



RE: H6128 988 Sustainable Funding

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,

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of H6128 the bill to ensure funding for the state's 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. My name is Kerrie Constant; I am a Warwick, RI, resident and a mom of two adult children who struggle with mental health.

I am also the Area Director for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Rhode Island Chapter (AFSP-RI). I support the work of AFSP-RI volunteers, many whom have experienced a suicide loss, have lived experience or struggle with their mental health. They are all dedicated to our mission to save lives and bring hope to those affected by suicide. Along with our AFSP-RI volunteers and in collaboration with other mental health organizations in Rhode Island we work to address suicide as a public health issue. Research shows suicide is preventable. Ensuring Rhode Islanders have local access for somewhere to call when experiencing a mental health crisis is an important resource for prevention.

This is my third year advocating for sustainable funding for 988 and each year I share my personal story about my son. A few weeks before my son's 21st he was showing signs of severe depression. At first, I didn't talk to him about it; I thought maybe he was just stressed over college finals. It happened that I took a mental health first aid class around that time, which made me realize my son was in crisis. I went home and asked him if he thought about taking his life, and without skipping a beat, he said yes. He was not planning on living past his 21st Birthday. At that moment, I did not know what to do, how to help him, or who to call. Luckily, we kept him safe and eventually got him to help, but it took a few days. Those few days felt like an eternity. I couldn't sleep thinking- what if he took off or made an attempt. All I could think about was how I could keep my son alive. I think about it all the time, what if I didn't ask him- what would have happened? If there was a local 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, he could have talked to someone, I could have talked to someone, and we could have accessed local help much sooner. If we think of our mental health as important as our physical health and a loved one was experiencing a physical health crisis, like a heart attack, we wouldn't have to wonder where to get help- we would call 911, and that 911 call wouldn't get routed out of state. We would receive immediate response with access to local care. Responding to a mental health crisis should work the same way- call 988 and receive an immediate response with access to local mental healthcare.

Between January and February of this year, 1,991 calls to 988 were routed to Rhode Island, a 90% increase compared to the same time frame just two years earlier. Lifeline evaluations and caller feedback show crisis counselors effectively reduce distress and suicidality and help tens of thousands of people get through crises daily. Most callers are deescalated over the phone, with links made to in-person services when needed.

Nationally, an average of 10% of law enforcement agencies' total budgets and 21% of total staff time is spent responding to and transporting those with mental health conditions. Full implementation and promotion of 988 will reduce healthcare spending with early intervention, reduce the burden on emergency rooms and law enforcement, and improve outcomes for individuals experiencing a suicide or behavioral health crisis.

We all have a role to play in preventing suicide, and with your support, passage of this legislation will affirm Rhode Island's commitment to improving the lives of our residents and preventing the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future.

Sincerely,

Kerrie Constant
Area Director, AFSP Rhode Island Chapter
Kent County, Warwick, Rhode Island