



Virginia Department of
Behavioral Health &
Developmental Services



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 19, 2022

DBHDS CONTACT: Lauren Cunningham

lauren.cunningham@dbhds.virginia.gov

VDH CONTACT: Abigail Wester

abigail.wester@vdh.virginia.gov

THREE DIGIT 988 DIALING CODE FOR NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE LAUNCHES IN VIRGINIA

National transition to 988 offers once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strengthen and expand the existing Lifeline.

RICHMOND, VA – The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) and Virginia Department of Health (VDH) today announced the successful transition of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to the three digit 988 number. In 2020, Congress designated the new 988 dialing code to operate through the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline’s (1-800-273-8255) network of over 200 locally operated and funded crisis centers across the country.

“988 will give Virginians in crisis an easy way to quickly connect to trained support, no matter where you are,” said **Governor Glenn Youngkin**. “This is a crucial step in transforming our crisis system so that all Virginians have someone to talk to, someone to respond, and don't have to wonder about how to access help.”

988 is more than just an easy-to-remember number—it’s a direct connection to compassionate, accessible care and support for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress. Similar to dialing 911 in emergencies, anyone who needs mental health support can dial 988, whether they are experiencing thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support.

“Tragically, Virginia over 1,200 Virginians died by suicide in 2020, and the rate of suicide in Virginia has been on the rise for many years,” said **Secretary of Health and Human Resources John Littel**. “Yet, suicide is often a preventable health crisis, especially if the person can get help quickly. 988 provides Virginians access to a life-saving service for anyone having thoughts of suicide or experiencing any kind of mental health distress. 988 will also be a tremendous resource for families worried about the mental health of a loved one.”

988 calls across the nation will go to regional call centers to provide local help for the caller. Thanks to state legislation and a focus on statewide comprehensive crisis efforts, Virginia has been ahead of the curve in preparing for the 988 rollout. Virginia has increased its ability to answer Lifeline calls in-state by 33 percent since January of 2021, in large part due to the enhanced assistance provided to call centers. During this same time, call centers in Virginia saw an increase in calls by 23 percent.

“988 is an incredibly important advancement by getting people quick access to mental health support,” said **DBHDS Commissioner Nelson Smith**. “But a hotline is only part of improving crisis services for Virginians. We are building a range of crisis services to help more people with mental illness avoid homelessness, hospitalization, or incarceration and will connect them to the best community service to meet their needs.”

“The 988 emergency number provides a quick, easy-to-remember connection to help for a person in crisis, allowing the most timely intervention to prevent suicides. This innovation will save lives,” said **State Health Commissioner Colin M. Greene, MD, MPH**.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and has been administered by Vibrant Emotional Health since it began in 2005. The Lifeline is a national network of over 200 local, independent crisis centers equipped to help people in mental health related distress or experiencing a suicidal crisis via call, chat, or text. The Lifeline provides free and confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or mental health-related distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the U.S.

For more information on the 988 Lifeline, visit <https://988lifeline.org>.

###

The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) seeks to promote dignity, choice, recovery, and the highest possible level of participation in work, relationships, and all aspects of community life for individuals with mental illness, developmental disabilities or substance-use disorders. DBHDS operates 12 state facilities and partners with 40 locally-run community services boards and hundreds of private providers statewide. For more information, please visit www.dbhds.virginia.gov, [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#).