

February 20, 2024

The Honorable Pamela Beidle  
Senate Finance Committee  
3 East  
Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

### **SB 0739 (Sen. Hester) - Favorable**

Chair Beidle, Vice-Chair Klausmeier, esteemed Committee Members, thank you for hearing me today in support of SB 0739 Algorithmic Addiction Fund.

Grace McComas was a joyful child from birth and was a well-adjusted and well-loved young teen. I am her mother.

It's been nearly 12 years since we lost Grace to suicide related to social media cyber abuse and I have been actively involved in educating and advocating for child internet protections since.

Losing her was devastating and we felt compelled to make people aware of what had happened, and began speaking out right away.

[WBAL News 2013 Christine McComas on Cyberbullying](#)

In 2012 smartphones and social media were new and there was no understanding how far-reaching, inescapable and damaging hatred was when instantaneously launched through social media, or how it boils over into real life bullying, harassment and heartache.

Maryland's [Grace's Law Against Cyberbullying](#) was passed in 2013 but none of us were yet aware of how social media worked or how entrenched it would become in the lives of our children.

When [Grace's Law 2.0](#) was passed in 2019, we had learned about the dangers of the criminal misuse of social media, including sextortion and suicide-baiting, but we didn't know until 2021 when Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen came forward with documentation that **platforms are actually purposefully designed to addict** users.

Children in particular have been their product and cash cows all along. Big Tech platforms collect an average of 72 MILLION data points on a child by age 13 (Geoffrey Fowler, Washington Post), and they certainly have a good idea from that data how old

they are- even though \*by law\* (COPPA) children under age 13 aren't even supposed to be on social media.

In 2022 social media companies made an astonishing **11 BILLION** dollars in ad revenue targeted at kids.(Harvard School of Public Health study)

Late last year Arturo Behar, a longtime Facebook and Instagram engineer and trust and safety specialist appeared before Congress to share that he had warned Meta management of unwanted sexual advances and misogyny that were happening to children on their platform and that were easily remedied, but that they chose to take no action.

On the very same day that Maryland Senator Katie Hester submitted this bill, I was on Capitol Hill with Arturo Behar, and other bereaved parents, sitting just behind Meta's Mark Zuckerberg and the CEO's of TikTok, Twitter/X, Snapchat and Discord as the Senate Judiciary Committee called them to account for the harms to children that their warped business models have wrought.

(We spent the next day meeting legislators to advocate for the federal Kids Online Safety Act KOSA, which is now poised to pass the Senate.)

I am heartened that Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown is taking action to hold Big Tech accountable for purposeful addiction resulting in youth harm and mental health crisis, and that a fund will be set up to use any funds recovered. The ability to garner these funds for good use in educating/protecting/healing the public is commendable.

I think it's important to note however, that *purposeful online addiction is just one\* problem posed by Big Tech's greed and algorithms.*

There are MANY grievous online harms to children that stem from \*HOW\* they keep them online longer, including

- Amplifying and giving wider distribution to violent, angry or bullying content to increase engagement/sharing/'likes'
- Child Sexual Exploitation and trafficking, including sextortion and wide production and open distribution of CSAM, Child Sexual Abuse Material, previously known as child porn.
- 'pushed' content, which serves perilous things to kids that they didn't even go looking for such as dangerous choking challenges, pro-suicide pages and those glorifying anorexia/disordered eating and
- It's an open secret that some social media platforms are illicit drug marketplaces with the head of the DEA describing them as "the last mile of the drug pipeline".

(60 Minutes) Thousands of teen lives have been lost when kids have gone online to buy what they *think* is a single percocet or adderall which is delivered right to their homes, but that ends up being laced with deadly fentanyl.

For these reasons I'd like to suggest that the title of the fund be changed to better reflect the harms, reading more like

**"Algorithmic Protection Fund to Prevent, Mitigate and Educate about Online Harms to Children"**,

which could encompass things like mental health and wellness, suicide prevention, drug use prevention, digital literacy and online safety education, including the protections of Grace's Law and to law enforcement such as the admirable work done by MD. State Police- Maryland Internet Crimes Against Children in conjunction with NCMEC- the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children,

And maybe even digital and in-person civility education, my favorite being the need to **Remember G.R.A.C.E. ~ by Giving Respect And Compassion to Everyone.**

