

SB223_LeadingAgeMD_FAV

Uploaded by: Aaron Greenfield

Position: FAV

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.

SB0223_MHAMD_Fav.pdf

Uploaded by: Ann Geddes

Position: FAV

SB 223 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment

Senate Finance Committee

January 22, 2025

Position: SUPPORT

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of SB 223.

SB 223 would rename and enhance the existing Senior Call-Check Service (a robo-call) by utilizing new technologies such as text messages, video calls, or direct communication through individual volunteers. These changes would offer more than simply an automated check-in call, they would introduce an element of personal communication to the service.

This change would benefit those for whom the existing program is inadequate, such as the deaf and hard of hearing, and those with limited English proficiency. In addition, it has the potential to better address the social isolation felt by many older adults. Research has linked social isolation to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental health conditions, including heart disease, obesity, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, and Alzheimer's disease.¹ SB 223, by expanding the Department's methods of communication to older adults, could serve to reduce feelings of social isolation and improve an individual's physical and mental health.

For this reason, MHAMD supports SB 223 and urges a favorable report.

¹ Social isolation, loneliness in older adults pose health risks. National Institute on Aging (April 2019). <https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks>

SB223 - Social Connections Program.Hopkins.Support

Uploaded by: Annie Coble

Position: FAV

TO: The Honorable Pamela Beidle, Chair
Senate Finance Committee

SB223
Favorable

FROM: Annie Coble
Assistant Director, Maryland Government Affairs

DATE: January 22, 2025

RE: SB223 Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment

Johns Hopkins supports **SB223 Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment**. This bill expands the communications and service options for the Senior Call Check Service and Notification Program so it can meaningfully engage with more older adults and be more accessible to people with disabilities. Johns Hopkins treats hundreds of patients that would benefit from this program.

Research conducted by Johns Hopkins University of Medicine and Bloomberg School of Public Health provided evidence that social isolation is a substantial risk factor for dementia in community-dwelling older adults.¹ Interventions to reduce that risk are possible, according to results of the second study, published Dec. 15 in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. Specifically, researchers found the use of communications technology such as telephone and email lowered the risk for social isolation.

The Social Connections program created by this legislation will provide the necessary communication to lower the risk of social isolation. The program will provide a outreach to seniors in an accessible and comprehensive way. The program will result in better peace of mind for vulnerable adults and their families.

Johns Hopkins is committed to providing the highest quality clinical care to improve the health of older adults and society by creating, translating and disseminating knowledge through information. The Social Connections Program aligns with this commitment.

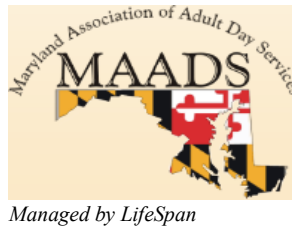
Accordingly, Johns Hopkins respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE** committee report on **SB223**.

¹ <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/newsroom/news-releases/2023/01/new-studies-suggest-social-isolation-is-a-risk-factor-for-dementia-in-older-adults-point-to-ways-to-reduce-risk>

SB0223_FAV_LifeSpan, MAADS, MNCHA_Dept. of Aging -

Uploaded by: Danna Kauffman

Position: FAV



Senate Finance Committee
January 22, 2025

Senate Bill 223 – *Department of Aging – Social Connections Program – Establishment*
POSTION: SUPPORT

On behalf of the LifeSpan Network, the Maryland Association of Adult Day Services, and the Maryland-National Capital Homecare Association, we express our strong support for Senate Bill 223. This bill updates Maryland's current Senior Call-Check Service Program (Program) to incorporate advancements in technology and communication.

Specifically, the bill allows the Department to continue to call participants enrolled in the Program and enables the use of text messages, video calls, or other forms of communication. Additionally, it permits participants to designate a person of their choice as their point of contact rather than the current limitation, which only allows the Department to contact local law enforcement of another government agency.

We believe these updates are practical and necessary to align with technological advancements since the original legislation was enacted. This will further the State's goal of enabling more individuals to "age in place." We urge a favorable vote.

For more information:

Danna L. Kauffman
Andrew G. Vetter
Christine K. Krone
(410) 244-7000

MD Catholic Conference_SB 223_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Garrett O'Day

Position: FAV



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

January 22, 2025

SB 223

Department of Aging - Social Connections Program – Establishment

Senate Finance Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of Senate Bill 223. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

Senate Bill 223 rebrands and expands the “Senior Call-Check Service and Notification Program” through the Maryland Department of Aging. The revamped program will be called the “Social Connections Program” and will expand promotion of wellness and purposeful social engagement amongst senior Marylanders. Those eligible for the program will be residents of Maryland who are “older adults” at risk of social isolation. This legislation would remove the age threshold of 65 years in defining “older adults”, thus further expanding eligibility for the program. Additionally, this legislation would assist those with disabilities and limited English proficiency by providing regular direct communication services for the deaf and hard of hearing community, thus exemplifying another warranted expansion of the current program.

