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To the judiciary committee,

I attended in person to testify last night and am submitting a written version.

My name is Maya Lehrer, I'm here supporting H8328 as an organizer with the PSL and the Rhode Island Deportation Defense Network.

We have been organizing for virtual courts since July, when the deportation defense line responded to four ICE kidnappings in one week. Our community instantly launched ICE watch at the courthouse, and in the past nine months we have conducted outreach, launched a petition, circulated an open letter with over 100 organizations, lawyers and social workers, and held a press conference — all to demand virtual courts. We have documented over 100 ICE sightings across all Rhode Island state courts in the last nine months, have watched countless kidnappings, and have even forced ICE to leave empty handed because our community showed up in the dozens and hundreds to protest and alert our neighbors.

This bill exists because people have fought for it. I'm here representing the 3,646 people, including over 2,000 Rhode Islanders, who have signed the petition demanding virtual courts.

I'm one of hundreds of volunteers who have stood outside morning after morning in the cold, warning our neighbors when ICE shows up at the Garrahy and Licht courthouses. I was there when ICE charged through the Garrahy to try to kidnap someone attending a court hearing.

It's a shame that Chief Justice Suttell and Governor McKee have only made promises and tiny steps, when they have the power to institute virtual courts tomorrow. There is one, basic, easy way to prevent ICE kidnappings at court: it's to give all people the right to attend a virtual hearing, conference or trial. ICE tracks our community members when they arrive in the parking lot, when they enter and leave the building. They break windows, pull people out of ubers, and smash them into the concrete.

Virtual Courts can cut off one of the main sources of ICE kidnappings in the state, and can pave the way for pushing back against ICE nationwide. Every day we don't have virtual courts, another community member risks being kidnapped. Our immigrant siblings deserve to attend court without fear of being disappeared. Courts were made virtual during covid, and the infrastructure is still there. Thousands of people across this state are demanding: virtual courts now.

Maya Lehrer
Deportation Defense Network of RI