

Deborah Polhemus Testimony

Hello, my name is Deborah Polhemus and I am writing to you today in support of virtual access to courts. Six weeks on a grand jury showed me how opaque the criminal justice system is. I vowed to do what I can to prevent injustice from happening in empty courtrooms. I attend bail review hearings virtually once a week, as a court watcher in PG district court. The judges, prosecutors, and jailers know we are monitoring their work and holding them accountable. That is why I am submitting this testimony.

Virtual access to the courts is an equity issue. This legislation will reduce obstacles that low-income families, overwhelmingly Black and Latinx, confront as they struggle to appear in court in person. Access to virtual court is a step toward leveling the playing field for the thousands of poor people of color who churn through the criminal justice system every year. It is important to me that my tax dollars do not sustain a system that refuses to address blatant racial disparities in the courts.

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.

Virtual court access also 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.

Initial appearance. Bail review. Preliminary hearings. Status hearings. Motions hearings. Trial. Sentencing. Some of these court hearings last only minutes; sometimes defendants wait all morning for a case to be called; some hearings begin only to be continued months later. How much time should a family member have to take off from work to support their loved one? PG residents who live inside the Beltway without a car spend up to two hours each way to reach the courthouse in Upper Marlboro. That is much more time than the judge will spend deciding the fate of their loved ones. This is not right and is why I am urging your support of this legislation.

Thank you.

