



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB133/SB043

1-23-2023

Delegate David Moon
Senator Jim Rosapepe

Dear Senator Rosapepe and Delegate Moon

My name is Qiana Johnson, and I am the Executive Director of Life After Release. Life After Release (LAR) is a women-based, formerly incarcerated-led organization. LAR provides support for formerly incarcerated women reentering their communities. We empower our Black community by teaching them to manage life after release from incarceration. We also teach our community grassroots organizing and advocacy skills to shape legislation and policy that affects the quality of their lives. Our work is key to reducing recidivism, finding restorative options, and challenging judicial officials to find and adopt meaningful ways of ending the systemic incarceration of Black and brown people through equitable and transformative means of justice.

I strongly support remote access to courts as it is provided for in your proposed legislation. I appreciate the effort you both made by sponsoring similar legislation last session.

As you know, since then the Courts in my county, Prince George's, have removed zoom access and have substituted inadequate audio-only access. I regularly log in to bail hearings that used to be held via zoom. The new audio "access" is spotty at best. I have heard situations, where the people whose release from detention is being determined, cannot hear the proceedings from the jail. This bill H.B 133/ S.B043 is very important because allowing more people to observe court is the first step to fixing problems like these, and the fact that these issues predominantly affect Black and Brown people is unjust. Injustice happens in empty courtrooms. Thank you for taking the time listen to me I hope the Judiciary Committee votes favorably

Ms. Qiana Johnson
qjohnson@lifeafterrelease.org
Founder and Executive Director
4710 Auth Place
Camp Springs, MD 20744
240-845-4007

To:

Senator Jim Rosapepe and

Delegate David Moon

Re: Virtual Access to Courts

I strongly support virtual access to courts as is provided for in your proposed legislation. I appreciate the effort you both made by sponsoring similar legislation last session.

Since the nationally recognized work of LAR (Life After Release) Court watch, Prince George's County courts have removed zoom access to substitute inadequate audio-only access. This change in access appears to be retaliation against court watchers from the courts. Which is a clear indication of seismic harm in our judicial system.

Thank you for your work to keep our courtrooms truly public. Injustice happens in empty courtrooms.

Sincerely,

From:

Alexiss Kurtz-Hoggard

4500 Donatello Sq.

Owings Mills, MD 21117

609 Littlestown Pike, #1
Westminster, MD 21147

Testimony of Raina Newsome

In favor of: S.B. 43/H.B. 133
An Act Concerning Courts – Remote Public Access

My name is Raina Newsome, and I am a lifelong Maryland resident, currently living in Carroll County. As a community member engaged with issues around incarceration and connected to organizations including Courtwatch PG and the Justice Arts Coalition, I write to you in support of S.B. 43 and H.B. 133.

I, along with so many others, began to seriously reckon with the depths of racism and violence embedded in our policing, prison, and court systems in 2020, when the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd sparked worldwide uprisings for Black lives. Still in school during the time, I brought criminal justice to the forefront of my studies, researching the intersections between environmental racism and jails, the role of surveillance in normalizing mass incarceration, and the impact of advocacy organizations like Courtwatch PG and Civil Rights Corps. Jails and prisons are widely viewed as means of keeping those on the outside safe, but by locking people up and hiding them away from society, we create the perfect conditions for neglect and abuse to fester inside. The visibility and accessibility afforded by remote court access is a fundamental right, as well as a crucial means of countering the injustices that happen when we collectively turn a blind eye.

The First and Sixth Amendments to the Constitution guarantee open public access to court proceedings, and in 2020, when the pandemic first arose, the Supreme Court of Maryland responded accordingly to uphold this right by authorizing remote access to courtrooms. The benefits of this decision cannot be understated. It has been a means of keeping people healthy and safe, and has also allowed access to people without the time or means to physically attend their loved ones' hearings. The increased accessibility of remote access encourages attendance from the broader public as well, which is valuable in promoting civic engagement and transparency in the system. Courtwatch PG has been a brilliant example of this, with its volunteers working diligently to take note of what happens in bail hearings and ensure that defendants are treated justly.

