



March 7, 2023

Dear Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and Members of the Finance Committee:

I am writing today representing friends and colleagues at Doctors for America, a national organization of over 20,000 physicians and medical students, including nearly 1000 members in Maryland. We are committed to supporting policies that protect the health and wellbeing of our patients, viewing all policy through a public health lens. That is why, on behalf of these fellow doctors and doctors-in-training, I am writing to express my strong support for the Maryland Age Appropriate Design Code, instantiated as HB 901 (Delegates Solomon and Wilson) and SB 844 (Senators Kramer and West).

I grew up in Calvert County to a primary care doctor-father and an ER nurse-mother. I currently live in Baltimore while studying for both my medical degree and PhD at Johns Hopkins, both of which I will receive in a few short weeks, after which I will become a physician treating adults, adolescents, and young children. As a senior medical student in Baltimore who is planning to care for children and teens as they transition to young adulthood, I have been “on the ground” in the fight to protect children and their families from the hazards of an unregulated digital world. I have counseled parents about the ways to protect their children and help them thrive – not just by regulating screen time, but by encouraging parents to be aware of and talk to their children about the dangers posed by the content on those screens – both the benign and the insidious, the overt and the hidden. And I have treated suicidal teenagers coming in by ambulance, hospitalized after an attempt on their own life caused in whole or in part by the digital world, whether due to online bullying, exposure to sexual predators, or breeches of their privacy.

In today's digital age, the unregulated online world poses one of the most significant threats to a child's well-being. I have grown deeply concerned about the impact of social media on my patients' mental health. The statistics are staggering - Instagram's own research found that a third of teen girls reported that the platform made them feel worse about their bodies. With filters that significantly alter one's appearance to create unachievable beauty standards and TikTok's algorithms recommending eating disorder and self-harm content to 13-year olds within 30 minutes of joining the platform – it should not be a surprise.

And it is not only a child's body image that is under threat. Young people – particularly children and teens of color or who are socioeconomically disadvantaged – are often the targets of bullying, harassment and discrimination online. Racist hate groups are targeting boys and young men through these same platforms, leading to radicalization with catastrophic impacts. The data that companies collect on our kids – their

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location, race, gender identity, sexual exploration, religious preferences, everything in their seemingly private search history – all are put up to the highest bidder, purchased by data brokers and shoved into algorithms that discriminate and put kids in harms' way.

American Academy of Pediatrics guidance states that “multiple developmental and health concerns continue to exist for young children using all forms of digital media to excess.” Yet, 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 beholden to shareholders, performance incentives for product developers and executives are tied to profit and therefore time spent on their platform. But the addictive nature of these platforms only scratches the surface of the pervasive dangers posed 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](#); and 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. It is no surprise, as many are now starting to see, that children and teenagers are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. 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. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association have declared “a national state of emergency” in children's mental health.

The introduction of Maryland's Age Appropriate Design Code, SB0844, is an important step as we seek to help young people safely navigate the online world. This first-of-its-kind legislation aims to protect children's privacy and online safety by requiring platforms to design their products according to the developmentally appropriate needs of kids at every age, from infancy to teenagehood. This means restricting the data collection and profiling of child users to feed them content that is harmful, turning off geolocation for children, prohibiting strangers from messaging kids if they are not mutual followers, and being transparent in showing young users how they can control what shows up in their feeds.

Social media platforms and tech companies do not design their 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. And while the parents of my young pediatric patients understand the need to regulate screen time and monitor their child's online activity, even the most well-intentioned and informed parent can only do so much. The fault cannot and should not be laid at the feet of parents; no

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amount of the most draconian monitoring can make up for the fact that many of the dangers currently inherent in online activity are hidden from view. It is the tech companies that intentionally build platforms to nudge kids into risky behaviors, recommend harmful material, share data with predatory third parties, and whose products are known to encourage compulsive behavior and psychological harm who are responsible. These companies simply need to design their platforms to be safe from the start.

Whether we are prepared to admit it or not, protecting our children's physical and mental health now includes having guardrails in place for their online experiences. The internet has become an integral part of our daily lives, and as such, we must do all we can to ensure that children are protected while using it. This includes our legislators taking steps to prioritize our children's mental health and ensure their protection in the digital space. We owe it to the next generation to create a world where they can flourish without the threat of preventable harm or exploitation. Supporting Maryland's Age Appropriate Design Code is not only a moral imperative but a crucial step towards safeguarding the well-being of our children. Our children's mental health and development are on the line, and we must act now to ensure that they can thrive in a digital age that is designed with their best interests in mind.

Maryland has the opportunity to lead the nation in protecting our children online and prioritizing well-being over profit, childhood over exploitation. On behalf of dozens of physicians, medical students, and public health advocates across the state and the nation, I call on Maryland lawmakers to put children's interests ahead of those of the tech industry by supporting the Age Appropriate Design Code.

I urge a favorable report on SB0844.

Sincerely,

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