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Westminster, MD 21157

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 their 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 the work done by community members to advocate 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. 43 and H.B. 133.

Sincerely,  
Raina Newsome