Even where you’re not allowed to buy your way to the head of the line, you can sometimes hire someone else to queue up on your behalf. Each summer, New York City’s Public Theater puts on free outdoor Shakespeare performances in Central Park. Tickets for the evening performances are made available at 1:00 p.m., and the line forms hours in advance. In 2010, when Al Pacino starred as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, demand for tickets was especially intense.

Many New Yorkers were eager to see the play but didn’t have time to stand in line. As the New York Daily News reported, this predicament gave rise to a cottage industry—people offering to wait in line to secure tickets for those willing to pay for the convenience. The line standers advertised their services on Craigslist and other websites. In exchange for queuing up and enduring the wait, they were able to charge their busy clients as much as $125 per ticket for the free performances.

The theater tried to prevent the paid line standers from plying their trade, claiming “it’s not in the spirit of Shakespeare in the Park.” The mission of the Public Theater, a publicly subsidized, nonprofit enterprise, is to make great theater accessible to a broad audience drawn from all walks of life. Andrew Cuomo, New York’s attorney general at the time, pressured Craigslist to stop running ads for the tickets and line-standing services.

“Selling tickets that are meant to be free,” he stated, “deprives New Yorkers of enjoying the benefits that this taxpayer-supported institution provides.”

Central Park is not the only place where there’s money to be made by those who stand and wait. In Washington, D.C., the line-standing business is fast becoming a fixture of government. When congressional committees hold hearings on proposed legislation, they reserve some seats for the press and make others available to the general public on a first-come, first-served basis. Depending on the subject and the size of the room, the lines for the hearings can form a day or more in advance, sometimes in the rain or in the chill of winter. Corporate lobbyists are keen to attend these hearings, in order to chat up lawmakers during breaks and keep track of legislation affecting their industries. But the lobbyists are loath to spend hours in line to assure themselves a seat. Their solution: pay thousands of dollars to professional line-standing companies that hire people to queue up for them.

The line-standing companies recruit retirees, message couriers, and, increasingly, homeless people to brave the elements and hold a place in the queue. The line standers wait outside, then, as the line moves, they proceed inside the halls of the congressional office buildings, queuing up outside the hearing rooms. Shortly before the hearing begins, the well-heeled lobbyists arrive, trade places with their scruffily attired stand-ins, and claim their seats in the hearing room.
The line-standing companies charge the lobbyists $36 to $60 per hour for the queuing service, which means that getting a seat in a committee hearing can cost $1,000 or more. The line standers themselves are paid $10–$20 per hour. The Washington Post has editorialized against the practice, calling it “demeaning” to Congress and “contemptuous of the public.” Senator Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat, has tried to ban it, without success. “The notion that special interest groups can buy seats at congressional hearings like they would buy tickets to a concert or football game is offensive to me,” she said.

The business has recently expanded from Congress to the U.S. Supreme Court. When the Court hears oral arguments in big constitutional cases, it’s not easy to get in. But if you’re willing to pay, you can hire a line stander to get you a ringside seat in the highest court in the land.

The company LineStanding.com describes itself as “a leader in the Congressional line standing business.” When Senator McCaskill proposed legislation to prohibit the practice, Mark Gross, the owner of the company, defended it. He compared line standing to the division of labor on Henry Ford’s assembly line: “Each worker on the line was responsible for his/her specific task.” Just as lobbyists are good at attending hearings and “analyzing all the testimony,” and senators and congressmen are good at “making an informed decision,” line standers are good at, well, waiting. “Division of labor makes America a great place to work,” Gross claimed. “Linestanding may seem like a strange practice, but it’s ultimately an honest job in a free-market economy.

Oliver Gomes, a professional line stander, agrees. He was living in a homeless shelter when he was recruited for the job. CNN interviewed him as he held a place in line for a lobbyist at a hearing on climate change. “Sitting in the halls of Congress made me feel a little better,” Gomes told CNN. “It elevated me and made me feel like, well, you know, maybe I do belong here, maybe I can contribute even at that little minute level.”

But opportunity for Gomes meant frustration for some environmentalists. When a group of them showed up for the climate change hearing, they couldn’t get in. The lobbyists’ paid stand-ins had already staked out all the available seats in the hearing room.16 Of course, it might be argued that if the environmentalists cared enough about attending the hearing, they too could have queued up overnight. Or they could have hired homeless people to do it for them.