The Conference supports this bill as a means for caring for vulnerable elderly populations, who are at significant risk for social isolation. This legislation would heed what Saint John Paul II reflected upon in his “Letter to the Elderly”, wherein he stated, “especially in the more economically advanced nations, there needs to be a reversal of the current trend, to ensure that elderly people can grow old with dignity, without having to fear that they will end up no longer counting for anything. There must be a growing conviction that a fully human civilization shows respect and love for the elderly, so that despite their diminishing strength they feel a vital part of society.” (*Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Elderly, 1999*)

Stronger connections and regular communications are the first means in ensuring elderly Marylanders maintain their vitality within society, rendering this legislation pivotal. With longer lifespans due to nutrition and medical advancements and fewer seniors living with immediate family, this legislation is a cost-effective way of helping to ensure that elderly Marylanders are less vulnerable to isolation, depression, malnutrition and elder abuse. For these reasons, the Maryland Catholic Conference respectfully requests this committee to return a favorable report on Senate Bill 223.

NASW Maryland - 2025 SB 223 FAV - Social Connectio

Uploaded by: Karessa Proctor

Position: FAV

**Testimony Before the Senate Finance Committee
January 22, 2025**

**Senate Bill 223 - Department of Aging – Social Connections Program – Establishment
** Support ****

The National Association of Social Workers is the largest professional association of social workers in the country, and the Maryland Chapter represents social workers across the state. On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Maryland Chapter (NASW-MD) Committee on Aging, we would like to express our support for Senate Bill 223. As social workers, we are in favor of this bill because it expands the services currently offered to seniors through the Senior Call Check Service and Notification Program, thereby meeting the needs of an increasing number of isolated older adults.

During the pandemic, we learned a great deal about the suffering of isolated people, both older adults and those with disabilities. This isolation affected them in several ways, including increased risk for depression and dementia, and the very real risk that some people would experience falls or medical episodes while alone, and no one would be aware until it is too late to help them. Now that most pandemic restrictions are lifted, many older adults still face isolation. This bill would build on the successes of the original Senior Call Check program to meet these ongoing needs.

Currently, Senior Call Check provides an automated call to participants each day; if the call is not answered, two additional calls are placed before the service notifies the participant's emergency contact. SB 223 proposes to expand the program by including not just automated calls, but texts, web-based communication and in-person communication. This would allow people to receive the type of communication that meets their needs and would allow those with communication disabilities and limited English proficiency to participate. Of particular note, the bill would allow the service to be accessible to people who are Deaf and hard of hearing and would ensure that these features of the program are funded by the Universal Service Trust Fund.

This bill would offer many isolated older adults an important tool to stay connected to a support system and feel safer. We believe that the new program's personalized approach would appeal to many more Marylanders than the current Senior Call Check.

For those reasons, we ask that you give a favorable report on Senate Bill 223.

Respectfully,

Karessa Proctor, BSW, MSW
Executive Director, NASW-MD

SB 223 - Dept of Aging - Social Connections.pdf

Uploaded by: Ken Phelps Jr

Position: FAV



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 0223

**Department of Aging – Social Connections Program
- Establishment**

Finance Committee

FAVORABLE

TO: Sen. Pam Beidle, Chair; Sen. Antonio Hayes, Vice-Chair; and the Members of the Senate Finance Committee

FROM: Ms. Lynn Mortoro, Episcopal Public Policy Network

DATE: January 22, 2025

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to ask for a Favorable Report on SB 0223.

The Episcopal Church is very committed to helping to solve the issues of Social Isolation. Any assistance with Social Connections is vital to the comfort and the very survival of the elderly and disabled people.

There have been studies done on the effects of the lack of social connections as we age and the problems that isolation brings. This bill takes one that instead of just checking to see that someone is still able to answer a phone to a different level, that of encouragement and assistance in developing connections that will enhance their lives and ensure safety as well.

The Diocese requests a Favorable Report on this Bill.

SB 223- MDH- FIN -LOS.pdf

Uploaded by: Maryland State of

Position: FAV



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Wes Moore, Governor · Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor · Laura Herrera Scott, M.D., M.P.H., Secretary

January 22, 2025

The Honorable Pamela Beidle
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Senate Bill (SB) 223 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment – Letter of Support

Dear Chair Beidle and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) respectfully submits this letter of support for Senate Bill (SB) 223 – *Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment*. SB 223 renames the Senior Call-Check Service and Notification Program to be the Social Connections Program, and establishes the new program to provide communication services to eligible older adults to promote wellness and purposeful social engagement.

MDH served more than 138,768 individuals aged 65 and older through the Medical Assistance Program in 2024. MDH covers nursing facility services as required by Federal law and offers eight 1915(c) Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) waiver programs that serve targeted populations including medically fragile children with chronic illnesses, aged adults, and individuals with disabilities. While Medical Assistance provides a full set of long term services and supports, individuals must be significantly disabled and meet financial requirements to qualify for coverage. Demand for these services as Maryland's population ages is expected to grow.

