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Representative Marvin Abney, Chairman
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

May 15, 2024

Dear Representative Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

On behalf of all the Horizon Healthcare Partners (HHP), our collective staffs, our Board of Directors, and the clients we serve, we submit this testimony today in support of H-7035, the bill to ensure funding for the state's **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**.

Community Care Alliance, Newport Mental Health, Thrive Behavioral Health, Tides Family Services, The Galilee Mission, Child & Family and CODAC are the seven behavioral health and substance use organizations that comprise HHP. As you hopefully know, the HHP agencies provide critical mental health and substance use services to individuals and families that are most vulnerable in local communities across the state.

We submit written testimony today to urge you to support H-7035 and ensure that 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is adequately funded and sustained.

On October 17, 2020, Congress passed legislation, co-authored by Rhode Island's own Senator Jack Reed, creating the new 988 behavioral health hotline. The legislation, named the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020, directs the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to designate 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline.

The new 988 line replaces the National Suicide Lifeline which operates the 10-digit number: (800) 273-TALK (8255). The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** offers 24/7 call, text and chat access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing suicidal, substance use, and/or mental health 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. 988 is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices.

In Rhode Island, BH Link operates the local calls to 988. BH Link has been answering these calls since the summer of 2019, when the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH), which funds BH Link, chose to take advantage of the fact that the center was already answering calls 24/7. HHP contracts with Community Care Alliance (CCA) to run both BH Link and the 988 Call Center.

Almost immediately, the percentage of Lifeline calls answered in-state jumped from about 15 percent to 99 percent, the best call answer rate in the country, and that is making a difference in terms of helping people in need.

Additionally, 988's physical placement within the BH Link ensures that there is a team of masters-level clinicians, nurses, peers, and frontline workers who can assist crisis counselors in responding to calls and who can offer 24/7, in-person assessment and referrals for people wanting immediate treatment.

Timely access to crisis services saves lives. By offering immediate help to everyone who may need it, 988 provides invaluable support at critical times. Lifeline crisis centers help to ensure that gaps in local services and delivery areas are served and that all calls are answered 24/7/365 by individuals trained to handle suicidal, mental health, and substance use crises.

Reliable, sustainable funding is needed for 988 to ensure that call centers can meet growing service demand and link callers to a full continuum of crisis care, which consists of 3 key parts: **someone to talk to** (24/7 crisis call centers), **someone to respond** (mobile crisis response teams), and **somewhere to go** (crisis respite and stabilization centers).

At present, 988 is an unfunded federal mandate. We estimate it will cost a minimum of \$2.9 million annually to fund this critical, lifesaving, and ultimately cost-saving service. Currently, this program is funded with temporary funding, including American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars. This ARPA funding does not cover indirect costs, like program leadership and facilities, meaning local community agencies like Community Care Alliance lose money - to-date, half a million dollars - without the necessary state funding.

For all these reasons, we urge you to support H-7035 and ensure that 988 has ongoing and sustainable funding. Thank you for considering our testimony and we hope you will consider the bill favorably; we know doing so will make a tremendous difference in the lives of the thousands of Rhode Islanders who will benefit by passage of this bill.

Please don't hesitate to contact me, AKalinick@hhpartners, if you have questions or need more information about 988 or the BH Link. We look forward to working with the legislature as we continue to care for the behavioral health needs of the citizens of our great state. We stand as your partner in ensuring that all Rhode Islanders have access to behavioral health services to support their best selves.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "AKalinick". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "k".

Amy Kalinick
Chief Financial Officer, Horizon Healthcare Partners