

# The Maryland 988 Helpline Network

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline launched one year ago, establishing **the first nationwide three-digit phone number for mental health and substance use crises**. The 988 network consists of over 200 helplines across the country that participated in previous iterations of the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The transition to 988 presents an opportunity to reimagine how we support people experiencing emotional distress and save lives. Maryland has taken steps to build a robust 988 network and has more work ahead to make the most of this opportunity.

## What is the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline?

The 988 Lifeline is a network of community-based organizations that provide free, 24/7, confidential supportive counseling for those experiencing a mental health crisis. The network has existed for over twenty years and transitioned to become the 988 Lifeline through the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act passed by Congress in 2020.

Most 988 callers can resolve their concerns over the phone through the support of counselors. First responders are usually not needed, and if they are, specialized mental health teams can often be dispatched instead of police or emergency medical services. This allows 988 to serve as an important alternative to emergency departments, 911, or law enforcement for behavioral health interventions.

**MARYLAND HAS A NETWORK OF EIGHT 988 HELPLINE PROVIDERS THAT SERVE THE ENTIRE STATE**



- Mental Health Association of Frederick County
- EveryMind\*
- Baltimore Crisis Response, Inc. (BCRI)
- Community Crisis Services, Inc. (CCSI)\*
- Grassroots Crisis Intervention\*
- Baltimore County Crisis Response System (Affiliated Sante)
- Eastern Shore Crisis Response (Affiliated Sante)
- Life Crisis Center
- Central Maryland Crisis Response System

\*Helpline centers reachable through texting

**“When I find myself in a crisis situation where I feel hopeless and overwhelmed but want to stay out of the hospital, I dial 988 and then get connected to a crisis counselor who assists me in coming up with a plan to help keep me safe until I am able to go to my therapy appointment the next day and avoid hospitalization.”**

NAMI MARYLAND CONSUMER TESTIMONY



## The First Year of 988 in Maryland

Maryland's network of eight 988 helplines has a long-standing track record of effective services but they have needed increased resources to make sure no one has their call for help go unanswered. The launch of the more easily remembered and higher profile 988 number has increased calls by almost 40% and led to a ten-fold increase in texts for help.

AVERAGE NUMBER  
OF MONTHLY CALLS  
BEFORE 988 LAUNCH

vs

AVERAGE NUMBER  
OF MONTHLY CALLS  
SINCE 988 LAUNCH

3,110



4,267

Maryland has kept up with this increase in demand thanks to funding provided by the federal government and the General Assembly. The legislature appropriated \$5 million to 988 helplines for FY23 which has proven invaluable in maintaining a responsive network.

### The funding has allowed Helpline providers to:

- Hire new frontline and management staff;
- Provide increased salaries needed to compete during the current behavioral health workforce shortage;
- Increase and improve training and workforce management efforts; and
- Invest in improved infrastructure to improve data collection, conduct quality assurance, and connect with other behavioral health resources.

These investments have allowed the Maryland 988 network to maintain and improve its average call answer speed and in-state answer rate, but new resources are needed to continue to strengthen the network. Only three Maryland 988 helplines answer text messages, and few participate in the Spanish language 988 network. The Maryland 988 network also needs to be better integrated with other behavioral health services and 911 answer points. And marketing is needed to increase awareness. Much work and further investments remain.

## Looking ahead

Over the last several years, the Fund MD988 Campaign, a group of over 80 community organizations, worked with the General Assembly to secure state 988 funding for the first time and to establish a 988 Trust Fund with \$17.5 million available over the next two years. The 988 Trust Fund resources are dedicated to maintaining the Maryland 988 network and implementing any other initiatives needed for the crisis response continuum such as mobile crisis and crisis stabilization services. The state must use these resources wisely to continue investing in 988 helplines and to build out the range of crisis response services needed to keep every caller safe.

Looking ahead, the Fund MD988 Campaign will continue to advocate for additional resources and stronger policies to ensure our crisis system meets the behavioral health needs of all Marylanders. A long-term solution including dedicated revenue for the 988 Trust Fund and reimbursement for crisis services by public and private payors will be needed, but if we work together, we can build the robust system needed to save the lives of Marylanders in distress.

## MARYLAND 988 HELPLINE FACTS

The Maryland 988 network received over **50,000 CALLS** in the last year.



As many as **90% OF 988 CALLERS GET RELIEF OVER THE PHONE** through supportive counseling and a connection to community resources.

**ONLY 2% OF CALLERS REQUIRE A TRANSFER** to 911 for active rescue by EMS or law enforcement.



**TEXTS TO 988 INCREASED TEN-FOLD** in Maryland over the last year.

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