In 2024, MDH and Maryland Department of Aging (MDOA) received technical assistance through ADvancing States to identify opportunities to redesign Maryland's system of care for older adults. Core recommendations of the technical assistance received was to improve coordination of community-based supports available through MDOA and other local agencies. The reestablishment of the Social Connections Program will be foundational to the success of MDH and MDOA to partner together to make it easier to access community-based supports for Marylanders to remain at home longer. This will prevent decline in their health, and ultimately, slow their need to access safety-net services through Medical Assistance. MDH looks forward to the continued strong partnership with MDOA as this program is formed to address the needs of older adults across the long term services and supports continuum of care.

If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact Sarah Case-Herron, Director of Governmental Affairs at sarah.case-herron@maryland.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "LH Scott", enclosed in a light blue rectangular border.

Laura Herrera Scott, M.D., M.P.H.
Secretary

SB 223 - FAV - FIN - ALZ Association.pdf

Uploaded by: Megan Peters

Position: FAV



Bill: SB 223 - Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment

Committee: Finance Committee

Position: Favorable

Date: January 22, 2025

On behalf of the 127,200 Marylanders living with Alzheimer's disease and their 247,000 caregivers, the Alzheimer's Association supports *SB 223 - Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment*. This bill will expand the communications and services options for Maryland's Senior Call Check Service and Notification Program.

Maryland's Senior Call Check Program serves over 2,000 Marylanders age 65 and older. Each day, a phone call goes out to participants to make sure they are okay. SB 223 will expand the current phone call service to include live and virtual web- and text-based communications, as well as possible in-person service options. Additionally, the updates will allow for supporting older adults with communications disabilities and limited English proficiency. These updates provide opportunities for more purposeful social engagement that has the opportunity to better address needs and reduce social isolation. It is important to reduce social isolation in older adults as studies show that loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher risks for health problems such as heart disease, depression, and cognitive decline.¹

Call check programs also have the opportunity to allow for monitoring of any noticeable changes, such as cognitive decline, that may need more direct intervention and support. The updates in Maryland's program, especially the opportunity for live based communications will provide more comprehensive and informed assessments of participant's personal welfare.

Lastly, call check programs can be helpful for people living with dementia, primarily for those in the early stages of the disease and who are living alone. These calls can provide a regular point of contact, help to monitor well-being, and offer peace of mind to both the individual living with dementia and their caregivers who may be living elsewhere.

The Alzheimer's Association urges a favorable report on SB 223. Please contact Megan Peters, Director of Government Affairs at mrpeters@alz.org with any questions.

¹ National Institute on Aging - Loneliness and Social Isolation - Tips for Staying Connected.
<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>

2025 MOTA SB 223 Senate Side.pdf

Uploaded by: Michael Paddy

Position: FAV



Maryland Occupational Therapy Association

PO Box 36401, Towson, Maryland 21286 ♦ mota-members.com

Committee: Senate Finance Committee

Bill Number: Senate Bill 223

Title: Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment

Hearing Date: January 22, 2025

Position: Support

The Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA) supports Senate Bill 223 - Department of Aging - Social Connections Program – Establishment. This bill renames the Senior Call-Check Service and Notification Program to be the Social Connections Program; establishes the Social Connections Program to provide certain communication to eligible older adults to promote wellness and purposeful social engagement; and authorizes the integration of services between the Program and Telecommunications Access of Maryland.

Occupational therapy practitioners strongly support the importance of social connection for older adults in maintaining overall health and well-being and mitigating the effects of isolation and loneliness, which can lead to cognitive decline, decreased physical activity, and poorer mental health. Essentially, social engagement is considered a crucial aspect of maintaining quality of life in aging individuals. MOTA supports volunteer community engagement connecting older adults with local community resources and activities that align with their interests.

We ask for a favorable report. If we can provide any further information, please contact Michael Paddy at mpaddy@policypartners.net.

BJC Support SB223 Social Connections Senior Call C

Uploaded by: Sarah Miicke

Position: FAV



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- Shaarei Tfiloh Congregation
- Shomrei Emunah Congregation
- Suburban Orthodox Congregation
- Temple Beth Shalom
- Temple Isaiah
- Zionist Organization of America
- Baltimore District

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

**Senate Bill 223 – Department of Aging - Social Connections
Program - Establishment
Finance Committee
January 22, 2025
Support**

Background: Senate Bill 223 would revise and expand the 2017 senior call-check service program for eligible seniors in Maryland through the management and direction of the Department of Aging. While the current program reaches about 2,000 Marylanders over the age of 65 a day via automated calls, this bill would make more people eligible for the program, including those with disabilities, limited English proficiency and older adults under the age of 65. Further, SB223 increases service options to include not just phone calls but text, web-based and in person communications.

Written Comments: The Baltimore Jewish Council represents Comprehensive Housing Assistance, Inc. (CHAI) which directs the “adopt a neighbor” program in Baltimore. This program matches seniors with volunteers in their community who regularly call, visit and even help with household maintenance. Unfortunately, many seniors do not have access to this type of support network, and can become isolated, putting them at risk if they fall, become ill or are isolated. Some low-income seniors may make the difficult choice to enter a nursing facility to avoid this risk, costing the state and federal government a combined \$120,000 a year on average. SB223 would help avert these costs by keeping Marylanders in their homes, where they can comfortably age-in-place without the risk of an unreported illness, injury or isolation

With this in mind, the Baltimore Jewish Council urges a favorable report of SB223.

