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Economic Matters Committee  
Chair  
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Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates  
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Delegate C. T. Wilson  
Chairman, House Economic Matters Committee  
House Office Building – Room 231  
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Mr. Chairman,

I am writing in support of HB 254 and hope for a favorable report.

HB 254 will prohibit public social media accounts for minors under the age of thirteen and require parental consent for minors between the ages of thirteen to eighteen. Large social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter will be responsible for identifying and removing all accounts started or operated by unauthorized minors.

Over the last fifteen years, there has been an alarming increase in anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide among children. From 2007 to 2016 emergency room visits for people between five and seventeen years old rose 117% for anxiety disorders, 44% for mood disorders, and 329% for deliberate self-harm.<sup>1</sup> At the same time the use of personal electronic devices exploded, and by 2018 95% of teens had phones and nearly half of whom reported being online ‘almost constantly’.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately ninety-two percent of U.S. teens are active on social media, and data has shown that minors typically start using social media around eleven years old.<sup>3</sup> Teens who spend a great deal of time on social media often report symptoms of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Social media has also been shown to disturb sleep patterns, lead to cyber-bullying, and distort body image.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Richtel and Annie Flanagan, *A Teen’s Journey Into the Internet’s Darkness and Back Again*. The New York Times (Aug. 22, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/22/health/adolescents-mental-health-technology.html?searchResultPosition=6>

<sup>2</sup> Id., at 1

<sup>3</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics, *Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health: Pediatric Mental Health Minute Series*. (n.d.), [Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health: Pediatric Mental Health Minute Series \(aap.org\)](https://www.aap.org/social-media-and-adolescent-mental-health)

<sup>4</sup> Id., at 2

<sup>5</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Children & Young People’s Mental Health in the Digital Age*. United States Government, Department of State (2018). [Children-and-Young-People-Mental-Health-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/children-and-young-people-mental-health-in-the-digital-age.pdf)

As a father of two children on social media, I have seen the disturbing and often violent videos posted on various social media sites. Videos of children getting in fights have circulated through schools, leading to further social isolation and emotional damage to these children. I have personally worked with local schools to get these videos taken down before more harm can be done. These stories are all too similar to the recent story of a child in New Jersey, who took her own her life due to the physical, emotional, and mental toll videos like these have caused.<sup>6</sup> These events are not isolated, and our children are victims of this abuse.

Research has detailed how Instagram can make body image issues worse for some minors.<sup>7</sup> Social media companies have been advised by the National Eating Disorders Association to remove content that explicitly promotes eating disorders; but young people have formed online communities where they discuss eating disorders and trade tips for losing weight and looking thin.<sup>8</sup> Influencers in fashion, beauty, and fitness can often serve to draw young people into extreme online eating disorder communities. Mishel Levina, a nineteen-year-old college student with 21,000 followers on TikTok posts content encouraging unhealthy behaviors with a warning to ‘block if you’re sensitive’.<sup>9</sup> Many popular TikTok trends highlight thin bodies, implicitly encouraging thinness as an ideal while not explicitly promoting eating disorders.

Social media platforms not only impact children’s mental health, but also collect and share personal data about minors who use the applications. By the time a child turns thirteen, advertisers already hold over an estimated seventy-two million data points about them.<sup>10</sup> Different social media companies have different policies, but generally all collect data on registration and log-in details, activity, content, and device data.<sup>11</sup> The apps collect kids’ general locations and identifying information and send it to companies that can track their interests and predict what they might want to buy, or the companies sell the information to others.<sup>12</sup>

More than two-thirds of the 1,000 most popular iPhone apps likely to be used by minors collect and send their personal information to the advertising industry.<sup>13</sup> Recent studies found that nearly ninety percent of educational apps and websites sent information to the tech industry, and two-thirds of the apps played by a group of preschool students collected and shared identifying

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<sup>6</sup> See Bethany Dawson & Alia Shoaib, *4 Students Charged after a 14-Year-Old Girl who was Attacked in a School Hallway and Died by Suicide Days Later*, INSIDER.COM (Feb. 12, 2023), <https://www.insider.com/new-jersey-teen-died-by-suicide-video-school-beating-circulated-2023-2>.

<sup>7</sup> Kate Conger, Kellen Browning, and Erin Woo, *Eating Disorders and Social Media Prove Difficult to Untangle*. The New York Times (Oct. 22, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/technology/social-media-eating-disorders.html?auth&#x3D;login-google>

<sup>8</sup> Id., at 6

<sup>9</sup> Id., at 4

<sup>10</sup> Elena Yi-Ching Ho and Rys Farthing, *How Facebook still targets surveillance ads to teens*. Fairplay for Kids and Reset Australia (Nov. 2021), <fbsurveillancereport.pdf> ([fairplayforkids.org](http://fairplayforkids.org))

<sup>11</sup> Id., at 8

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey A. Fowler, *Your kids’ apps are spying on them*. The Washington Post, We the Users (Jun. 9, 2022), [Apps violate kids’ privacy on a massive scale - The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/09/apps-violate-kids-privacy-on-a-massive-scale/)

<sup>13</sup> Id., at 10

information.<sup>14</sup> This has created a \$1 Billion industry dedicated to advertising to children on social media platforms. A separate study found that many free children's apps were potentially in violation of the 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act or COPPA.<sup>15</sup>

HB 254 requires large social media platforms, as defined in the bill, to remove all public accounts started or operated by unauthorized minors. The platforms are mandated to submit progress reports as they identify and remove these accounts. If the platforms fail to submit these reports, they are subject to a \$5,000,000 fine for each missed reporting deadline.

The bill will also establish a Digital Citizenship Fund in the Maryland State Budget; the funds will help Maryland public schools invest in digital citizenship programs and curriculum. Research has suggested that many children can't distinguish advertisements from content, a study found that only 25% of children aged eight to fifteen were unable to identify results from a Google search as adverts, despite them being labelled 'ad'<sup>16</sup> Minors who engage with social media, online education, gaming, and on the internet in general are digital citizens. Programs and curriculums on digital citizenship helps minors take part in the online community safely, ethically, and respectfully.

HB 254 further outlines ways in which the social media platforms may be held accountable for failures to disable accounts and delete user data, directing subsequent fines and other penalties into the Digital Citizenship Fund. In addition, if an unauthorized minor wishes to delete their accounts they will be able to do so and erase all their previous user data on the platform. Adolescents often engage in risky behavior, and as their brains are developing it's difficult for them to recognize or stop poor decision making; this section of the bill recognizes that reality and ensures that minors are not penalized for rash posts or content that they wish to walk back.

Apps and social media are collecting data on our kids at a shocking scale. Yet tech companies continue to turn a blind eye when children use their products.

HB 254 will protect children's privacy and well-being; I urge the committee to vote favorably on this bill.

Respectfully,



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<sup>14</sup> Id., at 8

<sup>15</sup> Id., at 10

<sup>16</sup> [https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/i-Spy\\_NEF.pdf](https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/i-Spy_NEF.pdf)

Delegate David Fraser-Hidalgo