FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, July 13, 2023

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline Adds Spanish Text and Chat Service Ahead of One-Year Anniversary

The 988 Lifeline answered nearly 5 million contacts in the past year – 2 million more than the previous 12 months – following $1 billion Biden-Harris Administration investment

Specialized services for LGBTQI+ youth and young adults were expanded, following a successful pilot test

Note to editors and reporters: B-roll video is available for download and use in reporting, courtesy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

One year after the rollout of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and its 988 Lifeline partners announced the addition of Spanish text and chat services. Specialized services for LGBTQI+ youth and young adults were also added earlier this month, following a successful pilot test. The 988 Lifeline is part of the Biden-Harris Administration’s comprehensive strategy to address the nation’s mental health crisis, and to date, the Administration has invested nearly $1 billion into this life-saving initiative. This investment is driving an increase in calls, texts and chats, with nearly 5 million contacts answered in the past year — and helped millions of people in crisis.

“Today, we celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Biden-Harris Administration’s launch of 988, America’s three-digit Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. 988 is a life-saving program that connects Americans with trained counselors who offer real support in times of crisis,” said HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra. “Building on our good news, this year we enhance 988’s reach by adding new 24/7 text and chat support in Spanish to the already
existing call support. 988 is about delivering life-saving resources to Americans facing mental health challenges, and now we can say that to you in Spanish.”

Almost 1 million of the nearly 5 million contacts were answered by Veterans Crisis Line (VCL). The 988 Lifeline links to the VCL, which military members, veterans and their families can reach by dialing 988 and pressing option 1.

“There is nothing more important to VA than preventing Veteran suicide – and that means getting Veterans the support they need, exactly when they need it,” said Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Denis McDonough. “Since the launch of Dial 988 then Press 1, the Veterans Crisis Line has fielded nearly 1 million contacts from Veterans and their loved ones. This new, shorter number has made it easier for those in crisis to connect with caring, qualified responders and access lifesaving support.”

“The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a life-saving resource,” said Deputy Secretary Andrea Palm. “We are facing a behavioral health crisis in this country. With our continued investment in 988, and the addition of Spanish language text and chat services, we are furthering our commitment to addressing this crisis head on.”

The 988 Lifeline, a network of more than 200 state and local call centers supported by HHS through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), answered nearly 5 million calls, texts and chats from people looking for help with suicide, mental health and substance use-related crises since launching last July – 2 million more than the 988 Lifeline received in the previous 12 months.

“The 988 Lifeline is responding to thousands of people in crisis every day. The data continues to show increased calls, texts and chats and at the same time, speed to answer rates are significantly improved,” said Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D., HHS Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use and the leader of SAMHSA. “This means that more people are getting help and they are getting help more quickly, which is crucial for a person in crisis.”

The Biden-Harris Administration’s nearly $1 billion investment into the 988 Lifeline includes funding from President Biden’s American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) and supports the President’s Unity Agenda to address the mental health crisis. Much of that investment has gone directly to states, territories, and tribes to hire crisis counselors and improve local response. More than $200 million in 988 Lifeline grants will be awarded in late Fiscal Year 2023 to support states, territories and tribes as they continue to build out local capacity for crisis services and connect with more people in need.

Compared to the 12 months prior, text contacts through the Lifeline increased by 1135%, chats answered increased by 141% and calls answered increased by 46%. Average speed to answer for contacts decreased from 2 minutes and 39 seconds to 41 seconds.
The 988 Lifeline also uses Language Line Solutions to provide translation services in more than 240 additional languages. Later this year, the 988 Lifeline plans to add video phone service to better serve deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

In another expansion of national services, the 988 Lifeline network administrator Vibrant Emotional Health concluded a successful pilot earlier this month and now offers, as part of the national subnetwork, the option for LGBTQI+ youth and young adults under the age of 25 who want to connect with a counselor specifically focused on meeting their needs. The pilot, which began in September 2022, demonstrated a demand for the service, which accounted for about 6% of calls, 11% of chats, and 15% of texts routed to the 988 Lifeline network during the pilot phase.

“As the nonprofit administrator of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, Vibrant is committed to building a lifeline that is accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all individuals,” said Dr. Tia Dole, Chief 988 Lifeline Officer at Vibrant Emotional Health. “We are proud of the work that has been done and look forward to working closely with national and local partners to continue to significantly impact mental health support across the nation, saving lives and fostering well-being.”

The concept for 988 was first proposed to Congress by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in August 2019 as a nationwide, easy-to-remember, 3-digit dialing code for individuals in crisis to connect with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, signed into law after the passage of bipartisan legislation in 2020, authorized 988 as the new three-digit number for suicide and mental health crisis.

“When the FCC started our work on 988 several years ago, I encouraged our agency to explore incorporating texting into the Lifeline. It shouldn’t make a difference how you reach out in an emergency, but that you can connect to mental health resources, no matter how you communicate,” said FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel. “In the past year, both text and chat have become an integral part of the 988 Lifeline. And now, that reach is further expanded to Spanish speakers, who can communicate in Spanish by text and chat for the first time. I’m extremely proud of the work that our agencies have done to make this life-saving service more accessible to those who need it most.”

In 2021, according to SAMHSA’s National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 4.8% of adults ages 18 or older (about 12.3 million people) had serious thoughts of suicide, and among adolescents ages 12 to 17, 12.7% (about 3.3 million people) had serious thoughts of suicide.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that in 2021, suicide was the second-leading cause of death for people aged 10–14 and 25–34 years and more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses.
Studies have shown that after speaking with a trained crisis counselor, most callers are significantly more likely to feel less depressed, less suicidal, less overwhelmed, and more hopeful.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat 988lifeline.org. Individuals who speak Spanish can now connect directly to Spanish-speaking crisis counselors by calling 988 and pressing option 2, texting “AYUDA” to 988, or chatting online at 988lineadevida.org or 988Lifeline.org. To learn how to get support for mental health, drug, and alcohol issues, visit FindSupport.gov.

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