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Sent via email to HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov

Honorable Chairman Marvin L. Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: H 8177 — 988 CALL CENTER FUNDING AND OPERATIONS ACT

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee:

Thank you, Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is Kim Lees. I'm a lifelong Rhode Islander from Lincoln, an advocate and volunteer with the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and a suicide loss survivor. I'm here to urge you to pass **H 8177** out of committee so Rhode Island can sustain a strong, independent **988** crisis lifeline.

On the morning of February 26, 2021, the phone rang and I will never forget the words I heard - that my brother Kyle died by suicide. We were extremely close—born 11 months apart in the same year and living just minutes from each other at the time of his death. We were true Irish Twins and apparently I used to walk around telling everybody that. We were so close that we shared the same group of friends throughout our childhood. This call, his suicide, came out of nowhere. It blindsided and shattered our family, and we're still living with the impact every single day.

Kyle died during the height of COVID, when many services were hard to reach. Even now, people face long waits for counseling, confusion about coverage, and the cost of care. In a crisis, you don't have days or weeks—you have minutes. **988** gives Rhode Islanders a simple, free, 24/7 way to reach trained counselors by phone, text, or chat, right when someone is ready to ask for help.

Since 988 launched in July 2022, Rhode Island's 988 center has answered more than 64,000 calls. Monthly call volume has more than tripled—from about 490 calls in the first month to roughly 1,530 by July 2025. That growth is proof that people are using a lifeline that works—but it also means we must keep pace with staffing, training, and technology so every call is answered quickly and locally.

When contacts overflow out of state, Rhode Islanders may reach someone who doesn't know our local resources. In a mental health crisis, **time is everything**. We need the capacity to keep contacts in Rhode Island—answered fast, by people who can connect someone to the right in-state support.

The challenge is sustainability. Start-up federal dollars helped launch 988, but those grants are temporary. **H 8177** creates a dedicated, restricted funding stream—modeled after 911—so 988 can reliably support staffing, technology, and public awareness, year after year.

I can't know whether 988 would have saved my brother. But I do know this: sustainable funding for 988 gives people a real chance to survive their hardest moment—and it can spare other families the lifelong devastation of suicide.

Someone I loved died by suicide. He was not weak, he was not selfish and he was not a coward. Although he hid it well, he was in great pain and lost site of hope. Every 40 seconds someone dies by suicide and every 41 seconds someone like me is left with the stigma and never ending “why?”.

I'm here to honor Kyle and on behalf of others who no longer have a voice by asking you to take action today and help bring hope to Rhode Islanders.

So I'm respectfully urging you: **please pass H 8177 out of the House Finance Committee**. This bill ensures that when a Rhode Islander reaches out to 988—by call, text, or chat—someone answers quickly, someone answers locally, and someone can connect them to real help. Your vote to move this bill forward is a lifesaving decision.

As Dr. Seuss wrote, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.”

I thank you for your time.



Kim Lees
Lincoln, RI

AFSP – RI Chapter
Advocacy Committee Member
Northern RI Walk Committee
Team Captain of *Kyle's Storm Troopers*, Northern RI Out of the Darkness Walk since 2021

