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May 6, 2025

The Honorable Representative Marvin L. Abney
Chair of the Senate Finance Committee
82 Smith Street Providence, RI 02903

Re: Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 6128 and Senate Bill 892

Chairman Abney and esteemed Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Joe Ash – Director for Rhode Island’s BH Link and 988 Call Center. I am writing today in support of H-6128 and S892, both of which propose the appropriation of funding for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in Rhode Island.

The work we do at the 988 call center is person-centered and emphasizes least restrictive interventions – we avoid costly and unnecessary hospital admission and police contact, all while offering our community members a human experience during what is likely a very overwhelming moment in their lives. We’ve made so much progress since taking on Rhode Island’s Lifeline.

- Lifeline call volume has more than doubled over the past few years, illustrating the serious need for this resource.
- Since the launch of 988, back in July of 2022 the call center has taken over 19,000 988 calls, in addition to the over 30,000 calls that have come through the BH Link’s statewide crisis line (414-LINK).
- Of these calls, 2,500 community members in need have reported recent thoughts of suicide and only 14 % of those contacts required the dispatch and support of first responders.
- We’ve also launched a 988 follow-up program, offering support to help-seekers beyond even their initial contact with our call center. Since implementation our counselors have engaged in over 4,000 secondary follow-up calls, providing a deeper continuity of support than ever before.
- 500+ adults who contacted the line were able to make an immediate connection to the program’s statewide walk-in triage center and an over 5,000 more were provided with some other type of referral or resources.
- Since becoming Rhode Island’s designated 988 call center, has consistently led the nation’s 988 network in answer rates (averaging 98%) and speed to answer (Averaging 2.0 seconds).

Beyond these successes, your 988 crisis center has become more and more engrained in the fabric of our community’s behavioral health support system:

- Inpatient and residential programs reference 988 as a part of their aftercare planning process at discharge and outpatient providers and their clients use our line when in crisis.
- We coordinate care on a daily basis with members of Rhode Island’s CCBHC and MRSS systems, which offer mobile crisis response services throughout the state.
- We’re building stronger connections with our local first responder departments who, more and more, are identifying behavioral health cases on-scene and offering information about 988.
- We’ve spent several years cultivating trust and awareness in our communities. People are using this resource and spreading the word.

In reflecting on all of the great work that’s been done so far and in looking ahead to the future of 988 in Rhode Island, I think it’s important to emphasize that all of this currently rests upon a foundation of uncertainty. Everyone who’s been involved in answering the call of this essential but unfunded federal mandate has poured their heart and soul into making sure we keep this resource alive through a delicate juggling act of temporary and highly restricted grant funding, but there will come a time when that isn’t enough.

If the dollars go away tomorrow and we have to shut down operations, even for a time, that’s a bell that can’t be un-rung. All of the progress we’ve made, all of the systems we’ve established, and all the trust that we’ve built are demolished. Just like that, thousands of Rhode Islanders lose what has become an integral life-saving support. And the reason will have been because we opted to gamble. We chose to risk lives on the assumption that we can continue to string together shaky funding sources in a time when the sustainability of grant funding has never been more questionable.

When I spoke in front of the finance committee last year, I mentioned a few reasons for supporting the previous iteration of this bill. I spoke about the common sense of supporting work that saves lives and saves money. But I want to close this testimony with other side of that coin, which is what it costs us if this all goes away. And for that reason, I urge you to pass this bill and let Rhode Island be an example to the rest of the country on how to put community first.

Thank you for your time and attention, and for your service to our state. Please submit this to the record as written testimony.

Respectfully submitted,
Joe Ash, MSW, QMHP
BH Link Administrative Director