The Baltimore Jewish Council, a coalition of central Maryland Jewish organizations and congregations, advocates at all levels of government, on a variety of social welfare, economic and religious concerns, to protect and promote the interests of the Associated Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, its agencies and the Greater Baltimore Jewish community.

MSCAN Testimony - SB 223 - Social Connections Prog

Uploaded by: Sarah Miicke

Position: FAV



Maryland Senior Citizens Action Network

MSCAN

AARP Maryland

*Alzheimer's
Association,
Maryland Chapters*

*Baltimore Jewish
Council*

Catholic Charities

*Central Maryland
Ecumenical Council*

Church of the Brethren

*Episcopal Diocese of
Maryland*

*Housing Opportunities
Commission of
Montgomery County*

*Jewish Community
Relations Council of
Greater Washington*

*Lutheran Office on
Public Policy in
Maryland*

*Maryland Association of
Area Agencies on Aging*

*Maryland Catholic
Conference*

*Mental Health
Association of Maryland*

Mid-Atlantic LifeSpan

NAACAP- Maryland

*National Association of
Social Workers,
Maryland Chapter*

Presbytery of Baltimore

*The Coordinating
Center*

*MSCAN Co-Chairs:
Carol Lienhard
Kimberly Burton
443-901-1550 x 210*

Testimony in Support of SB 223 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment Senate Finance Committee January 22, 2025

The Maryland Senior Citizens Action Network (MSCAN) is a statewide coalition of advocacy groups, service providers, faith-based and mission-driven organizations that supports policies that meet the housing and care needs of Maryland's low and moderate-income seniors.

MSCAN commends the Department of Aging for leading the Governor's Longevity Ready Maryland Initiative as our state prepares for unprecedented growth in our senior population. To meet the needs of this wave of elders while recognizing the fiscal realities we currently face, SB 223 proposes to embrace technology to enhance important human service programs without additional cost.

SB 223 will expand and enrich the original Senior Call-Check Service and Notification Program which offered a daily robo-call to seniors who signed up for the service. The program basically determined if the participant could answer the phone – if not, a designated contact was notified.

The new Social Connections Program will do much more to prevent social isolation. Using telephone calls, text messages, web-based, virtual, video, or in-person communication the program will maintain regular contact with participants to keep them connected with their neighborhoods and communities.

The Social Connections Program will partner with local, volunteer-led organizations that aim to support community members in their efforts to age in place through creating events and activities as well as coordinating volunteer neighbor-helping-neighbor models.

We thank you for your consideration of SB 223 which will establish the Social Connections Program which will help to reduce loneliness and isolation and enrich the lives of older Marylanders in the years to come.

SB 223 Social Connections Program Established AAR

Uploaded by: Tammy Bresnahan

Position: FAV



One Park Place | Suite 475 | Annapolis, MD 21401-3475
1-866-542-8163 | Fax: 410-837-0269
aarp.org/md | md@aarp.org | twitter: @aarpm
facebook.com/aarpm

**SB 223 Department of Aging – Social Connections Program Established
Senate Finance Committee
January 22, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chair Beidle and distinguished members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 223 Department of Aging’s Social Connections Program – Establishment Act. My name is Tammy Bresnahan, and I am Senior Director of Advocacy for AARP Maryland. On behalf of our more than two million Marylanders aged 50 and older, thank you for the opportunity to comment on SB 223.

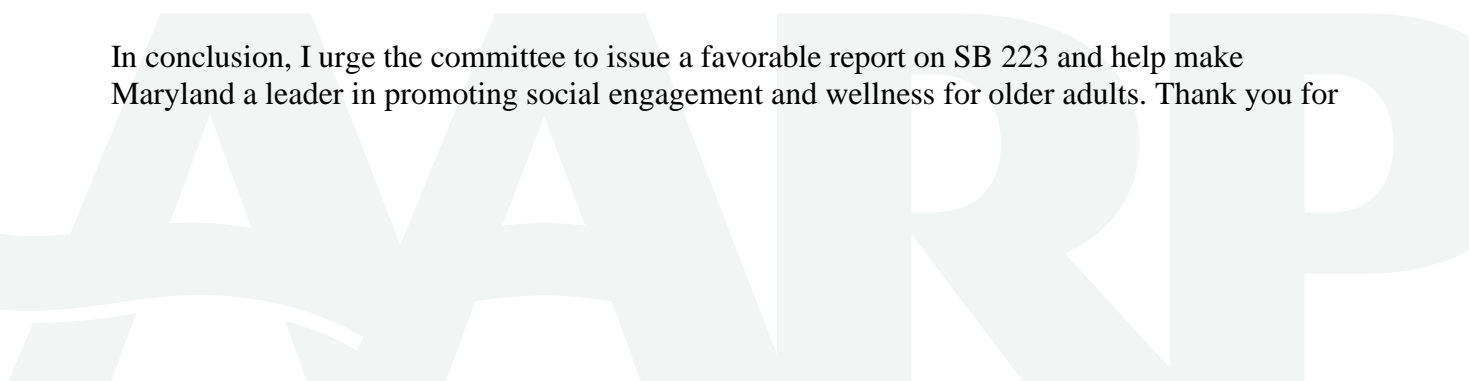
As we all know, social isolation among older adults is a growing concern, with significant implications for physical and mental health. Research has shown that loneliness can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, increasing the risk of health conditions such as heart disease, depression, and cognitive decline. This bill’s focus on transforming and expanding the existing Senior Call–Check Service and Notification Program into the Social Connections Program demonstrates a proactive commitment to promoting wellness and purposeful social engagement among older Marylanders.

