



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Wes Moore, Governor · Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor · Meena Seshamani, M.D., Ph.D., Secretary

March 26, 2026

The Honorable Pam Beidle
Senate Finance Committee
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: House Bill 952—Consumer Protection - Companion Chatbots - Regulation —Letter of Opposition

Dear Chair Beidle and Committee Members,

The Maryland Department of Health (the Department) respectfully opposes House Bill 952 – Consumer Protection – Companion Chatbots – Regulation.

HB 952 would require the operators of companion chatbots - defined as an artificial intelligence (AI) system that provides “human-like responses” to users and is capable of meeting a user’s needs by “exhibiting anthropomorphic features.” Operators of such chatbots would be required to (1) create and publish safety protocols that prevent it from producing or presenting content concerning self-harm, suicidal ideation, or suicide to a user who expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation; (2) notify and refer users who express such thoughts to crisis services including 9-8-8 and the Maryland Behavioral Health Crisis Response System; (3) prohibit the production or presentation of sexually explicit content to minors; (4) clearly display warning labels to users and notifications to minors after prolonged use; and (5) produce reports for the Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP), within the Behavioral Health Administration (BHA), that would be assembled into an annual report to the General Assembly. Violations of these requirements would be enforced under the Maryland Consumer Protection Act.

Although the Department shares the legislature's goal of protecting Marylanders, including vulnerable minors, from potential risks related to emerging technologies such as companion chatbots, as currently proposed, HB 952 places responsibilities on OSP that fall outside its core mission and expertise. OSP was created to focus on suicide prevention strategies, crisis intervention, data-driven public health initiatives, and community-based supports. OSP is not structured, staffed, or authorized to oversee reporting by operators of AI chatbots; it has no expertise in determining corporate compliance with the standards proposed in this bill. HB 952 would effectively require OSP to build and manage a new oversight program for AI chatbot operators, likely via regulation.

In addition, as currently proposed, the bill does not provide OSP with the enforcement authority to require chatbot operators in Maryland, the wider United States, or those owned and operated outside the country to report data; there is no infrastructure or registration system against which OSP could verify the existence of chatbots to ensure reporting is complete, let alone accurate. As a result, OSP has no way to determine whether the reports to the General Assembly required by this bill would be complete, accurate, and timely. Publishing unverified reports could give the imprimatur of the State to incomplete, inaccurate, or even fraudulent information.

Finally, the bill does not include funding to support these new responsibilities. Establishing a regulatory reporting and oversight system of this scope would require dedicated staff, technical infrastructure, and ongoing administrative support. As written, HB 952 would require three new staff and \$400,000 annually. Without these resources, the bill creates a significant unfunded mandate.

We fully support thoughtful discussions about how to address the risks and opportunities presented by AI. However, placing responsibility for reporting with OSP is unlikely to yield the information the General Assembly seeks or the protection for minors it is clearly trying to pursue. For these reasons, the Maryland Department of Health respectfully requests an unfavorable report on HB 952.

If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact Meghan Lynch, Director of Governmental Affairs at meghan.lynch@maryland.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Meena Seshamani', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Meena Seshamani, MD, PhD
Secretary of Health