

To the Honorable **Chairman Marvin L. Abney** and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Melissa Ames. I am a Rhode Island resident and the **Advocacy Committee Policy Chair** for the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in support of H8177. I am writing to you today not just as an advocate, but as someone who is still carrying a weight that never truly goes away after losing someone to suicide.

On June 1, 2015, my life changed forever. It started as a perfectly normal morning of school drop-offs and work emails. Then, at 10:00 AM, a single question shattered everything: “Did you hear about Johnnie?” Johnnie had been my friend for 24 years. Just two weeks earlier, he was at my 40th birthday party, laughing and celebrating. We had talked only three days before he died. When the news was confirmed, time simply ceased to exist for me. While the rest of the world kept moving, I was trapped in a slow-motion grief that I still navigate today, eleven years later.

Johnnie struggled with depression that made him feel utterly alone, even though he was surrounded by people who loved him. The crisis in our state has only intensified since I lost my friend. **Suicide remains the 14th leading cause of death in Rhode Island**, and for our younger generations, it is the **second leading cause of death for Rhode Islanders aged 15-34**. These are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they are friends, siblings, and children.

The Rhode Island 988 Lifeline has become a literal lifeline for those in their darkest moments. Since its launch in 2022, the service has seen a **212% increase in call volume**, rising from just 490 calls in July 2022 to **1,530 calls in July 2025**. Despite this surge, our state maintains a **98% in-state answer rate**, often answering in under two seconds.

However, this system currently relies on temporary federal grants that are set to expire. **H 8177 provides a sustainable path forward by establishing a "988 fee"—a monthly surcharge on telecommunications services**. This mechanism ensures that the 988 call center has a reliable revenue source deposited into a **restricted receipt account**, strictly dedicated to staffing, technology, and public awareness. Importantly, it follows the model already used for our 911 services, recognizing that mental health emergencies are just as critical as any other.

Crucially, sustainable funding for 988 directly **reduces the burden on our local law enforcement and emergency services**. Currently, a typical 911 dispatch for a mental health crisis costs taxpayers thousands of dollars and often results in unnecessary police presence or expensive emergency room visits. In contrast, **less than 2% of 988 Lifeline**

**calls require the dispatch of emergency medical services.** By diverting these calls to trained mental health professionals, we allow our police and EMS to focus on public safety emergencies while ensuring those in crisis receive specialized, de-escalated care.

Chairman Abney, I am asking you and this committee to help ensure that no other Rhode Islander has to experience the 10:00 AM phone call that changed my life. Please support H 8177 and the funding needed for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Let's choose hope for the Ocean State.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Melissa Ames

Advocacy Committee Policy Chair

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Rhode Island Chapter