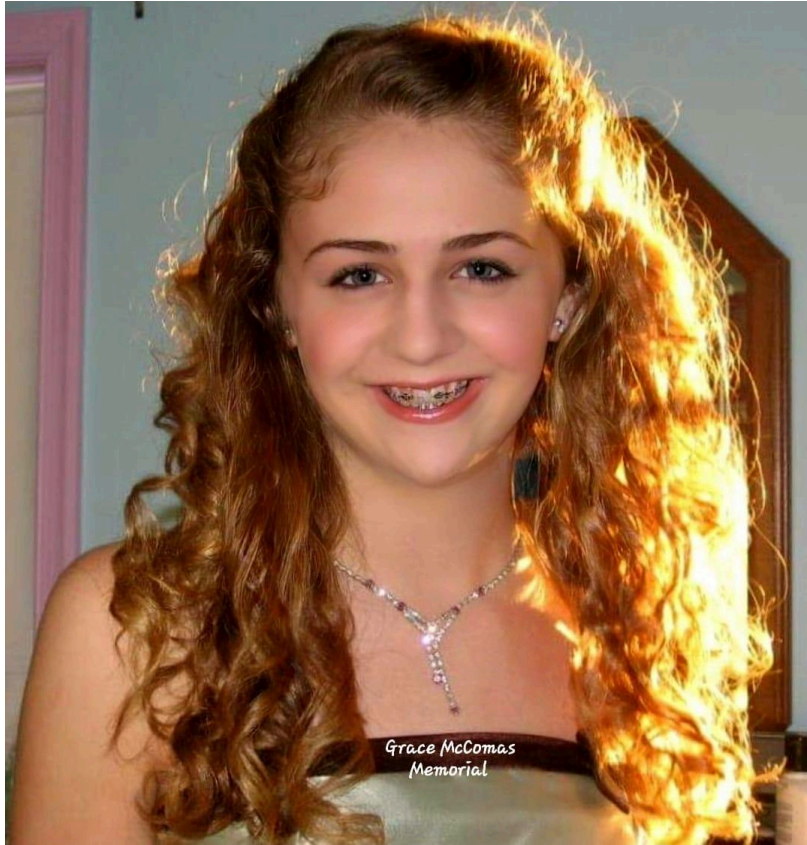
Please visit [Parents S.O.S.- Parents for Safe Online Spaces](#) where I recently joined 19 other bereaved parents to speak for our children.

There you can learn about our children and some of the harms that destroyed them, and work we are doing to stem the devastating losses, including what will hopefully be the historical passage of the [Kids Online Safety Act \(KOSA\)](#), *the first federal law made to protect kids online since before smartphones and social media even existed.*

Thank you.

Christine McComas  
Mother of Grace, forever 15

[Grace McComas video eulogy](#)



*Grace McComas  
Memorial*



Recent interviews- Big Tech CEO Capitol Hill Hearing on Child Internet Harms/KOSA:

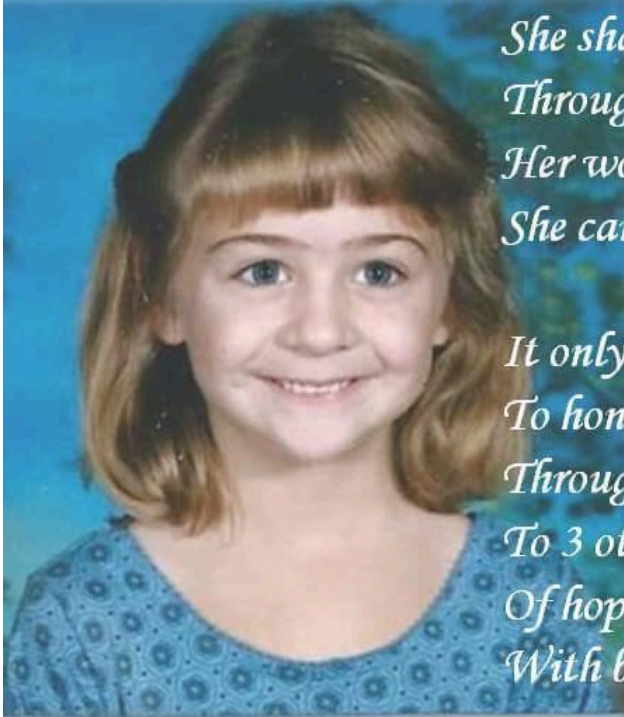
PBS NewHour:

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/lawmakers-grill-big-tech-executives-accusing-them-of-failing-to-protect-children?fbclid=IwAR1o01Ch0qvjWOJXnZ0xTMdHSSRu1sGyxZL3U63BOZ8aZ1mYxe5qRAJBHcl>

Fox & Friends: <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6346218106112>

CNN: [▶ Mom whose daughter died by suicide reacts to Zuckerberg's stunning apology](#)

# *Be a Life-Giving Organ Donor!*



*She shared her smile, this child named Grace  
Through 'blueberry eyes' that lit her face  
Her words were kind, her love was pure  
She cared for others while life endured*

*It only made sense when she went away  
To honor her spirit, and to help, we prayed  
Through organ donation which gave a lift  
To 3 other families who received the gift  
Of hope, of life, their fears erased;  
With blessings from our child named Grace*

Grace McComas Memorial Webpage & Grace's Law Against Cyberbullying in Maryland, U.S.A.



[Grace McComas video eulogy](#)