

Bill Number: HB 810
John P. Cox, Deputy State's Attorney for Baltimore County
Opposed

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JOHN P. COX,
DEPUTY STATE'S ATTORNEY FOR BALTIMORE COUNTY,
IN OPPOSITION OF HOUSE BILL 810
CAMERAS IN THE COURTROOM

I write in opposition to House Bill 810 that allows cameras in the courtroom during sentencing proceedings. While I acknowledge that House Bill 810 was carefully drafted I believe even with these restrictive guidelines allowing cameras at sentencing hearings will be intimidating to victims, victim's families and witnesses.

To be sure, the media will only want to cover the most sensational of cases. For example cases in which a grieving family member of a murder victim will be giving victim impact testimony to the sentencing judge about how the crime has affected them. During most of these impact statements people are usually crying and often revealing very intimate matters about their private life. While the media may argue that protections can be put in place, these victims and family members should not even have to face the possibility that what they say in court will be broadcast on the evening news for all to hear and see. They have been through enough. Broadcasting these images will also reveal their identity to the world. Many victims of crime often try to keep their "victim-status" private, as should be their right. While House Bill 810 does permit a victim to object, the very existence of that possibility will cause great consternation in victims. Seeing other cases broadcast on the media may also discourage victims from pursuing their case.

In recent years we have had several disruptive sentencing hearings in gang related cases. One example is the Timothy Rawlings sentencing for a gang related murder. Several older, established gang members showed up for court. They wore gang colors, flashed gang signs and were disruptive of court proceedings. They had to be removed from the courtroom. This sentencing was already a circus and a security nightmare. If media coverage is added it will cause gang members to become more disruptive and outrageous to draw attention to themselves.

Furthermore, many prosecutors and judges will not want their own images displayed to the world. Especially when sentencing in gang cases and other violent crimes where associates of the defendant will be able to take screen shots of the broadcast images and post them all over the internet. It is one thing for people in one courtroom, in one case, to know what you look like; but if this were permitted your image is only a few clicks away from being known to the world.

Finally, while I have tremendous respect for the commercial media in Maryland and know they uphold very important journalist ethics, there are a number of bloggers and others who may not follow the same standards who could send out more personal information on victims and family members. Being the victim of crime is already a difficult matter. Let's not make it more so.

I ask you to give an unfavorable vote to House Bill 810.