

988 FAQs:

A SMALL PRICE FOR STRENGTHENING SUICIDE PREVENTION, CRISIS RESPONSE, AND CARE



What is 988?

In 2020 the FCC and Congress designated a new three-digit dialing code—988—for Americans to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline) starting on July 16, 2022. The [National Suicide Designation Act](#) allows states to collect a telecommunication fee to support costs associated with 988 operations, similar to a 911 fee. A small 988 fee has been enacted in some states.

What is the purpose of 988?

The new 988 dialing code was enacted to enhance access to suicide prevention and crisis services. Instead of trying to remember the toll-free Lifeline number (1-800-273-TALK) during times of emotional and suicidal distress, individuals can access the Lifeline network via the new easy-to-remember 988 number. In their ruling the FCC quoted the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration’s report under the [National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act](#) noting that a three-digit code “has the potential to play a key role in improving national crisis intervention and suicide prevention efforts if the launch of a new number is accompanied by efforts to develop a more coordinated crisis system with greater capacity and access to sophisticated data and technology systems and an ongoing commitment to data driven quality improvement.” A call for help should not result in trauma or tragedy. Building a 988 crisis system in your state, city, county, or community will move us closer to a respectful, dignified and effective crisis care response for everyone who experiences a mental health, substance use, or suicidal crisis.

What happens when someone contacts 988?

Beginning July 16, 2022, an individual can contact the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) network (or the Veterans' Crisis Line) by phone, text, or chat. Until then, the Lifeline can be reached at 1-800-273-TALK. Trained crisis counselors will help the individual and/or their family members through the crisis or, if necessary, dispatch a mobile crisis team to their location. **Lifeline provides free and confidential support 24/7/365.**

Does the public care about the 988 service?

Yes. An October 2021 poll, conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), revealed that creating a 988 crisis response system, as well as actions by the federal and local governments to fund it, is very important to the public. **Eighty-six percent of Americans**

agreed that building and providing mental health crisis services can prevent people from cycling in and out of emergency rooms, arrests, incarcerations, and homelessness. Three-quarters (75%) of Americans are not content with the status of mental health treatment in this country, regardless of political affiliation, while 54% of Americans say there is significant room for improvement in addressing mental health and suicide crises. That number is far higher than the percentage (26%) of responses indicating the need to significantly improve other medical emergency responses. In addition, four of five people believe that mental health professionals rather than law enforcement should be the primary first responders when someone is having a mental health or suicidal crisis.

What makes 988 better than 911 for crisis calls?

911 is the public safety service system number to dispatch police, fire/rescue squads, and EMS personnel in case of life-threatening emergencies. Individuals who are suicidal or experiencing a behavioral health crisis have different needs. 988 provides trained crisis counselors to respond to those needs. Counselors provide emotional support, screening, referrals, or dispatch a mobile crisis team that is composed of behavioral health professionals, and often peer support specialists with lived experience. **Lifeline dispatches mobile crisis teams for only 2% of contacts, resulting in significant savings.** Unlike 911, they may provide follow-up services as appropriate for the individual. The quality of the crisis response will significantly improve because 911 often dispatches police who are not necessarily familiar with behavioral health crises. But police departments agree that behavioral health is not their strength and data show that a police response results in more individuals being jailed. 988 allows police to manage their primary duties of providing public safety and only be part of the crisis response if safety is a concern.

Why did the FCC choose not to repurpose an N11 number or expand the use of 211?

The FCC stated in their ruling that they are concerned that expanding 211 “would lead to significant delays in establishing a ubiquitous system capable of handling both calls (i.e., existing 211 community services calls and crisis and suicide prevention services) is of the utmost importance for those in suicidal distress.” They examined repurposing or expanding other N11 codes, but determined it is not feasible and would create confusion and significant delays to callers in crisis, as each code is used widely and already serves an important purpose. In recommending 988, the FCC said it was not worried about carriers’ convenience, but the volume of calls already going to 611 (300 million per year) thereby a suicide hotline could be flooded with misdirected calls, potentially costing lives if they crowded out callers in crisis.

Why are some in the telecommunications industry expressing concerns about the change to 988?

The industry is supportive of improving the mental health crisis system, but some oppose fees associated with funding it. Some states will fund the system and services via 988 legislation to

include small fees on customers' phone bills. The FCC has approved the imposition of a 988 fee. To be clear, **the small fees will be passed on to the customer and not on to the telecommunications providers**. States would require providers to collect the small fees and give them to the state in the same manner that 911 and other fees are collected. Some in the industry are pressuring State legislatures to reduce the size of the fees assessed and the scope of services to which the fees could apply—not to fund mobile response, treatment, or preventive services. Yet, the proposed 988 fees in states' legislation are quite small and have ranged from \$0.08 to \$0.75 a month. **Fee calculations should be a transparent process and fees should be set aside in a trust fund only available for 988 services, i.e., not subject to transfer or reversion at year end, but continuously appropriated for the purposes of 988-related services.**

What has been the response to the naysayers in the telecommunications industry?

The public is supportive of 988. The Kennedy Forum, an organization that seeks to revolutionize the health care system, expressed no sympathy for industry concerns stating that the telecommunication industry made billions of dollars with the increase in telehealth and conference calling. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley of Oregon and Chris Murphy of Connecticut wrote a letter to Meredith Baker, CEO of CTIA (an association that represents the U.S. wireless communications industry), writing, "Telecom lobbyists appear to be pressing state legislatures to reduce the size of the fees assessed, the scope of the services to which the fees could apply, well beyond—and in some cases contrary to—the guardrails already written into law... **Every American should be doing everything they can to get those in crisis help when and where they need it, and not working to tie the hands of those who can provide it...** we urge CTIA and its member companies to rethink its efforts...and stand up this critical resource."

Is the telecommunications industry united in their opposition?

No. T-Mobile announced that it is the first major wireless provider to make the 988 Lifeline immediately available to its customers. Beginning on November 20, 2020, T-Mobile customers who dialed 988 had access to the Lifeline network of approximately 200 crisis centers that offer real-time, lifesaving mental health services from professionally trained counselors. T-Mobile moved quickly to modify its nationwide network to translate and route 988 calls to the existing Lifeline number (800-273-TALK) and update its billing system to ensure the customer is not charged for using the service. T-Mobile's Executive Vice President and Chief Technology Officer, Abdul Saad said, "Making 988 available to our customers was a matter of urgency for us, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and the holiday season approaches. And it's particularly meaningful to launch this during November as we recognize the contributions and acknowledge the sacrifices of our military veterans. I'm proud that T-Mobile is doing our part to help get this lifesaving tool in the hands of those who will benefit from it." AT&T also supports 988 stating that it wants to be part of the solution combatting suicide. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of AT&T's wireless customers can dial 988 right now.