

February 13, 2025

**Testimony in Support of Bill A5135
Committee on Aging and Human Services**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Speight, and members of the committee. My name is Melissa Acree, and I am the CEO of NJ 211. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today in strong support of Bill A5135, which seeks to establish a central registry for senior citizens living in New Jersey and provide vital informational outreach and wellness check calls during emergencies.

At NJ 211, we know firsthand the importance of speaking one-on-one with vulnerable populations. Many seniors struggle to navigate complex systems and need personalized assistance, reassurance, and encouragement. Our team is trained to listen patiently, help them understand the steps they need to take, and guide them to the resources that can improve their quality of life. We handle approximately 33,000 calls for help a month. 20% of our callers are seniors seeking help with utility bills, housing, and other basic needs. These are critical, often time-sensitive requests, and having a central registry will allow for more efficient and proactive outreach.

Additionally, during times of crisis, accurate and accessible information is essential. The public is often bombarded with conflicting messages, leaving many unsure of what to believe or how to respond. NJ 211, in partnership with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, serves as a trusted source of vetted, state-approved emergency information and referrals. We function as a central portal to disseminate critical updates in ways that residents can understand and act upon.

A senior registry will give the Department of Human Services (DHS) the ability to push vital messaging to seniors through multiple communication channels, including phone calls, texts, chat, and social media. NJ 211 is well-positioned to support DHS in this role, given our existing infrastructure and experience in providing live assistance and explanation of programs and services.

For this reason, we respectfully ask you to consider adding 211 to your bill. We would suggest the following language for your consideration, "*DHS, in cooperation with NJ 211, shall establish and maintain a voluntary central registry of senior citizens residing in the state.*" This partnership will ensure that seniors can update their status 24/7 and receive timely, accurate, and compassionate outreach, both in their everyday needs and in times of crisis.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have. I can be reached at macree@nj211.org or 973-887-4618.