Chair Marcotte and members of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development,

As a general pediatrician and on behalf of the Vermont Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I'm honored to be here before you today to express the strong support of Vermont's pediatricians for the Vermont Kids Code (S. 289/ H. 712). As pediatricians, we are committed to supporting the health and wellbeing of young people and their ability to thrive. It is for this reason that the Vermont Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics supports the common sense measures in the Vermont Kids Code to implement privacy-by-default and safety-by-design protections for kids as they interact with their peers and the world online.

As the committee is well aware, in the year 2024, children and adolescents live within an increasingly digital world. In the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 73% of Vermont's high schoolers and 57% of Vermont's middle schoolers reported spending 3 hours or more a day on screens, including social media.

Even for younger age groups, digital media is omnipresent and use of algorithm-driven apps can have risks. I will never forget a few years ago, when I set my 4 year old son up to watch a Thomas the Tank Engine video on YouTube. We'd set up the age restrictions per the app's instructions to ensure that if the video ended, only other age-appropriate content would be available to him. A few minutes later, from the other side of the room, I heard inappropriate language blaring from the screen. Adult content had broken through YouTube's age filter, and was beaming into my 4 year old's wide eyes. If as a pediatrician who was sitting 10 feet from my son, I am unable to successfully protect my own school age child from digital media, how can we possibly expect other parents and caregivers to be continuously responsible for the safety and privacy of their youth online?

There's no doubt that social media can play a positive role in the lives of many young people, expanding their social networks and allowing marginalized youth in particular to find powerful, positive connection beyond their immediate community. But in too many cases, young people themselves believe they are spending too much time on social media, but find themselves unable to unplug because of features intentionally designed to keep them hooked. While spending so much time online, they are being regularly exposed to dangerous content and unhealthy habits that pose a direct risk to their health and wellbeing. In the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 29% of Vermont's middle schoolers, and 17% of Vermont's high schoolers, reported being bullied online, with significantly higher rates among females in both age groups. Such bullying is directly correlated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal intent. Nationally, 25% of 9- to 17-year-olds report having had an online sexually explicit interaction.

Much of the motivation of social media platforms – and their design which intentionally facilitates prolonged use – is financial. Social media companies collectively made over $11 billion in U.S. advertising revenue from minors last year, according to a study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Our kids deserve better.

The Vermont Kids Code would put common sense measures in place to improve young people's digital experiences by requiring tech companies to implement privacy-by-default and safety-by-design protections for kids online. This means not collecting or selling kids' data, setting high privacy standards by default, and avoiding manipulative design. Government safety measures are already in place for

other every day items like vehicles and car seats; we should use similar logic when supporting safety in young people's digital lives.

In summary, the Vermont chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics urges your positive vote on Vermont Kids Code (S. 289/ H. 712). Our children's online safety and wellbeing depend on it.

Heidi Schumacher, MD FAAP

General pediatrician