

Testimony In Support of HB2757, Ebony Clarke, Behavioral Health Director

4.27.23

Chair Nathanson, Vice Chairs Reschke and Walters, members of the committee, for the record, my name is Ebony Clarke. I am the Behavioral Health Director for the Oregon Health Authority and I am here today to testify in support of HB 2757.

Introduction

The 988 Suicide and Crisis lifeline provides free and confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or any kind of emotional distress. Anyone in Oregon can call, text or chat 988 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to speak with a trained crisis counselor and, if appropriate, be connected to resources in their community.

988 went live nationally and in Oregon in July 2022. In February 2023, 89% of 988 calls were answered in Oregon, within an average of 27 seconds. We are the first state to secure a higher federal match for Mobile Crisis Services.

Our success so far has been made possible by legislative investments through House Bill 2417, which invested 5 million dollars in 988 call centers and 10 million dollars in additional funding for mobile crisis services. There was also \$13 million additional ongoing investment in stabilization services for children and families. We also secured 2 million dollars in one-time federal grant funds for the current biennium. We will soon be leveraging federal matching funds through Medicaid to expand mobile crisis.

Future Need

988 is a national program, but states must ensure there is funding for the 988 line and crisis services so that callers receive the help they need, statewide. The federal legislation explicitly enables states to enact telecommunication fees to support the ongoing costs of the 988 line and crisis response.

As call, text and chat volume increases, Oregon's call centers will need to hire and train crisis intervention specialists, clinical supervisors and other staff necessary to develop and maintain a statewide system that can provide culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate crisis services to every person in Oregon, whether they are in Lincoln City or beyond Baker City.

It is essential that the call center be fully funded as it will serve as the first and crucial entry point for Oregonians experiencing behavioral health crisis. For many, the call center will serve as a means to de-escalate a situation or provide an individual with the human contact necessary to avoid any further services. For some, a mobile crisis team or other intervention will be necessary. We must have the funding to fully meet the need.

The Governor's Recommended Budget also includes the telecommunications fee. If the legislature does not enact this revenue measure, we will need General Fund for the call center in addition to all of the other components of a behavioral health crisis system.

Conclusion

Last, I want to thank Representative Sanchez for her leadership on this issue. This bill is an important step towards fully funding the 988 crisis system. It will also magnify the effectiveness of other investments made by the legislature in recent years including:

- Increasing capacity in residential and secure residential treatment facilities
- Increasing behavioral health provider rates
- Increasing substance use disorder treatment services through Measure 110 dollars.
- Divert individuals from emergency department and jail.

I therefore urge you to support this bill to make the most of past and current investments and set us up for a future where every Oregonian has low-barrier access to behavioral health crisis support, referral and services.