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Testimony of William A. Haines

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My name is William A. Haines. As a volunteer with Courtwatch PG, I have monitored and reported on over a thousand bond hearings in the Prince George's County District Court in the past 14 months. I am writing in support of House Bill 133, to make Maryland's "public" court hearings genuinely public by ensuring remote access to hearings meant to be public.

This bill would greatly facilitate citizen attendance at public court hearings.

A legal system cannot well work unless the people believe it works for them, feel they have access, feel that in some fundamental sense the system cares about them and respects them. In these days of fragmenting community and communication we desperately need common spaces that matter, where the rules are clear, impressive, and respected, and fair and disciplined discourse is modeled. Courtrooms in the broad sense, truly accessible courtrooms, can be among those spaces.

Much in the criminal legal system is broken. The way to fix it is not by concealing its activities.

Just as it is plain nonsense to think "freedom of the press" is about actual printing presses, so it is quickly becoming plain nonsense to think a "public" trial is one in which a few people are permitted into a physical courtroom. It is quickly becoming plain that only remote access is public access. **This bill would make Maryland a leader in what must be the wave of the future.**

The reason trials are public is to protect you and me. Sunshine is the best disinfectant. But there is no protection if the public is not actually listening. **We are called to be good citizens,** and we need to be allowed to be good citizens, good neighbors. The days are gone when we could all just walk to the town courthouse and find seats for the show. Most of us can't take a day off our jobs, can't easily afford transportation to attend, can't afford someone to stay with our children, or can't get out of our sickbeds. We do not attend our town's trials as a community. **Journalists who might attend in our place are fewer every day, as court hearings multiply.**

The courts sorely need the supervision that publicity is supposed to provide. Court officers are only human. For example, in an ongoing Federal lawsuit charging Prince George's county with detaining hundreds of people unconstitutionally, the judge hearing the jurisdictional question has already said there are serious but fixable problems of substance. My experience as a courtwatcher has shown me that judges, prosecutors, defenders, police, and jail officials

often make plain mistakes that can ruin lives—and that after a few months of vigorous feedback from a courtwatching group, their performance improves.

During the year and a half when court business was all by Zoom, people had much better access to court hearings involving their loved ones. People could attend from work, or while caring for children. But today, over and over we hear that even people who want to be character witnesses for their loved ones cannot make it to court. This bill would give judges the discretion to let people participate remotely, at great benefit to fairness and to the community's respect for the courts.

I beg you to support this bill.

Thank you sincerely.

William A. Haines
Volunteer, Courtwatch PG