

CALIFORNIA STATE BOARD OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES BILL ANALYSIS

BILL NUMBER: AB 1988

VERSION: AMENDED APRIL 14, 2026

AUTHOR: PELLERIN

SPONSOR: DIDI HIRSCH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

STAFF RECOMMENDED POSITION: SUPPORT

SUBJECT: COMPANION CHATBOTS: CRISIS INTERRUPTION PAUSES

Summary: This bill improves safety protocols for companion chatbots by requiring operators to establish policies for detecting credible crisis expressions, issue warnings, and initiate a mandatory crisis interruption pause after two credible crisis expressions within 72 hours, including directing users to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Existing Law:

- 1) Requires that if a reasonable person interacting with a companion chatbot would be misled to believe that they are interacting with a human, the operator must issue a clear and conspicuous notification indicating that the chatbot is artificially generated and not human. (Business and Professions Code (BPC) §22602)
- 2) Requires the operator of a companion chatbot to maintain a protocol for preventing production of suicidal ideation, suicide, or self-harm content to the user. This protocol must include providing a notification to the user that refers them to crisis service providers such as a suicide hotline or crisis text line if they express suicidal ideation, suicide, or self-harm. Details of this protocol must be published on the operator's website. (BPC §22602)
- 3) If the user is a minor, the operator must disclose that the user is interacting with artificial intelligence (AI) and must clearly and conspicuously provide a notice to the user every 3 hours that reminds them to take a break and that the companion chatbot is AI and not human. (BPC §22602)
- 4) Beginning July 1, 2027, requires operators to annually report to the Office of Suicide Prevention the number of times in the past year that the operator has issued a crisis service provider referral notification, their protocols to detect, remove, and respond to instances of suicidal ideation by users, and their protocols to prohibit a companion chatbot response about suicidal ideation or actions with the user. (BPC §22603)
- 5) Requires the operator of a companion chatbot to disclose on its platform that companion chatbots may not be suitable for some minors. (BPC §22604)

- 6) Provides that a person who is injured as the result of a violation of the above may bring a civil action for injunctive relief, damages, and attorney's fees and costs. (BPC §22605)

This Bill:

Requires an operator of companion chatbots to adopt and make public a policy governing its protocol for identifying and responding to credible crisis expressions. The policy must include a policy of terminating the crisis interruption pause, suspending or canceling the user's account, and notifying appropriate contacts or authorities.

Beginning January 1, 2028, a chatbot operator must annually report this information to the Office of Suicide Prevention and must ensure this report contains no personal or identifying information. (BPC §22587.2(a), 22587.3(b))

- 1) Requires companion chatbot operators to implement a system for monitoring and detecting credible crises expressions in user conversations for every chatbot they make available in California. (BPC §22587.2(b))
- 2) When the monitoring system detects a credible crisis expression, requires the chatbot operation to do all of the following (BPC §22587.2(c)):
 - a) For the first crisis expression, the chatbot must immediately warn the user it has detected the crisis expression, and that if it detects another one within 72 hours, there will be a crisis interruption pause, during which conversation will be suspended until a human moderator has reviewed the crisis expression. The warning must acknowledge the person's distress in nonjudgemental language, encourage them to seek immediate human support, communicate that many people feel relief after a short conversation with a trained crisis counselor and that reaching out may help them feel less alone. The contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline must be prominently displayed.
 - b) If a second crisis expression is detected within 72 hours, a crisis interruption pause must commence immediately, with no further conversation generated. During the pause, the chatbot must acknowledge the person's distress in nonjudgemental language, encourage them to seek immediate human support. It must communicate that the pause is intended to interrupt rumination and reduce emotional intensity, that many people feel relief after a short conversation with a trained crisis counselor and that reaching out may help them feel less alone. The contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline must be prominently displayed. Additionally, it must inform the user that the 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.
- 3) Prohibits the operator from terminating a crisis interruption pause until a human moderator has reviewed the crisis expression in context and determined the appropriate course of action and documented the basis for that action. (BPC §22587.2(d))

