

988 Lifeline is working, but more state funding is needed

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Your Turn

Guest columnist

Launched nationwide in July 2022, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline replaced the 10-digit number with an easy three digits and added behavioral health crises to the suicide-related calls it would address.

Since its launch, calls to Lifeline have more than doubled, with disproportionately higher use among adolescents and young adults.

A peer-reviewed study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* on April 22, 2026, shows suicides in the U.S. among young people ages 15-34 were 11% lower than expected between July 2022 and December 2024, representing 4,372 fewer deaths than projected.

Importantly, the study also found that states with the largest increases in 988 call volume saw suicide rates drop by 18.2%, compared with a 10.6% decline in states with the smallest increases.

I believe 988, as the door to the system, is the most important innovation in behavioral health crisis care in the past decade, with the potential not only to prevent suicides but also to connect families to early evidence-based treatment and local health resources. Callers get help from trained counselors for suicidal ideation, substance use or mental health issues, or emotional distress. 988 relieves 911, which is for speedy dispatch (not counseling); avoids the hospital and the ER; links to mobile response teams that come to you where you are and connects you to crisis stabilization centers. Only about 2% of calls, deemed life-threatening, are transferred to 911.

Florida's call centers have not been well-funded, although our state is moving in a positive direction, with recurring funding over the last two years added to federal funding from mental health and substance use block grants, and a three-year Substance Abuse

and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant that may not recur.

Florida's Lifelines received 19,280 routed calls in March and answered 14,585 of them, with an average answer rate around 76%. The average time to answer is 30.1 seconds and the average talk time is 15.7 minutes.

Florida's 13 call centers are working hard to save and improve lives, but they need enough trained staff to answer calls quickly, ideally in under 30 seconds when a person in crisis may hang up if help is delayed. Centers need to be able to answer more than 76% of calls and provide follow-up. Additionally, they need to prepare to respond to local 988 texts and chats, which will require additional funding beyond the amount being requested to address calls.

Since the 988 roll-out, over 248,000 Floridians have reached out to 988 by chat or text for an average of 5,800 contacts. Those chats and texts were routed to the national backup overseen by SAMHSA and Vibrant Emotional Health; while contacts received help, they could not be connected to local resources.

Data from Vibrant Emotional Health shows that over 40% of the Florida texters and chatters reaching out to 988 are under the age of 18.

Florida must fully fund the Department of Children & Families' request for a recurring \$7.56 million for our 13 Lifeline centers to handle calls. The state should also ensure optimal staffing, expand backup capacity, and build the infrastructure needed to support in-state text and chat response.

If funded and managed well, 988 has the potential to capture valuable data, make appointments in real time, follow patients through the continuum of care, and be that door to recovery we so desperately need.

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