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Representative Marvin Abney, Chairman
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

May 22, 2025

Dear Representative Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

On behalf of all the Horizon Healthcare Partners (HHP), our collective staffs, our Board of Directors, and the clients we serve, we submit this testimony today in support of H6128, the bill to ensure long-term funding for the state's **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**.

Community Care Alliance, Newport Mental Health, Thrive Behavioral Health, Tides Family Services, The Galilee Mission and CODAC are the six behavioral health and substance use organizations that comprise HHP. As you hopefully know, the HHP agencies provide critical mental health and substance use services to individuals and families that are most vulnerable in local communities across the state.

We submit written testimony today to urge you to support H6128 and ensure that 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, is adequately funded and sustained.

On October 17, 2020, Congress passed legislation, co-authored by Rhode Island's own Senator Jack Reed, creating the new 988 behavioral health hotline. The legislation, named the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to designate 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline.

The new 988 line replaces the National Suicide Lifeline which operates the 10-digit number: (800) 273-TALK (8255). The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** offers 24/7 call, text and chat access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing suicidal, substance use, and/or mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. 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 custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices.

This legislation establishes a long-term, and sustained, funding source for the state's 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. 988 is an unfunded federal mandate and while our state boasts one of the best in-state answer rates in the country, we need state legislation to

ensure that this critical lifeline for all Rhode Island residents is fully funded each year with room to expand the 988 vision of “someone to talk to, someone to respond, and somewhere to go.”

The bill would direct monies from the already established 911 and first responder surcharges on mobile phones to include funding the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. **This legislation does not enact any new fees or taxes as the 911 and first responder fees are currently in place and the state is already collecting monies for Rhode Island’s first responder needs including 911.**

The implementation of the 988-dialing code as the national number for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline represents a monumental step forward in mental health support. This easily remembered three-digit number provides a vital lifeline for individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts, emotional distress, or any other behavioral health crisis.

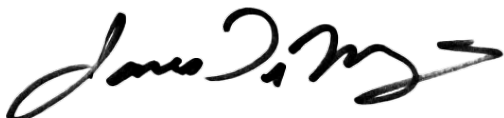
Thousands of Rhode Islanders have been helped by 988. Since the launch in July 2022, nationally nearly 10 million calls, texts and chats have been received, and here in Rhode Island the 988 and BH Link hotline has answered over 65,000 calls. Rhode Island boasts a 98% in-state answer rate, one of the best in the country. Additionally, the Rhode Island speed to answer time of 2 seconds means that callers are getting immediate and swift attention.

Investing in the 988 program is an investment in the well-being of our community. By ensuring sufficient funding for its continued growth and operation, we are creating a lifeline of hope and support for those struggling most. We can save lives, alleviate strain on emergency services, and foster a more compassionate approach to mental health crises.

For all these reasons, we urge you to support H6128 and ensure that 988 has ongoing and sustainable funding. Thank you for considering our testimony and we hope you will consider the bill favorably; we know doing so will make a tremendous difference in the lives of the thousands of Rhode Islanders who will benefit by passage of this bill.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me, JDinunzio@hhpartners, if you have questions or need more information about 988. We look forward to working with the legislature as we continue to care for the behavioral health needs of the citizens of our great state. We stand as your partner in ensuring that all Rhode Islanders have access to behavioral health services to support their best selves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James DiNunzio", with a stylized flourish at the end.

James DiNunzio
Chief Executive Officer, Horizon Healthcare Partners