

February 21, 2024

Chair Zack Stephenson, Chair
House Commerce Finance and Policy Committee
449 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Subject: Testimony on HF2257, the Minnesota Age-Appropriate Design Code Act - Support

Chair Stephenson and members of the committee:

My name is Shama Tolbert, and I am here today as a concerned parent from Minneapolis, advocating for the support of HF2257. This legislation is crucial for the safety and well-being of our children.

In 2022, my daughter fell victim to a sex trafficker who exploited the weaknesses within social media platforms. A 30-year-old man, connected to her by Facebook and posing as a “friend,” lured her into a dangerous situation, leading to her kidnapping and sex trafficking. It was a traumatic experience for our family, and we have still not recovered.

There should be safety measures. The platforms allow sex traffickers and pedophiles to prey on our kids. Parents alone can't keep their kids safe. Features like disappearing messages and secretive communications channels make it hard for us to monitor. I held off on allowing my daughter to have a phone. I monitored her social media. I did everything I was supposed to do, and she was still not safe. The people who want to prey on our kids can reach them because the platforms are designed to let them do it.

Social media online is more dangerous than any street in a bad neighborhood because these harms are happening in what are supposed to be safe spaces. Before my daughter got a phone, she went to the library to get on social media. She says all the kids did. We thought they were studying, but they were online meeting adult strangers who knew how to target them through social media.

Predators have more access to our kids than we do because the platforms are set up to make these connections and to make it so that our children cannot log out. Social media's addictive features keep my daughter online even though that's where she was harmed. The constant exposure and overstimulation caused by explicit content, violence, and self-harm narratives has taken a toll on my daughter's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Yet, social media is not going away.

We need you to make the platforms places where kids can use them the way they want – to express their feelings, keep in contact with their peers, and post pictures. Not be exposed to suicide stories and self-harm Reels – things she's not looking for but that are fed to her through the Video, Explore, or For You features of the sites where they send you images and videos you never even selected.

Please put safety measures in these platforms. Please support HF2257 to create a safer online environment for our children and to prevent what happened to my daughter from happening to another girl.

Thank you.

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