

**Senate Bill 204 Health Care Facilities - Assisted Living Programs - Memory Care and Alzheimer's Disease Unit Regulations**  
Senate Finance Committee  
February 11, 2021  
**Position: Support**

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is the state's only volunteer, nonprofit citizen's organization that brings together consumers, families, professionals, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and mental illness. We appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 204.

SB 204 seeks to require the Maryland Department of Health to adopt regulations establishing standards governing memory care and Alzheimer's disease units in assisted living programs. This would include requirements regarding training, staffing, admissions and discharge, and other procedures to reduce social isolation among residents. These regulations would support staff working directly with older adults who are facing increasing incidences of Alzheimer's disease and related dementia.

Alzheimer's disease and related dementia is currently afflicting 110,000 Marylanders, and impacts Black and Latinx communities at twice the rate of white communities.<sup>1</sup> This is not a genetic difference but rather one of structural racism – studies show that when adjusting for health and socioeconomic factors, the racial differences in Alzheimer's prevalence is significantly reduced.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Black and Latinx older adults are often diagnosed in the later stages of the disease, requiring more intensive and costly levels of care.<sup>3</sup> Updating assisted living facility regulations would be an important step in the work of addressing this undue racial disparity.

SB 204 also seeks to establish standards for "adjusting activities to reduce social isolation of residents during a disease outbreak investigation." Social isolation has been demonstrated to negatively impact people's mental health, including increasing rates of anxiety and depression, and is a known symptom as well of pre-existing mental health conditions.<sup>4</sup> Long term social isolation can contribute to depression, poor sleep quality, impaired executive function, accelerated cognitive decline, poor cardiovascular function and impaired immunity at every stage

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<sup>1</sup> Alzheimer's Association. *Race, Ethnicity, and Alzheimer's*. March, 2020.

[https://www.alz.org/aaic/downloads2020/2020\\_Race\\_and\\_Ethnicity\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.alz.org/aaic/downloads2020/2020_Race_and_Ethnicity_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Chen, C., & Zissimopoulos, J. M. (2018). Racial and ethnic differences in trends in dementia prevalence and risk factors in the United States. *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, 4, 510–520. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trci.2018.08.009>

<sup>3</sup> Alzheimer's Association. *Race, Ethnicity, and Alzheimer's*. March, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, 2020. *Understanding the Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health*. <https://publichealth.tulane.edu/blog/effects-of-social-isolation-on-mental-health/>

*For more information contact:*

*Margo Quinlan, Director of Youth & Older Adult Policy: 410-236-5488 / [mquinlan@mhamd.org](mailto:mquinlan@mhamd.org)*

of life,<sup>5</sup> and may be coupled with post-traumatic stress disorder when connected with traumatic events such as death, illness, or social disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Social isolation can also increase substance misuse and abuse, and social wellness has been identified as one of the eight dimensions of wellness under the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 has greatly exacerbated social isolation for many residents in congregate care facilities, as they are unable to safely visit with family during the pandemic who might otherwise provide support around meals, medications, and critical social interactions.

The Mental Health Association of Maryland supports the goals and intents of this bill and urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 204.

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<sup>5</sup> Novotney, A., 2020. *The risks of social isolation*. American Psychological Association.

<sup>6</sup> Triangle Spring, 2020. *Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health: What to Expect After Quarantine*. <https://trianglesprings.com/blog/social-isolation/>

<sup>7</sup> Kobrin, M. *Promoting Wellness for Better Behavioral and Physical Health*. SAMHSA. [https://mfpc.samhsa.gov/ENewsArticles/Article12b\\_2017.aspx](https://mfpc.samhsa.gov/ENewsArticles/Article12b_2017.aspx)