

SURJ

BALTIMORE

showing up for racial justice

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January 19, 2023

The Honorable Jim Rosapepe
101 James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Senator Rosapepe:

We are writing as representatives of Showing Up for Racial Justice Baltimore, a group of voters in the Baltimore metro area supporting local groups working for greater racial justice. We are writing today to express our support for **SB 43**, which would require the courts to provide remote access to courtroom proceedings that are not closed to the public.

While most of our court proceedings are open to the public, it can be very hard for folks to jump through the hurdles that attending court requires: clearing their schedule on a work day, navigating public transit or paying for parking, and finding someone to babysit kids who are too young to sit quietly for hours. While the pandemic threw the courts into disarray, it did one positive thing by forcing the courts to adapt their equipment and procedures to hold hearings entirely via videoconference. Suddenly family and friends of accused people, victims and witnesses, and members of the public with an interest in the courts had the ability to be present in court without traveling anywhere. Now trials, and many other hearings, have resumed in person. But there is no reason to abandon the greater accessibility that video hearings provided to the public. SB 43 merely requires that the courts continue to make hearings accessible remotely, as well as in person, so that factors like income or disability will not affect the ability of members of the public to be present in court.

The Supreme Court has said that the right of a criminal defendant to a public trial includes a right of the public to be present, and to report on what they have seen. The court stated that public faith in the integrity of the courts required that the public be allowed to know what is happening in the courtroom. Public access promotes transparency and fairness, which are bedrock principles of democratic government. We hope that the Judicial Proceedings Committee will agree, and vote favorably on SB 43.

Sincerely,

The SURJ Baltimore Coordinating Committee