

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 21, 2025

Bill Number: **HB158**

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

Committee: House Health and Government Operations

MDOA Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

The Department of Aging (MDOA) thanks the Chair and Committee members for the opportunity to testify on House Bill (HB) 158 - 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.

HB158 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. HB158 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, HB158'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 HB158 is simply to grow the Social Connections Service, so that it serves *a larger number of* older Marylanders.

HB158 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 is working with HGO Committee staff on the drafting of an amendment to remove the 5 cent cap on the existing Senior Call Check service's 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 HB158 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 HB158. If you have any questions, please contact Andrea Nunez, Legislative Director, at andrea.nunez@maryland.gov or (443) 414-8183.