

Members of the Ohio House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am Lt. Brian Steel, I am here representing the Ohio Fraternal Order of Police. The FOP of Ohio is in strong support for including app store parental approval requirements in the state budget.

As law enforcement officers, we see the dangers that unrestricted social media access poses to our youth. Far too often are cases involving predators who target children through online platforms. These criminals exploit the current fragmented system of age verification to gain access to minors. Many of these predators know exactly how to manipulate the current systems better than parents do.

When we investigate these cases, we consistently find that children were able to create accounts on platforms they shouldn't have been on in the first place. The current patchwork of verification measures simply doesn't work. It creates gaps in protections and predators know they can exploit parent's and law enforcement's struggle to keep up. Stronger preventative measures are desperately needed.

Let me walk you through what typically happens today versus what would happen with app store verification. Currently, a 12-year-old can easily download Instagram or Snapchat by simply clicking "Yes, I'm 13 or older" when prompted. There's no real verification. Then they create an account using any email address, often one their parents don't even know about. Within minutes, they're on platforms designed for older users, potentially connecting with anyone in the world. Parents often have no idea this has happened until problems arise.

Now compare that to what would happen with app store parental controls: That same 12-year-old tries to download a social media app, but instead of being asked to self-verify their age, the system recognizes the device is registered to a minor. It automatically sends a notification to the parent's phone asking for approval. The parent can deny the download or approve it if they feel their child is ready. There's no easy workaround, no simple lie to bypass the system. This creates a real checkpoint where parents can make informed decisions about their child's online presence before problems occur, not after.

The solution is straightforward. It creates a single, strong checkpoint that's much harder to bypass than the current system. App stores already have the technology to link family accounts and require approval for purchases. Extending this to app store downloads is a common-sense step that would immediately improve child safety online.

This approach gives parents real control without creating burdensome regulations or costly new programs. It's the kind of direct, effective measure that we in law enforcement appreciate - it addresses the problem at its source and doesn't just treat the symptoms after harm has already occurred.

By preventing parents from having a say in what their teens are doing online, and when they're ready to access certain apps, we would see fewer cases of online predation, cyberbullying, and exploitation.

As officers who have sworn to protect and serve, we believe this measure represents a practical, effective approach to a serious problem. We're not interested in flashy programs or complex regulations - we want solutions that work. App store parental approval is exactly that kind of solution. This reinforces parents as the first line of defense in protecting their children, a principle that aligns with effective community policing.

The Ohio Fraternal Order of Police strongly urges you to include this provision in the state budget. It's time to give parents and law enforcement the tools we need to keep Ohio's children safe from online predators.

Thank you for your consideration.