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**Written Testimony of Sarah Thacker, Legislative Analyst**

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**Testimony in Favor of MD H.B. 1179, Consumer Protection – App Store Accountability Act**

Maryland General Assembly, Economic Matters Committee  
March 10, 2026

Chairwoman Valderrama, Vice Chair Charkoudian, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Sarah Thacker. I am a lifelong resident of Southern Maryland, and a Legislative Analyst for the the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, an organization with a mission to eradicate all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. I urge you to support HB 1179, a strategic solution to protect children from exposure to harmful content online.

As our world has become increasingly digital, the dangers facing children have followed suit. Today, nearly 95% of teenagers report having access to a cellphone, and predators are well aware of this. Worse still, these devices and the apps on them are designed to be addictive, engineered to capture attention, and optimized to maintain young users' attention for as long as possible. As a substitute teacher and math coach, I have walked into classrooms at every level in Maryland where students are at their desk, wearing headphones, and on a laptop for hours. Just last Friday I spoke with a class of 27 fifth graders, where every single student had at least two devices in their possession.

Whistleblower testimony and internal company documents have revealed that major tech platforms consistently prioritize profit over child safety, despite clear evidence of harm. Big Tech companies cannot be trusted to self-regulate. Use of these platforms exposes children to a growing array of harms, including addiction, depression, loneliness, anxiety, dissatisfaction with life, self-harm, eating disorders, cyberbullying, sex-trafficking, exposure to child sexual abuse material, suicide, and more.

Unfortunately, these harms are ever-present in Maryland. In that same fifth grade class, at least half reported that they have experienced a dangerous interaction on their device while teachers report that parents consistently reach out to them regarding concerning online interactions.

Research shows that approximately 90% of digital activity occurs within apps, making app stores the primary gatekeepers controlling access to digital content—and the harms Maryland kids are experiencing online. Yet, app stores currently bear little responsibility for preventing children from these experiences. Descriptions of apps are often inaccurate—designed to mislead parents—and age ratings are assigned by developers seeking to sell products, regardless of rating accuracy.

For example, the apps Instagram and Snapchat consistently appear on Bark's list of dangerous apps in terms of severe bullying, severe violence, depression, body image concerns, and suicidal ideation. Yet Instagram is currently rated appropriate for kids ages 12+ and SNAP's current age rating is 13+. These age assignments should not be in the hands of those selling the product but should be verified by external experts in order to guard against potential harm.

The App Store Accountability Act addresses this gap by placing responsibility where it belongs: on the app store. This approach mirrors other industries, where retailers are responsible for verifying a consumer's age before selling dangerous products. The digital marketplace should be no different.

The bill also prevents corporations from entering into contracts with children without parental consent. Every day, app stores facilitate contracts between minors and billion-dollar companies which routinely give companies access to a child's personal data, exact location, camera, microphone, and more. This would not be permitted in every other industry.

For far too long, Big Tech has operated with a special exemption from the rules that apply to everyone else. This bill rightly corrects this imbalance. Maryland has the opportunity to protect children, empowers parents, and hold powerful corporations accountable.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.