

GUEST COLUMNIST

988 crisis-response system getting Florida's attention

[◀ PREVIOUS IMAGE](#)

Image

[NEXT IMAGE >](#)

The 988 crisis-response system, which completes its first year July 16, has the potential to be the front door into Florida's behavioral health system. Even in the middle of the night, a caller can speak confidentially, and anonymously, with a compassionate Lifeline counselor to de-escalate a crisis and be referred to community resources.

If done right, it's a money-saver. It avoids emergency rooms and provides early intervention.

In Florida, the Legislature ordered a study to see how 988 is working. Gov. Ron DeSantis recently signed Senate Bill 914, sponsored by Sen. Ileana Garcia (R-Miami-Dade) and Rep. Dana Trabulsy (R-St. Lucie) in the House. It directs the Commission on Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder to evaluate the 988 Suicide and Crisis Line in Florida, as well as the other essential elements: Mobile Response Teams and Crisis Stabilization Facilities, such as Centralized Receiving Centers.

Among other considerations, the study will include strategies to improve links between the 988 system and crisis response services and identify sustainable funding sources. The final report is due in September 2026 but interim reports are due every year on Jan. 1.

Commission Chair Dr. Jay Reeve of the Apalachee Center in Tallahassee created a "Suicide Prevention" subcommittee even before the bill passed and assigned Clara Reynolds, CEO of The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, to lead it.

Nikki Wotherspoon, who leads the 988 initiative for Florida's Department of Children & Families, has demonstrated a deep understanding of crisis-response needs and has ushered in an increased spirit of collaboration between the Lifelines, DCF, the managing entities and behavioral health family and peer advocates.

With about \$12 million in non-recurring federal money going to Florida's 13 Lifelines in FY 2022-23, she said that the Lifelines have increased their overall call answer rate from 52% in October 2022 to 74% in May 2023. Unanswered calls are usually routed to an in-state backup center before going to the national backup center.

Many questions remain for the commission, such as:

How much money does each Lifeline need to answer all calls quickly, provide follow-up and achieve life-saving outcomes?

From what sources will the money come and will it be sustainable?

How will 988 and 911 work together to provide the most effective and appropriate response in all situations?

How do Lifelines collaborate with the Mobile Response Teams and Crisis Stabilization Centers?

Does our crisis-response system serve all ages?

What data do we need from the Lifelines to track progress, improve systems and fill gaps?

How do we build the behavioral health crisis-response workforce?

The subcommittee's work is promising. I am encouraged by the energized, active participation of all commissioners and subject matter experts. They are not only looking at the requirements of SB 914, but also brainstorming a vision for the very best Florida crisis-response system.

As the subcommittee's chairperson, Clara Reynolds, said, "We can't treat 988 like a bake sale to fund the band trip."

Gayle Giese is president of the Florida Mental Health Advocacy Coalition, a NAMI Florida board director, and a NAMI Broward member. She also leads the Florida 988 Advocacy Group and serves on the DCF's 988 Coalition.