

Press Release

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### **SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Surgeon General's Call to Action: Warning Labels on Social Media Platforms**

Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general, recently announced that he would strongly advocate for a warning label on social media platforms advising parents that using the platforms might damage adolescents' mental health. Warning labels — like those that appear on tobacco and alcohol products — are one of the most powerful tools available to warn of negative consequences.

The proposal builds on several years of escalating warnings to Congress from the surgeon general. In a May 2023 advisory, he recommended that parents immediately set limits on phone use, and urged Congress to swiftly develop health and safety standards for technology platforms. Tech companies were also called upon to make changes: to share internal data on the health impact of their products; to allow independent safety audits; and restrict features like push notifications, autoplay and infinite scroll, which he says “prey on developing brains and contribute to excessive use.” It is anticipated that legislators will put forward a bill requiring a warning label, which would appear regularly on screens when people use social media sites.

The push for a warning label will create a divide between the Biden administration and the tech industry, which has sued several states for laws on social media. Technology companies are likely to argue that the science on the harmful effects of social media is not settled. They will also invoke free speech law, arguing that the government cannot force companies to carry a product warning, which is sometimes described as “compelled speech.”

That challenge may find a sympathetic ear in U.S. courtrooms, with a cohort of judges who show less deference to public health regulations than their predecessors did. For more than a decade, cigarette companies have successfully used a First Amendment argument to fend off a requirement that they print a graphic photograph of diseased lungs on tobacco products.

Past warning labels have had significant effects on behavior. In 1965, after a landmark report from the surgeon general, Congress voted to require all cigarette packages distributed in the United States to carry a warning that using the product “may be hazardous to your health.” Thus

began a 50-year decline in smoking. When the warning labels first appeared, around 42 percent of U.S. adults were daily cigarette smokers; by 2021, that portion had dropped to 11.5 percent.

There is fierce debate among researchers about whether social media is behind the crisis in child and adolescent mental health. In his new book, “The Anxious Generation,” social psychologist Jonathan Haidt points to the rise of smartphones as an inflection point that led to a sharp increase in suicidal behavior and reports of despair. Other experts say that, while the rise of social media has coincided with declines in well-being, there is no evidence that one caused the other, and point instead to factors like economic hardship, social isolation, racism, school shootings and the opioid crisis.

Dr. Murthy points to research showing that teens who spent more than three hours a day on social media faced a significantly higher risk of mental health problems, and that 46 percent of adolescents said that social media made them feel worse about their bodies. U.S. teens are spending an average of 4.8 hours per day on social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, according to a Gallup survey of more than 1,500 adolescents released last fall.

The platforms are designed to maximize how much time is spent utilizing them. For a child, whose impulse control is still developing, their brain is at a sensitive phase of development. Dr. Murthy has long indicated that he views social media as a health risk and warned that there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, Mental disorders can contribute to substance use and Substance Use Disorders (SUD). Studies found that people with a mental disorder, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may use drugs or alcohol as a form of self-medication. However, although some drugs may temporarily help with some symptoms of mental disorders, they may make the symptoms worse over time. Additionally, brain changes in people with mental disorders may enhance the rewarding effects of substances, making it more likely they will continue to use the substance. Additionally, substance use and SUDs can contribute to the development of other mental disorders. Substance use may trigger changes in brain structure and function that make a person more likely to develop a mental disorder.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is concerned about youth mental health and substance use, providing evidence-based prevention education throughout the year at school and in the community. Its Coalition is conducting a variety of prevention awareness campaigns entitled “Keeping Glen Cove SAFE” that educate youth, parents and professionals as well as provide links to services. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on [www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition](https://www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition) or visit SAFE’s website at [www.safeglencove.org](https://www.safeglencove.org).