

September 1, 2022

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814
Via leg.unit@gov.ca.gov

Re: AB 988 (Bauer-Kahan) – Mental health: 988 Crisis Hotline – Request for Signature

Dear Governor Newsom,

The undersigned national behavioral health organizations representing patients, family members, providers, advocates, and other stakeholders write to express our strong support for Assembly Bill 988, The Miles Hall Lifeline and Suicide Prevention Act (Bauer-Kahan). This landmark legislation would make California a national leader in transforming responses to individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis.

Named in remembrance of Miles Hall, a young man who was fatally shot by police during a mental health crisis after his family called 911, this legislation will save lives. We urge you to sign it into law without delay.

Our country has long had an antiquated, deeply harmful, and punitive approach to responding to behavioral health emergencies. Every year, millions of behavioral health crisis calls are made to 911, which is ill-equipped to help individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis. Too often, law enforcement — not a mental health professional — is dispatched. The results can be tragic. One study found that between one-quarter and half of all fatal police shootings involve individuals with untreated serious mental illness, with those individuals being 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter.¹ Unnecessary interactions with law enforcement also steer individuals towards the criminal legal system, which can add to their trauma and have life-changing consequences.

Tragically, Black and other individuals of color are disproportionately harmed. UC Berkeley researchers found that, among men showing signs of mental illness, Black men are more likely to be fatally shot than white men. Furthermore, Black men are less likely to receive mental health treatment.² The intersections of race, gender, mental illness, and substance use powerfully contribute to the deep inequities of California’s carceral system, in which 28% of the prison population is Black – more than quadruple the percentage of California’s population.³ Additionally, between 2009 and 2019, the proportion of incarcerated people in California with an “active mental health case” rose 63%.⁴

¹ <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/overlooked-in-the-undercounted.pdf>

² <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/10/05/stark-racial-bias-revealed-in-police-killings-of-older-mentally-ill-unarmed-black-men/>

³ <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-california.pdf>.

⁴ https://calhps.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Jail_MentalHealth_JPSReport_02-03-2020.pdf.

The new three-digit 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline offers an opportunity for states to choose a different, more equitable path by creating a system of mental health services to help individuals in need, thereby shifting away from the damaging punitive response. In addition to being a number to call (though, approximately 95% of calls to California Lifeline Centers can be resolved over the phone), 988 can also connect individuals to mobile crisis teams, and crisis receiving and response services that treat individuals' acute needs and connect them to longer-term services that can promote recovery. Thus, 988 offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reimagine crisis services.

Unfortunately, not enough states across the country have shown the leadership necessary to seize this opportunity. Thankfully, California lawmakers have demonstrated leadership in passing AB 988. This critical piece of legislation will:

- Coordinate implementation and long-term planning to ensure that the promise of 988 is realized by all Californians.
- Utilize sustainable funding mechanisms similar to 911 that will help build system capacity needed to meet widespread needs.
- Ensure health plans meet their responsibilities to cover behavioral health crisis (i.e., emergency) services, just as they cover physical health emergency services.

By signing critical piece of legislation, you will once again put California at the forefront of implementing systemic reforms that are necessary to correct historic inequities. Failure to act now will unfortunately put more lives at risk and steer California away from urgently needed reforms and creation of a coordinated system across the state. We urge you to sign AB 988 to make California a national leader, yet again, in advancing mental health equity.

Sincerely,

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