

Testimony for the Record – Support SB223

Submitted to the Senate Finance Committee

For the Hearing "Department of Aging – Social Connections Program – Establishment"

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Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing to explain my support for SB223 and for your attention to this critically important topic.

My name is Thomas Cudjoe. I am an Associate Professor of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University. I am a physician; I provide primary medical care to individuals who have great difficulty leaving their homes. In addition, I am a researcher, I study the impact of social isolation and loneliness on health. I have been worked to bring greater attention to this important area for almost 10 years. I serve on the Scientific Leadership Council of the Foundation for Social Connection. I have presented my work before the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine and was fortunate to serve as an invited reviewer of the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community that focused on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation, 2023. The opinions I share today are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Johns Hopkins University.

### **The Problem**

In my research and practice, I have observed the profound impact of social isolation on the well-being of older adults. Data consistently shows that social isolation is associated with increased risks of depression, cognitive decline, and physical health deterioration. Studies demonstrate that older adults who lack meaningful social connections cost Medicare an additional \$6.7 billion dollars annually and also have a higher mortality level than those who have good social connections. This makes the issue of social connection not just a matter of quality of life but a pressing public health concern.

The proposed Senate Bill 223, which establishes the Social Connections Program, represents an important step toward addressing this challenge. By expanding the Senior Call-Check Service into a more robust and inclusive Social Connections Program, this legislation aligns with evidence-based strategies to promote wellness and purposeful engagement among older adults.

### **The Solution**

I urge the committee to support Senate Bill 223 and ensure its successful implementation. Specifically, I believe that the evolution from the Senior Call Check Service Program is timely. The expanded communication modalities can accommodate diverse preferences and needs that may exist. Also, SB 223, in my mind has the potential to facilitate expanded partnerships with community organization to amplify the impact of this important work.

By implementing these measures, the Social Connections Program can become a national model for addressing social isolation and promoting active aging.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important legislation. I commend the committee for prioritizing the well-being of older adults and taking proactive steps to foster social connection and engagement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have and to provide additional data or insights from my research to support the committee's work. I urge a favorable report on SB223.