



Date: March 10, 2021

To: Senate Ways and Means Committee

From: Monica Kurz, LMSW, Vice President for External Programming,  
Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ

RE: S.B. 267

Chairperson Billinger and members of the Senate Ways and Means Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony relating to the state budget and encouraging the committee to consider additional budget enhancements for mental health crisis services. I am Monica Kurz, Vice President for External Programming for Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ. Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ is a resource center and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline) call center that operates in all 105 counties in Kansas. We are the only Lifeline call center to do so in 104 of those counties.

I am here today to talk about the growing problem of suicide. Unfortunately the Kansas Department for Health and Environment's Vital Statistics Reports show suicides have increased by 15 percent over the past 10 years.

Recently a teenager called the Lifeline after having taken a substance to end her life. She was feeling sick as a result of her suicide attempt. She was not ready to wake up her mother and let her know she needed to go to the hospital. Our counselor listened to her talk about the stressors that led her to attempt suicide and then helped the girl decide to wake her mother up.

This is just one of an estimated 20,600 people who call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline on an annual basis. Suicidal Kansans benefit from having free access to evidence-based counseling services 24/7. A 2007 study published in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* shows that suicide hotlines are highly effective. It shows that more than half of suicide hotline callers have a suicide plan and eight percent of callers have already taken steps to attempt suicide before calling. While helping callers to achieve safety is a big task for our highly-trained volunteer counselors to take on, the study also found 56 percent of callers report no longer feeling suicidal after contacting the Lifeline. This is why our staff and volunteer counselors at Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ are working 24/7 to make sure all Kansans have an opportunity to speak to a trained counselor if they are in a suicidal crisis.

Sen. Jerry Moran knows the importance of providing suicide prevention in Kansas. He passed landmark legislation on the federal level known as S. 2661, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020. This law created 988, a 3-digit phone number that will be just like 911, but for suicidal and mental health emergencies.

988 will replace the current 10-digit Lifeline phone number. When people are in crisis, they need a short number similar to 911 to call. Once Kansans are able to contact 988, they can speak to a

highly-trained counselor who will listen to feelings and either de-escalate them or stay on the phone and help them access the appropriate resource.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's best practices guidelines indicates a person in crisis often first talks to a counselor on the Lifeline (soon to be 988). The counselor often is able to de-escalate the caller on the line using counseling skills, a collaborative safety plan and referrals to outpatient service providers. When counselors are not able to de-escalate callers, centers like ours need a robust system of mental health services including mobile crisis response teams, crisis stabilization centers, and crisis residential centers. This continuum of services allows a caller to be directed to the appropriate level of care avoiding high cost solutions like emergency departments or inappropriate settings like jail.

A mobile crisis response team is a team of behavioral health professionals that will meet on the scene for a person in an immediate mental health or suicidal crisis. If the person in crisis cannot be de-escalated on the scene, the person is referred to a stabilization center, which is an outpatient facility for people in crisis. Sometimes people may not be safe to return home right after a crisis, but they may not need a hospitalization. People in these situations can benefit from a crisis residential center, which is a home-like setting for those who need a calming space for a few days before they are ready to return to their normal responsibilities.

To prepare for the rollout of 988 and local communities' adoption of new crisis services, my organization is working closely with telecommunications providers, law enforcement organizations, government organizations, mental health advocacy organizations, and Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services. We are also pleased to hear Johnson County Mental Health is planning to join us and COMCARE of Sedgwick County to provide 988 Lifeline services to Kansas.

All telecommunications carriers have until July 16, 2022 to route 988 calls to the Lifeline. Sprint/T-Mobile are already routing their calls. Lifeline centers will see a higher call volume than ever before as the 988 transition is completed. Vibrant Emotional Health, the administrator of the Lifeline, estimates call volumes will increase by 300-800 percent. Additionally, new infrastructure will also be needed to provide mobile crisis units and stabilization services to our local communities. We must increase funding for crisis care this session.

Building new infrastructure, increasing capacity, and giving KDADS the resources it needs to assist local governments and organizations to coordinate services will require additional funding. KDADS estimates the mental health crisis system will require \$18 million of additional funding. Lifeline hotline services alone will cost \$3 million to upgrade technology and build capacity to answer an additional 41,000 to 144,000 crisis calls every year.

At the time of submission of the written portion of this testimony, H.B. 2281 is in the House's General Orders. This bill will provide the approximately \$18 million necessary to fund 988 services and the supporting alternatives to hospitalizations for calls that cannot be de-escalated





over the phone. We know members of this committee care about social services, only to have these services reduced or eliminated in the allotment process. H.B. 2281 is a solution that will allow our legislature to have more of a voice in emphasizing the importance of suicide prevention.

If passed, H.B. 2281 does not collect funding until July 16, 2022. To prepare for the rollout of 988, \$3 million from our state general funds is needed to upgrade the technology for 988 call centers and to build capacity for increased counselors. If H.B. 2281 does not pass, 988 call centers will need \$3 million from state general funds every year to sustain call centers that will see between a 300 to 800 percent increase in call volume compared to this year's numbers. Additionally, more funds will be needed to provide mobile crisis units and crisis stabilization services for all 105 counties in Kansas.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this request. I am happy to answer questions at the appropriate time.