

## **Testimony in Support of HB 5037: Protecting Minors from Algorithmic Harm and Promoting Digital Safety**

**To:** The Honorable Co-Chairs Senator James J. Maroney and Representative Roland J. Lemar, and the Distinguished Members of the General Law Committee

**Date:** February 24, 2026

**From:** FOCUS (Fostering Optimal Connectivity, Understanding & Safety)

**Subject:** Safeguarding Adolescent Mental Health, Restoring Cognitive Focus, and Implementing Safety-by-Design Standards for Social Media Platforms

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On behalf of FOCUS (Fostering Optimal Connectivity, Understanding & Safety), a parent organization based in West Hartford, we are writing to express our support for **HB 5037**. Our advocacy is rooted in the belief that Connecticut's children deserve a digital environment that prioritizes their safety and development over corporate profit.

The current digital landscape is not a "neutral" town square; it is a highly engineered ecosystem designed to capture and monetize the finite attention of our youth through addictive algorithms. By passing HB 5037, Connecticut can lead the nation in establishing a "Safety-by-Design" standard that protects the psychological well-being of our next generation [1].

### **1. The Epidemic of Algorithmic Addiction and Mental Health**

Our students are currently weathering a crisis of anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Research indicates that the "infinite scroll" and "intermittent reward" systems utilized by major platforms are specifically engineered to bypass the developing prefrontal cortex of adolescents [2,3].

- **Psychological Harm:** Evidence that the "great rewiring" of childhood is driving a contemporary epidemic of mental illness [4] is underscored by research published in *JAMA Psychiatry* showing that adolescents spending more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes [5].
- **Amplified Bullying:** Algorithmic recommendations often prioritize high-engagement content, which frequently includes inflammatory material, cyberbullying, and unrealistic body standards that fuel dysmorphia [6].
- **Sleep Deprivation:** The "rabbit hole" effect of automated content delivery keeps students awake late into the night, leading to chronic sleep deprivation that impairs cognitive function and emotional regulation during the school day [7].

### **2. Protecting Connecticut's Workforce and Economic Future**

Connecticut's economy thrives on "deep work" required in high-stakes sectors like Aerospace, Defense, and Semiconductor manufacturing. We cannot expect our future workers to lead

these sophisticated industries if their formative years are spent conditioned for constant distraction and Pavlovian responses to digital notifications [8].

A workforce capable of sustained focus is a competitive advantage. By regulating the most addictive features of these platforms, we are essentially protecting the "cognitive infrastructure" of our state. If we fail to address the erosion of student concentration, we risk a long-term decline in the technical proficiency required for Connecticut's leading economic drivers.

### 3. Addressing Stakeholder Concerns - Counterarguments

We recognize that regulating the tech industry requires a nuanced approach. The following table addresses common points of opposition:

Stakeholder Concern	Evidence-Based Rebuttal / FOCUS Recommendation
The "First Amendment" Argument	<b>Conduct vs. Speech:</b> This bill does not regulate content; it regulates the deployment of manipulative design features. The state has a "compelling interest" in protecting minors from documented harm [3,9].
The "Privacy Paradox"	<b>Privacy-Preserving Tech:</b> HB 5037 mandates immediate deletion of verification data. Platforms can use "zero-knowledge proofs" to confirm age without collecting sensitive IDs [10].
"Marginalized Youth"	<b>Search vs. Feed:</b> The bill restricts <i>automated</i> recommendations, not the ability to search for specific groups. Safety from predatory algorithms is a universal right [11].
"Parental Responsibility"	<b>Safety-by-Default:</b> It is "developmentally inappropriate" to expect parents to win a battle against multi-billion dollar AI systems. This bill shifts the burden to the corporation [4].
"Commerce Clause"	<b>State Leadership:</b> Connecticut is not acting in a vacuum; at least 20 other states enacted similar child online safety laws in 2025 alone, establishing a clear national trend toward state-level consumer protection for minors [12].

### 4. Recommendation for Digital Literacy and Public Health

Regulation must be paired with education. FOCUS recommends that HB 5037 include provisions for age-appropriate digital literacy for both students and parents. This initiative could be coordinated by the CT Department of Public Health and should focus on:

- Identifying AI Deepfakes: Teaching students to discern authentic content from manipulated media.
- Recognizing Human Trafficking Ploys: Educating children on the tactics used by online

- predators.
- Parental Guidance: Equipping parents with tools to establish boundaries and understand digital risks.

## 5. Conclusion

At FOCUS, we believe that the digital world should serve humanity, not the other way around. Our children deserve the chance to grow up in an environment where their attention is not a commodity, and their mental health is not collateral damage. We urge this committee to support HB 5037 to ensure a psychologically safe future for every child in Connecticut.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan M. Rheaume, PhD  
Esther Gonzalez Garcia  
Dana Reynolds  
Regina Belen  
Danielle Jurich  
*On behalf of FOCUS (West Hartford)*

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### About FOCUS:

FOCUS is a parent group based in West Hartford that aims for children's safe use of technology by advocating for healthy boundaries and by educating our community about the impacts and best practices of digital technologies.

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## References and Supporting Citations

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