

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 043

Court Proceedings- Remote Public Access and Participation

TO: Hon. Will Smith, Chair, Hon. Jeff Waldstreicher, Vice Chair, and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: **Linda D. Green MD**

DATE: January 23, 2023

I am submitting testimony in favor of continuing virtual access to the courts in Maryland. I am a 43 year resident of Mount Rainier where our Mayor and City Council have been, and continue to be, in support of virtual court access. The current proposed legislation would make this permanent. Last year we held two discussions of this in our city council meetings. There was unanimous support for this with two administrations. The legislation proposed by Court Watch PG will give the public remote access to court proceedings via live audio and video streaming. During 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic led to the use of virtual court access and in 2021 the Court of Appeals authorized virtual access to courtrooms in Maryland in order to maintain the courts' performance of core functions during the pandemic.

I understand that this is not a replacement of in-person legal proceedings themselves. Over the past 2 years Court Watch PG has demonstrated that virtual access creates greater transparency and accountability regarding court proceedings. This has increased civic engagement and support for the First and Sixth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution which guarantee open public access to court proceedings. The meetings of our city council have been virtual and easily accessible and we expect that other public meetings as well as court proceedings will continue to be virtual for the foreseeable future. We urge the legislature to pass this bill and keep up with the times.

As we have noted in our previous letters to Judges, Senators and Representatives the benefit to our community has many facets. Personally I have attended several virtual hearings and appreciated the ability to follow the cases much better than when present in person. The ability to hear what is transpiring is much better and improved my understanding of the details and analysis of cases. But more importantly in our neighborhood the challenges of coming to court such as the cost of transportation, time off from work and child care erect barriers of entry that disproportionately affect low income communities. Virtual court access ensures loved ones can be present to support defendants, victims and witnesses in their proceedings. Of course the judges maintain discretion to restrict public access in rare circumstances. Since the courts have already developed the technology for managing remote access there should be no new costs to the system. We urge you to support this legislation and ensure that the public has audio-visual virtual access to all criminal and civil proceedings unless otherwise exempted by law. Thank you for your consideration.

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