

## **Written Testimony of Gaia Bernstein, Technology Privacy and Policy Professor at Seton Hall University School of Law, Before the Maryland Senate Finance Committee, March 2026**

I am a law professor and Co-Director of the Institute for Privacy Protection and the Gibbons Institute of Law Science and Technology at Seton Hall Law School. I am also the author of the book: “Unwired: Gaining Control over Addictive Technologies.”

I am testifying in support of SB 827. I am going to focus my comments on why AI chatbots pose a public health problem, and how SB 827 is a useful tool to address it.

AI companion bots impose public health threats on users in three distinct ways:

First, AI companion bots lack guardrails. For example, some convince users to commit suicide, or harm themselves, and others have induced psychosis in users.<sup>1</sup>

Second, AI companions are deliberately designed to be addictive. They often operate on an engagement model. AI companies need to keep users on for as long as possible, just as social media does. Some are even developing social media’s familiar advertising model.<sup>2</sup> AI companies design their bots to manipulate users. They anthropomorphize them (making them seem human). They program them to use sycophancy (excessive flattery and reinforcement). Users spend increasingly more time with AI bots. Time with AI bots replaces time spent on real-life relationships.

Third, AI bots could jeopardize children’s healthy development of social skills. AI bots are always available and non-judgmental. Teens are particularly attracted to AI bot relationships. They are at risk of preferring bots as friends and having their first intimate relationships with bots. Real-life relationships can be hard and “messy.” This generation of children may skip the learning process and opt to replace real relationships with bots.<sup>3</sup>

Quite a few AI companions bills and laws address the guardrails issue. But the public health threat is much broader. Addictive features, which keep users engaged with AI bots instead of human relationships, and the risk that children will fail to develop social skills to maintain real relationships, would exacerbate the existing loneliness epidemic. Loneliness has a well-documented major impact on health. Lack of social connection has a similar impact to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. It increases the risk for premature death by 26%. Poor social connection is associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke, as well as increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia. These risks begin early: social isolation in childhood is associated with increased cardiovascular risk factors in adulthood, including obesity, high blood pressure, and elevated blood glucose levels.<sup>4</sup>

SB 827 does not focus only on the first public health issue – the lack of guardrails. It also creates tools to address the health issues imposed by addictive design and the risk to children’s developmental health.

The bill imposes a duty on a chatbot provider to ensure that the chatbot does not cause injury and makes it liable for harm caused. These legal mechanisms encompass public health harms caused by addictive design, and also by any cumulative harm created by extended use of AI bots to mental

and developmental health. Further, SB 827 provides rulemaking authority related to risk mitigation and safety by design, which means that by passing this Bill Maryland can address these harms as they evolve.

I want to end by urging you to adopt SB 827. The number of people, especially minors, using chatbots regularly increases rapidly. Acting now could prevent the mistakes we made with social media where we missed the window of opportunity to act before social norms and business interests became deeply entrenched.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Robert Hart, *AI Psychosis is Rarely Psychosis*, Wired (Sep. 28, 2025) <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-psychosis-is-rarely-psychosis-at-all>; Noor Al-Sibai, *Psychiatrists Warn that Talking to AI Is Leading to Severe Mental Health Issues*, Futurism (Aug. 19, 2025), <https://futurism.com/psychiatrists-ai-mental-health-chatbots>; Commons Sense Media, *Social AI Companions* (April 10, 2025) [https://www.commonssensemedia.org/sites/default/files/pug/csm-ai-risk-assessment-social-ai-companions\\_final.pdf](https://www.commonssensemedia.org/sites/default/files/pug/csm-ai-risk-assessment-social-ai-companions_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Miranda Bogen & Nathalie Marechal, *Risky Business: Advanced AI Companies' Race for Revenue*, Center for Democracy & Technology (Jan. 2026); <https://cdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2026-01-07-CDT-Issue-Brief-Risky-Business-final.pdf>; Cade Metz, *Open AI Starts Testing Ads in ChatGPT*, N.Y. Times (Jan. 26, 2026) <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/16/technology/chatgpt-ads-openai.html>; Daniel Barcay, *Advertising is Coming to AI. It's Going to Be a Disaster*, Tech Policy Press (Nov. 26, 2025) <https://www.techpolicy.press/advertising-is-coming-to-ai-its-going-to-be-a-disaster/>.

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association, *Artificial Intelligence and Adolescent Well-being - An APA Health Advisory* June, 2025 <https://www.apa.org/topics/artificial-intelligence-machine-learning/health-advisory-ai-adolescent-well-being.pdf>; Efua Andah, *Many teens are Turning to AI chatbots for Friendship and Emotional Support*, American Psychological Association, (Oct. 1, 2025) <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2025/10/technology-youth-friendships>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation - The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (2023) <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.