

January 24, 2023

Testimony of Jennifer Ruffner
Greenbelt, MD 20770

In Favor Of: S.B. 43 - An Act Concerning Courts – Remote Public Access

My name is Jen Ruffner, and I am a resident of Greenbelt, MD. Since 2020, I have been a volunteer with Courtwatch PG, an advocacy group that observes bail hearings in the Prince George's County District Court to document our country's policies in action and to hold officials accountable for injustice in the court system. I am writing in support of S.B. 43 / H.B. 133. I believe Maryland should protect and expand remote access to court proceedings in our state judicial system because greater transparency only leads to greater accountability.


I serve as the lead for the Courtwatch PG accountability committee. Courtwatchers observe bond hearings in the Prince George's County judicial system, and the accountability team then reviews their notes and writes letters to court officials alerting them to injustices that happen every day. We have sent almost 400 letters to date, detailing the routine injustices that are happening as loved ones. We have seen judges deny community members their Constitutional rights. We have seen assistant state's attorneys humiliate and criminalize individuals because they are poor and unhoused. We have heard their callous comments and their denial of bond based on illegal searches and unconstitutional consideration of pending charges, and their disregard that even one night in jail can ruin a person's life. The majority of these injustices are inflicted upon our Black and brown community members.

Witnessing the reality of our criminal justice system has convinced me of the importance of ensuring accountability across the state—and I believe that protecting and expanding remote court access is our best chance to do so. Our constitutional rights to open and public courts are a cornerstone of our democracy. But, modern-day challenges—such as the cost of transportation, taking time off work, and securing child care—have severely limited our collective ability to exercise these rights. I was only able to start court watching during the pandemic, when Zoom access to proceedings was provided by the Prince George's County District Court. Without this remote access, I would never have been able to exercise my constitutional rights—or call to attention the critical justice issues I saw as a volunteer.

In recent months, our remote access has been severely curtailed, undermining the tremendous impact that volunteers and community members have had in ensuring equal justice for their loved ones. Without the necessary safeguards for remote access, we risk further undermining the integrity of our criminal justice system—and harming thousands of individuals in the process.

For the reasons above, I wholeheartedly support S.B. 43. I hope the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee votes favorably as well.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Ruffner