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Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill No. 7127 - Article 10 – Health and Human Services, 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

House Finance Committee

March 4, 2026

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-7127 – Article 10 – Health and Human Services.

This article would fund the continuation and codification of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. As a public health advocate, I believe this infrastructure is a fundamental investment in timely, trauma-informed mental health care for the well-being of Rhode Island’s families.

A Comprehensive Public Health Approach

A public health framework approach recognizes that a mental health crisis is not merely a purely clinical event, but one that recognizes that suicide is a public health challenge for which not only do we need to address the root causes that adversely affect and exacerbate health inequities but also that we must adopt evidence-based suicide care and policies that support those in crisis. The 988-crisis line is one such policy.

The Public Health Case for 988

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

Before the designation of 988 in July 2022, individuals had few alternatives to 911. Research indicates that 7% to 10% of all police encounters involve a person with mental illness. While these encounters are typically non-violent, they result in disproportionately high arrest, injury, and fatality rates.² In many cases, people in crisis were transported to emergency rooms in handcuffs or restraints—reinforcing the harmful stereotype that mental illness equates to danger. This not only criminalizes mental illness, the overutilization of emergency health care services results in poor-quality care, longer wait times to access treatment higher health care costs and even potential forced medical treatment.³

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:⁴

- 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 American Public Health Association, *Public Health Actions That Support Implementation of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline*.

⁴ 988 Lifeline, “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.⁵

Maintaining high-functioning call centers with locally trained counselors is essential. Without adequate and continued funding, Rhode Island risks losing the current 97% in-state answer rate (as of January 2026 – the second highest in the country), and thousands of residents may not reach help when they need it most.⁶

US Department of Health and Human Services data shows that in 2025, the 988 Lifeline received 15,105 calls from Rhode Islanders.⁷ Comparing January 2026 to January 2025, the crisis line received 347 more calls this year.⁸ These are not just numbers, these are people in our community who are asking for help.

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-7127.

Thank you for your time.

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⁵ Fader-Towe and Vorpahl, “Biden Administration Transitions to New 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to Help People in Mental Health Crisis.”

⁶ 988 Lifeline, “State-Based Monthly Reports.”

⁷ Vibrant Emotional Health, *988 In-State Monthly Reports 2025*.

⁸ Vibrant Emotional Health, *988 In-State Monthly Report January 2026*; Vibrant Emotional Health, *988 In-State Monthly Reports 2025*.