The Social Connections Program will build on the foundation of the Senior Call–Check Service by providing not only check-ins but also meaningful opportunities for communication and interaction. This evolution reflects the understanding that social engagement is a cornerstone of healthy aging. By fostering connections, we are helping older adults maintain their independence, improve their quality of life, and reduce the burden on healthcare systems.

I commend the provision authorizing the integration of services between the Social Connections Program and Telecommunications Access of Maryland. This collaboration will enhance accessibility and ensure that older adults with disabilities or technological barriers are not left behind. Additionally, the opportunity for the Department of Aging and the Department of Disabilities to jointly develop the program’s budget underscores a commitment to inclusivity and strategic planning.

This legislation sends a powerful message: we value our older residents and recognize the importance of investing in their well-being. By establishing the Social Connections Program, we are not only addressing the immediate needs of our aging population but also laying the groundwork for a more connected, compassionate, and resilient community.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 223 and help make Maryland a leader in promoting social engagement and wellness for older adults. Thank you for



your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. If you need to follow up with me, please contact me at tbresnahan@aarp.org or by calling 410-302-8451.

Testimony for the Record SB223_1.20.2025 updated.p

Uploaded by: Thomas Cudjoe

Position: FAV

Testimony for the Record – Support SB223

Submitted to the Senate Finance Committee

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

January 18, 2025

Thomas K.M. Cudjoe, MD, MPH, MA

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.

MDOD_SB0223_FWA_01.22.2025.pdf

Uploaded by: Anne Blackfield

Position: FWA

Carol A. Beatty, Secretary
Anne Blackfield, Deputy Secretary

Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor



DATE: January 22, 2025
BILL: SB0223 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment
COMMITTEE: Finance
POSITION: Favorable with Amendments

Dear Chair Beidle,

The Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) is pleased to submit this letter in support of SB0223 Department of Aging – Social Connections Program – Establishment. We commend the revisions to Social Connections that will support access to the program for all eligible Marylanders, including those who are older and are deaf, hard-of hearing, or have communication disabilities. We also look forward to the continued collaboration among the Maryland Department of Aging (MDoA), MDOD, and MDOD’s Telecommunications Access of Maryland Program (TAM) memorialized by these changes.

MDOD would like to provide additional support and context for the sponsor amendment to SB0223 repealing Human Services Article § 7-806(a)(2)(ii) (bill page 5, lines 14 through 17, as noted below):

- 11 (2) For fiscal year 2019 and each fiscal year thereafter, the program under
12 § 3.5–702 of the State Finance and Procurement Article shall be funded at an amount that:
- 13 (i) is equal to the cost that the Department of Aging is expected to
14 incur for the upcoming fiscal year to provide the service and administer the program; {and}
- 15 (ii) ~~does not exceed 5 cents per month for each account out of the~~
16 ~~surcharge amount authorized under subsection (c) of this section; AND~~
- 17 **(H) IS BASED ON A BUDGET DEVELOPED BY THE DEPARTMENT**
18 **OF AGING IN COLLABORATION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES AND IN**
19 **CONSIDERATION OF THE FISCAL NEEDS OF THE PROGRAMS FUNDED THROUGH THE**
20 **SURCHARGES PAID UNDER SUBSECTION (C) OF THIS SECTION.**

Social Connections is funded by the Universal Service Trust Fund (USTF), which, as of 2020, the Secretary of MDOD administers pursuant to Human Services Article § 7-806(f). Prior to July 2020, the USTF was administered by the Department of Information Technology. Currently, five programs are funded by the USTF. (These are described in the attachment.)

The USTF is funded through a surcharge applied to bills for telecommunications services rendered in Maryland. The surcharge rate is set by the department that oversees the USTF (currently MDOD) in collaboration with the Public Service Commission (PSC). The USTF was intended as a flexible funding



mechanism and the surcharge changes over time. Prior to 2017, this surcharge was 11 cents per account. In 2017, while the USTF was still administered by DoIT, this rate was reduced to 5 cents. In December 2024, MDOD directed the PSC to increase the surcharge to 9 cents to ensure continued financial stability for the USTF programs.

Social Connections is the only USTF-funded program that has a funding amount specified in statute. Per Human Services Article § 7-806(a)(2)(ii), Social Connections' funding is currently capped at 5 cents per account; between 2017 and June 2025, 5 cents per account would be 100% of the USTF's annual revenue. While MDoA never requested that full amount for Social Connections, it had that ability under law if the program expenses had risen to that level. Doing so would have defunded all other USTF programs, including Maryland Relay, which administers federally mandated telecommunications services required by Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If Maryland Relay were to become insufficiently funded, Maryland's telecommunications providers would become individually responsible for providing the accessible services currently delivered by Maryland Relay.

