

Advocates praise new National Suicide Prevention Lifeline law

Calling it a “groundbreaking moment,” mental health advocates are applauding the designation of 988 as the new, universal hotline telephone number for suicide prevention and mental health crises. The bipartisan National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 was signed into law by President Trump on Oct. 17. The new number is expected to be active by July 2022.

The Federal Communications Commission on July 16 adopted rules to establish 988 as the new, nationwide, three-digit phone number for Americans in crisis to connect with suicide prevention and mental health crisis counselors. The rules require all phone service providers to direct all 988 calls to the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK, or 1-800-273-8255) by July 16, 2022 (see *MHW*, July 24).

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, creating a three-digit number (988) for suicide prevention and mental health crises, last month. It had already been approved by the Senate (see *MHW*, Sept. 25).

The new law enables states to enact fees similar to those in place for 911 that will support the need for expanded services at the local level to receive and respond to crisis calls, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), who called the new law a “groundbreaking moment.”

“The need for 9-8-8 is urgent,” NAMI CEO Daniel H. Gillison Jr. said in a statement. “Without appropriate care, people with mental illness end up on our streets, in jails, and in emergency departments — and dying in tragic encounters with law enforcement. By signing this bill into law, we are making real progress toward ensuring people in crisis get help, not handcuffs. We are grateful to Congress and the FCC for their efforts in moving this legislation forward and making 9-8-8 a reality.”

“This is absolutely fantastic,” Roger McIntyre, M.D., FRCPC, CEO of AltMed and director of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, told *MHW*. “The USA is the only country that has been witnessing an increasing suicide rate in the past two decades. COVID-19 is projected to increase suicide rates in America. The CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] has just reported an increase in excess deaths during the past nine months, much of which are due to deaths of despair.” McIntyre is also head of mood disorders at University Health Network in Toronto, Canada.

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AFSP weighs in

“This historic legislation, now law, will bring our mental health crisis response system into the 21st century,” Robert Gebbia, CEO of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), stated in a news release. “We are encouraged by the federal government’s dedication to preventing this leading cause of death and showing all Americans that mental health is just as important as physical health.”

Gebbia added, “It should be noted however that the United States’ mental health crisis response system is woefully underfunded and undervalued. It is crucial that local crisis call centers are adequately

equipped to respond to what we expect will be an increased call volume and provide effective crisis services to those in need when 9-8-8 is made available in July 2022.”

The AFSP expressed thanks to the legislation’s sponsors: Sens. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.), Jerry Moran (R-Kansas) and Jack Reed (D-R.I.), and Reps. Chris Stewart (R-Utah), Seth Moulton (D-Mass.), Greg Gianforte (R-Montana) and Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Texas), as well as their staff. “We would also like to thank the committee members, congressional leadership, and staff who have supported these efforts on Capitol Hill,” said Gebbia.

The AFSP’s nearly 30,000 volunteer field advocates engaged their members of Congress for years in support of the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, he said. “They made their voices heard through thousands of letters, phone calls, and emails,” Gebbia stated. “They have pushed the suicide prevention movement forward, and their efforts will save lives.” •

HOSPITAL from page 1

first complaint regarding practices in a psychiatric facility in the state.

At issue in general, Roberson said, is that many hospitals in California still are trying to bypass strong regulations from the state’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health (a government unit commonly referred to as Cal/OSHA), professing instead to be following guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

However, “They’re not a regulator,” Roberson said of the CDC, which in recent months has issued conflicting guidance about the threat of airborne spread of the virus.

Allegations against Kaiser

A pair of CalMatters reporters wrote in an Oct. 16 article that ac-