



March 10, 2022

House Energy, Telecommunications and Utilities- 988 Phone Fee Proponent

Chairperson Finch and members of the House Energy, Telecommunications and Utilities Committee:

Thank you for the the opportunity to provide testimony in support of the establishing a phone fee as a reliable and sustainable funding stream for the 988 mental health and suicide prevention hotline services. My organization, the Kansas Suicide Prevention Headquarters (KSPHQ), is a one of three National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) call centers operating for Kansas. My organization provides first line coverage for 103 counties in Kansas and backup coverage to Johnson and Sedgwick. We are the only crisis contact center to offer text and online chat support. We are strongly in favor of the legislature enacting policy which will identify a strong and sustainable funding stream for 988 services.

In response to the passage of the federal *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020*, my organization has been working closely with the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services and the other two crisis call centers to improve Kansas's capacity to answer NSPL calls in-state rather than rolling to an out of state center. Through an investment in hiring and training workforce at the three crisis call centers, the in-state answer rate for the NSPL has improved by 26% to a monthly average of over 80%. While we are proud of these gains, it is necessary to increase the answer rate even more before 988 goes live on July 16, 2022.

It is important for the committee to understand the significant investment of time and resources required to build and maintain a sufficient workforce to meet the level of need currently in Kansas. Our hotline counselors participate in approximately 100 hours of training which includes live instruction, independent study, observation of live phone calls and extensive role play practice. A significant portion of administrative and supervision time is allocated to the preparation of our counselors due to the sensitive nature and widely varied needs of our callers. Due to the highly intense nature of crisis phone work we experience high turnover, and have found that a model of continually operating training sessions is necessary to maintain appropriate staffing levels. Understanding the nature of our workforce is essential to understanding the need for a sufficient and reliable funding stream. Reductions in staffing levels due to interruptions in funding will be impossible to correct in a timely manner.

Robust funding for 988 services also holds the promise of reducing the burden of mental health calls placed on other emergency services like 911, law enforcement and emergency medical services. In their report to Congress, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Vibrant Emotional Health estimated 8% of all 911 calls are related to emotional disturbance. The report estimates that between 10-30% of these mental health related calls will self-divert from 911 to 988 as awareness of the line grows. Additionally, representatives from 988 crisis call centers are in the planning phase with the 911 Coordinating Council contractors to adapt a 911 to 988 call transfer model which has been used successfully in other regions of the country. The ability of 988 to handle a proportion of mental health calls currently serviced by 911 is further backed up by the current Kansas crisis line network's record of activating 911 emergency response for less than 10% of calls.



Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ

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Over the course of developing and refining the 988 system, it will be essential for 988 and 911 to work together to best meet the needs of Kansans in a mental health crisis. It is essential that the services not be seen as in competition with each other, but instead as two sides of the same coin which both require and deserve sustainable and reliable funding mechanisms. It was likely the acknowledgment of this reality which led to a compromise on \$0.20 per line being reached with the three largest telecommunications providers in Kansas.

The people of Kansas cannot afford for 988 to lose functionality during years when there are reductions in state revenues and mental health budget allocations. We will put lives at risk if there is insufficient ability to answer every call that comes into Kansas in a timely manner. Calls to our local contact centers at this time are answered within **15 seconds**. This is a trend we must continue. It is imperative that financial resources continue to be made available to crisis call centers, so that we can meet the increased demand coming in July. Vibrant Emotional Health, the national administrators of the hotline, anticipate Kansas 988 will require at least **\$6 million** in funding in FY 23 to meet call/text demand only. A \$0.20 per line fee is sufficient for these expenses.

Identifying a steady, sustainable, and reliable source of funding to be dispersed by the legislature for purposes of delivering 988 services is essential. Thank you to the committee for considering the addition of a telecommunications fee to meet this very real demand for crisis services by Kansans. I am available to answer the committee's questions at the appropriate time.

Sincerely,

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What is 988?