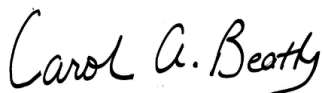
At the same time, Social Connections could be unnecessarily limited by this cap. For instance, should the surcharge someday increase to the legally allowed maximum of 18 cents per account, Social Connections would be limited to the 5 cents per account, even if Social Connections needed additional funding and such funding was available in USTF.

As part of its role administering the USTF (as required at § 7-806(f)), MDOD administers the Social Connections funding as a Reimbursable Fund. The amount of funding for the Social Connections program is included in MDOD's budget each development cycle, and is based upon previous FY actuals, the current FY appropriation, and the projected FY expenses as communicated to MDOD by MDoA. Social Connections is included in both MDoA's and MDOD's budget submissions to DBM.

Other provisions in § 7-806 ensure that Social Connections will remain sufficiently funded; § 7-806(a)(2)(i) already requires that Social Connections receive the funding it needs based on actual spending, and § 7-806(d) directs the Secretary of MDOD to certify to PSC the costs of all USTF-funded programs for the purpose of setting an appropriate USTF surcharge. The new language proposed in § 7-806 as part of SB0223 further memorializes the collaboration that already exists between MDoA and MDOD, as well as acknowledging that the USTF is shared by multiple programs.

For the reasons stated above, MDOD requests a favorable report for SB0223 with the amendment removing in statute a specified budget maximum for Social Connections. Removing this cap ensures the financial stability of the other USTF-funded programs, including the Maryland Relay program responsible for maintaining Maryland's compliance with the ADA, and avoids potentially shortchanging Social Connections in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this letter of support.

Sincerely,



Carol A. Beatty
Secretary

Attachment 1: Programs Funded by the USTF

Telecommunications Access of Maryland (TAM): Background

TAM operates under the Maryland Department of Disabilities, providing necessary services and equipment to facilitate effective telephone communication for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, have speech difficulties, or other disabilities.

Core USTF/TAM Programs

1. Maryland Relay – (\$ 2,220,000 Per Annum)

Maryland Relay provides Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, enabling individuals with hearing or speech disabilities to communicate on the telephone through a communications assistant. TRS is a federally mandated service under Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act. By serving as Maryland's certified TRS provider Maryland Relay fulfills the ADA obligations that would otherwise fall directly on each telecommunications carrier in the state. Should Maryland Relay ever become insufficiently funded, it would be decertified as the TRS provider and common carriers would individually have to assume the financial and logistical responsibility of providing TRS.

2. Maryland Accessible Telecommunications (MAT) (\$ 1,200,000 Per Annum)

The MAT program provides specialized telephone equipment to individuals with disabilities.

3. Communication Facilitator Program (\$ 90,000 Per Annum)

Launched in 2021, the Communications Facilitator program provides personalized support and specialized communication techniques to help individuals with both hearing and vision impairments effectively use TRS.

Other Programs Funded by the USTF

1. NFB NewsLine Reading Service (\$ 46,500 Per Annum)

The Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled (MSLA) receives USTF funds, which it provides to the National Federation of the Blind to deliver the NFB Newsline Reading Service for blind and visually impaired individuals

2. Social Connections Program (\$ 450,000 Per Annum)

The Social Connections Program, overseen by the Maryland Department of Aging (MDoA), offers a complimentary, opt-in telephone service that routinely monitors the well-being of older residents statewide. Participants receive a call, with necessary follow-up actions taken if assistance is deemed needed. MDOD reimburses MDoA for program expenditures based upon the budget submitted to MDOD at the beginning of the budget development cycle.

Attachment 2: USTF Funding History

Pre-2017

- The USTF surcharge amount was set to 11 cents per account, leading to a surplus.

2017

- Due to the surplus in the USTF, the surcharge amount was reduced to 5 cents per account, generating about \$2.7 million a year.

2017-2024

- The total expenditures of the USTF-programs has been around \$4 million a year, while the USTF has been earning \$2.7 million.
- USTF-funded programs have been funded through a combination of the pre-2017 surplus and the revenue generated between 2017-2024.
- The programs have nearly exhausted the surplus.

July 2025

- The surcharge will increase to 9 cents per account.
- USTF programs will be sufficiently funded by this 9 cents per account without generating an excessive surplus.



MDOA written testimony SB223 1.20.25.pdf

Uploaded by: Carmel Roques

Position: FWA

Social Connections

Senior Call Check Service and Notification Program

HB158/SB223 will expand the communications and service options for the Senior Call Check Service and Notification Program so it can meaningfully engage with more older adults and be more accessible to people with disabilities.

Intended Goals of Bill HB158/SB223:



SUPPORT MORE OLDER ADULTS

including people with communications disabilities and limited English proficiency.



INCREASE SERVICE OPTIONS

to include calls, texts, web-based, and in-person communications.



PROVIDE PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT

to better address needs and reduce social isolation.



