

Senate Bill 2149

Presented by: Randy Christmann, Chair
Public Service Commission

Before: House Finance and Taxation Committee
The Honorable Craig Headland, Chair

Date: March 13, 2023

TESTIMONY

Mr. Chair and committee members, I am Randy Christmann, Chair of the Public Service Commission, and I'm here to share concerns the PSC has with the current proposal to add a new tax on telecommunications services. First, let me be clear that we are not opposed to this bill and are not weighing in on whether or not money should be appropriated for this purpose. That is completely out of the Commission's area of expertise. The PSC's objection is to raising this money for Human Services through a tax on utilities.

Over the decades, in almost every Legislative Session, our income and sales tax systems are tweaked to make those larger revenue raising taxes as fair as possible for the people of North Dakota. We believe those are the types of revenue sources that are most appropriate for raising dollars deemed necessary for human services. But the current version of HB 2149 proposes to raise the money with an additional tax on telecommunications services. This would be a very regressive, and in our opinion, a very unfair revenue source.

There are currently programs in operation to significantly lower the costs for those who struggle to pay for telecommunications services, and many of our citizens are using

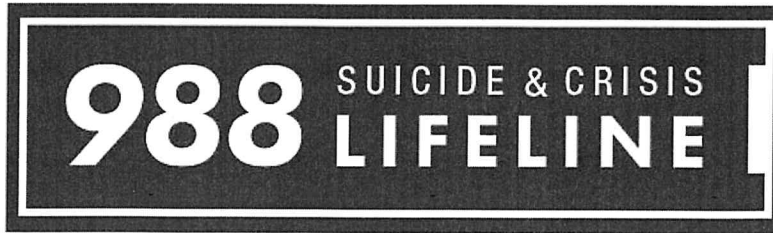
these programs. They encourage people to maintain or add to their service, which is important because these are proven, important life safety tools. For many, they are also essential for educational and employment opportunities. The Commission works closely with providers to make sure these programs are working correctly.

Taxing telecommunications services moves exactly the opposite direction and actually negates some of our efforts to make these services less costly. I can only imagine the frustration that would be felt by young families, often among the least able to pay more, when they have to pay this new tax on multiple devices in order to maintain broadband access at home and to also assure that all members of their family can have coverage when away from home.

On line 18 of SB 2149 it says, "The department shall establish ... a 988 crisis hotline program ..." But it is important to note that the suicide and crisis lifeline is not exactly a new concept. This has been in existence since 2005. There are more than 200 crisis centers in this national network. The original number was 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). What is new though is the switch to a three-digit option of just dialing "988", making it easier to remember and call. I have attached a document that provides information about the program and outlines its history for you to review.

The PSC asks that if the Finance & Taxation Committee decides this is a good investment for North Dakota, please pay for it from the fairest of revenue sources and not with this extraordinarily regressive and investment stifling new utility tax.

Mr. Chair, this concludes our testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions.



“988” is the three-digit, nationwide phone number to connect directly to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Too many people experience suicidal crisis or mental health-related distress without the support and care they need. There are urgent mental health realities driving the need for crisis service transformation across our country. In 2020 alone, the U.S. had one death by suicide about every 11 minutes—and for people aged 10-34 years, suicide is a leading cause of death.

There is hope. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline – previously known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – is a **national network of more than 200 crisis centers** that helps thousands of people overcome crisis situations every day. These centers are supported by local and state sources as well as the Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). As of July 16, 2022, all calls and text messages to “988” route to a 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline call center.

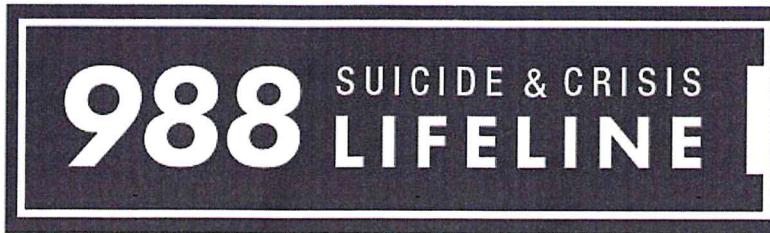
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or mental health-related distress.

- **New Nationwide Number:** 988 is more than just an easy-to-remember number — it’s a direct connection to compassionate, accessible care and support for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress – whether thoughts of suicide, mental health, substance use crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress.
- **Provides Support:** People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support.
- **FCC Rules:** Under FCC rules, calls and texts to 988 will be directed to the Lifeline. Calls and texts to 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) will also continue to reach the 988 Lifeline even after the nationwide implementation of 988.
- **Saving Lives:** The FCC actions reflect its commitment to saving lives and connecting individuals to necessary intervention services. Switching to the easy-to-remember 988 makes it easier for individuals in crisis to access the help they need and decrease the stigma surrounding suicide and mental health issues.
- **Important Step:** The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is an important step toward strengthening and transforming crisis care in this country. It serves as a universal entry point so that no matter where you live, you can reach a trained crisis counselor who can help.
- **Help for Veterans:** For calls, pressing “1” after dialing 988 will connect you directly to the Veterans Crisis Lifeline which serves our nation’s Veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who support them. For texts, continue to text the Veterans Crisis Lifeline short code: 838255.

History

2005: The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline launches with the number 1-800-273-8255 and received 46K calls in the first year.





August 2019: FCC staff—in consultation with SAMHSA, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the North American Numbering Council—released a report recommending the use of 988 as the 3-digit code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

July 2020: The FCC designated this new phone number for individuals in crisis to connect with suicide prevention and mental health crisis support.

October 2020: The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 was signed into law, incorporating 988 into statute as the new Lifeline and Veterans Crisis Line phone number.

November 2021: The FCC adopted rules to expand access to text 988 to directly reach the Lifeline to better support at-risk communities in crisis, including youth and individuals with disabilities.

July 16, 2022: All phone companies and text messaging providers are required to route all calls and text messages to “988” to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

To learn more, visit <https://www.fcc.gov/988Lifeline>.

