



June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, and Children and Families

Members of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Prevention

**Testimony on 2025 Senate Bill 307/ Assembly Bill 303**

***Relating to: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline grants. (FE)***

Thank you, Chairman Tittl, and other members of the committees for the opportunity to testify on this legislation today. Twenty years ago, the federal government launched the first National Suicide Prevention Lifeline with the number 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). The lifeline was utilized immediately, with 46,000 calls received within the first year. Over the next few decades, services such as a chat feature, a veteran specific crisis line, and additional languages were added. In 2018, the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act was passed, requiring a feasibility study be conducted on designating a three-digit dialing code for the hotline system to help with ease and accessibility.

In 2020, the Federal Communications Commission designated 988 as the new suicide and crisis lifeline number, and the transition to the easy-to-remember dialing code began. The lifeline would be administered through community-based providers who can deliver a full range of crisis care services locally. The lifeline is staffed 24/7 with counselors who are trained to reduce stress, provide emotional support, and connect people with local resources. The new 988 crisis line launched in 2022, and received nearly 5 million contacts within the first year. Wisconsin has answered 166,177 calls and 27,417 texts and chats total since 2022, averaging over 6,000 calls and 2,000 texts and chats per month.

988 was initially funded through supplemental block grants funds during the pandemic, and is currently funded by the Department of Health Services with federal grants, including the mental health block grant. With these grants funds set to expire both this year and in 2026, DHS needs to step in and administer the grant program at the state level for consistent and stable funding. This bill requires the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations that provide crisis intervention services and crisis care coordination to individuals who contact the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline from anywhere within the state.

Our state benefits from the essential services this lifeline provides. No matter who you are or what you are going through, 988 is there to help. Thank you all again for your time and consideration, and I will be happy to answer any questions you have.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse James".

Senator Jesse James

23<sup>rd</sup> Senate District

[Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov)



WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE

# Benjamin Franklin

88TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## Assembly Bill 303

Tuesday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025

### Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Prevention

Good morning, Chairman Tittl, Senator James and members of the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 303, which would ensure the continued operation of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in Wisconsin. 988 was originally launched in 2022 with federal COVID-19 relief funding, unfortunately Wisconsin's Lifeline is no longer expected to receive additional federal support later this year.

Under AB 303, the Department of Health Services (DHS) is required to award grants to organizations that provide crisis intervention and care coordination for individuals who contact the National Crisis Hotline—defined as the federally designated 988 telephone, text, or chat access number, or its successor. Currently, the Wisconsin hotline is operated by NEW Family (Northeastern WI Family Services) which is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by mental health professionals and trained volunteers. These staff members often connect individuals with local follow-up services.

Since its inception, 988 has proven to be highly effective and used frequently amongst Wisconsinites and is a vital service we should be funding.

Thank you for considering Assembly Bill 303, I'd be happy to answer any questions.



State of Wisconsin  
**Department of Health Services**

Tony Evers, Governor  
Kirsten L. Johnson, Secretary

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**TO:** Members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families and of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Prevention

**FROM:** Arielle Exner, Legislative Director

**DATE:** June 10, 2025

**RE:** Senate Bill 307/Assembly Bill 303

The Department of Health Services (DHS) appreciates the opportunity to submit written testimony for information only on Senate Bill 307/Assembly Bill 303 which requires the Department to award grants to organizations that provide crisis intervention services and crisis care coordination to individuals who contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline without inclusion of funding for said grants.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides free and confidential support for anyone experiencing a suicidal, mental health, and/or substance use crisis. People of all ages who need help for themselves or a loved one can call, text, or chat 24/7. Use of the 988 Wisconsin Lifeline is available at no cost to Wisconsin residents. Currently, 988 is supported by DHS and operated by Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin, an agency based in Green Bay with trained counselors serving people throughout the state.

In 2024 alone, 988 Wisconsin Lifeline counselors answered 80,000 calls from Wisconsinites, listening and supporting people through their distress with a focus on de-escalation and coping skills. As families and communities across our state grapple with the impact of suicides and suicide attempts, Governor Evers proposed \$12.2 million in his 2025-2027 executive budget to meet the needs of those contacting the 988 Wisconsin Lifeline and to address a continually increasing volume of contacts. This proposal's language mirrors the Governor's executive budget proposal but does not include the necessary funding the Department needs to continue to support 988. Without ongoing funding, DHS will not be able to continue to offer this essential service to Wisconsinites.

DHS thanks both Committees for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Good morning, Chairpersons and Committee Members of the Assembly and Senate Committees on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, and Children and Families.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your leadership in supporting the well-being of all Wisconsinites.

My name is Tana Koss. I live in the Town of Chase in Oconto County and serve as the Vice President of Programs and Strategy with Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin. Our main office is in Green Bay, but our work extends across the entire state.

Family Services is a nonprofit that's been serving northeast Wisconsin for **126 years**. We operate **20 programs**, addressing family strengthening, youth development, mental health, victim services, and crisis intervention. I've had the honor of working here for **17 years**, overseeing our **crisis services**, including our role as a **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline Center**.

