

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 818

To provide for media coverage of Federal court proceedings.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 18, 2021

Mr. GRASSLEY (for himself, Ms. KLOBUCHAR, Mr. CORNYN, Mr. DURBIN, Mr. LEAHY, Mr. BLUMENTHAL, and Mr. MARKEY) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on the Judiciary

A BILL

To provide for media coverage of Federal court proceedings.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Sunshine in the Court-
5 room Act of 2021”.

6 **SEC. 2. FEDERAL APPELLATE AND DISTRICT COURTS.**

7 (a) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

8 (1) PRESIDING JUDGE.—The term “presiding
9 judge” means the judge presiding over the court
10 proceeding concerned. In proceedings in which more
11 than one judge participates, the presiding judge

shall be the senior active judge so participating or, in the case of a circuit court of appeals, the senior active circuit judge so participating, except that—

(A) in en banc sittings of any United States circuit court of appeals, the presiding judge shall be the chief judge of the circuit whenever the chief judge participates; and

(B) in en banc sittings of the Supreme Court of the United States, the presiding judge shall be the Chief Justice whenever the Chief Justice participates.

(2) APPELLATE COURT OF THE UNITED STATES.—The term “appellate court of the United States” means any United States circuit court of appeals and the Supreme Court of the United States.

(b) AUTHORITY OF PRESIDING JUDGE TO ALLOW MEDIA COVERAGE OF COURT PROCEEDINGS.—

(1) AUTHORITY OF APPELLATE COURTS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided under subparagraph (B), the presiding judge of an appellate court of the United States may, at the discretion of that judge, permit the photographing, electronic recording, broadcasting, or televising to the public of any court proceeding over which that judge presides.

(B) EXCEPTION.—The presiding judge shall not permit any action under subparagraph (A), if—

(i) in the case of a proceeding involving only the presiding judge, that judge determines the action would constitute a violation of the due process rights of any party; or

(ii) in the case of a proceeding involving the participation of more than one judge, a majority of the judges participating determine that the action would constitute a violation of the due process rights of any party.

(2) AUTHORITY OF DISTRICT COURTS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—

(i) AUTHORITY.—Notwithstanding any other provision of law, except as provided under clause (iii), the presiding judge of a district court of the United States may, at the discretion of that judge, permit the photographing, electronic recording, broadcasting, or televising to the public of any court proceeding over which that judge presides.

1 (ii) OBSCURING OF WITNESSES.—Ex-
2 cept as provided under clause (iii)—

3 (I) upon the request of any wit-
4 ness (other than a party) in a trial
5 proceeding, the court shall order the
6 face and voice of the witness to be
7 disguised or otherwise obscured in
8 such manner as to render the witness
9 unrecognizable to the broadcast audi-
10 ence of the trial proceeding; and

11 (II) the presiding judge in a trial
12 proceeding shall inform each witness
13 who is not a party that the witness
14 has the right to request the image and
15 voice of that witness to be obscured
16 during the testimony of the witness.

17 (iii) EXCEPTION.—The presiding
18 judge shall not permit any action under
19 this subparagraph—

20 (I) if that judge determines the
21 action would constitute a violation of
22 the due process rights of any party;
23 and

24 (II) until the Judicial Conference
25 of the United States promulgates

1 mandatory guidelines under para-
 2 graph (5).

3 (B) NO MEDIA COVERAGE OF JURORS.—

4 The presiding judge shall not permit the
 5 photographing, electronic recording, broad-
 6 casting, or televising of any juror in a trial pro-
 7 ceeding, or of the jury selection process.

8 (C) DISCRETION OF THE JUDGE.—The
 9 presiding judge shall have the discretion to ob-
 10 scure the face and voice of an individual, if
 11 good cause is shown that the photographing,
 12 electronic recording, broadcasting, or televising
 13 of the individual would threaten—

- 14 (i) the safety of the individual;
- 15 (ii) the security of the court;
- 16 (iii) the integrity of future or ongoing
- 17 law enforcement operations; or
- 18 (iv) the interest of justice.

19 (D) SUNSET OF DISTRICT COURT AUTHOR-
 20 ITY.—The authority under this paragraph shall
 21 terminate 3 years after the date of the enact-
 22 ment of this Act.

23 (3) INTERLOCUTORY APPEALS BARRED.—The
 24 decision of the presiding judge under this subsection
 25 of whether or not to permit, deny, or terminate the

1 photographing, electronic recording, broadcasting, or
2 televising of a court proceeding may not be chal-
3 lenged through an interlocutory appeal.

4 (4) ADVISORY GUIDELINES.—The Judicial Con-
5 ference of the United States may promulgate advi-
6 sory guidelines to which a presiding judge, at the
7 discretion of that judge, may refer in making deci-
8 sions with respect to the management and adminis-
9 tration of photographing, recording, broadcasting, or
10 televising described under paragraphs (1) and (2).

11 (5) MANDATORY GUIDELINES.—Not later than
12 6 months after the date of enactment of this Act,
13 the Judicial Conference of the United States shall
14 promulgate mandatory guidelines that a presiding
15 judge is required to follow for obscuring of certain
16 vulnerable witnesses, including crime victims, minor
17 victims, families of victims, cooperating witnesses,
18 undercover law enforcement officers or agents, wit-
19 nesses subject to section 3521 of title 18, United
20 States Code, relating to witness relocation and pro-
21 tection, or minors under the age of 18 years. The
22 guidelines shall include procedures for determining,
23 at the earliest practicable time in any investigation
24 or case, which witnesses should be considered vulner-
25 able under this section.

1 (6) PROCEDURES.—In the interests of justice
2 and fairness, the presiding judge of the court in
3 which media use is desired has discretion to promul-
4 gate rules and disciplinary measures for the court-
5 room use of any form of media or media equipment
6 and the acquisition or distribution of any of the im-
7 ages or sounds obtained in the courtroom. The pre-
8 siding judge shall also have discretion to require
9 written acknowledgment of the rules by anyone indi-
10 vidually or on behalf of any entity before being al-
11 lowed to acquire any images or sounds from the
12 courtroom.

13 (7) NO BROADCAST OF CONFERENCES BE-
14 TWEEN ATTORNEYS AND CLIENTS.—There shall be
15 no audio pickup or broadcast of conferences which
16 occur in a court proceeding between attorneys and
17 their clients, between co-counsel of a client, between
18 adverse counsel, or between counsel and the pre-
19 siding judge, if the conferences are not part of the
20 official record of the proceedings.

21 (8) EXPENSES.—A court may require that any
22 accommodations to effectuate this Act be made with-
23 out public expense.

24 (9) INHERENT AUTHORITY.—Nothing in this
25 Act shall limit the inherent authority of a court to

- 1 protect witnesses or clear the courtroom to preserve
- 2 the decorum and integrity of the legal process or
- 3 protect the safety of an individual.

