

988—the new suicide-prevention hotline—sees big increase in use

OCT 19, 2022

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For decades, people in the U.S. experiencing a mental health crisis have typically called 911 for help. But most local law enforcement agencies weren't set up to deal with these emergencies, so callers often didn't get the help they needed.

In July, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration launched the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which replaced the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The easy-to-remember, three-digit number improves on the previous contact number, 800-273-TALK (8255), which will continue to function indefinitely.

Calls to 988 can trigger immediate dispatches of mobile crisis teams—24 hours a day, seven days a week—to anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, if needed.

988 is also set up to receive texts for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech-disabled, and online chat is available.

Learn more with the AMA about how your primary care practice can help prevent suicide.

Suicide by the numbers

In 2020, the U.S. had one death by suicide every 11 minutes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between 10–14 years old or 25–34.

SAMHSA's 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) brought to light the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health in the United States. It estimated that nearly 5% of adults had serious thoughts of suicide, 1.3% had made a suicide plan and 0.5% had attempted

suicide in the previous 12 months. Among adolescents 12–17, 12% said they had had serious thoughts of suicide, 5.3% had made a suicide plan and 2.5% percent had attempted suicide.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on the mental health and well-being of people throughout our country, and now more than ever more resources are needed to help people experiencing a mental health crisis,” AMA Trustee Ilse R. Levin, DO, MPH, said in June during the 2022 AMA Annual Meeting. “We encourage anyone who’s experiencing a mental health crisis, or knows someone who is, and seeking support to call the new 988 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.”

At the Annual Meeting, the House of Delegates directed the AMA to:

- Use their existing communications channels to educate the physician community and the public on the new 988 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline program.
- Work with the Federation of Medicine and other stakeholders to advocate adequate federal and state funding for the 988 system.
- Collaborate with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the 988 partner community to strengthen suicide prevention and mental health crisis services.

“Studies have shown that after speaking with a trained crisis counselor, most 988 callers are significantly more likely to feel less depressed, less suicidal, less overwhelmed and more hopeful,” notes a SAMHSA press release.

Explore this AMA suicide-prevention guide for treating at-risk patients.

Immediate jump in use

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is a national network of more than 180 local crisis centers in all 50 states that provide free, confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

Calls have risen steadily since the support line was established in 2005, from just over 50,000 to more than 2.5 million in 2021. Data for August 2022, the first full month following the launch of the new 988 number, showed a 45% rise in contact volume compared with August 2021. And during the same period, answer rates and waiting times meaningfully improved. The 988 Lifeline answered 152,000 more contacts—calls, chats and texts—and the average speed to answer across all contacts fell from 2.5 minutes to just 42 seconds.

Resources for care teams

The 988 website has resources tailored to specific communities, issues and concerns, including:

- People with neurodivergence.
- Black mental health.
- Maternal mental health.
- Young people.
- Disaster survivors.
- Native Americans and Alaska Natives.
- Veterans.
- Loss survivors.
- LGBTQ+ people.
- Spanish speakers.

The website includes sections focused on best practices and professional initiatives—such as Zero Suicide, a systemwide approach to improving outcomes and closing gaps—as well as a store with downloadable collateral materials, including flyers, posters and wallet cards.

Discover AMA resources on preventing physician suicide.