

Tara Benipuri Bhardvaj Testimony

My name is Tara Benipuri Bhardvaj 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.

I became involved in this courtwatching because I believe that there is a widespread commitment to equity that has been made in recent years and that working to remove virtual court is a step backwards. Increasing the accessibility of court hearings not only serves those who need to show up to court but also saves time, money, and effort to make the court more accessible so that there are fewer failures to appear. My experience with virtual access has personally had a huge impact on my ability to sit in. Attending court in person can be difficult between driving, parking, finding the right room, etc. Virtual court access is also more accessible for me personally because it makes waiting for a case to be called less intrusive, as one can still send emails or do work as they wait. It simply makes court truly open.

I think this legislation is a wonderful step for our community and that is why I want to see it passed. Not only does virtual court access help to mitigate the dangers of COVID-19 but it is generally beneficial for those cases where people feel slightly ill and ought not to attend in-person court. In addition, for immunocompromised people, this would tremendously increase their safety and well-being. If there are any other reasons such as future pandemics, or natural disasters I think this investment in virtual courts is vital.

Furthermore, it helps to decriminalize poverty. Failure to appear for court is often due to lack of transportation, adequate childcare, and/or an inability to take time off of work. For those who are further criminalized because they lack the means to attend court, this virtual hearing system can be the difference between continuing to support themselves and their loved ones and jail.

Lastly, while this pivot to online happened in the wake of COVID-19, it has provided everyone with more flexibility. Officers of the court can stay home if they feel unwell without disrupting due process, people who are attending court to provide testimony as to the character of a defendant can do so without needing to take the day off.

I urge you to support this legislation in order to increase the accessibility and safety of the court system. Removing virtual hearings would increase the COVID risk for officers of the court as well as defendants, witnesses, and anyone else who wants to or has to attend court. Thank you.

