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May 22, 2025

Representative Marvin L. Abney
Chairman
House Finance Committee
State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02908

RE: H6128- RELATING TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE, DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITIES AND HOSPITALS - CORE STATE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS
SERVICES SYSTEMS-988

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the Committee:

We are writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Psychological Association to ask you to support Rhode Island's 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by voting to support H6128.

The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to designate "988" as the universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline. It offers 24/7/365 call, text and chat access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing various forms of emotional distress, including suicidal thoughts, substance use or any other mental health crisis. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support. 988 is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining customized local care and resources with national standards and best practices.

The Rhode Island Psychological Association unequivocally supports continued funding of this service, as it has provided a literal lifeline of support for people in need, especially when access to qualified behavioral health care continues to be a national problem. Earmarked taxes are a sustainable way to fund the 988 hotline sustainably.¹ Any disruption to 988 will leave Rhode Islanders vulnerable to unnecessary harm, undermine

¹ [1] Purtle, J., Wynecoop, M., Crane, M. E., and Stadnick, N. A. (2023). Earmarked taxes for mental health services in the United States: A local and state legal mapping study. *The Milbank Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12643>

trust in our state's fundamental safety net services and make re-establishing the 988 service difficult.

The 988 service fulfills a critical need in several ways:

- We know that when people are in crisis, they are more likely to get the help they need if it is very simple to access that help. Navigating the current healthcare system can be very challenging. In contrast, 988 is ideally designed. The number is short and easy to remember, and people or families in need may call for any type of mental health or substance use crisis. They do not need to stop and find the right number to match the problem they are currently experiencing.
 - As psychologists, any time we create a suicide safety plan with someone or even talk with them about their risk for suicide, we always make sure they are aware of 988 as an option. We are encouraged that we increasingly hear people in the community are already aware of 988.
 - In the same way that 911 has saved countless lives, an easy to remember 3-digit number is a vital lifeline for individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts, emotional distress, or any other behavioral health crisis.
 - The vision of 988 nationally is a system that links callers to a full continuum of crisis care, which consists of 3 key parts: someone to talk to (24/7 crisis call centers), someone to respond (mobile crisis response teams), and somewhere to go (crisis respite and stabilization centers).
 - Investing in the 988 program is an investment in the well-being of our community. It saves lives, alleviates strain on emergency services, and fosters a more compassionate approach to mental health crises.
 - Thousands of Rhode Islanders have been helped by 988. Since the launch in July 2022, nationally nearly 10 million calls, texts and chats have been received, and here in Rhode Island the 988 and BH Link hotline has answered over 65,000 calls. Rhode Island boasts a 98% in-state answer rate, one of the best in the country. Additionally, the Rhode Island speed to answer time of 2 seconds means that callers are getting immediate and swift attention.
 - The importance of 988 cannot be overstated. Continued funding will allow for the expansion of call center staffing and chat functionalities, ensuring more people in need can access help quickly and effectively.
 - By providing a designated crisis care hotline, 988 has the potential to divert many calls from 911, reducing the burden on emergency services and allowing them to focus on true public safety emergencies.
- The ease of access offered by 988 encourages individuals to seek help without hesitation. This can be a critical step in breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health issues and promoting timely intervention.
- The 988 long-term funding bill (H6128 and S892) establishes a long-term, and sustained, funding source for the state's 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Currently 988 is unfunded federal mandate. We need state legislation to ensure



that this is a critical lifeline for all Rhode Island residents. This legislation does not enact any new fees or taxes.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is much more than just a phone number; it's the cornerstone of a comprehensive crisis care continuum. It offers a central point of contact, connecting callers with trained professionals.

We would like to thank the sponsors for supporting this important community service with this legislation. Given these important factors, the Rhode Island Psychological Association asks all Rhode Island lawmakers to support the passage of H6128 to fund 988. It is a critical lifeline for Rhode Islanders and the moral responsibility of lawmakers to guarantee continued access to this vital service.

Sincerely,

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