

February 6, 2023

Thank you, Chair Nosse and members of the committee. My name is Roberta Lincoln, and while I work for the State of Oregon, I am here as a private citizen today. I am an adoptive parent of two special needs male children of color. Both of my sons are considered “Complex Cases” – because they experience Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DD), as well as Mental and Behavioral Health issues. My older son has high-functioning autism as well as PTSD from trauma caused in school-settings. At times, over the past few years, he has gotten dysregulated – and may have been completely unaware of the cause – be it stomach discomfort, being triggered by something he saw (or heard) in the community, or from misunderstanding social interactions. We have experienced horrendous behaviors in our home and in the community, including property damage, physical harm to others, as well as multiple suicide attempts.

Our son is not a criminal, but when you experience crisis – who else can you call? 911 -- but they are not equipped to effectively handle crisis in children with mental, behavioral and developmental challenges. Even when we asked for a mental health crisis specialist to come with them, these are not available. We have called local MH emergency crisis numbers, and were instructed to ‘bring him in and they’d do an assessment. But we couldn’t safely transport him, so there was no help.

On one occasion, our teen son was attempting to jump out the 2nd story window of our home. During that crisis, 911 was the only option. And, more than once, upon arrival at the local Emergency Room (ER), our family was told that the hospital doesn’t serve or treat children. We were told to take our child somewhere else. It took us months to get resources identified, on our own. If we could have called 9-8-8, we would have had the resources available, with trained staff to assist us either over the phone or in-person, to help de-escalate our son earlier in the day... which could have prevented his suicide attempt. And, afterward, they could have helped connect us with resources to prevent future attempts.

On another occasion, the ER allowed my son to stay, but refused to do a mental health assessment, and sent us home with a printout explaining that at times, teens just get angry or sad. This punctuated how Emergency Room staff at most hospitals are not trained or equipped for how to help children experiencing mental, behavioral and other complex crisis issues such as these. And, after each suicide attempt and trips to hospitals, we were never connected with outside resources in follow-up.

THIS IS THE EXPERIENCE of Oregonians! I have heard of countless families who have experienced the exact same failures in the systems in Oregon spanning the past 25 years, and nothing has changed in all that time - which is both ludicrous and unconscionable!! Our family is informed and well connected and yet during major moments of crisis, even we have been unable to access support for our family. Having 9-8-8 as a resource would be life changing.

When we are in the throes of a crisis, trying to navigate the broken system of care, on our own, has been overwhelming and unmanageable... and in fact, paralyzing. Just knowing that the 9-8-8 program means someone would be available to provide guidance and direction, support and expertise in the immediate and act as a conduit for resources for additional helps in follow up, would mean less time spent on tracking things down, when all you want to do is focus on your child and their needs. Resources at the ready, trained staff available 24/7, 365 days a year, would mean families across the state could have access to the helps not currently available.

Funding a fully staffed, fully accessible 988 crisis and suicide prevention program, with trained and experienced multilingual trauma-informed staff who are available 24/7 – 365 days a year - includes paying staff equitably. Please know that this program is an investment in Oregon's youth. Passing this legislation is an investment in Oregon's youth – and sends the message that every child, every parent, every person in Oregon matters! We need YOU to MAKE THIS POSITIVE CHANGE HAPPEN for Oregon's children!

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with this testimony.

Roberta M. Lincoln
Salem, OR