

Implementing 988 and Future Priorities



988 goes live in July. What does that mean?

Beginning July 16, 2022, 988 will be the new, easy to remember three-digit dialing code connecting people to the existing [National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) (Lifeline), where free and confidential support is available 24/7 nationwide for anyone experiencing a mental health or suicide crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support. 988 will be the new three-digit dialing code connecting people to the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, where compassionate, accessible care and support is available for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress—whether that is thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. 988 will connect that individual to a trained Lifeline counselor who can provide support in the moment.

What will happen when you call 988?

On July 16, 2022, an individual can contact the Lifeline (or the Veterans Crisis Line) by phone or text using 988, or by chat: 988lifeline.org. Before that date, individuals can access the Lifeline via phone or text using 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or by chat: SuicidePreventionLifeline.org/chat/. Trained crisis counselors will help the individual and/or their family members through the crisis and, if appropriate, connect them with resources in their community. In some locations, it may also be possible to dispatch a mobile crisis team, if needed. The Lifeline is administered by [Vibrant Emotional Health](#) with a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMHSA](#)).

How does 988 compare to 911?

If a life-threatening crisis is underway (i.e. a suicide attempt in progress), then 911 is the best number. For individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts, 988 provides a trained crisis counselor who can effectively de-escalate the person's distress and provide connection to local resources.

911 is a relay service for dispatching a response team (fire, EMS or law enforcement). In the near-term, the capacity of 988 to deploy mental health mobile crisis teams will be limited. Contacting the Lifeline is an intervention in itself, and most individuals currently contacting the Lifeline are served by engaging with its trained crisis counselors. However, as more people utilize 988 in the future, the need for more robust in-person response capacity and crisis stabilization services is expected to grow.

It is important to remember that the 911 infrastructure developed over many years and, for many states and communities, did not offer comprehensive in-person response capabilities for 10 to 20 years post establishment. Establishment of the 988 number was an important first step, but much work remains. To that end, SAMHSA has identified three phases of development for 988:

- Regional/local call centers able to respond to 90% of contacts by the end of 2023, with remainder handled by national backup network;
- Widespread mobile crisis capacity and rapid dispatch capabilities by 2025; and
- Broad access to community-based crisis receiving and stabilization services by 2027.

Comparing 911 and 988 Current Capabilities

	911	988
Nationwide network to route calls	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No , calls to 911 only go to the single public safety answering point in any specified area. There is no backup network or other routing to ensure calls are answered.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , calls to 988 are routed through a central administrator to regional crisis centers and, if needed, a national backup network to ensure calls are answered quickly.
Assistance available via text	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No national backup network	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes
Assistance available via chat	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes
Call centers with trained professionals	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes
Provide de-escalating emotional support via phone, text or chat	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , via dispatch until EMS personnel arrive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , the contact is the intervention
Provide referrals to community-based resources	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes
Capacity to dispatch mobile emergency response personnel	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not in all locations
Capacity to provide emergency care	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , throughout the dispatch and transport process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not in all locations
Capacity to connect to ongoing treatment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , by providing referrals to local treatment providers, although the capacity of that local system may be limited.
Funding through fees assessed on phone bills	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes , well established	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No , not yet well established

What will it take to ensure 988 can reach its full potential?

Establishment of the 988 number is an important transition from the current 10-digit number of the Lifeline. It serves as the point of entry – the front door – to a larger continuum of care. But it is just the beginning; work must continue to build out a broader crisis services system. The [National Council for Mental Wellbeing](#) has identified six elements that will be key to ensuring a robust crisis care continuum:

1. **Crisis Call Centers** - personnel, data systems and technology platforms
2. **24/7 Mobile Crisis Teams** - personnel, transportation and transport, mobile technology
3. **Robust Continuum of Care** - stabilization programs (inpatient and outpatient), diversion network, follow up care and community supports
4. **Essential Crisis Care Principles and Practices** - best practices, training, evaluation and analysis
5. **Public Awareness and Support** - engagement with key community partners and especially with vulnerable communities
6. **Federal and State Accountability** - financing, quality metrics, tracking and evaluation

The National Council supports a number of policy initiatives designed to ensure 988 can reach its full potential as a well-functioning crisis response resource.

At the federal level, a bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced the **9-8-8 Implementation Act (H.R. 7116)** in March, 2022. If enacted, the bill would expand community-based mental health and substance use treatment services and dedicate resources for regional and local call centers and mobile crisis response programs. This is an important step toward ensuring that anyone who is in need of care and dials 988 has someone to talk to, someone to come to them and somewhere to go.



Similarly, states and counties will play a critical role in funding and coordinating what is currently a very fragmented system. With 988 serving as the catalyst for change, states and counties have the opportunity to develop a more coordinated crisis response system, one that appropriately diverts people from the criminal justice system and hospital emergency departments while maximizing the impact of community-based mental health and substance use treatment providers.

The promise of 988 is extraordinary. The foundation has been laid, the proverbial front door has been opened and now policymakers and communities must come together to make that promise a reality.

