



May 15, 2024

The Honorable Representative Marvin L. Abney  
Chair of the House Finance Committee  
82 Smith Street Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 7035**

Dear Representative Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Joe Ash – Administrative Director for Rhode Island’s BH Link and 988 Call Center. Our crisis center offers our community a place to call for anyone experiencing a behavioral health crisis; and when we talk about crisis, that’s something that is defined by the person in need and can range anywhere from being connected to outpatient resources to struggling with suicidal thoughts (and everything in between). We answer the line with warmth and empathy, gather information, assess for risk, stabilize the person seeking help, and connect folks to vital resources every day. Most importantly we invite everyone into a human experience and help them navigate situations that can be overwhelming in so many ways.

Since taking on the lifeline for the state of Rhode Island, our program has stood out against the national landscape, consistently leading the way in lifeline answer rates and offering people a place to go that is both affordable and person-centered. But we aren’t stopping there – we are currently in the process of raising standards in quality of service, building partnerships with local behavioral health mobile crisis teams (including those that focus specifically on supporting children and families), providing more comprehensive coverage of local chat/text services, developing more collaborative relationships with local 911 and first responder departments in order to avoid preventable police contact, and so much more.

With all that said, continued funding is needed for our crisis services continuum to meet growing needs and to truly provide all Rhode Islanders with someone to call, someone to respond, & somewhere to go.

To help better support these community crisis needs, [H. 7035](#) would codify state budget funding for 988 and create a revolving 988 trust fund to consist of state appropriations, grants, gifts, and any fee money dedicated to 988 in the future for the purpose of

implementing, maintaining, and improving the 988 system, including call centers, mobile crisis response teams, and crisis stabilization services.

To reinforce this need and emphasize just how essential these services are, I wanted to leave you with some key takeaways:

- Evaluations and feedback show crisis counselors effectively reduce distress and suicidality and help tens of thousands of people get through crises daily.
- **Most calls are stabilized over the phone**, with links made to in-person, crisis and/or wrap-around services when needed.
- Full implementation and promotion of 988 will **reduce healthcare spending** through both prevention and early community-based intervention, **reduce the burden on emergency rooms and law enforcement**, and **improve outcomes** for individuals experiencing a suicidal or behavioral health crisis.
- **Nationally, an average of 10% of law enforcement agencies' total budgets and 21% of total staff time** is spent responding to and transporting those with mental health conditions.
- A well-resourced crisis response system will **ensure more equitable access** to and fill gaps in the current system, particularly those that affect underserved communities.

To learn more about the 988 Lifeline and AFSP's work on this issue, visit [afsp.org/988](https://afsp.org/988).

Thank you for your time and attention, and for your public service. Please submit this to the record as written testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

Joe Ash, MSW, QMHP