BALTIMORE AREA COUNCIL

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

February 24, 2023

Chair C.T. Wilson
Economic Matters Committee
6 Bladen Street, Room 231
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chair Wilson and Committee Members,

The undersigned are writing to express support for the Maryland Age-Appropriate Design Code – HB 901 (Delegates Solomon and Wilson).

Children and teens are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. Even before the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent social distancing and isolation, teen suicide was on the rise; the CDC found that between 2007 to 2017 the suicide rate among people aged 10 to 24 across the US increased by 56%. And in the year between spring of 2020 and 2021 emergency room visits for girls ages 12 to 17 increased by 50%. In Maryland, between 2016 and 2020 the state saw a 36% increase of children ages 3 to 17 with anxiety or depression either reported to or diagnosed by a doctor or health care provider.

In 2020, 81% of 14 to 22-year-olds said they used social media either "daily" or "almost constantly." This is by design. As private companies are beholden to shareholders, performance incentives for product developers and executives are tied to profit and therefore time spent on their platform. Social media platforms and tech companies do not design these services with their youngest and most vulnerable users in mind. Ensuring the safety of tech products is long overdue. We have nutrition labels on food packaging, rigorous testing for cribs and car seats, and yet the technology children use daily from the youngest of ages have little to no safeguards. As a result:

- 75% of the top social media platforms use AI to recommend children's profiles to strangers.
- 95% of the commonly downloaded apps marketed to or played by children 5 and under contain at least one type of advertising, including advertising that is age inappropriate.
- 60% of school-based apps share kids' data with third parties.
- A leaked internal survey found that Instagram "makes body image issues worse for one in three teen girls" and that 6% of US teens link their interest in suicide directly to the platform.

More than 80% of Americans say they want legislation that requires social media platforms to take action to minimize harms to minors. Maryland has the opportunity to lead the nation in protecting our children online and prioritizing well-being over profit, childhood over exploitation. We call on Maryland lawmakers to put children's interests ahead of those of the tech industry by supporting the Age-Appropriate Design Code (HB 901).

Sincerely,

Kenn Miller
Scout Executive & CEO