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Health

Biden administration officials visit Philadelphia to kick off a new national mental health hotline

Calling 988 instead of 911 could prevent tragedies like the killing of Walter Wallace Jr., said Consortium CEO John White.



Xavier Becerra, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in West Philadelphia on Friday. HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer

by [Abraham Gutman](#)

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It is still hard for John White to talk about [Walter Wallace Jr.](#)

“Our greatest disappointment was not getting the opportunity to help him,” said the chief executive of Consortium, a mental health crisis response center in West Philadelphia.

In October 2020, two Philadelphia police officers shot and killed Wallace, a 27-year-old who was undergoing a mental health crisis. Wallace was known at Consortium and [received care there just days](#) before his death a few blocks away.

“There were three calls that day that went to 911,” White said. “Not one time were we called to assist.”

He shared his lingering frustration on Friday with local, state, and federal officials, including U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra and Secretary of Veteran Affairs Denis McDonough, at a roundtable discussion at Consortium as part of a kickoff event for 988 — a new national mental health hotline.

» ***READ MORE: [A new national mental health hotline launches Saturday. What to know about 988.](#)***

White believes that 988 could lead to a different ending in crises like the one Wallace experienced. A call to the line would have gone “directly to a behavioral health provider who could have been there on any one of the three calls that were made on 911 to prevent this tragedy,” White said.

The new suicide and crisis line is [an easy-to-remember three-digit number](#). It will officially launch on Saturday. Federal officials came to Philadelphia to mark the launch with a roundtable discussion and news conference — saying the decision was to celebrate the crisis response work that is done in the city by organizations like Consortium.

“There is no accident in our being here in Philadelphia,” Becerra told the roundtable. “It is because you made a commitment to make it work the right way.”

Standing in front of a mural that, among other things, represents overcoming hardship, Becerra said that 988 is more than a number, “it’s a message.”

“When you think 911, you think emergency and rescue. Starting tomorrow, when [you hear 988](#), think crisis and rescue,” the HHS secretary said. “If you’re about to fall, reach out. We will catch you.”

The line has been nearly two years in the making since the passage of the [National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020](#). Becerra touted the Biden administration’s \$430 million investment so far in the project. Pennsylvania received more than \$3 million in grant funding to support the launch of 988.

McDonough emphasized the importance of 988 to the veteran population, which can reach the veteran crisis line by dialing 988 and pressing 1.

Also in attendance were Federal Communication Commissions Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel, HHS Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, HHS Region 3 director Ala Stanford, Democratic U.S. Rep. Dwight Evans, and Mayor Jim Kenney, among others.

» ***[READ MORE: Ala Stanford appointed by President Biden to be regional director of Health and Human Services](#)***

One of Philadelphia’s goals for 988 is to reduce law enforcement involvement in behavioral health crises, said Jill Bowen, the city’s behavioral health commissioner.

Philadelphia has a call center that currently responds to calls made to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and to the Philadelphia Crisis Line — and it will be responsible for 988 calls. It currently receives about 5,000 calls a

month and the city is anticipating a 40% increase in calls over time following the rollout of the shorter number.

The majority of crisis calls are resolved on the phone. The city works with community organizations — such as Consortium — to deploy a mobile crisis response team when a caller needs more hands-on support.

In the past two budgets, Philadelphia has made investments both in [mobile crisis response teams](#) and in [co-response teams](#) where police and a behavioral health specialist respond together. The city also [embedded a mental health specialist in the 911 dispatch room](#) to help flag crisis calls. Bowen said that when a 911 call is only related to suicide it is transferred to Philadelphia's crisis line.

"We want a system that mitigates trauma; person's already in distress, the response needs to bring that stress down," she said.

There are still open questions about 988. Pennsylvania is among half the states that didn't pass legislation to secure long-term funding for the program. Some advocates are concerned that an increase in call volume will overwhelm the mental health system, which is already stretched for resources.

But one of the biggest challenges for 988 could be awareness and stigma — people just not picking up the phone and dialing the three digits in a moment of need.

Raffaela Gualtieri is a person in mental health recovery. She had the experience of reaching out for help and now she works at Elwyn, one of the city's partner organizations in crisis response, answering hotline calls. She said that while it doesn't always feel like it in a moment of crisis, recovery is possible.

“Once you reach out for that help, and call a number like 988, that is the first step,” she said. “People should not hesitate to use that number.”

HOW TO FIND HELP

If you or anyone you know is thinking of suicide, help is available 24/7:

- **The National Suicide Prevention Talk Line** offers help in over 150 languages. Call 1-800-273-8255 or text HELLO to 741741. **En Español**, marca al 1-888-628-9454. If you're **deaf or hard of hearing**, call 1-800-799-4889.
- **The Philadelphia Suicide and Crisis Center** offers guidance and assessment about depression, self harm, hopelessness, anger, addiction, and relationship problems, at 215-686-4420.
- **Veterans Crisis Chat** is available at 1-800-273-8255 or by text at 838255.
- **The Trevor Project** offers crisis support to LGBTQ+ youth 25 and under. Call 1-866-488-7386, text START to 678678, or start a [chat](#).

Original Source:

<https://www.inquirer.com/health/988-mental-health-suicide-prevention-hotline-police-20220715.html>



Abraham Gutman - I write about mental health, how it affects people's lives, and the systems meant to provide support.