SUSTAIN MDOA AND MDOD PARTNERSHIP

for communications programs funded by USTF.

What does Senior Call Check currently do for older adults?

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.

What are the advantages of the amended bill?

The Senior Call Check/Social Connections Bill HB158/SB223 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).



Wes Moore | Governor

Aruna Miller | Lt. Governor

Carmel Roques | Secretary

Date: January 20, 2025

Bill Number: **SB223**

Bill Title: Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment

Committee: Senate Finance

MDOA Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

The Department of Aging (MDOA) thanks the Chair and Committee members for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill (SB) 223 - Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment.

The Maryland Department of Aging (MDOA) serves as Maryland's State Unit on Aging, administering federal and state funding for core programs, overseeing the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) network at the local level that provides services to older adults, and planning for Maryland's growing older adult population. In 2017, the Senior Call-Check Notification Service and Program was established by statute led by Senator Kramer. This free program currently serves approximately 2,000 Marylanders age 65 or older. Each day, an automated phone call goes out to participants at the time of day of their choosing. The purpose of the call is to check on the immediate safety and welfare of an older adult at home. If that call goes unanswered, follow-up calls are placed before reaching out to the participant's designated emergency contact person and potentially local non-emergency services to conduct an in person welfare check. The intended outcome is increased safety and peace of mind for older adults, their families and other caregivers, and additional support for participants living in their homes or in other independent settings.

SB223 aims to expand this outstanding, free service for older Marylanders. It does so by expanding the types of communications the program may utilize beyond telephone calls, which the current statute is limited to. The new statutory language will give MDOA more flexibility to utilize a variety of service providers using texts, emails, virtual, web-based or in-person



Wes Moore | Governor

Aruna Miller | Lt. Governor

Carmel Roques | Secretary

communications with participants in the future. SB223 will also confirm that program communications will be more expansive than in the past, with a focus on providing purposeful engagement to address social isolation. Notably, SB223's expansion of the types of communications that can be used will make the program more accessible to the deaf and hard of hearing community as well as anyone else who does not easily access the current telephone call-only service. Building an equitable Social Connections Service is a shared priority of MDOA and MDOD and aligns with MDOA's Longevity-Ready Maryland Initiative's goals. MDOA's goal with all of these changes incorporated into SB223 is simply to grow the Social Connections Service, so that it serves *a larger number of* older Marylanders.

SB223 also will update current budget challenges with the program's administration, and confirm the collaborative budgeting relationship between the Departments of Disabilities and Aging with respect to the program. As established in statute, Senior Call-Check is funded through the Universal Service Trust Fund, which is a state surcharge on wireless communication accounts geared at funding communications-oriented programs.

MDOA requests the enclosed amendment to remove the 5 cent cap on the existing Senior Call Check service's potential funding. MDOA's and MDOD's original intent was to remove this existing funding cap and insert the new language proposed in subsection Human Services Article §7-806(a)(2)(III) instead. This amendment corrects a drafting oversight.

MDOA notes that the Department of Disabilities has recently gotten approval from the Public Service Commission to increase the level of the USTF surcharge from 5 cents to 9 cents per month per account. This increased fee will take effect in July, 2025. The new language SB223 adds to Human Services Article §7-806 in subsection (a)(2)(III), read together with existing provisions in (2)(i) are more than sufficient to maintain at least the level of funding for the Department of Aging that the Senior Call Check has received annually since its inception. This language also codifies the collaborative funding relationship between the Departments of Disabilities and Aging with respect to this program and the consideration needed for the other four programs the USTF funds that are federally mandated for the Department of Disabilities.



Wes Moore | Governor

Aruna Miller | Lt. Governor

Carmel Roques | Secretary

For these reasons, the Department of Aging respectfully urges a **favorable with amendments** report for SB223. If you have any questions, please contact Andrea Nunez, Legislative Director, at andrea.nunez@maryland.gov or (443) 414-8183.



SB0223/223428/1

AMENDMENTS
PREPARED
BY THE
DEPT. OF LEGISLATIVE
SERVICES

20 JAN 25
08:56:08

BY: Chair, Finance Committee
(To be offered in the Finance Committee)

AMENDMENTS TO SENATE BILL 223
(First Reading File Bill)

AMENDMENT NO. 1

On page 1, in line 8, after “Maryland;” insert “altering funding requirements for the Program;”.

AMENDMENT NO. 2

On page 5, in line 14, strike the brackets; and strike beginning with “does” in line 15 down through “(III)” in line 17.

SB223_DHCD_SUPPORT_W_AMD.pdf

Uploaded by: Chuck Cook

Position: FWA



WES MOORE
Governor
ARUNA MILLER
Lt. Governor
JACOB R. DAY
Secretary
JULIA GLANZ
Deputy Secretary

DATE: January 22, 2025
BILL NO.: Senate Bill 223
TITLE: Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment
COMMITTEE: Senate Finance Committee

Letter of Support with amendments

Description of Bill:

Senate Bill 223 expands the Department of Aging's Senior Call Check Program to include live and virtual web- and text-based communications, as well as possible in-person service options. It also renames the program as the Social Connections Program to reflect these increased options.

