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SB 555 Health – Dementia Services and Brain Health Program and Clinical Toolkit
Senate Finance Committee
February 24, 2026
FAVORABLE

Good afternoon, Chair Beidle and members of the Senate Finance Committee. I am Sara Westrick, Advocacy Director of AARP Maryland. I am here today to support SB 555 Health – Dementia Services and Brain Health Program and Clinical Toolkit. I would like to thank Vice Chair Hayes for sponsoring this important legislation.

AARP is the largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization representing the interests of Americans age 50 and older, with approximately 850,000 members in the state. Our mission includes ensuring health security and supporting a strong safety net for older adults and their families. Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias affect tens of thousands of Marylanders, placing enormous strain on families, caregivers, and our health care system.

Why AARP Maryland Supports SB 555

Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias are a growing public health crisis. In Maryland alone, more than 127,200 people are living with Alzheimer’s, and this number is expected to rise as the population ages. In fact, Maryland has one of the highest rates of Alzheimer’s in the United States, with Baltimore City and Prince George’s County showing particularly high prevalence rates among residents 65 and older.

This bill strengthens Maryland’s response by establishing a Clinical Toolkit for dementia care, expanding the duties of the Virginia I. Jones Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementias Council and creating a Dementia Services and Brain Health Program within the Department of Health. These measures will provide a coordinated, statewide approach to dementia care and prevention, ensuring accountability and measurable progress.

Critically, the legislation addresses a major gap: health care providers often lack the training and tools to deliver dementia-capable care. By establishing a Clinical Toolkit and promoting continuing education, this bill equips clinicians to detect cognitive impairment earlier, plan effective care, and reduce disparities in diagnosis and treatment.

The bill also promotes brain health and risk reduction strategies, helping delay or prevent dementia onset and reducing long-term costs. The bill explicitly calls for resources that recognize racial and ethnic disparities in dementia detection and care. By incorporating culturally competent practices and equitable access into the Clinical Toolkit and provider education, Maryland can close gaps that disproportionately affect minority communities. As Maryland ages

and more racially and ethnically diverse generations reach older adulthood, racial and ethnic diversity among people with dementia will increase.

A Personal Story

This bill is about helping real people, and we would like to relate the reflections of one of AARP Maryland's volunteer advocates, Marsha Goldberger, whose mother lived for three years with dementia. Her condition quickly progressed, requiring her to move from senior living to a nursing home with around-the-clock care. While the nurses and other caregivers were kind, Marsha describes that they did not have special training in helping people with Alzheimer's and other dementias. When Marsha's mother did not understand something, she could become angry with the staff, which was very upsetting to all involved.

The creation of a Clinical Toolkit, like the one envisioned in this legislation, and opportunities for continuing education in this evolving field will help not only medical professionals but also their patients and families, like Marsha's.

Detecting cognitive impairment earlier, using risk reduction strategies, and promoting brain health may very well have helped Marsha's mother and others like her by delaying the onset of dementia, decreasing the time she spent in a nursing home, and receiving dementia-capable care during her time in one.

The introduction of SB 555 acknowledges the urgency of getting ahead of the growing rates of Alzheimer's and other dementias for the benefit of all Marylanders.

For these reasons, AARP Maryland respectfully urges the Committee to issue SB 555 a favorable report.

If you have any questions, please contact Sara Westrick at swestrick@aarpp.org or 410-310-0374.