

GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF FUNDS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA LAWSUITS:

ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA HARMS BY INVESTING IN YOUTH WELL-BEING

I. Background

Young people are spending more time in digital environments and, at the same, facing rising mental health challenges and increasing feelings of isolation. On average, teens spend nearly five hours per day on social media platforms,¹ with the highest frequency users experiencing negative impacts on their mental health.² States, communities, school districts, and families are suing social media companies for knowingly designing their platforms to maximize engagement for profit, at the expense of youth mental health and safety. At the same time, millions of children, youth, and young adults lack access to safe, engaging, real-world opportunities and mental health supports that prevent and mitigate the harms of social media while protecting and promoting the well-being of children and youth.

If these court cases result in legal payouts or settlements, litigation funds could create new public funding to support the mental health, safety, well-being, and positive development of school-age children, youth, and young adults.³ These funds could create a comprehensive abatement strategy for supporting young people that includes education and mental health services as well as programs that promote positive youth development—all provided by caring and trained adults in community organizations, schools, and clinical settings. Funds could be widely invested in nondigital, engaging alternatives to social media that reduce screen time and promote well-being. Meanwhile, education about the harms of social media and tools for safe engagement would help all young people and their families navigate these technologies safely. Advanced treatment and targeted interventions would be designated for young people who exhibit mental health needs after extensive social media use. Finally, system-level investments will help ensure the infrastructure is ready to provide effective and equitable service delivery. Most importantly, the payouts from these lawsuits should be protected and dedicated toward the programs and services that can safeguard young people from and remedy the effects of the harms caused by social media. State and local leaders should not use these funds to fill general budget holes.

By investing in programs, services, and “in real life” opportunities that promote youth well-being and healthy development, state and local leaders can ensure that young people will experience the connection, joy, belonging, support, and engaging experiences they’re seeking to help them grow and thrive in the digital and offline world.

II. Guiding Principles for Use of Funds from Social Media Lawsuits

1. **Protect and Support Youth Well-Being and Mental Health:** Funds should be used to measurably prevent, mitigate, and remediate harms associated with social media use and promote off-screen connection and resilience for children, youth, and young adults.
2. **Invest Across a Variety of Supports and Settings:** Funds should prioritize investments across the behavioral health continuum, including universal access to youth programs and third spaces⁴ where young people can gather, play, learn, and connect; targeted interventions; and support for children with intensive behavioral health needs. Supports should span a range of community, school, and clinical settings.
3. **Use Evidence and Data to Guide Decisions:** Funds should be directed toward policies and programs that demonstrate alignment with research-based youth development and mental health frameworks or ones that are being studied for impact. Allocation decisions should be informed by data on child and youth needs and gaps in access to programs and services
4. **Ensure Fair, Inclusive, and Transparent Governance:** Youth and family members, educators, clinicians, researchers, community-based organizations, and community leaders should have a formal role in shaping funding decisions and overseeing program outcomes. Decision-making processes should be structured to ensure funds are allocated equitably, and funding decisions should be transparent and publicly available online.
5. **Guarantee Meaningful Access for All Youth:** All school-age children, youth, and young adults should have access to high-quality programs and services that strengthen well-being and mental health, with particular attention paid to meeting the needs of underserved youth and those disproportionately impacted by social media harms. Funds should help connect young people to in-person programs and services and address barriers that limit participation.

III. A Framework for Reducing the Harms of Social Media

A. In Real Life Alternatives

Universal programs and services that foster social connection, build trusted adult and peer relationships, reduce screen time, and promote youth mental health, safety and child well-being. This includes programs and services provided by community-based organizations, schools, and municipalities.

1. Positive youth development programs such as before-, after-school, and summer learning and enrichment programs; outdoor learning, environmental education, and nature-based programs; youth sports and recreation; play-based programs; arts, music, and creative expression programs; culturally specific programs; faith-based programs; community schools and clubs; libraries; museum-based programs; and safe third spaces designed for young people
2. Career, workforce, post-secondary readiness, life skills, youth employment, and youth mentoring programs, including opportunities for young people who are disconnected from school or work
3. Youth service, youth leadership, youth organizing, civic engagement, and other youth-led initiatives
4. Caregiver and family programs to support healthy and trusting family adult-child relationships

B. Safe Digital Engagement

Education, curricula, and youth leadership opportunities that prepare young people and their adult caregivers to understand the harms of social media and other emerging technologies, build skills to navigate their online experiences safely, and inform responsible technology policies and design.

5. Digital citizenship education (digital safety, well-being, and literacy; cyberbullying prevention) delivered in person and digitally for youth, caregivers, and youth-serving staff including youth-guided curricula, programs, tools, and peer-to-peer supports
6. Youth-led and youth-serving initiatives that advocate for safe platform design and policies and elevate youth voices through listening tours, youth town halls, community conversations, and public awareness campaigns

C. Mental Health Services and Supports

Universal age-appropriate mental health screenings with linkage to referrals and care using validated tools. Targeted interventions designed to strengthen mental health and social connection and address emerging concerns for young people most harmed by social media.

7. Youth-serving professionals and educators trained on early detection, screening, and referrals to care for emerging mental health needs
8. Peer and near-peer delivery models to expand clinical and nonclinical mental health workforce capacity
9. Community, school, and pediatric clinical and nonclinical supports, including pediatric collaborative care, dyadic care, and other evidence-based interventions
10. Crisis response and community-based treatment models for youth with acute needs, such as investments into the local 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, Mobile Response and Stabilization Supports, and pediatric behavioral health urgent care infrastructure

IV. System-Level Investments in Harm Reduction and Abatement

Implementation of the above will require investment in reasonable intermediary, operational, workforce, training, evaluation, cross-system coordination, data sharing, and related costs necessary to ensure effective, equitable, and sustainable service delivery. State and/or local needs assessments that integrate community voice will identify service gaps, readiness for implementation, and implementation support that is needed for successful deployment of funds and delivery of services.



About Fund IRL

[Fund IRL](#) is a national coalition led by Children's Funding Project working to ensure that if social media lawsuits result in financial payouts or settlements, those resources are invested in programs and services that help young people connect, build relationships, and thrive in real life. These "in real life" opportunities create spaces where young people experience belonging, connection, creativity and joy - a critical investment in youth well-being and community infrastructure. The coalition is working to ensure these resources are directed to those most impacted by the harms of social media - young people - and are prioritized with clear guardrails, transparency, and accountability to support young people's mental health and well-being.

Endnotes

1. Defined as “Interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks, including social networking, gaming, virtual worlds, video-sharing sites, and blogs.” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine. Consensus Study Report Highlights, *Social Media and Adolescent Health*. December 2023.
2. American Psychological Association. 4.1.2024.
https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27396/Highlights_for_Social_Media_and_Adolescent_Health.pdf
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/teen-social-use-mental-health#:~:text=4.8%20hours,day%20on%20these%20three%20apps.>
3. Fund IRL focuses on remediating the harms of social media among school-age children, youth, and young adults considering the groups of young people who have been most impacted by the harms and research that shows the impact of higher screen use and mental health symptoms for adolescent youth. *What We Know About Screen Time and Social Media in Early Adolescence: A Review of the Findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12259366/>
4. For the purposes of this document, third spaces may include structured or unstructured programs and environments offered to youth and young adults at teen drop-in centers, clubs, museums, libraries, and other community spaces.