

April 5, 2021

My name is Jessica Wong, and I am the proud Chair of the Board for LiveMore ScreenLess. I submit this testimony in support of the “Digital Well-Being” portion of the Senate Education Finance Omnibus bill. We appreciate the bipartisan support of our program.

LiveMore ScreenLess is addressing the challenge of screen misuse and overuse and is prepared to create a statewide movement in the coming biennium. We have broad support from numerous sectors in the wider community, especially from teachers who say screen time is the #1 issue in their classroom affecting learning and health. Our attached excerpts of testimonies include insights from school administrators, teachers, mental health professionals and young people urging your decision to act and turn the tide on this.

In addition to my volunteer work with LiveMore, I am a national director of youth and family outreach for the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation working out of our dually licensed adolescent and young adult facility here in Plymouth for more than 16 years; and a nationally renowned speaker on the topics of teen addiction, mental health, and screen use. Adolescent mental health and well-being isn't just something I do to earn a living; it is something I have dedicated my personal life to, as well.

As adolescent mental health, addiction, and suicidality numbers continue to rise, it is clear something needs to be done to address these troubling trends. Building on their work over the last couple of years, LiveMore ScreenLess has the opportunity to lead the way towards digital well-being in the state of Minnesota and to reverse the trends of rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide in the young people of our state.

LiveMore's two cofounders, Ms. Myers and Ms. Hampton, each have over 25 years of experience in education and youth development as well as the knowledge, the passion, the ability, and the support to be building a lofty, meaningful and necessary organization supporting the wellbeing of young people. I rest a little easier at night knowing these two courageous, intelligent, and determined women are dedicating themselves to something that had personally been keeping me awake at night.

My professional interest in the topic of how technology use impacts the still developing teen brain grew after a consistent observation I was making while working at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation. Annually we admit approximately 2,000 young people from across the country who have been diagnosed with addiction to mood altering chemicals, 98% of whom have co-occurring mental health issues. As I was watching these young people enter our facility to receive the help that could save their lives, I noticed a troubling trend: oftentimes it was more difficult for the young people we serve to surrender their phones while in treatment than it was for them to give up their drug of choice. This sent me down the path to explore and research the relationship between technology use, misuse, addiction, and mental health.

While videogame, social media, and screen addiction are not currently included in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual – 5th Edition (DSM-V) published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association, online gaming addiction has been better documented, and thus, included in section III of the manual, an appendix of disorders for further study. Because the APA comes out with a new DSM on average every 12 years or so, the hope is technology addiction will be included in the next revision so we can begin to develop evidence based tools, practices, and services to support individuals who are struggling with screen addiction; and that those services would be then reimbursable by insurance. But because this is not yet the case, prevention and education on technology use is even more critical, and the work of LiveMore ScreenLess in advocating and promoting digital wellbeing, even more needed.

We know that there are many similarities between addictions to mood altering chemicals and addictions to video games, social media, and other technology. Most notable, perhaps, is the way that use of screens, like use of mood altering chemicals, restructures the reward system in the brain. Through brain imaging studies like one published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, we have learned that a like or a comment on Instagram or TikTok has a similar impact on the brain as drugs, sex, or gambling. All of these activities cause the brain to release higher than normal amounts of a pleasure-causing chemical called dopamine. Dopamine is also released in lower levels in healthy activities such as exercise, listening to music, and getting enough sunlight. Because technology use or mood altering chemicals cause a quicker, far more intense dopamine rush than you would get naturally from, say, exercising, that powerful rush leaves you wanting more. Over time, you need more dopamine to get you back to the same pleasure level, so use increases, and this can lead to addiction.

Additional similarities in technology addiction and substance addiction include the presence of withdrawal symptoms such as agitation, depression, anxiety, mood swings, changes in appetite, and strong cravings; and the potential for negative consequences such as loss of or damage to friend or family relationships, loss of job or lowered academic performance, and giving up other activities and hobbies and a decline in physical health.

Continuing to ignore the impact that unbalanced and unhealthy technology use can have on our kids would be a terrible oversight. I would like to encourage the Minnesota Legislature to approve the inclusion of the Digital Well-Being bill SF 1012 and HF 1836 into the Omnibus bill for the health of our families, our communities, and our young people, now and in the future.

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