



Ohio House Judiciary Committee HB 226 Proponent Testimony

May 28, 2025

11:00 am

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify as a proponent of HB 226 that would require app stores to verify with parents the age of children who access apps on their phones and tablets and approve the download of apps.

My name is Tony Coder and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation, a non-profit focused on breaking stigma around suicide, but also providing strategies for communities, individuals and families to improve opportunities for mental health wellness.

Youth suicide is a critical issue that communities across Ohio. Approximately 1 in 5 youth experience a mental health condition each year and this significantly impacts their ability to learn and succeed in school, build healthy potential and reach their full potential. Bullying and cyberbullying can be a major contributor to a child's mental health problems, with young people experiencing higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.

In 2023, the US Surgeon General issued a brief on "Social Media and Youth Mental Health," which reported that 95% of youth ages 13-17 use at least one social media platform and one-third of youth that age report that they use social media almost constantly. Further, the report goes on to state that a longitudinal study showed that youth ages 12-15 who use social media three hours a day or longer more than double their risk of poor mental health, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. Compared to the fact that 8th-10th graders spend 3.5 hours per day on social media, one can see that this can add up to real issues for young people.

We lose a young person to suicide every 34 hours in the State of Ohio and meeting with and working with families who have lost a child is truly humbling. Over the past seven years, I have learned that there is nothing that I can say to make their life any

better. I can give no advice to take away their pain and I have no words of wisdom to lessen suffering with the loss of a child. One such family that OSPF works with is a young man who was bullied at school to the point where he could not even feel comfortable in the lunchroom to eat lunch, so, according to his mom, he had to go to the music room to eat his lunch in peace. He would then go home, and through his Instagram, the bullying would continue. Until one night, when he was just 15 years old, he reached out on Instagram to the world with a statement, "I will give everyone 30 minutes to let me know that they care" – reaching out to someone to be a friend, to give him one work of hope, but not one person answered and that evening which was also his mom's birthday, that young man took his life. This mother told me she didn't even know he was on Instagram, so it was surprising when a classmate's parent informed her of the social media post. As I have said, there are no words that I can give her that lessens her suffering, but we can do things like pass this commonsense piece of legislation that HB226 offers.

I call this a commonsense piece of legislation as I want to make sure that we are not just making social media an enemy – social media can provide connections with others, create learning opportunities, and raise awareness of critical issues that impact young people. We don't need to go as far as Australia which has banned all social media for children under 16 because of mental health concerns, but we can and should give parents the ability to understand what their young children are seeing and whom they are interacting with. Just last year, we gathered ten groups of high-school youth from all across Ohio to learn more about their thoughts around mental health. We were somewhat surprised to learn of their concern for what social media is doing to themselves and their friends. This came from the mouths of those who are being impacted the most.

Having age verification and parental consent at the app-store level allows a much less confusing process for a parent to protect their children under 16 from the dangers of social media. It also gives parents to have conversations with young people about social media, their use, the impact of social media on mental health, and safeguards if they are approached online or start to see changes in their kids while using social media.

As OSPF has been pretty active in advocating on the dangers of unchecked social media use on young people, I have heard a common question – aren't you afraid that app stores will just lobby to get this bill shut down. And I am sure that you will hear from those app stores in opponent testimony that they are doing all of these great things to protect youth from social media but, as a parent of a 16 year old, they aren't doing enough. I am very involved in my son's life – I coach his baseball team, helped him get his private pilot's license and try to teach him to the best of my ability lessons of life. Yet, nearly every week, he tells me about a new social media app or something going on in social media that I've never heard of. Give parents a chance and choose Ohio's children over the interests of app stores and their profit margins.

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today about this opportunity to improve youth mental health by allowing parents to be an active participant in their child's social media use and ask that you pass HB226 to give parents an opportunity to protect their children in this very important public health issue.