The **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** is getting a major overhaul; on July 16, 2022, dialing 9-8-8 from any phone line will connect you, or someone you love, to a crisis call center staffed by trained crisis counselors who are prepared to help you navigate any mental health concern. Implementation of 9-8-8 will mean that people who are in crisis or experiencing mental health distress are one, easy to remember, phone call away from receiving the help they need.

How Does 988 Work?

9-8-8 phone calls are routed by the caller's area-code to a near-by, local crisis call center. The people of Kansas are served by three, 9-8-8 crisis call centers which are COMCARE of Sedgwick County, Johnson County Mental Health Center, and Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ. All 9-8-8 crisis call centers strive to provide quality services aligned to best-practice, clinical recommendations approved by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Crisis call centers also undergo an accreditation process, which evaluates the quality of their training programs and service delivery.



When Should I Call 988?

Anyone in need of mental health or crisis support for themselves or someone else should call 9-8-8 starting **July 16, 2022**. Until that time, help can be found at 1-800-273-8255.

When a person calls or texts 988, they can expect a local counselor to immediately begin providing crisis counseling. Current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline call data shows that the majority of callers

(over 80%) are able to receive the help they need over the phone; thereby reducing the need for an in-person crisis response.

Mental health emergencies are different from police, fire, or other medical emergencies. That's why the response from 988 crisis counselors is different from the response from 9-1-1. 9-8-8 is designed to serve the person right where they are, without the need for an in-person response. And when in-person support is needed, then those types of interventions are made available in as timely a manner as possible. Hotlines are effective and save lives.

Even after July 16, 2022, anyone experiencing a life threatening emergency such as a house fire or home invasion should call 9-1-1 for assistance. Collaboration is on-going among the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), the 9-8-8 Planning team, and representatives from 9-1-1 to roll out 9-8-8 and ensure widespread, safe services for all Kansans.



How Can 988 Help Me?

9-8-8 is available to help a person in a mental health crisis. The phone is answered by highly trained, crisis counselors who are prepared to deliver supportive counseling to people experiencing a variety of concerns. Counselors set out to meet the unique needs of each individual contact because of the belief that a crisis is defined by the person experiencing it. Compassionate emotional support, thorough risk assessment, collaborative safety planning, resource navigation, and referrals to local providers and human service agencies are key to providing quality support.

9-8-8 is available to support those who are concerned about a loved one. The experience of a mental health or suicide crisis can be confusing, scary and difficult for all of those involved. Highly trained crisis counselors are available to provide support and guidance to navigate resources in the community and communicate with loved ones who are at risk.

9-8-8 reduces the need for law enforcement to respond to mental health crises. Over 90% of phone calls can be resolved without the need to activate a law enforcement response. In the majority of cases, when law enforcement is involved it is with the expressed permission of the caller.

9-8-8 helps reduce the need for Emergency Department visits. Calling 9-8-8 helps connect people with help without a visit to the emergency department. Far too many Kansans have had to spend hours, sometimes days, waiting in hospitals for appropriate help to be identified. Since 9-8-8 counselors are properly trained to de-escalate crises and connect people to on-going services many people can avoid an expensive trip to the emergency department.



What Can I Do to Support 988's Success?

9-8-8 crisis call centers need your help to ensure long-term, sustainable funding sources are identified to make these services available across the state of Kansas. At this time, crisis phone services are not reimbursable through health insurance and other means used to pay for healthcare costs. KSPHQ believes that mental health care is healthcare. That means another funding source is needed. A telephone line service fee has been identified as a logical option as this is the current mechanism used to fund 9-1-1 services, the other well known emergency number.

HB2281 is currently being considered by the Kansas Legislature as the mechanism to establish a protected suicide prevention trust fund which would be utilized to fund 9-8-8 crisis call centers and other crisis mental health services. The bill will add \$0.20 to each phone line (cellular or landline) each month, and would be collected with the subscriber's regular phone bill. For decades, suicide prevention efforts in Kansas have not been systematically funded. This bill presents Kansas with the opportunity to catch up and put the necessary capital into creating and sustaining the crisis care system.