

TESTIMONY

S.F. 2588

March 16, 2023

Jennifer Illich

Madame Chair Wiklund, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the life saving work of 988. My name is Jennifer Illich, and I am the executive director of FirstLink. I am here to express support for S.F. 2588. FirstLink is one of the four crisis centers that answer the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline for the entire state of Minnesota. 988 services are imperative to build a strong mental health system that provides the care, support, and services needed to help people build better lives throughout Minnesota.

On October 16, 2020, President Trump signed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act into law, officially designating 988 as the new, easy-to-remember number for anyone experiencing suicidal ideation, a mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. As you may know, the transition from 1-800-273-8255 to 988 as the nation's suicide hotline officially happened on Saturday, July 16, 2022. This transition represents a historic moment for Minnesotans in crisis, giving them a number to call 24/7. With this new Designation came the ability to fund 988 suicide and crisis phone lines with a telephone user fee like 911. Also, with this new federal designation came many new requirements, but unfortunately only short term federal funding to implement the new required suicide safety standards.

Added requirements from 988 rollout

- REQUIRED to add chat services
- REQUIRED to add text services
- REQUIRED to have enough staff to back up our calls, in the past, if all of our staff were busy, the call could be routed to a back-up call center out of state.
- REQUIRED that we must collaborate with 911 and mobile crisis as part of the new federal mandates.

The 988 suicide and crisis phone line is part of a long-term effort to build a complete mental health and suicide prevention crisis response system in Minnesota. The overwhelming majority of callers can be stabilized over the phone. Those who need more support are connected to appropriate mental health services. 988 serves as a hub of information and a connector to other non-profit and behavioral health centers. We screen and triage for the most appropriate support such as mobile crisis units when needed.

Everyday MN 988 handles calls related to behavioral health 24/7. Our call specialists help people breathe through panic attacks, assess callers for safety to themselves and to others,

validate concerns, and encourage people to continue to reach out for help and hope. We talk to people who are thinking about suicide and use skills through our national accreditation to work on a safety plan.

988 needs increased support to continue operating 24/7 and meet all of the new requirements of the 988 phone line. We must add FTE to our team to keep up with the increases in call volume. We need to update our technology services because every second counts when talking to someone that is suicidal or in a behavioral health crisis. We need to add redundancy to ensure that our phone lines never go down. We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help and to help with staff retention.

Emergency 24/7/365 services like 988 need a base funding source that is sustainable and protected from budget cuts at a funding rate that can support the agency.

I hope you will consider supporting S.F. 2588 so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis.

I sincerely thank you for listening and for your ongoing support, and I look forward to your questions.

Jennifer Illich

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