These measures were originally put in place to accommodate public health measures, and although the pandemic is not over, efforts to maintain remote access have been significantly cut back, which is undermining efforts by community members to advocate for justice for their loved ones. Even if COVID-19 was no longer a risk, the increased accessibility and transparency that come with virtual access are enough justification to continue its use—that's why I urge you to vote for S.B. and H.B. 133.

Sincerely,
Raina Newsome

To:

Delegate David Moon
Senator Jim Rosapepe

From:

Rita Gray
7708 Hanover Pkwy,
Greenbelt, MD 20770

Re: Virtual Access to Courts

I strongly support virtual access to courts as is provided for in your proposed legislation. I appreciate the effort you both made by sponsoring similar legislation last session.

The Courts in my county, Prince George's, have removed zoom access and have substituted an inadequate audio-only access. I regularly log in to bail hearings that used to be held via zoom. The new audio "access" is spotty at best. I have heard situations where the people whose release from detention is being determined cannot hear the proceedings from the jail. Last year, my Quaker Meeting voiced its support for similar legislation. I testified before the house Judiciary Committee in favor of the legislation last year and plan to participate in any hearings held this year.

Thank you for your work to keep our courtrooms truly public. Injustice happens in empty courtrooms.

Sincerely

Rita Gray

Written Testimony for SB43 "Court Remote Public Access Act"

To:
Senator Jim Rosapepe

1-23-2023

Testimony of Shawnde' Sousa
In favor of SB43

My name is Shawnde' Sousa. My son is incarcerated in Jessup,MD and due to the pandemic family and friends were only able to support him via Zoom court, which the judge himself was impressed with the turnout. This not only shows the judge and prosecutors that the people before them aren't forgotten members of society but they have people that care about what happens to them. I have family all over the world that logged in because they couldn't physically travel due to their military duty and the costs. Most importantly it lets those defendants know that they have people that believe in them and haven't given up on them.

Thank you for your time,

Shawnde Sousa

202-427-4976

To:
Delegate David Moon
Senator Jim Rosapepe

1-23-2023

Dear Senator Rosapepe and Delegate Moon

My name is Lyntroya Bagby, I am a resident of Prince George's County, Maryland I strongly support remote access to courts as it provided for in your proposed legislation. I appreciate the effort you both made by sponsoring similar legislation last session.

As you know, since then the Courts in my county, Prince George's, have removed zoom access and have substituted a inadequate audio-only access. I regularly log in to bail hearings that used to be held via zoom. The new audio "access" is spotty at best. I have heard situations where the people who's release from detention is being determined cannot hear the proceedings from the jail. This bill H.B 133/ S.B043 is very important because allowing more people to observe court is the first step to fixing problems like these, and the fact that these issues predominantly affect Black and Brown people is unjust. Injustice happens in empty courtrooms. Thank you for taking the time listen to me I hope the Judiciary Committee votes favorably

Thank you for your time,
Lyntroya Bagby
Troya@lifeafterrelease.org
667-770-9928

To:

1-23-2023

Delegate David Moon

Senator Jim Rosapepe

From:

Afeni Evans

2800 Apple Green Lane

Bowie, Maryland 20716

Re: Virtual Access to Courts SB043 and HB133

I strongly support virtual access to courts as is provided for in your proposed legislation. I appreciate the effort you both made by sponsoring similar legislation last session. As you know, since then the Courts in my county, Prince George's, have removed zoom access and have wrongfully substituted it with inadequate audio-only access. I regularly log in to bail hearings that used to be held via zoom. The new audio "access" is spotty at best. I have heard situations where the people who's release from detention is being determined cannot hear the proceedings from the jail. I have been directly impacted by the Maryland Criminal Legal System and I believe that transparency in these courts is essential to ensuring justice. Thank you for your work to keep our courtrooms truly public. Injustice happens in empty courtrooms.

Afeni Evans
202-460-4521