

August 3, 2021

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor
State of California
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support for AB 988 – The Miles Hall Lifeline and Suicide Prevention Act

Dear Governor Newsom:

We write to you as leaders of national behavioral health organizations to ask for your support in ensuring the passage of Assembly Bill 988 this session. AB 988 is an urgently needed bill that will advance essential mental health reforms in California that are necessary to advance equity and help decriminalize mental illness.

Across our country, the default emergency response for individuals having a mental health crisis is law enforcement. The results are tragic – unnecessary incarceration and homelessness, damaging trauma, and preventable deaths. Between one-quarter and half of all fatal law enforcement encounters involve individuals with a serious mental illness.¹ And the intersection between mental illness and systemic racism is particularly deadly, with Black Americans being killed at a rate 250% higher than White Americans.²

California is no different. In fact, AB 988, The Miles Hall Lifeline and Suicide Prevention Act, is named after a young man who was shot and killed by police in Walnut Creek while he was having a mental health crisis. In another recent tragedy in Antioch that garnered nationwide attention, Angelo Quinto was killed after his sister called 911 because he was exhibiting symptoms of mental illness including paranoia. Similar tragedies are all too common in California and across the country.

To help states prevent such tragedies, Congress unanimously passed legislation last year that designated “988” as the nationwide three-digit number to reach both the National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline and the Veterans Crisis Line. This legislation also created a funding mechanism that states can use to ensure not only that calls to the lifeline were answered without delay, but also that individuals having a mental health crisis who need in-person response are greeted by mental health care, not handcuffs or guns.

¹ Overlooked in the Undercounted: The Role of Mental Illness in Law Enforcement Encounters (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2015). <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>

² “Fatal Force: 969 people have been shot and killed by police in the past year” (Washington Post, accessed May 21, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

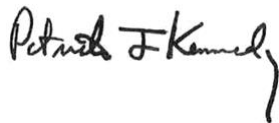
While it might be tempting to think California has the luxury of waiting, we believe it does not. The new federal law sets a July 16, 2022 deadline – less than a year from now – for 988 to be available on all phones nationwide. With an easy-to-remember three-digit number, call centers are expecting a **300% increase** in call volume in the first year alone. This comes on top of the 67% increase in call volumes over the last 5 years, which has only been accelerated by COVID-19 and is already straining call centers. These increases are particularly concerning given our understanding that California’s enacted FY 2022 budget has allocated no additional money to help call centers meet the demand.

Thus, failing to act both significantly increases the likelihood that those in need of help will not have their calls answered in a timely manner while also denying them effective in-person assistance when needed. Instead, police departments will continue to waste valuable resources, given that over 20% of police time is spent responding to and transporting people with mental illness.³ Failing to act will also leave open a key entry point to the criminal justice system, into which Black, Latinx, and other people of color disproportionately flow.

While no change occurs overnight and systemic change takes hard, sustained work, we believe the fierce urgency of this moment calls upon California to lead. By enacting AB 988 this session, California can help ensure individuals in crisis receive timely help and put the state on the path towards a statewide mobile crisis response and stabilization system that is the envy of the nation.

We respectfully request your strong support to help ensure that AB 988 reaches your desk.

Sincerely,



Patrick J. Kennedy
Former U.S. Representative (D-RI)
Founder, The Kennedy Forum
Co-founder, The Kennedy-Satcher Center for
Mental Health Equity



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Amit Paley
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³ Road Runners: The Role and Impact of Law Enforcement in Transporting Individuals with Severe Mental Illness. (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2019). <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/road-runners>



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