We've provided crisis services for 45 years—and since **summer 2020**, we've worked with DHS to build and launch **988 Wisconsin Lifeline**, our statewide crisis line that answers **calls, chats, and texts from across Wisconsin**. We are proud to serve every county in the state, with a Wisconsin-based workforce trained in suicide prevention, de-escalation, and emotional support.

**In 2024 alone**, our team responded to **nearly 86,300 contacts**—and we successfully de-escalated **99% of those situations without involving emergency services**. That means fewer emergency room visits, fewer law enforcement responses, and more people stabilized with compassion and connection, right from their homes.

**We support Assembly Bill 303 and Senate Bill 307**. These bills represent a step toward sustaining a life-saving service that thousands of Wisconsinites depend on every month.

On average, **more than 9,400 people reach out to 988 each month** in Wisconsin. That includes people experiencing thoughts of suicide, substance use crises, or overwhelming stress. The most common themes we hear are interpersonal pain—loneliness, family and relationship struggles, mental health diagnoses, chronic illness, trauma, and addiction.

These are not strangers. These are our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends. In fact, we've had contacts from **every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties**.

And yet, despite the demonstrated demand for 988, **the program's future is at risk**.

Until now, Wisconsin's 988 Lifeline services have been **entirely funded by federal dollars**. That funding landscape is now shifting—and the **federal grant we've been expecting for over a year remains uncertain**. Without new support from the State of Wisconsin, our ability to operate may be in jeopardy **as soon as next year**.

In other words: **This time next year, we could be out of funds**.

This is not just a fiscal issue—it's a public health emergency waiting to happen. We must not let this essential safety net disappear.

Over the past five years, we've made **significant investments** in scaling up 988 services to meet statewide needs. Here's what we've accomplished:

- **Tripled our Lifeline Counselor team.**
- **Expanded chat and text services to be available 24/7.**
- **Built a predominantly remote workforce**—ensuring we can hire across the state.
- **Achieved national accreditation** and implemented robust quality improvement systems.



- Focused heavily on **workforce wellness and retention**—achieving a retention rate of **95.5%** in recent quarters, far exceeding sector norms.

Our **988 team is now over 100 strong**, including **70 full-time-equivalent Lifeline counselors**, supported by a culture of compassion, continuous training, and evidence-based practice. Over the last year alone, we hired **44 Lifeline counselors** and are recruiting six more to meet rising demand.

Another major part of our success has been **strong collaboration across the crisis continuum**. Today, we have signed partnership agreements with **60 counties**—ensuring seamless connection between our Lifeline services and local county crisis response teams. These agreements clarify roles, enhance coordination, and prevent gaps in service.

We also work closely with **211 Wisconsin** and the **Aging and Disability Resource Center of Brown County** to maintain a comprehensive and up-to-date statewide resource directory- an essential tool in serving help seekers.

Let me give you a glimpse of the human side of this work:

One recent caller told us he reached out to 988 with his stomach in knots, overwhelmed by anxiety, and convinced that **suicide was the only way out**. But after talking to John, one of our Lifeline Counselors, he said he felt calmer than he had in months. He no longer felt suicidal and was deeply grateful for the support he received.

That's what 988 does—it saves lives, one conversation at a time.

The return on investment is real. Robust crisis services:

- **Reduce emergency room visits**
- **Lower law enforcement involvement**
- **Improve outcomes**
- **Lower costs for the state**

In addition to supporting AB 303 and SB 307, we urge you to explore **broader long-term solutions**—including **allocating state budget dollars** and **considering a small telecom fee**, like those used to fund 911 services. **More than 26 states** have already implemented this model to support 988, creating a stable foundation for their crisis systems.

Your leadership on this issue is critical. The stakes are real—and personal—for tens of thousands of Wisconsinites who need someone to talk to when life feels unbearable.

**Please support AB 303 and SB 307.** Please help ensure that the 988 Lifeline remains available, accessible, and effective for every person in our state who reaches out in crisis.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

## Testimony

Sita Diehl, Public Policy & Advocacy Director

**RE: SB 307/ AB 303 Grants for the 988 Wisconsin Lifeline**

Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, and Children and Families  
Assembly Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Prevention

June 10, 2025

Senator James, Representative Tittl and Honorable Committee Members,

I'm Sita Diehl, Public Policy and Advocacy Director for NAMI Wisconsin, the state organization of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Thank you to Senator James and Representative Franklin for this bill and for their advocacy efforts surrounding the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline; and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share our support for Senate Bill 307/ Assembly Bill 303. This bill establishes a grant program at Department of Health Services to provide crisis intervention services and crisis care coordination to individuals who contact the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline from anywhere within the state. We urge you to support this proposal along with state funding of \$12.1 in the state budget for this vital service on a recurring basis.

NAMI Wisconsin is a grassroots organization of individuals and families living with mental illness. The volunteers and staff of our 22 affiliates throughout the state provide support groups, classes, training, resources, and educational events for individuals, family members, and the community.

For years, NAMI has advocated for a three digit national mental health lifeline, knowing that moments count in a mental health or suicidal crisis. All too often people don't know what to do or who to turn to and making help readily available saves lives. We were thrilled by the passage of the bipartisan federal National Hotline Designation Act of 2020 that established the national 988 network of call centers in every state, supported by a national call center.

NAMI Wisconsin collaborated with in-state and national partners to ensure that 988 would launch successfully in July 2022 and would meet the needs of people in suicidal, mental health and substance use crises. We applaud the progress nationwide, and especially in Wisconsin where the Department of Health Services (DHS) has contracted with [Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin](#) to provide exemplary service 24/7/365 by call, text and chat.

States have funded their 988 systems in a variety of ways, including telecom fees, and state appropriations. The Wisconsin Lifeline was established with federal grants which were terminated in March of this year. There is a critical need to maintain this life-saving mental health service with state dollars.

In three short years, 988 has become an essential resource for the people of Wisconsin. In 2025, callers now wait less than a minute to talk confidentially with a trained counselor - for free from



anywhere in the state. In Wisconsin, the 988 Lifeline now averages over 6,000 calls and 2,500 texts and chats each month. Nearly all calls, 99.6%, are resolved by the 988 counselor providing support or resources. For the small fraction that require on-site response, 988 coordinates with and refers to county crisis services or 911.

It has been said that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The simple act of compassionate listening can defuse a crisis in the making and enable the person to get on with their lives. A professional counselor can empathize with the person, help them gain clarity about their situation and help them lay out their options.

In the absence of this simple act of listening, the person may spiral into desperation, which can jeopardize safety for them and others, and derail their lives over the long term. We all pay the price when people require crisis intervention, emergency room service, hospitalization or incarceration. With wise counsel at the moment of crisis, people can get the help they need to thrive in school and succeed at work, to keep their families whole, and contribute to their communities.

The Wisconsin 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline takes a welcoming approach, acknowledging that crises look different from person to person. Individuals can contact 988 on their own behalf or to get guidance regarding a family member or someone else in their lives. Where the concern is about housing, income or other social services the Wisconsin Lifeline refers to 211 and other resources. Children and youth who are bullied or troubled can text or chat 988. People in rural and underserved communities throughout the state can get free, confidential counseling even where access to mental health providers is very limited. Veterans can get vet-to-vet assistance. Frequent callers get a compassionate counselor who works with them to respond to their concerns while also developing a calling plan to curtail overuse of the service.

We are at a critical time in Wisconsin. Our state continues to face a significant mental health crisis with an increasing number of people seeking mental health care and a continuing shortage of mental health care providers. 988 is a good investment in Wisconsinites and a smart investment for Wisconsin. NAMI Wisconsin requests your support for Senate Bill 307 and Assembly Bill 303 to establish state-funded grants for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in Wisconsin beginning with \$12.1 million in the 2025-2027 budget.

We are grateful for your attention to this important public resource and I'm happy to answer questions.

Chair Tittl and Chair James, members of the Mental Health committees

My son was always active, always had a ball in his hand. My son developed schizophrenia around age 13. Friends stopped coming around. His mom and I did not understand but we knew something was changing. We got my son into counselling. We called the police for help managing our teenaged son. In total, he missed a semester-worth of high school. We are blessed that the school worked with him to graduate with the rest of his class. This was twenty-eight years ago.

There was something new happening at that time called the internet. Virtual health visits were not even imagined. National 911 was realized in 2000 but it took until January 1, 2005, to launch the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. 988 was no help to us twenty-eight years ago.

Since then, my son caught up with and became addicted to crack cocaine and was incarnated. He has been in several sober treatment centers. They last several weeks and he transitions to sober living housing. We came to recognize a behavioral tendency. By the end of the second month, he starts questioning the trustworthiness and compassion of the people in the house. Things are great for the first few weeks but that changes. When asked what happened or what was said, his is unable to be specific. "They are not nice to me." "One of them is taking my stuff." "I need to leave." "I am getting angry." I am sure you recognize this as paranoia. This ends with a confrontation or altercation and he is expelled within two or three months.

Today, my son is 41. He found a lifeline we never had before: 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. We are smarter parents now. The primary reason he is still in sober living is 988. When his paranoia started to percolate the people who love him encouraged him to call 988. He did.

For nine months now, he has been in sober living. Past behavior is the best indicator of future behavior. Because he was able to change his behavior and called 988, I am certain

- He avoided expulsion
- He avoided an encounter with police
- He avoided detention and new charges
- He avoided having his parole revoked.

My son represents any son or daughter. any son, any daughter, any family grappling with Serious Mental Illness. Please, fully fund the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in this biennium budget. It's not just a number; it's one reason we still have our son.

Rick Schultz

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June 10 2025