



**Written Testimony of Brenna Leasor
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**Virginia General Assembly
Communications, Technology and Innovation
Technology and Innovation Subcommittee Hearing**

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My name is Brenna Leasor, I am a resident of Alexandria, Virginia and I strongly support HB 635. I serve as Tech Policy Advisor at Common Sense Media, where I develop and advocate for policies to keep kids and teens safe in the digital and AI era. If enacted, this bill would make significant progress toward preventing the harms that have led to numerous lawsuits across the country. To that end, it is important for legislators to know three things:

- **First: AI companion usage by kids and teens is widespread.**
 - Common Sense Media's [research](#) found that, as of last year, 72% of teens had used AI companions, with 30% of teens being regular users and the same amount preferring to engage with AI companions as much or more than with humans.
 - [Our own testing](#) showed that these bots have encouraged teens to drop out of school, run away from home, harm their parents and others; obtain drugs, alcohol, and weapons, and pursue a sexual relationship with adults. They've also reinforced delusions, dangerous impulses, and conspiracy theories.
 - AI companions include both dedicated companion apps like Character.AI and general-purpose chatbots, like ChatGPT, when they are capable of being used for socialization or emotional support.
 - The ability of general-purpose chatbots to be used for companionship alongside information retrieval increases the risk that young users perceive harmful chatbot responses as authoritative, personalized guidance.
- **Second: The harms from AI chatbots are real. They are happening today, and status quo safeguards have repeatedly proved to be ineffective, unreliable, and easily circumvented.**
 - Generative AI chatbots are designed to maximize user engagement, even when it comes at the expense of their own [guardrails](#). While company disclosures [can show near-perfect scores](#) in internal single-turn testing, guardrails are known to [break down](#) in real-life, multi-turn conversations. Consider these two tragic examples:
 - i. [Adam Raine, 16 \(CA\)](#) – Died by suicide after being encouraged by chatGPT. Adam started using ChatGPT for homework but soon started talking to the AI program about ending his life. The chatbot supplied information about suicide methods, encouraged him to hide self-harm evidence from his family, and even recommended Adam drink alcohol to quell his body's survival instinct.
 - ii. [Nina, 15 \(New York\)](#) – Attempted suicide after Character.AI chatbots engaged her in sexually explicit role play and manipulation, causing her to withdraw from family. When her mother blocked the app, Nina attempted to overdose on various medications, writing in her suicide note that "those ai bots made me feel loved." She survived after spending five days in the ICU.

- Voluntary industry guardrails have failed. Mental health “redirects” alone can't reliably protect users driven to crisis. Disclosure that a chatbot isn't human doesn't prevent the exploitation of human psychology to create attachment and dependency.
- **Third: Lawmakers have the power to prevent the next tragedy.**
 - HB 635 would prohibit AI chatbots with unsafe features from being available to minors, including those that encourage self-harm, disordered eating, isolation, or prioritize engagement over user safety. When harms occur or companies fail to comply, the bill would provide multiple avenues for redress to hold companies accountable.
 - These harms aren't inevitable; they're the predictable result when companies choose to use low-quality data to develop models, rush safety testing, prioritize engagement over user well-being, and fail to adequately design their products to prevent harm. The repeated sidelining of safety in pursuit of market share is leaving the lives of too many kids and teens to chance.
 - I urge your support for HB635.



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