

HB 158 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment

House Health and Government Operations Committee

January 23, 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 HB 158.

HB 158 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 HB 158, 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 HB 158 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>