Background and Analysis:

The Senior Call Check Program serves over 2,000 older Marylanders daily by making automated calls to program participants to check on their welfare. If a participant does not answer, two follow-up calls are placed before the participant's listed emergency contact person or local services are contacted to conduct an in-person welfare check.

Expanding the current phone call service to include web- and text-based communication will increase the options available to vulnerable older adults and their families, and make the program more accessible to older adults with hearing loss or other communication challenges such as limited English proficiency. Services for the Deaf and hard of hearing, offered in partnership with the Department of Disabilities, are sustainably funded by the Universal Service Trust Fund, which is funded by surcharges on bills for communication services.

This valuable service helps give vulnerable older adults and their families peace of mind, reduces social isolation, and sustains the ability to live independently for those who so desire. Expanding this service to be more inclusive and accessible will help more older Marylanders remain in their homes. For older adults with fixed incomes and other issues associated with aging, in-home support services such as this one provide crucial help in remaining housed and able to live independently.

DHCD Position

The Department of Aging is planning on offering their own clarifying amendments to this bill, and, therefore, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development respectfully requests a **favorable with amendments** report on Senate Bill 223.



SupportLetter.pdf

Uploaded by: Darrin Smith

Position: FWA

Darrin R. Smith
7005 Concord Road,
Pikesville, Maryland 21208

January 20th, 2026

The Honorable Members of the Maryland General Assembly
100 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Letter of Support for SB0223 with Amendments to Enhance Senior Call Check Vitality

Dear Honorable Members,

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 0223, which addresses the expansion of the Senior Call Check program to improve the welfare of our senior citizen populations from the comfort of their own home. As the former Vice Chairman of the Governor's Advisory Board of Telecommunication, I have witnessed firsthand the critical role this program plays in ensuring the safety and well-being of our state's senior citizens.

SB0223 represents an important step towards enhancing the Senior Call Check program. However, I believe its impact can be significantly amplified by incorporating the following amendments:

- **Ensure Continued, Stable Funding:** The success of the Senior Call Check program hinges on consistent and adequate funding. I urge the legislature to consider **eliminating the cap** on program funding and to ensure the allocation of **continued, stable funding streams** to support program expansion and technological advancements.
- **Address the Unique Needs of Seniors and the Deaf Population:**
 - **Seniors:** The program should be actively promoted among seniors, with a focus on outreach and education initiatives.
 - **Deaf Population:** Recognizing the communication barriers faced by deaf seniors, the program should explore the integration of alternative communication methods, such as video relay services and text-based check-in systems.

By incorporating these amendments, SB0223 can be strengthened to better serve the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. I urge you to give this legislation your full consideration and support.

Sincerely,

Darrin R. Smith - Former Vice Chairman, Governor's Advisory Board of Telecommunication

MDAD Letter Written Testimony SB 223.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: MDAD President MDAD President

Position: FWA



**Maryland Association of the Deaf
Written Testimony**

**SB 223 – Department of Aging - Social Connections Program - Establishment
Wednesday, January 22, 2025
Position: Favorable with Amendment**

President

Tina Joyner

Vice President

Jacob Leffler

Secretary

Tiasha Bera

Treasurer

Allysa Dittmar

Board Members

Meredith DeSomma

Vikki Porter

Blaise Delahoussaye

Philip Mecham

Tori Reeves

Thelma Schroeder

The Maryland Association of the Deaf (MDAD) is writing to express our strong support for SB 223, with the proposed amendment. We commend the legislature's efforts to incorporate accessibility language into the law, ensuring that all Marylanders, including those who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have communication disabilities, have equal access to telecommunications services.

Currently, the Senior Call Check program poses significant accessibility challenges for the deaf and hard of hearing community. It is deeply ironic that this program draws from the Universal Service Trust Fund (USTF), which was specifically established to address telecommunications accessibility needs and provide equal telephone access for individuals who cannot use standard telephones. Instead of fulfilling its intended purpose, the program operates in a manner that excludes a significant portion of the population it aims to serve.

MDAD applauds the amendment to SB 223 that removes the arbitrary 0.05 cap solely applied to the Senior Call Check program. This cap is inconsistent with other USTF-funded programs, which do not face similar restrictions. Eliminating this cap is a crucial step toward ensuring that the Senior Call Check program can adequately serve all eligible Marylanders without compromising the financial stability of other vital services funded by the USTF, such as Maryland Relay, which is essential for maintaining Maryland's compliance with Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Furthermore, we are encouraged by the revisions to Social Connections. Continued collaboration among the Maryland Department of Aging, the Department of Disabilities, and the Telecommunications Access of Maryland Program (TAM) is vital for the success of these initiatives. MDAD looks forward to supporting these collaborative efforts to create a more inclusive and accessible Maryland.

In conclusion, MDAD strongly endorses SB 223 with the proposed amendments. These changes are essential for ensuring that all programs under the USTF fulfill their mission of providing equal telecommunications access to all Marylanders, particularly those who are deaf and hard of hearing. We appreciate the legislature's commitment to accessibility and look forward to continued progress in this area.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Tina Joyner