- 4) Prohibits the chatbot operator from describing a crisis interruption as punishment, violation, or enforcement action, and prohibits them from providing the user with any diagnosis, labeling, or assessment of their risk levels. (BPC §22587.2(e))
- 5) Requires chatbot operators to document the following for any companion chatbot that they make available in California (BPC §22587.3):
 - a) All credible crisis expressions detected;
 - b) The duration and conditions of each crisis interruption pause initiated; and
 - c) Any action taken by the operator in response to a crisis interruption pause.
- 6) Provides that a person who is injured as the result of a violation of the above may bring a civil action for injunctive relief, damages, and attorney's fees and costs. (BPC §22587.4)
- 7) Defines an "artificial intelligence system" as an engineered or machine-based system that varies in its level of autonomy and can, from explicit or implicit objectives, infer from input how to generate outputs that can influence physical or virtual environments. (BPC §22587.1(a))
- 8) Defines a "companion chatbot" as an AI system with a natural language interface that provides adaptive, human-like responses to user inputs and is capable of meeting social needs and sustaining a relationship across multiple interactions. It does not include a bot that is only used for customer service, business operations, productivity and analysis, internal research, or technical assistance. It does not include a bot that is a feature of a video game and is limited to replies related to the game that cannot discuss topics related to mental health or self-harm or maintain a dialogue on topics unrelated to the game. It also does not include a stand-alone consumer electronic device that is a speaker and voice command interface and acts as a voice activated assistant that does not sustain a relationship across multiple interactions or generate output likely to elicit an emotional response. (BPC §22587.1(b))
- 9) Defines a "credible crisis expression" as a statement by the user that reasonably indicates, in context, intent or desire to harm the user or others. (BPC §22587.1(c))
- 10) Defines a "crisis interruption pause" as a suspension of conversation output designed to disrupt the user's rumination and encourage human support engagement.

Comment:

- 1) **Author’s Intent.** In the Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection bill analysis dated 4/14/2026, the author’s office states the following:

“Artificial intelligence 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. AB 1988 treats credible expressions of suicidal intent with the urgency they deserve by pausing the interaction and creating a clear break for the user. This bill 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) **Previous Legislation.**

AB 489 (Chapter 615, Statutes of 2025) was signed into law by the Governor last year and became effective on January 1, 2026. It prohibits a person or entity who develops or deploys an artificial intelligence or generative artificial intelligence system from having that system represent or imply that it is a licensed health care provider by using prohibited terms, letters, or phrases. It makes violations subject to the jurisdiction of the applicable licensing board. At its May 2025 meeting, the Board had taken a “support” position on this bill.

SB 243 (Chapter 677, Statutes of 2025) was also signed into law by the Governor last year. It set disclosure requirements and safeguards for chatbot users, including requiring chatbot operators to have a protocol for preventing production of suicidal ideation, suicide, or self-harm advice to the user, and requiring notification of crisis services providers if the user expresses suicidal ideation.

- 3) **Related Legislation.**

The Board is considering the following AI-related legislation this year:

- **AB 1979 (Bonta)** prohibits health facilities and medical offices from using artificial intelligence tools for any tasks that require the professional judgment of a licensed health care provider. It also bans the use of AI to direct or instruct unlicensed personnel in performing duties that require a professional license.
- **AB 2575 (Ortega)** establishes protections and accountability for the use of artificial intelligence and clinical decision support tools in health care by preventing developers from escaping liability, requiring plain-language

disclosures for providers, and safeguarding workers' professional judgment from employer restrictions or retaliation.

- **SB 903 (Padilla)** establishes laws for the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in therapy and psychotherapy.
- **SB 1146 (Gonzalez)** requires an advertisement for a health-related product or service that uses an image, audio, or video of a natural person representing themselves to be or identifiably depicting a person as a health care provider, that is generated or substantially altered by artificial intelligence (AI), to include a clear disclosure stating that AI was used and that the person is not a health care provider.

4) Staff Recommended Position. Staff recommends that the Board consider taking a support position on this bill.

5) Support and Opposition.

Support:

- Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services (Sponsor)
- California Academy of Family Physicians
- California Alliance of Child and Family Services
- California Association of Social Rehabilitation Agencies

Opposition: Cal Broadband

6) History.

