

## OPEN MIC

# *Coming: 988, a mental health alternative calling to 911*

A new three-digit national phone number will be available in Florida to use as a help line for behavioral health needs starting in July 2022. The number, 988, which will replace the national 10-digit suicide-prevention hotline, 800-273-TALK, will be an alternative to 911 to provide around-the-clock response for behavioral emergencies.

Imagine calling 988 and speaking with someone who can send a mobile response team to your home, with workers trained to de-escalate a crisis.

Diverting behavioral emergency calls from 911 to a call center with backup services would save money. Law enforcement would respond to fewer

But money is needed to pay for call centers, response teams and centralized facilities to screen patients and provide immediate care. As in Virginia, the money could come from a small fee added to phone bills, the same way 911 is funded.

The Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition, a network that includes local chapters of the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health America, will ask policymakers to embrace 988 as a cost-efficient way to address behavioral health crises. Our state legislators need to hear from citizens who understand that people having a behavioral health crisis need help, not handcuffs.

Building a robust crisis response system will move us closer to a respectful and effective response to everyone who experiences a mental-health, substance-use or suicidal crisis.

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