988: An Opportunity to Build a Better Mental Health Crisis System

A mental health crisis can be a time of distress, desperation, and even tragedy. But with the right connections to care, a crisis can also be a turning point. This July, the launch of the nationwide 988 mental health hotline presents funders with a unique opportunity to create a robust crisis response system that supports people with mental health challenges before, during, and after their most vulnerable times. The launch of 988 is just the first of many steps to build a better behavioral healthcare system that cares for those in crisis. With states and localities responsible for the implementation and funding of this system, philanthropy has an opportunity - and responsibility - to strengthen these efforts.

In this article, we examine why it’s important for philanthropy to lay the groundwork for urgent reform of the entire crisis response system and share high level considerations for funding local action. Next month, Mindful Philanthropy will launch our latest guidance on how funders can support 988 implementation within a broader crisis response system.

Moments of Crisis and Failed Responses

There is a growing need for an equitable, timely, and coordinated mental health crisis response system that serves all Americans. A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others, and/or prevents them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively in the community.¹ This may cause friends, family members, or even the individuals themselves to call for emergency services, such as dialing 911.

An inadequate crisis response system can mean missed opportunities to connect people with needed care, unnecessary involvement with a criminal justice setting, and further trauma. In some tragic instances, it can even lead to death. For communities of color, the intersection of racism, mental illness, and police violence are particularly troubling, and can lead to increased distrust of emergency personnel and hesitancy to call for help in a crisis.

The Crisis Response Continuum

A mental health hotline such as 988 is just one component of a crisis response system. A full Crisis Response Continuum of Care includes the following core components:

- **Crisis call center hubs** - Many crises can be resolved by skilled staff who are trained to answer a range of calls for mental health issues, suicide risk, and substance use - such as through 988. It is crucial that these hubs have the staff and resources they need to answer each call promptly and effectively.

- **Mobile crisis teams** - These teams include behavioral health professionals such as social workers, peer specialists, and family peer advocates who provide care in people’s homes and other community settings. They are trained to assess crisis situations, de-escalate, and intervene, as well as connect individuals to further care.

- **Crisis stabilization options** - Those in crisis should have access to multiple options for care if necessary, such as a crisis stabilization at an inpatient facility, hospitalization, or other clinical setting.

Additional components of this continuum include outreach and engagement before a crisis, such as through universal screening or early referral to services and supports. It also encompasses post-crisis, community-based support. Warm handoffs and follow-up between components are also important to ensure that once a crisis is addressed, the necessary supports are in place to prevent another crisis from occurring.

988 Launch as a Unique Opportunity for Change

Well-resourced and effective implementation of a 988 crisis call line at the state and local levels can jump start the creation of a robust and equitable crisis response system across the country. With 988’s July launch date quickly approaching, funders can consider the following opportunities as a starting point to ensure that the system best serves those in crisis:

- Help ensure that local call centers are equipped with enough trained, culturally sensitive staff and resources to answer calls in a timely and effective manner
- Expand the implementation and evaluation of existing crisis response approaches in diverse communities, so that people of all backgrounds are effectively and safely served in their time of need
- Increase connections from 988 call centers and mobile response to care, so 988 can serve as an entry point to quality care
• Advocate for federal funding, state legislation, insurance coverage for crisis care, and community-based engagement to support the three core elements of a mental health crisis continuum
• Support the coordination of 988 and 911 responses and development of standards to integrate the two systems

“988 is not just a new number to call – it is an opportunity to rethink how we approach mental health, substance use disorders, and suicide prevention in our communities.”

– CEO Alliance for Mental Health


To learn more about how philanthropy can help support the development of an effective crisis response system, including the 988 hotline, stay tuned for the release of our guide next month, which will include practical considerations and key opportunities for funders to get involved.