



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 21, 2025

Health and Government Operations Committee
Chair Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk
Vice Chair Delegate Bonnie Cullison
240 House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

To the Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify on House Bill 1070, my bill to require the Maryland Department of Health to study the feasibility of installing and maintaining landline telephone systems in assisted living facilities, psychiatric facilities, and nursing homes.

This study bill follows a 2024 bill that aimed to require healthcare facilities to implement a program ensuring telephone access. When that bill did not pass, stakeholders recommended establishing a study the following year to address the issue. This bill addresses a constituent issue brought to us and would require the Maryland Department of Health to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of each resident having access to a phone who are patients in psychiatric and assisted living facilities and nursing homes. The study would assess the potential cost of installing and maintaining telephone systems in these facilities, including but not limited to labor, equipment and installation. The original bill before you is a crossfile of a Senate bill and is written to study the feasibility of landlines but in working the bill and speaking to stakeholders, I would be willing to change it to explore alternative communication technologies including WiFi phones, Voice-over-IP systems or mobile phones with accessibility features. The challenge with portable phones is making sure that older or mentally impaired residents know how to use them and that they remain available in each room and not disappear into someone's pocket, but I'd be happy to have the experts consider the available options.

The study also would investigate the benefits of patients having access to telephones, including but not limited to social interaction and access to support services, such as attorneys, personal physicians and social workers.

Current federal and state laws dictate that a patient in a long-term care facility must have reasonable rights to telephone access. However, they only guarantee a minimum of two common-use phones throughout the facility for all residents to use. This does not guarantee that every resident will have access to a telephone every day, nor does it guarantee the privacy promised in the Resident's Bill of Rights.

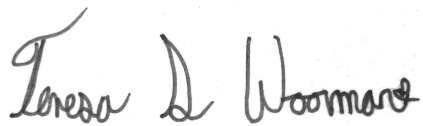
State law also states that a resident is only guaranteed a phone jack and adequate wiring for a direct landline in their room. The physical phone itself must be provided by the patient or their family. This is an added cost to patients and their families who already may be paying the high cost of long-term care. In critical situations, a landline or other communication technologies provide reliable communication during emergencies, allowing residents to easily reach out to medical staff, security or other emergency services.

A landline in patient rooms or an alternative mode of communication away from the nurses' station would help allow confidential communication between patients and their caregivers or healthcare providers. It would also improve the overall quality of patient care, contributing to more positive experiences for patients in medical facilities.

I have discussed the bill with representatives from the Department of Health and am happy to consider any amendments they deem necessary to reduce the fiscal note or turn the study into a workgroup. The fiscal note on this bill is high because the Department says they would need to pay for consulting services to carry out the study as they say they do not have the necessary expertise to conduct the study called for under the original bill. If we were to change the bill to explore other alternatives to landlines, I believe the Department can use the existing staff for those costs to go down.

I appreciate your time and the opportunity to testify on this matter, and I respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 1070.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Teresa S. Woorman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T" and "W".

Delegate Teresa S. Woorman