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December 20, 2021

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Alphabet, Inc.
1600 Amphitheater Parkway
Mountain View, California 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai,

On December 9, the *New York Times* reported about a disturbing website linked to dozens, and potentially hundreds, of suicides.¹ The website draws 6 million page views a month—four times more views than the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline—and contains devastating content that explicitly encourages and assists people who are suffering to take their own lives. When asked by grieving families and public officials to steer visitors away from the site, Google refused and deflected responsibility. I write to urge Google to take responsibility and act pursuant to the Good Samaritan provisions of Section 230 to remove the website from search results.

We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, particularly among young people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate among 15-to-24-year-olds has increased 45% in the past decade. My office has heard from far too many parents and children who are struggling. As the *Times* piece notes, the website that was the subject of its reporting was primarily visited by young persons who had experienced mental illness. By providing instructions and social pressure, the site is helping to fuel this crisis and is directly culpable for the deaths of many young people.

Google has been warned and begged to intervene. But when grieving families and government officials asked Google to steer visitors away from the website, the company dodged responsibility. A mother who lost her 18-year-old son after he followed instructions on the website to take his own life asked Google for help. One Google policy specialist responded that the website's operator was "unhinged," but that the company would not act. Again, when Australian officials asked Google to remove the website from search results, Google refused, saying it would not act absent a legal requirement to do so.

¹ Megan Twohey and Gabriel J.X. Dance, "Where the Despairing Log On, and Learn Ways to Die," *New York Times* (Dec. 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/09/us/where-the-despairing-log-on.html>.

Today, many people know that Section 230 contains a liability shield that prevents tech platforms from being treated as publishers or speakers of content posted by users of their websites. But something that is too often lost in conversations about Section 230 is a central purpose of that provision: to encourage websites to regulate harmful content. Section 230 was included in the Communications Decency Act, which was enacted to make the internet safer for children. Section 230's liability shield is contained in the "Good Samaritan" provision, entitled "Protection for 'Good Samaritan' Blocking and Screening of Offensive Material." Congress made clear its intent for companies like Google to act as Good Samaritan managers of their platforms, not to shield it from its obligations to protect vulnerable communities.

Google's co-founder, Larry Page, said that he created the company "to make the world a better place." The website addressed in the *New York Times*' reporting is a straightforward example of the kinds of offensive material that Section 230 entrusts Google to screen—the type of content that makes the world a dark place for too many. Google has not only the ability but also the legal authority to do just that by steering people who are struggling away from this dangerous website. Google's hands are not tied, and it has a responsibility to act.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate