



March 1 2026

Members of the Maryland State Legislature

Support for HB 0693 —

Civil Actions - Distribution of Obscene Material to Minors (Age Verification for Online Pornography)

Dear Members of the Legislature,

Exodus Cry, a national anti-trafficking organization, writes in strong support of HB 0693, legislation that would require websites that publish obscene or indecent images or videos harmful to minors to implement reasonable age-verification methods and prevent access by children.

Since 2021, Exodus Cry has called for laws that protect children from exposure to pornography by requiring pornographic websites to verify that users are at least 18 years old. These common-sense safeguards would protect millions of children from the well-documented harms of early exposure to explicit content. More than 100,000 individuals have signed our Protect Children Not Porn petition, and over 100 anti-trafficking, women's rights, and child-protection organizations have formally expressed support for age-verification laws.

Research consistently shows that the average age of first exposure to pornography is approximately 11 years old, and continues to drop. In a 2022 survey conducted by Common Sense Media of 1,300 minors, 58% reported being exposed to pornography accidentally. Never before has access to the internet been so pervasive, and as a result, children are increasingly encountering some of the most violent and degrading sexual material imaginable, including incest, bestiality, racist content, and gang-rape scenarios.

Because many pornographic websites lack meaningful age or consent verification, children may also be exposed to real videos involving trafficking victims or minors. As a result of Exodus Cry's Traffickinghub campaign, Pornhub removed more than 10 million unverified videos in 2020, underscoring the vast scale of this problem. Today, tens of millions of pornographic websites remain accessible online, making it virtually impossible for children to avoid exposure without effective age-verification safeguards.

We have received thousands of messages from individuals describing how underage exposure to pornography negatively impacted their lives. Early exposure has been linked to anxiety, depression, self-loathing, body dysphoria, addiction, sexual dysfunction, and an increased risk of sexual aggression and violence.

HB 0693 reflects the same commonsense approach long accepted in the offline world. Retailers and restaurants are required to make reasonable efforts to verify age before selling alcohol because of the risks such products pose to minors. Websites that distribute obscene material harmful to children should be held to a comparable standard.

Courts have begun to recognize the constitutionality of these protections. In *Free Speech Coalition, Inc. v. Paxton* (5th Cir. 2024), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit held that Texas's age-verification requirement survives constitutional scrutiny because it is rationally related to the government's legitimate interest in preventing minors from accessing pornography.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Texas's age-verification law for pornographic websites, affirming the constitutionality of requiring users to verify their age before accessing explicit content online. The decision marked a pivotal advance in digital child protection and strengthened the legal foundation for similar legislation nationwide. Exodus Cry submitted an amicus brief documenting the prevalence of extreme and violent content in mainstream pornography.

Across the country, momentum is growing. As of today, 24 states have enacted age-verification requirements for pornographic websites, with many others actively considering similar legislation. This represents a historic shift toward prioritizing the safety and well-being of children in the digital age.

For these reasons, Exodus Cry strongly supports HB 0693 and urges Maryland lawmakers to stand with parents and children by advancing this critical child-protection measure.

Sincerely,

Helen Taylor

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