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New three-digit mental health/suicide prevention hotline number: 988

By Vera Kochan

In an effort to provide the public with a number easier to remember in times of emotional distress, the Department of Health and Human Services, through its Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, has invested \$282 million to help transition the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline from a 10-digit number to a three-digit dialing code - 988.

The new 988 number became nationally operational on July 16, but will take some time before all communications access points are functional across the United States. The 10-digit crises hotline number 1-800-273-TALK (8255) is and will continue to be available even after 988 is installed.

The number 988 was chosen due to its similarity to the 911 concept of an emergency number. "We know that remembering a three-digit number beats a 10-digit number any day, particularly in times of crisis," stated HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra in a December 2021 press release. "I encourage every state to rev up planning to implement 988 for the sake of saving lives."

The original 10-digit number was instituted in 2005, and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has received over 20 million calls to its more than 200 nationwide crisis centers since its inception. The hotline is open 24/7.

In 2020, Congress designated the new 988 dialing code in order to expand and strengthen the existing Lifeline network to not only allow calls, but also text or chat capabilities. With the \$282 million in funds coming from the Biden-Harris Administration's Fiscal Year 2022 budget and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), \$177 million of it will go into strengthening and expanding the existing Lifeline network operations and telephone infrastructure, and the remaining \$105 million will be used to build up staffing across states' local crisis call centers.

According to statistics gathered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the U.S. Nearly 46,000 individuals died by suicide in 2020, and nearly 12.2 million American adults contemplated it. HHS revealed that suicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people.

SAMHSA's 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health data revealed that 4.9% of adults aged 18 or older had serious thoughts of suicide, 1.3% made a suicide plan, and 0.5% attempted suicide in the prior year. The survey goes on to disclose that in adolescents between 12 to 17 years of age, 12% had serious thoughts of suicide, 5.3% made a suicide plan, and 2.5% attempted suicide in the prior year. SAMHSA's findings varied by race and ethnicity, with individuals of mixed ethnicity reporting higher rates of serious thoughts of suicide.

In a 2019 Washington Post opinion-editorial, Rep. Chris Stewart (R-Utah) and Rep. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.) wrote that people need to speak openly about mental health so that "seeking help for everything from suicidal thoughts to addiction to depression is as routine as going to the doctor for a broken arm or an annual checkup."

Lifeline currently provides services in English and Spanish. It also uses Language Line Solutions to provide translation services in over 250 additional languages. Text and chat are currently available in English only. For more information visit: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>. People not in crisis who are seeking treatment options for mental health conditions should visit: [https:// findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov) or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357). All calls are free and confidential.

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