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Sent: Thursday, April 11, 2024 2:22 PM
To: Andrew Hegarty <AHegarty@leg.state.vt.us>
Subject: Re: [External] Re: Testimony Request - House Commerce 4-11-24

Thank you, members of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development, for inviting me to speak today. I am testifying in my capacity as chief of staff at Front Porch Forum, Vermont's statewide neighbor network. We are a mission-driven Vermont Public Benefit Corporation, and our mission is to help neighbors connect and build community. Front Porch Forum is Vermont's biggest and most trusted neighbor-to-neighbor network. FPF's 230,000 Vermont members include over 14,000 Vermont businesses and nonprofits and nearly 3,000 Vermont public officials -- among them 20 sitting state senators and 104 state representatives.

I am testifying today in support of the Vermont Kids Code (H.712/ S.289). As I said earlier, Front Porch Forum is a mission-driven company. A core part of why we exist is to use online spaces to strengthen real-world relationships within communities. Success for us is when a critical mass of adults in every Vermont community spend five minutes a day reading their Forum or posting to their neighbors -- then they close their computer, put down their phone, and engage in real life with the people around them.

This is of course in many ways the opposite of the business model of most, if not all, Big Tech companies. As they see it, the more time we spend online, the better -- and they use every trick in the book to keep all of us glued to our screens. From developing deeply invasive profiles of our online activity to pushing outrage-inducing content that is extremely hard to look away from, they know how to keep us engaged, whether we want to or not.

This is bad for us as humans, and bad for our communities, in so many ways. It divides us against one another, making us think our neighbors are far more extreme in their views than they actually are. And as I'm sure you've heard from many expert witnesses more knowledgeable than I, it is doubly bad for young people.

To be honest, we would love to see the provisions in the Vermont Kids Code applied to Big Tech platforms for all users, not just kids. But young people is the obvious and most important place to start.

Thank you for your work on this legislation. Please don't hesitate to contact me with anything else I can help with.

Jason Van Driesche
Chief of Staff
Front Porch Forum