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Sent via email to: Christopher O'Brien, Committee Clerk, at HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov

House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: House Bill – H 6128

Dear Speaker and members of the House Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of H 6128, the bill to put in place a permanent and reliable funding mechanism for our state's 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. My name is Kim Lees and I am a lifelong resident of Rhode Island, currently residing in the Town of Lincoln. I am a volunteer and an advocate for the RI Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). I have been on the committee for the Northern RI AFSP Out of the Darkness Walk the past several years and was also the Chair for the Walk in 2023. I have spoken before the Senate Finance Committee. But most importantly, and what brings me here, I am a suicide loss survivor. I now walk every year for Kyle's Storm Troopers...a team I formed in honor of my brother Kyle who died by suicide in February of 2021.

February 26, 2021 is the day that has changed my life and the lives of many others and the reason why I am here. That is the day that I received a phone call that my brother Kyle had died – he had taken his own life that morning. We were 11 months apart and we lived 4 minutes away from each other. Never in a million years would I have expected to have received that phone call. It has completely devastated our family, still to this day, and I still feel like we are picking up the pieces. This is not something that we would have ever expected. It was in the midst of Covid and, as you know, most businesses, including doctor's offices had limited appointments. We have no idea if he attempted to even call a doctor to reach out for help, but like many men who want to appear strong even in the hardest of times, I am quite sure he did not reach out for help. Even to this day, it is still exceedingly difficult to get any kind of mental health counseling or treatment without waiting for months, seeing if they accept your insurance or without paying a good amount of money. Then comes along the 988 hotline.

According to 2022 statistics, a person dies by suicide every 11 minutes in this country and it reached a record high in 2022 - over 950K youth and 1.6M adults attempted suicide. The implementation of the 988 hotline, which went live in July of 2022, was a huge step forward in helping those who are experiencing a behavioral health emergency and need immediate help. Connecting individuals with mental health services and resources is a vital component in suicide prevention. By offering immediate help to everyone who may need it, crisis lines provide invaluable support at critical times. In RI alone, there were 2,724 calls to 988 from July-

December of 2022. In 2023, there were 10,034 calls and in 2024 it increased to 13,950 calls to the RI 988 hotline. 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.

However, what concerns me is that calls that are not answered locally are routed to an out-of-state overflow facility or are abandoned by their caller. Nationally, about 10% of calls are transferred to out-of-state overflow facilities and 11% are abandoned by the caller – abandoned!! If overflow facility counselors are not familiar with local resources, they may not be able to assist callers with treatment referrals or extra assistance, which can be better provided from local crisis centers. In fact, a close friend of mine, after 988 was implemented, told me about a member of her family called 988 and was on hold for over 20 minutes! This should never, ever happen during such a crisis – time is of the essence. Luckily, he had a family member who showed up to help him, which ultimately saved his life. This is where we need your help – we need to do better.

As states debate their fiscal year budgets, long-term funding of local 988 crisis call centers may become an issue since only a handful of states have chosen to enact legislation for the 988 telecommunication fees that are intended to sustainably fund local crisis call centers. Although federal investments have assisted with the implementation of 988, ongoing funding for local crisis call centers relies heavily on local and state funds, as local crisis call centers historically receive minimal funding from the federal government. Under the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, states can collect cell phone fees to sustainably fund their local. Adequate funding is needed to ensure that calls can be answered locally 24/7/365 by individuals who have been trained to handle suicide risk and other mental health crisis situations, are supervised by a mental health clinician, and are familiar with available community mental health services. Funding is also needed to ensure a full continuum of crisis care and collaborate and coordinate with 911 and emergency services when needed. It would not enact any new fees or taxes given that the state is already collecting monies for Rhode Island First Responder needs, including 911. Interestingly, a recent poll of over 800 voters found that almost 4 out of 5 (79%) agreed that they would be willing to pay a small monthly fee on their phone bill for 988.

Had the 988 lifeline been around in February of 2021, I would like to think it would have saved my brother - but sadly I will never know that. One thing we can ALL do together is to support the funding to the 988 hotline to ensure that crisis care is available for all Rhode Islanders at the most critical time – and spare the devastation of suicide across our state and our country.

While there is nothing I could ever do to bring my brother back, I can honor his memory by stepping forward and asking for your support.

I humbly ask that you support House bill H-6128 by passing this most important and lifesaving bill and urge your colleagues to do the same. 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.

In the words of Dr. Suess **"unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot; nothing is going to get better. It's not."**

I thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kim Lees

Cc: Speaker Shekarchi - rep-shekarchi@rilegislature.gov and
Rep. Mary Ann Shallcross Smith - rep-shallcross-smith@rilegislature.gov