04/14/26 From committee chair, with author's amendments: Amend, and re-refer to Com. on P. & C.P. Read second time and amended.
04/13/26 (Pending re-refer to Com. on HEALTH)
04/13/26 Assembly Rule 56 suspended.
03/09/26 Referred to Coms. on P. & C.P. and HEALTH.
02/14/26 From printer. May be heard in committee March 16.
02/13/26 Read first time. To print.

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ASSEMBLY BILL

No. 1988

Introduced by Assembly Member Pellerin

February 13, 2026

An act to add Chapter 22.2.6 (commencing with Section 22587.1) to Division 8 of the Business and Professions Code, relating to artificial intelligence.

legislative counsel's digest

AB 1988, as amended, Pellerin. Companion chatbots: crisis interruption pauses.

Existing law requires, among other things related to ensuring the safety of companion chatbots, 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, as specified.

~~This bill~~ *bill, the Preventing AI User Self Endangerment (PAUSE) Act, would require, if a companion chatbot detects a credible crisis expression, the companion chatbot to take certain actions, including encouraging the user to seek immediate human support, and, if the companion chatbot detects that a user is reaffirming or escalating the credible crisis expression or detects a subsequent credible crisis expression, require the companion chatbot to initiate a crisis interruption pause of 20 minutes. require an operator to adopt and make publicly available a policy governing its protocol for identifying and responding to credible crisis expressions and, for each companion chatbot an operator makes available to users in this state, implement a system for*

monitoring and detecting credible crisis expressions in user conversations with companion chatbots. The bill would require, if the monitoring system detects a credible crisis expression, the operator to take certain actions, including commence a crisis interruption pause, as specified. The bill would define “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 to harm the user or others.

This bill would require an operator of a companion chatbot to document certain information related to credible crisis expressions and crisis interruption pauses and, beginning January 1, 2028, annually report that information to the Office of Suicide Prevention. *The bill would provide for its enforcement, as specified.*

Vote: majority. Appropriation: no. Fiscal committee: ~~no~~-yes. State-mandated local program: no.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

- 1 SECTION 1. *This act shall be known as the Preventing AI User*
- 2 *Self Endangerment (PAUSE) Act.*
- 3 ~~SECTION 1.~~
- 4 SEC. 2. The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:
- 5 (a) Moments of suicidal ideation or violent intent are often
- 6 characterized by acute emotional distress, cognitive narrowing,
- 7 rumination, and hyperfocus rather than sustained or fixed intent.
- 8 (b) Crisis counseling research demonstrates that interrupting
- 9 rumination and introducing time-based pauses can reduce
- 10 emotional intensity and impulsivity.
- 11 (c) The majority of crisis hotline engagements, including calls
- 12 to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, are brief, nonclinical, and
- 13 focused on deescalation, grounding, and connection to support.
- 14 (d) Companion chatbots are not substitutes for human crisis
- 15 intervention and are not suitable to perform diagnosis, crisis
- 16 counseling, or risk assessment.
- 17 (e) A structured-~~pause~~ *pause, accompanied by human review,*
- 18 *in companion chatbot engagement is a proportional safety*
- 19 *intervention tool that encourages human connection and supports*
- 20 *public safety while reducing foreseeable harm.*

1 ~~SEC. 2.~~
2 SEC. 3. Chapter 22.2.6 (commencing with Section 22587.1)
3 is added to Division 8 of the Business and Professions Code, to
4 read:

5
6 Chapter 22.2.6. Companion Chatbots: Crisis
7 Interruption Pauses
8

9 22587.1. As used in this chapter:

10 (a) “Artificial intelligence system” means an engineered or
11 machine-based system that varies in its level of autonomy and that
12 can, for explicit or implicit objectives, infer from the input it
13 receives how to generate outputs that can influence physical or
14 virtual environments.

15 (b) (1) “Companion chatbot” means an artificial intelligence
16 system with a natural language interface that provides adaptive,
17 humanlike responses to user inputs and is capable of meeting a
18 user’s social needs, including by exhibiting anthropomorphic
19 features and being able to sustain a relationship across multiple
20 interactions.

