

Representative Marvin Abney
Chair of the House Finance Committee
Dear Representative Abney

I want to voice my support for H 6128. This bill would establish the 988-lifeline as part of a core state behavioral health services system and include expanding the use of the 911 and first responder surcharges to include the 988-lifeline fee.

As a Child and Adolescent psychiatrist treating Rhode Island psychiatric patients for almost 35 years, I am aware of how valuable the 988 program is to Rhode Island residents facing an emotional/behavioral crisis. Often these crises can be dangerous, (about half with suicidal thoughts according to the 988 dashboard). Yet the vast majority of the calls (96% also according to the 988 dashboard) are resolved over the phone by a crisis counselor providing emotional support or connecting them to local services and resources rather than an in-person intervention. This service is always available with an average response time of 2 seconds and 98% of the time answered locally which is so important in a crisis.

Furthermore, its focus on mental health and use of mental health counselors is typically more appropriate than the general 911 response for mental health symptoms.

988 also takes a tremendous burden off of other systems in the state. For example, users of 988 lessen the need of the 911 hotline and can divert many from using hospital emergency departments, police involvement, or higher, more expensive levels of care such as inpatient hospitalizations if they are not needed. It is even possible that the 988 availability is one of the reasons that there have been fewer children and adolescents waiting on medical floors of Hasbro Hospital for an available psychiatric bed than a few years ago.

Therefore, I believe the continuation of this valuable resource is necessary and needs the long-term financial protection to ensure its continued viability. The shortage of health care providers made more severe with the closing of Anchor Medical Associates, and the uncertainty of federal funding, makes this state protection even more critical. This proposed bill directs money from the already established 911 and first responder surcharges on mobile phones. To include funding for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, therefore does not require new fees or taxes.

I believe these are important bills and strongly encourage your support for their passage. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email or call me at either of the numbers below.

Thank you for your consideration,

Gerald Tarnoff,
MD
432-1536, or 401-474-4198

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