

CALIFORNIA STATE BOARD OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES BILL ANALYSIS

BILL NUMBER: AB 1988 **VERSION: INTRODUCED FEBRUARY 13, 2026**

AUTHOR: PELLERIN **SPONSOR: AUTHOR**

STAFF RECOMMENDED POSITION: SUPPORT

SUBJECT: COMPANION CHATBOTS: CRISIS INTERRUPTION PAUSES

Summary: This bill seeks to improve safety protocols for chatbots by requiring them to use a graduated response warning system that includes a 20-minute crisis interruption pause when a user is expressing intent or desire to harm themselves or others.

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:

- 1) Requires when a companion chatbot operating in this state detects a credible crisis expression, it must do all of the following without immediately terminating the interaction with the user (BPC §22587.2):
- Acknowledge the user's distress in non-judgmental language;
 - Encourage them to seek immediate human support;
 - Provide the contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, including call, text, and chat options; and
 - Inform the user that a temporary pause may occur to allow space for de-escalation and human connection.
- 2) If after doing the above, the companion chatbot detects the user is reaffirming or escalating the credible crisis expression, or detects another expression, the chatbot shall initiate a 20-minute crisis interruption pause. (BPC §22587.2)
- 3) The chatbot is prohibited from describing this pause as a punishment, violation or enforcement action, and it must not diagnose, label or assess the person's risk level. (BPC §22587.2)
- 4) Requires chatbot operators to document the following for any companion chatbot that they make available in California (BPC §22587.3):
- The existence of a graduated response system;
 - All credible crisis expressions the chatbot detects; and
 - The duration and conditions of a crisis interruption pause its chatbot initiates.
- Beginning January 1, 2028, a chatbot operator must annually report this information to the Office of Suicide Prevention. (BPC §22587.3)
- 5) 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)

- 6) 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)
- 7) Defines a “credible crisis expression” as a statement by the user that reasonably indicates intent or desire to harm the user or others. (BPC §22587.1)
- 8) Defines a “crisis interruption pause” as a temporary suspension of conversation designed to disrupt rumination and encourage human support engagement, during which all of the following is done(BPC §22587.1):
 - The chatbot refrains from generating further conversation responses;
 - The chatbot displays a message stating 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 during the pause may help the person feel less alone and more grounded; and
 - The chatbot prominently displays 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline contact options, including immediate access links if technically feasible.

Comment:

- 1) **Author’s Intent.** In the intent language for the bill, the author states that moments of suicidal ideation or violent intent are often characterized by acute emotional distress, rumination, and hyperfocus rather than sustained or fixed intent, and that crisis counseling research shows that interrupting rumination and introducing timed pauses can reduce emotional intensity and impulsiveness. They note that the majority of crisis hotline engagements are brief, nonclinical, and focused on de-escalation, grounding, and connection to support, and that a structured pause from a companion chatbot engagement is a proportional safety intervention tool that encourages human connection and supports public safety.
- 2) **Required Annual Report.** BPC §22587.3(b) of this bill requires that beginning in 2028, chatbot operators must annually report the following to the Office of Suicide Prevention:

- The existence of a graduated response system;
- All credible crisis expressions detected by the companion chatbot; and
- The duration and conditions of a crisis interruption pause initiated by the chatbot.

Because some of the above information may include sensitive personal information, the Board may wish to consider requesting that the author specify that this reported information should be anonymized.

3) 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.

4) 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.

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

6) Support and Opposition.

Support: None at this time.

Opposition: None at this time.

7) History.

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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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 introduced, 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 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. 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.

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

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

1 SECTION 1. The Legislature finds and declares all of the
2 following:

3 (a) Moments of suicidal ideation or violent intent are often
4 characterized by acute emotional distress, cognitive narrowing,
5 rumination, and hyperfocus rather than sustained or fixed intent.

6 (b) Crisis counseling research demonstrates that interrupting
7 rumination and introducing time-based pauses can reduce
8 emotional intensity and impulsivity.

9 (c) The majority of crisis hotline engagements, including calls
10 to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, are brief, nonclinical, and
11 focused on deescalation, grounding, and connection to support.

12 (d) Companion chatbots are not substitutes for human crisis
13 intervention and are not suitable to perform diagnosis, crisis
14 counseling, or risk assessment.

15 (e) A structured pause in companion chatbot engagement is a
16 proportional safety intervention tool that encourages human
17 connection and supports public safety while reducing foreseeable
18 harm.

19 SEC. 2. Chapter 22.2.6 (commencing with Section 22587.1)
20 is added to Division 8 of the Business and Professions Code, to
21 read:

22
23 **Chapter 22.2.6. Companion Chatbots: Crisis**
24 **Interruption Pauses**
25

26 22587.1. As used in this chapter:

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

32 (b) (1) “Companion chatbot” means an artificial intelligence
33 system with a natural language interface that provides adaptive,

1 humanlike responses to user inputs and is capable of meeting a
2 user’s social needs, including by exhibiting anthropomorphic
3 features and being able to sustain a relationship across multiple
4 interactions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

23 (2) Intent or desire to harm others.

24 (d) “Crisis interruption pause” means a temporary suspension
25 of conversational output designed to disrupt rumination and
26 encourage human support engagement during which a companion
27 chatbot does all of the following:

28 (1) Refrains from generating further conversational responses.

29 (2) Displays to the user a message stating all of the following:

30 (A) The pause is intended to interrupt rumination and reduce
31 emotional intensity.

32 (B) Many people feel relief after a short conversation with a
33 trained crisis counselor.

34 (C) Reaching out during this pause may help the user feel less
35 alone and more grounded.

36 (3) Prominently displays 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline contact
37 options, including immediate access links if technically feasible.

38 (e) “Graduated response” means a multistep intervention that
39 escalates only after an initial supportive warning.

1 (f) “Operator” means a person that makes a companion chatbot
 2 available in this state.
 3 22587.2. (a) Notwithstanding any law, if a companion chatbot
 4 detects a credible crisis expression, the companion chatbot shall
 5 do all of the following without immediately terminating the
 6 interaction with the user:
 7 (1) Acknowledge the user’s distress in nonjudgmental language.
 8 (2) Encourage the user to seek immediate human support.
 9 (3) Provide contact information for the 988 Suicide and Crisis
 10 Lifeline, including call, text, and chat options.
 11 (4) Inform the user that a temporary pause may occur to allow
 12 space for deescalation and human connection.
 13 (b) Notwithstanding any law, if a companion chatbot detects
 14 that a user is reaffirming or escalating the credible crisis expression
 15 or detects a subsequent credible crisis expression after the
 16 companion chatbot has complied with subdivision (a), the
 17 companion chatbot shall initiate a crisis interruption pause of 20
 18 minutes.
 19 (c) Notwithstanding any law, a companion chatbot shall not do
 20 either of the following:
 21 (1) Describe a crisis interruption pause as a punishment,
 22 violation, or enforcement action.
 23 (2) Diagnose, label, or assess risk levels of a user.
 24 (d) An operator shall ensure that any companion chatbot it makes
 25 available in this state is compliant with this section.
 26 22587.3. (a) An operator shall document all of the following
 27 with respect to any companion chatbot that the operator makes
 28 available in this state:
 29 (1) The existence of a graduated response system.
 30 (2) All credible crisis expressions detected by the companion
 31 chatbot.
 32 (3) The duration and conditions of a crisis interruption pause
 33 initiated by the companion chatbot.
 34 (b) Beginning January 1, 2028, an operator shall annually report
 35 to the Office of Suicide Prevention the items set forth in
 36 subdivision (a) with respect to the previous calendar year.

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