21 (2) “Companion chatbot” does not include any of the following:

22 (A) A bot that is used only for customer service, a business’
23 operational purposes, productivity and analysis related to source
24 information, internal research, or technical assistance.

25 (B) A bot that is a feature of a video game and is limited to
26 replies related to the video game that cannot discuss topics related
27 to mental health, self-harm, sexually explicit conduct, or maintain
28 a dialogue on other topics unrelated to the video game.

29 (C) A stand-alone consumer electronic device that functions as
30 a speaker and voice command interface, acts as a voice-activated
31 virtual assistant, and does not sustain a relationship across multiple
32 interactions or generate outputs that are likely to elicit emotional
33 responses in the user.

34 (c) “Credible crisis expression” means a statement by a user of
35 a companion chatbot that reasonably indicates, as determined
36 through contextual analysis rather than keyword detection alone,
37 either of the following:

38 (1) Intent or desire to harm the user.

39 (2) Intent or desire to harm others.

- 1 (d) “Crisis interruption pause” means a ~~temporary~~ suspension
 2 of conversational ~~output~~ *outputs from a companion chatbot*
 3 designed to disrupt *the user’s* rumination and encourage *the user*
 4 *to engage with* human ~~support engagement during which a~~
 5 ~~companion chatbot does all of the following:~~ *support.*
- 6 (1) ~~Refrains from generating further conversational responses.~~
 7 (2) ~~Displays to the user a message stating all of the following:~~
 8 (A) ~~The pause is intended to interrupt rumination and reduce~~
 9 ~~emotional intensity.~~
 10 (B) ~~Many people feel relief after a short conversation with a~~
 11 ~~trained crisis counselor.~~
 12 (C) ~~Reaching out during this pause may help the user feel less~~
 13 ~~alone and more grounded.~~
- 14 (3) ~~Prominently displays 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline contact~~
 15 ~~options, including immediate access links if technically feasible.~~
- 16 (e) ~~“Graduated response” means a multistep intervention that~~
 17 ~~escalates only after an initial supportive warning.~~
- 18 (e) *“Human moderator” means a natural person that is an*
 19 *employee or agent of an operator who reviews a credible crisis*
 20 *expression and is responsible for determining the subsequent*
 21 *course of action on behalf of the operator.*
- 22 (f) “Operator” means a person that makes a companion chatbot
 23 available in this state.
- 24 ~~22587.2. (a) Notwithstanding any law, if a companion chatbot~~
 25 ~~detects a credible crisis expression, the companion chatbot shall~~
 26 ~~do all of the following without immediately terminating the~~
 27 ~~interaction with the user:~~
- 28 (1) ~~Acknowledge the user’s distress in nonjudgmental language.~~
 29 (2) ~~Encourage the user to seek immediate human support.~~
 30 (3) ~~Provide contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis~~
 31 ~~Lifeline, including call, text, and chat options.~~
- 32 (4) ~~Inform the user that a temporary pause may occur to allow~~
 33 ~~space for deescalation and human connection.~~
- 34 (b) ~~Notwithstanding any law, if a companion chatbot detects~~
 35 ~~that a user is reaffirming or escalating the credible crisis expression~~
 36 ~~or detects a subsequent credible crisis expression after the~~
 37 ~~companion chatbot has complied with subdivision (a), the~~
 38 ~~companion chatbot shall initiate a crisis interruption pause of 20~~
 39 ~~minutes.~~

1 ~~(c) Notwithstanding any law, a companion chatbot shall not do~~
2 ~~either of the following:~~

3 ~~(1) Describe a crisis interruption pause as a punishment,~~
4 ~~violation, or enforcement action.~~

5 ~~(2) Diagnose, label, or assess risk levels of a user.~~

6 ~~(d) An operator shall ensure that any companion chatbot it makes~~
7 ~~available in this state is compliant with this section.~~

8 22587.2. (a) *An operator shall adopt and make publicly*
9 *available a policy governing its protocol for identifying and*
10 *responding to credible crisis expressions, including, but not limited*
11 *to, a policy of terminating the crisis interruption pause, suspending*
12 *or canceling the user’s account, and notifying any appropriate*
13 *contacts or authorities.*

