



Develop a Full Crisis Continuum to Support 988

In 2020, Congress authorized 988 as a country-wide number to be used for immediate support to meet the growing risk of suicide and substance use distress. Just as 911 is used for emergency response for a physical health issue, 988 is used for urgent/emergency mental health and substance use response. Federal funding was provided to establish regional 988 call centers in each state. In the first year, 988 call centers in the US received 5 million calls, although many people were not aware of it. Pennsylvania has 12 regional call centers (with plans to add two more this year) and received 14,721 calls in the first year.

911 call centers have a care continuum of ambulances, mobile medical teams, and emergency rooms to respond to 911 calls for urgent physical health needs. These are primarily funded by commercial and publicly-funded health insurance. Similarly, 988 needs a care continuum to respond to urgent behavioral health emergencies, including a trained mobile crisis team and a stabilization center for short term assistance until someone is stabilized or alternate treatment is arranged. As is the case for the 911 care continuum, it is anticipated that health insurance will cover most of the cost of its operations.

A large impediment to standing up the crisis continuum for 988 is that the Pennsylvania Medical Assistance Program has not established regulations for the operation of the crisis continuum nor ongoing reimbursement for those providers. The regulations were anticipated at the end of the Wolf Administration and have been under review by the Shapiro Administration for the last 15 months. Some counties have funded mobile crisis teams, but the 988-crisis continuum that is needed to support the growing numbers of 988 calls across the state has not been implemented.

There is a critical need in Pennsylvania for the development and ongoing insurance coverage for this care continuum. In 2021, there were 1,895 suicides and 51,840 deaths due to a drug overdose.

A clear, tragic situation in PA on December 30, 2020, illustrates this critical need. Through a 911 call, PA State Police were sent to respond to a 19-year old on a bridge who was suicidal. The teen had a pellet gun in his hand as part of this suicide effort. State Police arrived with sirens blaring, exited their vehicle with guns drawn and shot and killed the teen although he had raised his hands at their command. Had a trained crisis mobile team been sent either alone or as a team with the police, the outcome could have been very different.

Action Needed: Urge PA DHS to immediately issue the Crisis Continuum regulations and proposed reimbursement particulars for providers. Because they will need to go through a lengthy regulatory review process, including a public comment period, there will be significant opportunity for fine tuning.