pandemic, it is imperative that rights keep up with the times to ensure fairness and transparency.

I urge you to support this legislation. Thank you.