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SB0223

March 20, 2025

TO: Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee

FROM: Nina Themelis, Director of Mayor's Office of Government Relations

RE: Senate Bill 223 – Department of Aging – Social Connections Program - Establishment

POSITION: Support

Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports** Senate Bill (SB) 223.

SB 223 modernizes and expands the “Senior Call – Check Service and Notification Program.” It proposes to re-name the program to be the “Social Connections Program,” diversify the modes of communication used to connect with the residents it will serve and focus specifically on older adults at-risk of isolation (rather than older adults in general). The new Program will more effectively target older adults at risk of social isolation and expand the methods by which participants are able to participate in the program, including accessible communication for older adults with disabilities. Communications with participants will still include calls ensuring safety of participants as well as added topics such as purposeful social engagement and promotion of relevant events.

Social isolation is a growing concern. According to a national poll conducted in 2023, approximately 37% of US adults ages 50-80 experienced loneliness and 34% reported feeling socially isolated.ⁱ Research shows that social isolation is harmful not only to mental health (linked to increased risk of depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline), but also to physical health.ⁱⁱ In fact, social isolation has been found to be related to increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and even a 26% increase in the risk of premature death.ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast, social connection supports longevity, health, and a better quality of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Baltimore City Health Department Division of Aging and Community Support acts as the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) for Baltimore City, serving Baltimore City's approximately 85,000 older adults and their families.^{iv} The Division is committed to working toward a Baltimore City in which all older adults can age in their communities with choice and dignity. Combatting social isolation – and providing opportunities for social connection – are crucial to this mission. The Social Connections Program would provide a more meaningful experience for a critical program supporting the physical, emotional, and social well-being of older adults.

For these reasons, the BCA respectfully requests a **favorable** report on SB 223.

ⁱ Gerlach LB, Solway ES, Malani PN. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults. *JAMA*. 2024;331(23):2058. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.3456

ⁱⁱ National Institute of Health. (2019). Research Highlights: Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks. Retrieved from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cacioppo, J. and Cacioppo, S. (2018). The growing problem of loneliness. *The Lancet*, Volume 391, Issue 10119, 426.

^{iv} United States Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Baltimore City, Maryland. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/baltimorecitymaryland/PST045224#PST045224>