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Carroll and Howard Counties

Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB893 - Public Health - Cyber Safety Handbook - Handbook Development and Publication

March 17, 2020

Chair Pendergrass, Vice-Chair Pena-Melnyk, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of SB893. This simple bill directs the State Department of Education, the Maryland Department of Health, and the Behavioral Health Administration to consult with professionals who specialize in child development and child psychology to develop a cyber safety handbook as a resource for students, parents, and teachers grappling with the emergence of ubiquitous social media and technology usage in our daily lives. The handbook will include:

- Evidence-based information on the impacts of Internet, social media, and technology usage on an individual's behavioral, mental, and physical health;
- Data and trends regarding social media and technology usage;
- A list of the top 10 safety recommendations for students, parents, and teachers;
- Any other relevant information

The handbook will then be posted to the websites of the Department of Education, Department of Health, and the Behavioral Health Administration, and distributed to each county board of education for their own use.

Over the interim, the Joint Committee on Cybersecurity, IT, and Biotechnology had the pleasure of being joined by Dr. Jacob Swartz - a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellow at Georgetown University Hospital, and Dr. Steven Czinn from the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Their research has been focused specifically on the issue of teen tech and social media use, and during their testimony they noted some significant trends and data points. Among teens, technology has become a constant presence: 95% have access to a smartphone, 45% are online at almost all times, and over 90% use a

social media platform - a number that continues to increase year over year. Simultaneous with the growing prominence of this technology over the last 5-8 years, suicide rates across 10 to 14, 14 to 18, and 18 to 21 year old youth have increased at least 50%. Since 2010, the suicide rate has doubled for teen boys and tripled for teen girls.

Obviously the correlation between these trends and statistical points is not enough to warrant an assumption of causation, suicide rates and mental health concerns are extremely complex and subject to a multitude of factors. But recent research has shown complex links between mental health and social media usage. In his testimony to our committee, Dr. Swartz made a point of highlighting two factors of digital usage that affected the mental and behavioral health of our children - quantity of usage and the manner in which technology is used. When used in the right ways, our kids can see benefits from social media and technology. It truly can be a non-intrusive way to build social connections and engage in positive community building. However, when used improperly, social media and technology use can be invasive, addictive, isolating, and destructive. We have all heard stories of cyberbullying and social media use ending in tragedies - as a parent it is easy to question what can be done.

However, emerging research is beginning to point to steps we as a community can take to encourage healthy cyber practices for our kids. Simple steps like minimizing screen time early in life, participating in healthy patterns of co-use on the part of the parent, and modeling healthy screen use can make all the difference - but they do require knowledge of best practices and a concerted effort on all our parts to come together and address this complex public health issue.

This can be a difficult problem to approach for a multitude of reasons. The problem is not particularly well understood, scientific studies are just starting to emerge, and the landscape changes so rapidly information can become outdated seemingly overnight. However, experts in the field are starting to grasp the simple steps we as a community and individuals can take to proactively address the public health concerns we are currently seeing unfold. This handbook would draw upon that emerging expertise and create a resource for parents, children, and teachers to draw on when attempting to address concerns of safe social media use in their daily lives - all at no cost to the state. This is one of the few situations we face in which it costs nothing to be proactive, and for that reason **I respectfully request a favorable report on SB893.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katie Fry Hester".

Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Carroll Counties