

# New 988 system relieves pressure on 911, promises better care | Opinion

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A man jogs past a sign about crisis counseling on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Aug. 3, 2021. People in crisis and those trying to help them will have a new three-digit number, 988, to reach the national suicide prevention network starting in July. (Eric Risberg/AP)

Thirteen years ago, when my son was a senior in high school, he had a first break with reality — a psychotic episode.

Like most families, we didn't know what was happening and we didn't know what to do. I called a friend who referred us to a psychologist who didn't take health insurance and didn't treat schizophrenia, which is common and gene-based, affecting 1.1% of the population.

We lost more than a year before we realized that our son was developing this serious brain disorder that required immediate medication and therapeutic treatment to allow him to live a productive and meaningful life.

For families and individuals not familiar with local behavioral health resources, the new 988 national hotline for behavioral health and suicide prevention will be a lifesaver, providing an easy portal into a complex system. Kids like our son can be connected to treatment available

throughout the state.



Gayle Giese is president of the Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition, a NAMI-Florida board director and an appointee to the state's 988 Planning Coalition.

Those of us with loved ones who have substance use disorders, mental illnesses or autism, have been begging for a kinder and more effective medical response — rather than law enforcement — since deinstitutionalization in the 1970s.

“Please, my child is sick and needs help, not handcuffs,” has been the cry of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) advocates nationwide.

Ashley Grimes, president of NAMI Florida says, “988, if implemented correctly, has the potential to link those dealing with a behavioral health crisis to care and treatment much earlier than our current system. This ultimately improves outcomes, reduces taxpayer costs and saves lives.”

Families and their loved ones who need help suffer in continuous crisis-mode for years, while also having to deal with stigma; mental illness is not something you post on Twitter or Facebook.

For those managing uncontrollable behaviors, thoughts or addictions, 988 would offer zero stigma because the call taker’s goal is to connect the caller to the right care, not an arrest. The idea is to provide the least intrusive and least costly response by linking callers to counseling, therapy, psychiatry, certified recovery peer specialists, assessment, stabilization, detox, case management and medication-assisted treatment — whatever behavioral health resources are available in the community.

At the very least, an effective crisis-response system must provide someone to talk to, someone who will come to those in crisis and someplace for them to go to get further help. Fortunately, most calls would be resolved on the phone (or via text or chat), saving the time and money associated with dispatching a first responder.

In addition, moving behavioral health calls from 911 to 988 will relieve overloaded and understaffed 911-dispatch systems of what a federal study projects to be at least 18% of their calls.

The new three-digit hotline would save money in many ways: avoiding hospitalizations and trips to the emergency room — repeated until someone gets the help they need. Because people with untreated serious mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders may get arrested or become homeless, jail and court costs and costs associated with homelessness would be significantly reduced.

Most importantly, lives will be saved.

Trained call-takers at 211-Broward, where Broward’s 988 calls will go, have already been de-escalating behavioral health emergencies and providing counseling referrals for years.

Until 988 starts by July 16, Americans can call the national suicide prevention lifeline at 800-273-TALK. After that date, both numbers will work, and in Broward County, the 211 hotline will remain an option as well.

When 988 begins to be nationally advertised, will existing centers be ready to quickly respond to a dramatic rise in calls? So far, Florida's 12 National Suicide Prevention Lifelines have not received any significant money to prepare for 988.

Florida's Department of Children & Families was recently awarded a grant for \$5.2 million from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and 85% of that will go to the Lifelines, but it's not nearly enough, as reported by Cindy Krischer Goodman in her April 15 South Florida Sun Sentinel story, "[The suicide hotline soon will be 3 digits. But Florida is unprepared, advocates say.](#)"

As Curtis Mayfield said, "People get ready, there's a train a-comin'." Florida communities, the state and the feds need to hop on board.

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