

KANSAS MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

An Organization Dedicated to Improving the Lives of Kansans with Mental Illnesses

Testimony in Support of HB 2281 House Health and Human Services Committee

February 15, 2022

988 – National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020: Sen. Jerry Moran was a key supporter of the passage of the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 (S. 2661). This bill created 988, a 3-digit mental health crisis line. 988 will be a crucial tool to link people with crisis response, reducing the burden on local law enforcement, emergency rooms, jails and state hospitals. However, the federal legislation is not fully funded – so states must create their own funding source.

State agencies, mental health providers and policy makers must prepare our state for the transition to 988 in order to deliver high-quality, timely and appropriate crisis services for Kansans in every community in our state. All telecommunications carriers have until July 16, 2022 to enable 988 calls to be routed to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Network. Some carriers are already routing.

Converting and expanding our current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to a fully functional front door to behavioral health crisis response in Kansas will fill one of the most glaring gaps in our current continuum of care. Families tell us they need somewhere to call when a crisis occurs for themselves or their loved ones – a link to a live voice who can help to deescalate the situation or link them to appropriate interventions and resources. Frankly, many are afraid to call 911 because they fear the appearance of law enforcement officers could escalate the situation. The Legislative Mental Health Task Force Reports and the Mental Health Modernization and Reform Committee Reports endorse a universal crisis response line.

Suicide has seen troubling increases in the past decade in Kansas. KDHEs annual vital statistics report shows that the suicide death rate increased by 15 percent between 2014 and 2019. The 2020 Kansas Child Death Review report shows the youth suicide death rate has increased 63 percent, from 2.03 per 100,000 in 2009-2013 to 3.38 per 100,000 in 2014-2018. Utilization of crisis call centers has been on the rise across the state of Kansas for the last five years. Calls from Kansans to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline have risen 65% in this time. Johnson County Mental Health Center also reports a 64% increase in calls to their county crisis line from 2016-2021. The trend is clear; **more and more Kansans are turning to crisis call centers when they need help de-escalating a crisis or getting connected to longer term support.** 988 can be the solution Kansas needs if it is well planned and funded – linking individuals and families to people with the right training to help.

This is an important step as Kansas modernizes our behavioral health system moving beyond the years of stagnation. Kansas has expanded access to crisis stabilization services in specific communities, but the majority of cities and counties do not have these programs. Crisis Intervention Training for law enforcement has been expanded – but most calls can be addressed without law enforcement if linked with properly trained staff.

Please support a robust properly funded 988 crisis line in Kansas. And thank you to the legislators and the staff at KDADS that have tirelessly pursued this initiative.

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