

February 28, 2024

Chairwoman Pena Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and distinguished members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 58,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for people living with mental illnesses, their families, and the wider community.

NAMI MD recognizes that there is a youth mental health crisis, which in part is due to social media usage. Social media, when used correctly, can help break down mental health stigma and encourage people to reach out for help when they need it.

However, social media, when misused, can be extremely detrimental to mental health.

This Fund would allow the Department of Health to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to identify where the State is in combatting algorithmic addiction and what we need for prevention, intervention, and treatment.

Social media among Maryland's youth is nearly universal, with 95% of children aged 13-17 reporting use of a social media platform. Of that 95%, more than one third report using social media "almost constantly." Digital platforms can make things difficult for people emotionally—sometimes, people behavior or act in ways online that they would not in person. This may include bullying, using offensive or insulting language, or other hurtful behaviors. When this behavior happens on social media, it can be viewed and shared widely, making it difficult to reduce its impact.

Research has shown that people who spend more time on social media and less time in personal interactions with others have an increased risk of feeling anxious and depressed. 46% of adolescents aged 13-17 said social media made them feel worse. 64% are 'often' or 'sometimes' exposed to hate based content through social media. 59% of American teens report being cyberbullied or experiencing online harassment.

Spending too much time on social media can cause difficulty sleeping, lead to inadequate self-image, disordered eating, social comparison, increased rates of depression and anxiety, among many other things. Several lawsuits across the county are alleging that social media is intentionally designed to manipulate and addict children and teens to social media.

This is an urgent issue we need to address. Adolescence and childhood represent a critical stage in brain development—which means young people may be more vulnerable to the harms from social media. We have a social responsibility to protect our youth from harm. Social media doesn't need to be replaced, rather, managed in some fashion. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.

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