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**HB 202 - Public Health - Social Isolation and Loneliness Pilot Grant Program -  
Establishment  
House Health Committee  
February 10, 2026  
FAVORABLE**

Good afternoon, Chair Bagnall and members of the House Health Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 202. I am Leslie Hartz, a member of the AARP Maryland volunteer legislative advocacy team and a resident of Howard County. AARP Maryland strongly supports HB 202, which proposes to establish a Pilot Grant Program to address social isolation and loneliness. We thank Delegate Vogel for sponsoring this important legislation.

AARP is the largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization representing the interests of Americans age 50 and older, as well as their families, with approximately 850,000 members in Maryland. Key priorities of our organization include helping all Marylanders achieve financial and health security, as well as supporting a safety net for older adults and low-income households.

The impact of loneliness on health is profound. Research has shown that a lack of connection has the same negative health effects as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or drinking 6 alcoholic beverages. Having fewer than 6 close connections significantly decreases life expectancy.

Social isolation is a problem for vulnerable populations, including older adults. I witnessed this firsthand at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. My mother-in-law was very isolated. She lived alone in an apartment with no car. She began showing signs of dementia and struggled with day-to-day life. When she moved to an independent living facility, surrounded by people, she was much happier, and her memory improved steadily and quickly.

AARP is extremely concerned about loneliness and social isolation as we age, and in fact, AARP Foundation created the Connect2Affect program. Connect2Affect is one tool in the toolbox, but AARP believes that we should develop programs to combat loneliness. That is why AARP strongly supports HB 202, which will provide grants to cover operational costs associated with maintaining or expanding programs that provide socioemotional support to vulnerable populations to address social isolation and loneliness.

AARP believes that grants to combat loneliness and social isolation are critical because of the profound impact these issues have on aging Marylanders. These grants can help Marylanders stay connected and thrive as they age. For these reasons, AARP urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB202. If you have any questions, please contact Sara Westrick at [swestrick@aarp.org](mailto:swestrick@aarp.org) or by calling 410-310-0374.