

TO: Finance Committee
FROM: LeadingAge Maryland
SUBJECT: Senate Bill 223, Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment
DATE: January 23, 2025
POSITION: Favorable

LeadingAge Maryland supports Senate Bill 223, Department of Aging - Social Connections Program – Establishment.

LeadingAge Maryland is a community of more than 140 not-for-profit aging services organizations serving residents and clients through continuing care retirement communities, affordable senior housing, assisted living, nursing homes and home and community-based services. Members of LeadingAge Maryland provide health care, housing, and services to more than 20,000 older persons each year. Our mission is to be the trusted voice for aging in Maryland, and our vision is that Maryland is a state where older adults have access to the services they need, when they need them, in the place they call home. We partner with consumers, caregivers, researchers, public agencies, faith communities and others who care about aging in Maryland. LeadingAge Maryland represents the vast majority of CCRCs in the state.

Senate Bill 223 expands and renames the existing Senior Call Check Program as the Social Connections Program. The program is aimed at providing enhanced communication services to eligible older adults to promote wellness and meaningful social engagement. The program includes regular communication, which may be an automated or live telephone call initiated by or directed to an eligible participant. It may also involve other forms of direct communication regularly provided to eligible participants. If an eligible participant does not respond to the regular communication, a follow-up direct communication must be made. Additionally, a designated person of record, whose contact information has been provided to the Department of Aging (Department), must be notified. The eligible participant must also receive relevant information as determined by the Department. The Department will integrate services with the Telecommunications Access of Maryland Program by promoting awareness of accessible telecommunications equipment. It will also utilize educational outreach materials produced by the Telecommunications Access of Maryland Program. The bill authorizes service integration between the Social Connections Program and the Telecommunications Access of Maryland Program. It also authorizes collaboration between the Department of Aging and the Department of Disabilities in developing the program budget.

The Senior Call Check Program serves over 2,000 Marylanders age 65 and over. Each day, an automated call goes out to program participants at a time of day of their choosing to make sure they are ok. If that call goes unanswered, two followup calls are placed before reaching out to their emergency contact person. If there is no response from their emergency contact person, local non-emergency services will be notified to conduct a welfare check. The result is better peace of mind for vulnerable older adults and their families, and additional support for those who wish to live independently.

Senate Bill 223 proposes to expand the current phone call service to include live and virtual web- and text-based communications, as well as possible in-person service options. The updates will provide more comprehensive and informed assessments of participant's personal welfare and work to reduce social isolation. Additionally, the program will be more accessible to the Deaf, hard of hearing, and those with other communications challenges including people with limited English proficiency. It will also ensure that programs offered for the Deaf and hard of hearing are sustainably funded by the Universal Service Trust Fund (USTF).

By expanding the scope of communication services and fostering interdepartmental collaboration, Senate Bill 223 seeks to improve the well-being of older adults through purposeful social engagement and accessible telecommunications support.

For these reasons, LeadingAge Maryland respectfully requests a favorable report for Senate Bill 223.