

Most states have yet to permanently fund 988. Call centers want certainty

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Since the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline transitioned a year ago to the three-digit crisis phone number 988, there has been a 33% increase in the number of calls, chats, and texts to the hotline.

But even with that early sign of success, the program's financial future is shaky.

Over the past two years, the [federal government](#) has provided about \$1 billion from the American Rescue Plan and Bipartisan Safer Communities acts to launch the number, designed as an alternative to 911 for those experiencing a mental health crisis. After that infusion runs out, it's up to [states](#) to foot the bill for their [call centers](#).

"We don't know what Congress will allocate in the future," said Danielle Bennett, a spokesperson for the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which oversees 988. "But the hope is that there will be continued strong bipartisan support for funding 988 at the level it needs to be funded at and that states will also create funding mechanisms that make sense for their states."

Only eight states have enacted legislation to sustain 988 through phone fees, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which is tracking [state funding](#) for the system. Others have budgeted short-term funding. But many predominantly rural states, where [mental health services](#) are in short supply and suicide rates are often higher than in more urban states, have not made long-term plans to provide support.

According to a KFF analysis of Lifeline data, since last summer 988 has received almost 5 million contacts, including calls, texts, and chat messages. And state programs managed to answer a high percentage of 988 calls instead of routing them to call centers elsewhere.

Mental health advocates and state 988 operators say that to keep those in-state staffers answering phones, promises of long-term funding are critical.

In the earlier version of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, "call

centers, basically, were not paid," said Chuck Ingoglia, president and CEO of the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, which advocates for sustained investment in 988. "There is a growing recognition that we're making it easier for people to contact and, therefore, we need to build more infrastructure."

In Ohio, where data from spring 2023 shows local operators responded to 88% of calls, lawmakers recently acknowledged the need for stable funding. In July, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine approved \$46.5 million for 988 in the state's biennial budget. But that support will last only two years.

"It is still not the most secure form of funding that we would hope for," said Brian Stroh, CEO and medical director of Netcare Access, a call center that serves four rural counties on Ohio's eastern border. "What if we turned the tables a little bit and said we're only going to fund 911 a little bit at a time? That's a really hard proposition to work under."

SAMHSA, which distributes 988 grant funding, likens the number to 911 except that it is strictly for mental health crises. The law that mandated 988's creation, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, allows states to install phone surcharges to support 988 indefinitely, similar to the funding structure for 911.

Stroh said that, while he is "pretty pleased" with how the first year of 988 went for Netcare Access, with short-term funding it's hard to reassure prospective call operators of job security or compete with rising wages in other industries.

For Kristin McCloud, executive director of Pathways of Central Ohio, a call center that also responds to rural counties in the eastern part of the state, the \$573,056 her center received in 988's first year was exactly what it needed. She had money for training staffers to answer crisis calls

and supplying them with computers for remote work.

During that time, operators answered 2,316 calls—almost double the previous year's volume.

"I really feel like, for once, we were given adequate funding," said McCloud, who has worked in social services more than 35 years.

According to SAMHSA, before 988 grants, most call centers received minimal federal funding to answer Lifeline calls, typically between \$2,500 and \$5,000 annually.

Like Stroh, McCloud views Ohio's recent allocation as positive but hopes the state installs a permanent funding plan. A bill pending in the legislature would add a surcharge to phone bills to help fund 988, as a few other states have done.

All but one of the eastern counties that Pathways of Central Ohio and Netcare Access serve are designated by the state's Department of Health Primary Care Office as mental health professional shortage areas.

In North Dakota, where almost every county is rural and has such a designation, a single call center manages the state's 988 program.

That center, FirstLink, has seen a significant increase in [mental health crisis](#) calls since the transition to 988. Comparing the first six months of 2023 to the first of 2022 alone, calls have increased 55%, according to Jeremy Brown, outreach director.

The demand has "helped us with sparking conversations with our state legislature about funding and support," he said.

In May, Republican Gov. Doug Burgum approved a one-time \$1.86

million appropriation to 988 in the state's biennial budget.

Brown said the funding will not only allow FirstLink to train staff members and keep [phone lines](#) updated, but it will also help human service centers support mobile crisis units that can be dispatched to callers if necessary.

Though mobile crisis unit dispatch is an option, FirstLink prefers to deescalate crises over the phone, said Dallas Tufty, one of FirstLink's operators.

"The only time that we'll really call for rescue or something is if that person is in immediate, imminent danger of their life," they said.

Tufty works 40 hours a week at FirstLink, at least six of those spent answering calls and messages to 988. Operators like Tufty also answer FirstLink's 211 line, another program that provides health and social service assistance information to callers. It's not an emergency line, but on occasion people in crisis call there instead of 988.

No matter which line a call comes through, Tufty said, the hard part is not knowing what happens once the call is over.

"There's times where you don't really know if they're going to call back because they need to again," they said. "Even if you make a plan, there's only so much we can do on the phone to hold people to those plans."

While North Dakota and Ohio fund 988 through their state budgets, not all states do. In Montana, Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte recently dedicated \$300 million to the behavioral health and developmental disabilities systems that, among other uses, can fund "opportunities for Montanans to receive integrated physical and behavioral health care," according to the bill authorizing the money. But the state has yet to

address 988 [funding](#) specifically.

In 2021, Montana lawmakers declined to advance a bill that would have established a phone fee and corresponding revenue account to fund 988 ahead of its launch.

At this point, "if it is able to be funded in the budget, without new legislation, that's just fine with us," said Matt Kuntz, executive director of Montana's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "We just want to make sure that it's sustainably funded, because it is an important service."

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