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Testimony on H-6128, 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline House Finance Committee May 22, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Abney and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio. I am resident of Cumberland and a public health professional offering this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your favorable consideration and support of H-6128 – An Act Relating to Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals – Core State Behavioral Health Crisis Services Systems-988, sponsored by Representative Shallcross Smith and co-sponsored by Representatives Hull, Corvese, J. Lombardi, Batista, Solomon, Casimiro, Fellela, Casey, and Cruz.

This bill would formally establish the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline as a central component of Rhode Island’s behavioral health crisis system—an essential investment in timely, trauma-informed mental health care.

The Public Health Case for 988

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of more than 200 state and local call centers, providing free and confidential support 24/7 to people experiencing mental health, substance use, or suicidal crises. Unlike 911, which traditionally routes crisis calls to law enforcement or emergency departments, 988 connects callers to trained mental health professionals equipped to provide de-escalation, triage, and referral to community-based services.¹

Before the launch of 988 in July 2022, individuals in crisis or those witnessing others in need of immediate mental or behavioral health support had few alternatives to dialing 911, often resulting in outcomes that were traumatic, stigmatizing, and expensive. It is estimated that 7% to 10% of all police encounters involve a person who has a mental illness, and these encounters tend to not be violent, these interactions still result in disproportionately high arrest, injury, and fatality rates among individuals with mental health conditions.²

In many cases, people in crisis are transported to emergency rooms in handcuffs or restraints—reinforcing the harmful stereotype that mental illness equates to danger. This model not only criminalizes mental illness but often worsens trauma for the individuals involved.

Equity, Access, and Cost-Savings

The 988 Lifeline is a public health tool that advances health equity. Callers receive immediate support from a crisis counselor who can:³

- De-escalate emotionally charged situations
- Provide phone-based triage and support
- Connect individuals to local resources regardless of income, insurance or zip code

¹ Saunders, “988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.”

² Borum, “Police Perspectives on Responding to Mentally Ill People in Crisis”; McCauley, “The Cumulative Probability of Arrest by Age 28 Years in the United States by Disability Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender”; Laniyonu and Goff, “Measuring Disparities in Police Use of Force and Injury among Persons with Serious Mental Illness”; Kindy et al., “Fatal Police Shootings of Mentally Ill People Are 39 Percent More Likely to Take Place in Small and Midsized Areas.”

³ “FAQ.”

Importantly, 988 also reduces the burden on emergency services and supports diversion from the criminal justice system—ensuring that people in crisis receive care, not punishment.⁴

Maintaining high-functioning call centers with locally trained counselors is essential. Without adequate and continued funding, Rhode Island risks losing the current 99% in-state answer rate (as of April 2025 – the highest in the country), and thousands of residents may not reach help when they need it most.⁵

So far in 2025, the 988 Lifeline has received 3,484 calls from Rhode Islanders. While that number demonstrates effective outreach, 45 call this year alone went unanswered or were abandoned, with 116 unanswered in 2024.⁶ These are not just numbers—they are missed opportunities to prevent harm, save lives, and build trust in a mental health system that works.

Conclusion

We need to properly fund the 988 Lifeline to ensure that the mental health crises of all are met with a mental health response. Doing so will result in substantial cost-savings and allow for law enforcement resources to be saved for non-mental health-related emergencies. I respectfully ask your consideration and passage of H-6128.

Thank you for your time.

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⁴ Fader-Towe and Vorpahl, “Biden Administration Transitions to New 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to Help People in Mental Health Crisis.”

⁵ “State-Based Monthly Reports.”

⁶ “State-Based Monthly Reports.”

Reference:

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