



**Mission:** *To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy*  
**Vision:** *Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities*

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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 202**  
**Public Health - Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program**  
**Committee: Health**  
**By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdpHA)**  
**Hearing Date: February 10, 2026**

Chair Bagnall, Vice-Chair Cullison, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify **in favor of HB 202**, which proposes to establish the *Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program* in the Maryland Department of Health. This program provides funding for the operating costs associated with the maintenance or expansion of programs that address social isolation and loneliness among vulnerable populations by providing socioemotional support.

The United States is currently facing a loneliness crisis that has significant health consequences for Marylanders. The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 report documented the severe and widespread nature of the problem, linking loneliness to shorter life expectancy, increased anxiety, greater depression, and preventable cognitive decline.<sup>1</sup> The report highlights that “the mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day,<sup>2</sup> and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity.”<sup>1</sup>

While the problem is widespread, the loneliness epidemic is particularly pronounced among older adults<sup>3</sup> who may have fewer social connections due to retirement from the workforce, mobility issues, and health concerns. Those living in urban centers, similarly, are especially

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2023. PMID: 37792968.

<sup>2</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J., Robles, T.F., Sbarra, D.A. Advancing social connection as a public health priority in the United States. *American Psychologist*. 2017;72(6):517-530.

<sup>3</sup> Cudjoe, T.K.M., Roth, D.L., Szanton, S.L., Wolff, J.L., Boyd, C.M., Thorpe, R.J. Jr. The epidemiology of social isolation: National Health and Aging Trends Study. *Journals of Gerontology Series B*. 2020; 75(1): 107-113.

vulnerable to loneliness, particularly those exposed to community violence.<sup>4</sup> Because specific populations are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness, a program that benefits vulnerable Marylanders may be especially impactful.

Thus, a targeted pilot program has great potential to improve the health and well-being of the residents of Marylanders by testing out ways to rebuild community connections, increase social touchpoints, and promote the development of social relationships. As social isolation is a modifiable risk factor, it is essential to fund this program now when rates of social isolation are at an all time high.<sup>5</sup>

The Maryland Public Health Association urges a favorable report on House Bill 202.

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The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.

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<sup>4</sup> Tung, Elizabeth L., et al. Social isolation, loneliness, and violence exposure in urban adults. *Health Affairs* 38.10 (2019): 1670-1678.

<sup>5</sup> Kannan, V.D. and Veazie, P.J., 2023. US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship—nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours, 2003–2020. *SSM-Population Health*, 21, p.101331.