



May 14, 2026

The Honorable Representative Marvin L. Abney
Chair of the House Finance Committee
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: House Bill 8177 - 988 Crisis Line

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island's (MHARI) support for House Bill 8177, which establishes a dedicated funding mechanism to sustain the state's 988 Suicide Prevention and Crisis Line. We respectfully urge the Committee to pass this important legislation.

MHARI is a private nonprofit advocacy organization committed to protecting the rights, dignity, and well-being of individuals living with mental health conditions. I also speak today from personal experience. In 2016, **I survived a suicide attempt**. I know firsthand how critical timely support can be during moments of despair. Crisis lines like 988 can offer connection, empathy, and safety when a person feels isolated and overwhelmed. These services save lives.

Ensuring the long-term stability of 988 is essential. States are required to implement 988 through a federal mandate, yet no permanent federal funding source has been provided to sustain operations. In response, **at least eleven states have established modest telecommunications surcharges—similar to the funding structure used for 911**—to support their crisis systems. These assessments are generally small, often between \$0.25 and \$0.75 per month, but they generate reliable revenue to maintain staffing, training, and service capacity. Rhode Island could pursue a similar approach, potentially with **a delayed start date** to allow time for implementation planning and public education.

At the same time, a sustainable solution may include **multiple funding strategies**. Options could include dedicating a portion of state lottery revenues; raising income taxes on the wealthiest Rhode Islanders; or increasing sales taxes on products such as vaping devices, hookah, or kratom. Each of these approaches reflects a shared principle: small, collective contributions can make a life-saving difference. Whether through modest fees, targeted revenues, or voluntary giving, the goal is the same—to ensure that help is there when it's needed most. By exploring a combination of options, Rhode Island can build a stable and sustainable foundation for 988.



If we truly believe that mental health is as important as physical health, we must create a dedicated funding mechanism for 988—just as we have done for 911.

It is also important to establish a permanent funding stream so that other sources of funding—such as **SAMHSA block grants—are not diverted** from local organizations to support 988 operations. These grants sustain a number of small nonprofit organizations, including MHARI.

At its core, 988 exists to save lives. But to do that, we must ensure the system is not only established, but also sustained, accountable, and responsive. When someone reaches out to 988, they are making a courageous decision to seek help. We have a responsibility to be there on the other end of that call—every time.

For these reasons, MHARI respectfully urges the Committee to pass this legislation and establish a dedicated, long-term funding source to support its operations.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie-Marie Pisciotta'.

Laurie-Marie Pisciotta
Executive Director
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