

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

This testimony is being submitted by **District 46** members of Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of individuals working to move white folks as part of a multi-racial movement for equity and racial justice in Baltimore. We are also working in collaboration with Out for Justice and Life After Release. **We are testifying in support of House Bill 647.**



This bill requires that each court in the state provide remote audio-visual access to all public court proceedings, unless a proceeding is deemed closed, confidential, or restricted by federal or State law; and authorizing a presiding judge to limit certain broadcasts.

During the pandemic, Maryland adopted virtual court access to protect the health of courtroom participants. This remote access has not only reduced public health risk, but also improved access for community members and increased transparency. As the pandemic has continued, some counties, like Baltimore County, have returned to in person hearings with no virtual access; others are eagerly awaiting the expiration of the current Court of Appeals order to return to business as usual. Not only do courtroom participants deserve continued safety as the uncertainty of the pandemic continues, but easier access provides many additional benefits to our society and should become the standard.

Incarcerated people deserve the support of their loved ones and community. Virtual access allows community participation and family support for people who are locked up. For example, some courthouses are in locations that are remote from other parts of the county and take considerable time to reach, especially with public transit; it is often impossible for people to take off work, get childcare and transportation to come to court. Virtual access allows easier access for all community members. Removing these barriers to access ensures that more people will be able to attend proceedings, regardless of their monetary and other resources.

Court access creates transparency and accountability; without it there is no public oversight. Public access ensures that any errors, oversights, and injustices are visible to the public. Two tools that provide public accountability are courtwatch programs and the media. The PG County Courtwatch has been operating with virtual access over the last few years. Courtwatch programs like these are vital because they gather real-time, objective data about the court system and they hold officials accountable who have been shown to misuse their position within the courtroom. Virtual court access also makes attending easier for the press. Local news sources are already struggling and sending a reporter to the courthouse to wait for a trial is a challenge. Virtual access makes local coverage of the courts more attainable. Taking away virtual access to the courts undermines their integrity and undercuts the public's confidence in the judicial process, which is the cornerstone of our judiciary. Enabling public access elevates our justice system to the highest standard of accuracy and integrity.

The pandemic has shown us that virtual access is possible. Virtual court had a rocky start in Maryland, but a year and a half of holding many hearings virtually has led to an increase in technological capacity and a lot of lessons learned about managing and moderating virtual hearings. It would be a mistake to let that capacity and knowledge wither away. Increasing access to court for journalists, courtwatch programs, family and community members will build a more trustworthy, equitable court system in the long term. It is for these reasons that I am encouraging you to vote **in support of House Bill 647.**

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Keipper

Brian Seel

Holly Powell

Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore