

Date of Hearing: April 21, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
Mia Bonta, Chair
AB 1988 (Pellerin) – As Amended April 14, 2026

SUBJECT: Companion chatbots: crisis interruption pauses.

SUMMARY: Requires operators of companion chatbots to implement a system for addressing “credible crisis expressions,” as defined. Requires the operator of the chatbot, when a credible crisis expression is detected, to ensure the chatbot displays a warning to the user that, among other things, encourages the user to seek human support and refers them to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Requires the operator, if a second credible crisis expression is detected within 72 hours, to initiate a crisis interruption pause during which no further conversational outputs are allowed until a human moderator reviews the credible crisis expression in context and determines and documents the appropriate course of action in accordance with the operator’s policy. Requires operators to submit an annual report to the Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP) with specified information related to the implementation of this bill. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Incorporates the existing definitions of “artificial intelligence” (AI) and “companion chatbot” and defines the following terms:
 - a) “Credible crisis expression” to mean a statement by a user of a companion chatbot that reasonably indicates, as determined through contextual analysis rather than keyword detection alone, intent or desire to harm themselves or others.
 - b) “Crisis interruption pause” to mean a suspension of conversational outputs from a companion chatbot, designed to disrupt the user’s rumination and encourage the user to engage with human support.
 - c) “Operator” to mean a person that makes a companion chatbot available in this state.
 - d) “Human moderator” to mean a human that is an employee or agent of an operator who reviews a credible crisis expression and is responsible for determining the subsequent course of action on behalf of the operator.
- 2) Requires an operator to adopt and make publicly available a policy governing its protocol for identifying and responding to credible crisis expressions. Permits actions taken in accordance with the policy to include, but not be limited to, terminating the crisis interruption pause, suspending or cancelling the user’s account, and notifying any appropriate contacts or authorities.
- 3) Requires an operator, for each companion chatbot it makes available to users in this state, to implement a system for monitoring and detecting credible crisis expressions in user conversations with companion chatbots.
- 4) Requires the operator to do the following if the monitoring system detects a credible crisis expression:

- a) Ensure, for the first credible crisis expression, that the chatbot immediately warns the user that a credible crisis expression has been detected and that if a second credible crisis expression within a 72-hour period is detected, a crisis interruption pause will be initiated and the chatbot will suspend conversational outputs until a human has reviewed the credible crisis expressions. Specifies that the warning must also do the following:
 - i) Acknowledge the user's distress in nonjudgmental language;
 - ii) Encourage the user to seek immediate human support;
 - iii) Communicate that many people feel relief after a short conversation with a trained crisis counselor;
 - iv) Communicate that reaching out during the crisis interruption pause may help the user feel less alone and more grounded; and,
 - v) Prominently display contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, including by providing call, text, and chat options, as applicable. Requires these options to be made available to the user through immediate access links, to the extent technically feasible.
- b) Ensure, for the second credible crisis expression in a 72-hour period, a crisis interruption pause commences immediately and prevent the companion chatbot from generating conversational outputs. Requires the operator to display a message with similar content to the warning that additionally informs the user that:
 - i) The purpose of the crisis interruption pause is to interrupt rumination and reduce emotional intensity; and
 - ii) The crisis interruption pause will continue until a human moderator has reviewed the chat and determined an appropriate course of action in accordance with the operator's policy described above.
- 5) Prohibits an operator from terminating a crisis interruption pause until a human moderator has reviewed the credible crisis expression in context and determined the appropriate course of action, in accordance with the operator's policy described above. Requires the human moderator to document the basis for the course of action taken.
- 6) Prohibits an operator that communicates with a user during a crisis interruption pause describing the crisis interruption pause as a punishment, violation, or enforcement action, and from providing the user with any diagnosis, labeling, or assessment of the user's risk levels.
- 7) Beginning January 1, 2028, requires an operator to annually report to OSP on crisis interruption pauses with respect to the previous calendar year. Requires an operator to ensure that the report does not contain any personal or identifying information of a user or other individual.
- 8) Makes a violation punishable pursuant to 7) of Existing Law below.
- 9) Makes certain findings and declarations about suicidal ideation and companion chatbots.

10) States that this bill shall be known as the Preventing AI User Self Endangerment (PAUSE) Act.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires an operator to prevent a companion chatbot on its companion chatbot platform from engaging with users unless the operator maintains a protocol for preventing the production of suicidal ideation, suicide, or self-harm content to the user, including, but not limited to, by providing a notification to the user that refers the user to crisis service providers, including a suicide hotline or crisis text line, if the user expresses suicidal ideation, suicide, or self-harm. Requires an operator to publish details on this protocol on the operator's website. [Business and Professions Code (BPC) § 22602(b)]
- 2) Requires an operator, if a reasonable person interacting with a companion chatbot would be misled to believe that the person is interacting with a human, to issue a clear and conspicuous notification indicating that the companion chatbot is artificially generated and not human. [BPC § 22602(a)]
- 3) Requires an operator, for a user that the operator knows is a minor, to do all of the following:
 - a) Disclose to the user that the user is interacting with AI;
 - b) Provide by default a clear and conspicuous notification to the user at least every three hours for continuing companion chatbot interactions that reminds the user to take a break and that the companion chatbot is artificially generated and not human; and,
 - c) Institute reasonable measures to prevent its companion chatbot from producing visual material of sexually explicit conduct or directly stating that the minor should engage in sexually explicit conduct. [BPC § 22602(c)]
- 4) Defines relevant terms, including:
 - a) "Companion chatbot" means an AI system with a natural language interface that provides adaptive, human-like responses to user inputs and is capable of meeting a user's social needs, including by exhibiting anthropomorphic features and being able to sustain a relationship across multiple interactions. Includes the following exemptions from the definition of companion chatbot:
 - i) A bot that is used only for customer service, a business' operational purposes, productivity and analysis related to source information, internal research, or technical assistance;
 - ii) A bot that is a feature of a video game and is limited to replies related to the video game that cannot discuss topics related to mental health, self-harm, sexually explicit conduct, or maintain a dialogue on other topics unrelated to the video game; and
 - iii) A stand-alone consumer electronic device that functions as a speaker and voice command interface, acts as a voice-activated virtual assistant, and does not sustain a relationship across multiple interactions or generate outputs that are likely to elicit emotional responses in the user.

- b) “Companion chatbot platform” means a platform that allows a user to engage with companion chatbots; and,
 - c) “Operator” means a person who makes a companion chatbot platform available to a user in the state. [BPC § 22601]
- 5) Requires an operator, beginning July 1, 2027, to annually report to OSP specified information, not including any identifiers or personal information about users. Requires OSP to post data from the reports on its website. [BPC § 22603]
- 6) Requires an operator to disclose to a user of its platform that companion chatbots may not be suitable for some minors, as provided. [BPC § 22604]
- 7) Provides that a person who suffers injury in fact as a result of a violation of 1) through 3) of Existing Law above may bring a civil action to recover all of the following:
- a) Injunctive relief;
 - b) Damages in an amount equal to the greater of actual damages or \$1,000 per violation; and,
 - c) Reasonable attorney’s fees and costs. [BPC § 22605]
- 8) Authorizes the California Department of Public Health (DPH) to establish the OSP with the responsibilities to include all of the following:
- a) Providing information and technical assistance to statewide and regional partners regarding best practices on suicide prevention policies and programs;
 - b) Conducting state level assessment of regional and statewide suicide prevention policies and practices, including other states’ suicide prevention policies, and including specific metrics and domains as appropriate;
 - c) Monitoring and disseminating data to inform prevention efforts at the state and local levels;
 - d) Convening experts and stakeholders, including, but not limited to, stakeholders representing populations with high rates of suicide, to encourage collaboration and coordination of resources for suicide prevention; and,
 - e) Reporting on progress to reduce rates of suicide. [Health and Safety Code (HSC) § 131300(a)]
- 9) Authorizes OSP, if established by DPH, to focus activities on groups with the highest risk, including youth, Native American youth, older adults, veterans, and LGBTQ people. [HSC § 131300 (b)]
- 10) Requires OSP, if established, to consult with the Behavioral Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (BHSOAC) to implement suicide prevention efforts consistent with the Suicide Prevention Report “Striving for Zero.” [HSC § 131315]

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill has not been heard by a fiscal committee.

COMMENTS:

1) PURPOSE OF THIS BILL. According to the author, AI companion chatbots are rapidly becoming a place where people turn for emotional support, including during moments of deep mental distress. But these systems are not therapists, and growing evidence shows that chatbots can fail to appropriately handle serious mental health crises and reinforce unhealthy dependence for the user on the chatbot. When someone signals that they may harm themselves or others, every minute matters. The author argues this bill treats credible expressions of suicidal intent with the urgency they deserve by pausing the interaction and creating a clear break for the user. The author concludes this helps prevent AI systems from becoming a substitute for human intervention and instead directs people in crisis toward trained professionals who can provide lifesaving support.

2) BACKGROUND.

a) Suicide and Self-Harm in California. According to a January 2025 data brief from DPH, suicide is the leading cause of violent death, and self-harm is the third leading cause of injury-related emergency department (ED) visits. Men consistently have higher rates of suicide than women, and in 2022 men accounted for more than three-fourths of suicides. Use of firearms was the most common mechanism for suicide in 2021 and 2022. Youth under the age of 10 had a statistically significant increase in self-harm ED visit rates from 1.9 per 100,000 Californians in this age group in 2021 to 2.7 in 2022. Although there was a small number of Black people who visited the ED for self-harm injury, this group is at elevated risk for self-harm. Self-harm by poisoning was the most common mechanism of self-harm injury leading to ED visits, followed by cutting/piercing and, when combined, both accounted for approximately 85% of self-harm ED visits. Other mechanisms of self-harm combined, including fall, firearm, and hanging/suffocation, made up 2% of self-harm ED visits.

The brief also highlights opportunities for prevention, such as advancing protective factors as a part of prevention programming to build resilience and foster support at the individual, relationship, and community level to help decrease suicide risk. While the brief notes that prevention efforts should focus on the most common and lethal means of suicide (firearms and intentional drug overdoses), it also highlights the 2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, which contains several goals, such as integrating suicide prevention into the culture of the workplace and into other community settings, and implementing research-informed suicide prevention communication activities in diverse populations, using best practices from communication science.

b) OSP. OSP was permitted to be established through AB 2112 (Ramos), Chapter 142, Statutes of 2020, to address the root causes of suicide and self-harm. OSP works to build partnerships, share critical data, and promote evidence-informed strategies that support safe and healthy communities across California. OSP has four strategic priority areas: Communications; Creating Safe and Protective Environments; Crisis Response and Postvention; and Continuing Education and Training. According to the OSP Annual Highlights Brief, Year 4, published by DPH, strategic priorities aligned with the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Suicide Prevention Resource for Action, and best practices in population-based suicide

prevention. The brief also notes that in Spring 2025, OSP conducted the second biennial Needs Assessment, including an online survey that received over 200 responses and 14 key-informant interviews. The assessment sought input from partners on specific technical assistance needs, focus areas within OSP's strategic priorities, and how OSP can best support suicide prevention and response work at the State and local level. A summary of needs assessment results will be released in Year 5 on the OSP website.

- c) **Chatbot harms and psychosis.** The Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee previously heard this bill, and that committee's analysis contains an extensive overview of chatbot-related harms and psychosis. Below is an excerpt from that analysis:

According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, psychiatrists are increasingly linking prolonged AI chatbot use to psychosis, with dozens of patients in recent months exhibiting delusional symptoms – often grandiose beliefs about scientific breakthroughs, government conspiracies, or communication with the dead – after extended conversations with tools like ChatGPT, which tend to validate and reinforce whatever the user presents as reality. While no formal diagnosis exists yet and experts stop short of claiming chatbots cause psychosis, a University of California, San Francisco psychiatrist has personally treated 15 such patients, and OpenAI's own data suggests roughly 560,000 of its weekly users may show signs of psychosis- or mania-related mental health emergencies, and multiple wrongful death lawsuits have followed cases in which chatbot interactions preceded suicides and at least one murder.

Researchers from Oxford, University College London, and Imperial College London argue that AI chatbots pose a distinct mental health risk arising from the interaction between human cognitive biases and chatbot behavioral tendencies. They write:

. . . the iterative interaction of chatbot behavioral tendencies and human cognitive biases can set up harmful feedback loops, wherein chatbot behavioral tendencies reinforce maladaptive beliefs in vulnerable users, which in turn condition the chatbot to generate responses that further reinforce user beliefs. This, in effect, creates an “echo chamber of one” that risks uncoupling a user from the corrective influence of real-world social interaction, potentially driving the amplification of maladaptive beliefs about the self, others, and the world. We do not see this risk profile as a soon-to-be-remedied transient phenomenon. To the contrary, current trends in chatbot personalization may perversely worsen mental health risks.

- 3) **SUPPORT.** Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services (Didi Hirsch) is the sponsor of this bill and states in support that Californians, and individuals worldwide, are increasingly relying on companion chatbots for support and advice during moments of acute psychological distress. However, these tools are not equipped to deliver appropriate care to people in crisis, creating a clear and growing public safety gap between how they are used and what they are capable of providing. Didi Hirsch notes a pattern of recent incidents underscores the potentially devastating effects of the current lack of guiding legislation around AI companion chatbots. In 2025, the family of a 16-year-old boy filed a wrongful death lawsuit alleging that a chatbot validated his suicidal ideation, assisted in drafting a suicide note, and failed to direct him to human support before his death. Crisis intervention research shows that timely human intervention during suicidal ideation can significantly reduce risk of harm, often within minutes. Didi Hirsch concludes that this bill applies these principles in a focused and

proportionate way by requiring that companion chatbots encourage users to connect to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and temporarily pause the chatbot conversation when crisis expressions persist or escalate.

California Academy of Family Physicians (CAFP) supports this bill noting that these safeguards rely on existing, widely used technology and can be implemented without imposing undue burden on developers. CAFP argues this bill provides a measured, evidence-based approach to reducing foreseeable and preventable harm while reinforcing the role of trained human care in moments of crisis.

- 4) **OPPOSE UNLESS AMENDED.** California Broadband & Video Association (CalBroadband) opposes this bill unless amended stating the current language risks capturing a broad range of lower-risk technologies that were never intended to be the focus of this policy. CalBroadband recommends incorporating language from a recently enacted New York bill, which they argue appropriately targets the type of AI systems that simulate ongoing emotional relationships with users, and avoids sweeping in many lower-risk AI applications that simply respond to user prompts or assist with routine tasks.
- 5) **DOUBLE REFERRAL.** This bill is double referred; it was heard in the Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee on April 16, 2026 and passed by a vote of 14-0.
- 6) **RELATED LEGISLATION.**
 - a) AB 1609 (Zbur) would require large private businesses, defined as those that make more than \$500 million in annual revenue and offer goods and services to Californians, other than certain utilities, to make a good faith effort to provide customers with access to a human customer service agent within 15 minutes of a customer's request during the 10-hour period that comprises the business's regular business hours. AB 1609 is pending in the Assembly Judiciary Committee.
 - b) AB 2023 (Wicks) would require an operator of a companion chatbot to, on or before July 1, 2027, do various things with respect to child safety and companion chatbots, including annually perform and document a comprehensive risk assessment to identify any child safety risk posed by the design, configuration, and operation of the companion chatbot that assesses, among other things, the likelihood of a covered harm, as defined, occurring to users. Would require an operator to submit to an independent audit of its compliance with those provisions, as specified, and would require, within 90 days of completing an independent audit, the auditor to submit an AI child safety audit report to the Attorney General for any audited companion chatbot. AB 2023 is pending in the Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee.
 - c) SB 300 (Padilla) would change the threshold for when operators must carry out the obligations of SB 243 (Padilla), Chapter 677, Statutes of 2023, to when they have actual knowledge that a user is a minor. Would require platform operators to prevent their chatbots from producing or facilitating the exchange of material of sexually explicit conduct or directly stating that the minor should engage in sexually explicit conduct, as provided. SB 300 is pending referral in the Assembly.

- d) SB 867 (Padilla) would impose a four-year moratorium on making or selling any toy that includes a companion chatbot, as provided. SB 867 is pending in the Senate Appropriations Committee.
 - e) SB 1119 (Padilla) is substantially similar to AB 2023. SB 1119 is pending in the Senate Privacy, Digital Technologies, and Consumer Protection Committee.
- 7) **PREVIOUS LEGISLATION.** SB 243 (Padilla), Chapter 677, Statutes of 2025 requires companion chatbot operators to disclose that the chatbot is artificial if a reasonable person interacting with a companion chatbot would be misled to believe that the person is interacting with a human. Requires an operator to take certain actions with respect to a user the operator knows is a minor, including disclosing to the user that the user is interacting with AI.
- 8) **POLICY COMMENT.** This bill, and SB 243 (Padilla) previously, requires reporting to OSP. Under current law, DPH is “authorized to establish” OSP, meaning that, without a change in law, OSP could potentially be shuttered or folded into another office or department. Moving forward, the author may wish to work with DPH to ensure that this bill, if enacted, does not include the risk of referencing an office that may not be in existence in perpetuity. The author also shared feedback that the definition in this bill of “credible crisis expression” could be too expansive. While no organizations have specifically reached out with this concern to this committee, the author may wish to continue working with stakeholders to refine the definition to reduce the possibility of low-risk expressions leading to pauses.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services (Sponsor)
 Association of Community Human Service Agencies
 California Academy of Family Physicians
 California Alliance of Child and Family Services
 California Association of Alcohol and Drug Program Executives, Inc.
 California Association of Social Rehabilitation Agencies
 El Proyecto Del Barrio, Inc.
 Florence Crittenton Services of Orange County, Inc.
 Helpline Youth Counseling, Inc.
 The Village Family Services
 Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Logan Hess / HEALTH / (916) 319-2097