

June 1, 2021

Members of the California State Assembly
California State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support for AB 988 – The Miles Hall Lifeline and Suicide Prevention Act

Dear Assemblymembers:

The undersigned national behavioral health organizations write in strong support of Assembly Bill 988, which would implement groundbreaking mental health reforms that are critical to decriminalizing mental illness and advancing equity in California. Too often, when individuals experiencing a mental health crisis need help, they are met by law enforcement, not mental health professionals or others with training in mental health – resulting in unnecessary incarceration, damaging trauma, and preventable deaths. Between one-quarter and half of all fatal law enforcement encounters involved individuals with a serious mental illness.¹ Black Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be killed than White Americans, and Latinos are also disproportionately killed.²

Last year, Congress unanimously passed legislation designating “988” as the nationwide three-digit number to reach the National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline. In this bipartisan legislation, Congress also set a July 2022 deadline for 988 to be available across the country and created a mechanism for states to ensure “the efficient and effective routing of calls made to the 988 national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline to an appropriate crisis center” and support “personnel and the provision of acute mental health, crisis outreach and stabilization services by directly responding to the 9-8-8 national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline.”

AB 988 would implement the 988 system in California, including establishing a new emergency response system that connects people experiencing a mental health crisis with around-the-clock intervention. Under AB 988, Californians would have access to:

- 24/7 crisis counseling through call, text, and chat;
- Mobile crisis teams, staffed by trained mental health professionals and peers, to respond to crises instead of law enforcement; and
- Crisis receiving and stabilization services, so that individuals in a mental health crisis are not left to languish in our emergency rooms and jails.

¹ Overlooked in the Undercounted: The Role of Mental Illness in Law Enforcement Encounters (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2015). <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>

² “Fatal Force: 969 people have been shot and killed by police in the past year” (Washington Post, accessed May 21, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

AB 988 comes at a pivotal moment, with the July 2022 deadline barely a year away. If California does not act, it will be ill-prepared to meet increased call volumes associated both with pandemic-related increases in mental health needs and the existence of an easy-to-remember, three-digit number. AB 988 would also help eliminate a key entry point to the criminal justice system that disproportionately ensnares Black, Latinx, and other people of color when law enforcement responds to mental health crisis calls.

Failure to pass AB 988 will maintain the unacceptable status quo of California lacking the capacity to provide mental health crisis response when individuals calling 988 need in-person assistance. Instead, this responsibility will continue to fall upon California's emergency responders, most commonly law enforcement officers, who should not be expected to manage health care crises. Indeed, law enforcement agencies have been forced to allocate an average of 10% of their total budgets to responding to and transporting persons with mental illness. And research shows that over 20% of total law enforcement staff time is spent responding to and transporting people with mental illness.³ There should be broad bipartisan agreement that such use of public resources is wasteful and inappropriate.

This is why AB 988 has also been endorsed by law enforcement working on the ground in behavioral health crisis response. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department⁴ supports the bill because many who experience a mental health crisis "need a method to connect with trained mental health professionals who can assist with their crisis before it is too late."

AB 988 would help fundamentally transform mental health crisis response in California, which is why more than 90 organizations, including affiliates of many of our organizations, and over 3,000 individuals have joined in support. More than one-quarter of the legislature has also joined as coauthors. If enacted into law, AB 988 would position California as a national leader in ensuring mental health crises receive a mental health response. We respectfully request your strong support when AB 988 comes before you.

Sincerely,



Robert Gebbia
Chief Executive Officer
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention



Saul M. Levin, M.D., M.P.A., FRCP-E, FRCPsych
CEO and Medical Director
American Psychiatric Association

³ Road Runners: The Role and Impact of Law Enforcement in Transporting Individuals with Severe Mental Illness. (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2019). <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/road-runners>

⁴ Office of the Sheriff, County of Los Angeles support letter to Assemblymember Rebecca-Bauer Kahan, May 18, 2021.



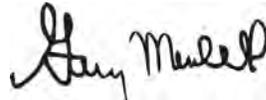
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