

Feb. 9, 2022

To the advisory committee on rules of criminal procedure. Thank you for this opportunity.

My name is Joe Spear. I am the managing editor of the Mankato Free Press where I have worked for 31 years, the last 16 as managing editor. I am also the media coordinator for the 5th Judicial District and two counties in the 1st and 3rd districts for the cameras in the court program.

I am past president and current member of the Minnesota Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, who I represent here today.

I have become very familiar with how the current cameras in the court program works. In the last 7 years or so that I have seen all the media requests for cameras in those districts, I have heard of no complaints from victims, witnesses, lawyers, judges or others involved in a trial where cameras were allowed.

I submit that evidence and evidence provided by my colleagues and the recent high-profile televised cases of the George Floyd murder trial and the Daunte Wright manslaughter trial to strongly advocate that the cameras in the court be allowed in all criminal proceedings as outlined by various proposals.

In all my years in journalism, I have met face to face with many people who are angry at the courts or who do not understand the courts. These folks were both victims, the accused and the general public who often think sentences are too easy on criminals.

I realize there are competing interests here with press freedom and victim privacy. But the committee should also consider damage done to the institution of the judiciary by the current lack of transparency.

Of course, complete victim privacy can never happen in public courts.

My colleagues and others will point out cameras in courts have been the norm in our neighboring states for years. There appears to be little or no evidence of disruption of the courts or damage to victims in those states.

As a member of the media, I appreciate recent outreach efforts of the courts to hold hearings in outstate locations, and to allow for full broadcast of appeals court and Minnesota Supreme Court arguments.

But criminal courts have a broader impact on the public. It is the place where rights and freedom are decided. Freedom from incarceration in a democracy should be taken seriously. The governed have a huge stake in the power of prosecutors and judges and the freedom of the people. The masses have a right to easily see how their courts work.

In the end, the truth is the truth. A camera doesn't change that. It only sheds more light on it.

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