



April 8, 2026

The Honorable Chairwoman Jacquelyn Baginski
Honorable Members of the House Innovation, Internet & Technology
Room 135- State House
Providence, RI 02903

My name is Beth Bixby, and I am the CEO of Tides Family Services. We serve children, adolescents, and families across Rhode Island through behavioral health, juvenile justice, child welfare, and Mobile Response and Stabilization Services. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding H7350.

I support the intent of this legislation. As artificial intelligence becomes more present in daily life, Rhode Island should act now to protect children and adolescents from the unique risks these technologies can create. Young people are especially vulnerable to emotional manipulation, misleading social connection, and confusion about whether they are interacting with a real person or a machine.

This bill is an important step because it recognizes that AI companions are not neutral tools when they are designed to simulate human relationship and emotional support. That concern is especially serious for children, who may be more likely to trust, rely on, or become attached to an AI system in unhealthy ways.

As this bill moves forward, I encourage the Committee to examine several child-specific issues more closely:

- How AI companion systems may affect children's emotional development, attachment, and social functioning.
- Whether youth are able to distinguish AI-generated responses from real human support.
- How AI systems respond when a child expresses distress, self-harm, abuse, or thoughts of harming others.
- Whether AI companion tools could delay access to licensed clinicians, parents, guardians, or crisis services.
- How personal data from children's interactions is stored, shared, retained, or used for commercial purposes.
- Whether children in foster care, juvenile justice, or other state systems are more likely to be exposed to these tools in ways that increase risk.
- Whether families, schools, and providers will have clear guidance on when AI use is appropriate and when human intervention is required.

Children and adolescents do not engage with technology the same way adults do. They are still developing emotionally, socially, and cognitively. A system that imitates empathy or friendship may be confusing or harmful to a young person who is seeking support, especially if that child is lonely, anxious, traumatized, or in crisis.



For children involved in behavioral health, child welfare, or juvenile justice systems, the need for clear safeguards is even greater. These children often depend on adults and systems to keep them safe. We should be careful not to introduce technology that could blur the line between support and simulation, or create a false sense of connection in place of real care.

The bill appropriately points toward safety protocols, and I would encourage legislature to look closely at how those protocols function in practice for children. If a child expresses self-harm, abuse, suicidal thoughts, or a threat to others, the system should immediately escalate to a trained human response. AI should never be allowed to replace urgent clinical judgment or crisis intervention.

We should also examine whether AI tools are being used in ways that could affect assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning, or risk screening. For children, those functions should remain firmly in the hands of licensed professionals.

Another critical area to examine is data privacy. Children cannot always meaningfully understand how their data is being collected or used. Rhode Island should consider stronger protections around consent, retention, secondary use, and commercial exploitation of child-generated data.

AI should never become a substitute for medically necessary services or a workaround for workforce shortages.

In summary, I support the intent of H 7350 and believe it raises an important issue for Rhode Island. But if we are serious about protecting children, we should examine how AI companion systems affect emotional well-being, crisis response, data privacy, and equitable access to human care.

AI may have a role as a support tool, but it cannot replace the human relationships that children need to grow, heal, and thrive. Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to Rhode Island's children and families.

Sincerely,

Beth A. Bixby, LICSW
Chief Executive Officer
Tides Family Services