14 (b) *For each companion chatbot an operator makes available*
15 *to users in this state, the operator shall implement a system for*
16 *monitoring and detecting credible crisis expressions in user*
17 *conversations with companion chatbots.*

18 (c) *If the monitoring system implemented pursuant to subdivision*
19 *(b) detects a credible crisis expression, the operator shall do all*
20 *of the following:*

21 (1) (A) *For the first detected credible crisis expression, ensure*
22 *that the chatbot immediately warns the user that a credible crisis*
23 *expression has been detected and that if a second credible crisis*
24 *expression within a 72-hour period is detected, a crisis interruption*
25 *pause will be initiated, and the chatbot will suspend conversational*
26 *outputs until a human moderator has reviewed the credible crisis*
27 *expressions.*

28 (B) *The warning shall additionally do all of the following:*

29 (i) *Acknowledge the user’s distress in nonjudgmental language.*

30 (ii) *Encourage the user to seek immediate human support.*

31 (iii) *Communicate that many people feel relief after a short*
32 *conversation with a trained crisis counselor.*

33 (iv) *Communicate that reaching out during the crisis*
34 *interruption pause may help the user feel less alone and more*
35 *grounded.*

36 (v) *Prominently display contact information for the 988 Suicide*
37 *and Crisis Lifeline, including by providing call, text, and chat*
38 *options, as applicable, through immediate access links, to the*
39 *extent technically feasible.*

- 1 (2) For a second credible crisis expression detected in a 72-hour
2 period, ensure a crisis interruption pause commences immediately,
3 prevent the companion chatbot from generating conversational
4 outputs, and, during the crisis interruption pause, ensure the
5 companion chatbot does all of the following:
- 6 (A) Acknowledge the user’s distress in nonjudgmental language.
7 (B) Encourage the user to seek immediate human support,
8 including by communicating all of the following information:
- 9 (i) The crisis interruption pause is intended to interrupt
10 rumination and reduce emotional intensity.
11 (ii) Many people feel relief after a short conversation with a
12 trained crisis counselor.
13 (iii) Reaching out during the crisis interruption pause may help
14 the user feel less alone and more grounded.
- 15 (C) Prominently display contact information for the 988 Suicide
16 and Crisis Lifeline, including by providing call, text, and chat
17 options, as applicable, through immediate access links, to the
18 extent technically feasible.
- 19 (D) Inform the user that the crisis interruption pause will
20 continue until a human moderator has reviewed the chat and
21 determined an appropriate course of action in accordance with
22 the operator’s policy required by subdivision (a).
- 23 (d) (1) An operator shall not terminate a crisis interruption
24 pause until a human moderator has reviewed the credible crisis
25 expression in context and determined the appropriate course of
26 action, in accordance with the operator’s policy required by
27 subdivision (a).
- 28 (2) The human moderator shall document the basis for the
29 course of action taken under paragraph (1).
- 30 (e) An operator that communicates with a user during a crisis
31 interruption pause shall not do either of the following:
- 32 (1) Describe the crisis interruption pause as a punishment,
33 violation, or enforcement action.
34 (2) Provide the user with any diagnosis, labeling, or assessment
35 of the user’s risk levels.
- 36 22587.3. (a) An operator shall document all of the following
37 with respect to any companion chatbot that the operator makes
38 available in this state:
- 39 ~~(1) The existence of a graduated response system.~~
40 ~~(2)~~

- 1 (1) All credible crisis expressions detected by the ~~companion~~
2 ~~chatbot~~ operator.
- 3 ~~(3)~~
- 4 (2) The duration and conditions of ~~a~~ each crisis interruption
5 pause initiated by the ~~companion chatbot~~ operator.
- 6 (3) Any action taken by the operator in response to a crisis
7 interruption pause.
- 8 (b) (1) Beginning January 1, 2028, an operator shall annually
9 report to the Office of Suicide Prevention the items set forth in
10 subdivision (a) with respect to the previous calendar year.
- 11 (2) An operator shall ensure that the report required by this
12 subdivision does not contain any personal or identifying
13 information of a user or other individual.
- 14 22587.4. A violation of this chapter is enforceable pursuant to
15 Section 22605.

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