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Rep. Stephen Kinsey,
Chair, House Human Services Committee
317 Irvis Office Building
P.O. Box 202201
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120-2201

Subject: Testimony in Support of the Behavioral Health Crisis Intervention/988 Fund Bill

Hearing: Joint Public Hearing of the Pennsylvania House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness and the Human Service Committee

Dear Human Services Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony before the joint committee regarding the 988 Fund Bill currently under consideration. The inclusion of 988 as a crisis response tool saves lives. Creating a statewide 988 system for mental health emergencies will relieve the burden on 911 while also providing immediate mental health support to those experiencing mental health emergencies. With 988 funding, a system can be created whereby 911 and 988 work together, resulting in improved access to behavioral health resources and enhanced crisis response across our community, by clearly delineating 988 as the mental health resource and 911 as the resource for police, fire, and emergency medical response. **It is imperative that individuals in crisis receive responses that are appropriate to the kind of crises they are experiencing.**

According to data provided by Vibrant to SAMHSA in 2020, 2 % of calls to 911 nationwide are clearly identified as behavioral health emergencies. PEMA acknowledges that the PSAP protocols are deficient in their ability to readily identify individuals in a behavioral health crisis. Therefore, diverting mental health calls from 911 to 988 can result in a better outcome. 911 dispatchers are trained to provide assistance quickly. Mental health calls are often the exact opposite. 988 hotline counselors are trained to build connections to callers, take time to hear their stories, validate their feelings, and provide resources and referrals, things that 911

dispatchers are not trained for. Freeing up 911 allows the dispatcher to be available for the man having the heart attack, or the family just involved in a car accident.

At our call center in State College we de-escalate 96% of crisis calls, preventing the need for 911 to be called, again freeing up those services for the kinds of emergencies they are intended to respond to. In cases where we do have to involve 911, the coordination between 911 and 988 provides a better outcome for all involved because we can typically secure the caller's collaboration on calling 911 or we can provide information to 911 to increase the safety of both the person in crisis and the first responders. We can provide information about potential dangers such as whether there is a weapon involved or if there is a dog on the property where they are responding. We can stay on the line with the caller, helping to keep them calm and safe, until emergency services arrive.

The Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and the 13 PA call centers are committed to partnering with our local PSAPS so the 2 entities (911 and 988) can coordinate services, and have in fact, already established a 911/988 subcommittee that is working to improve efficiencies between the two systems.

As this 988 system is rolled out, we expect calls to increase. Our call center in Centre County is anticipating an additional increase in calls should geo-location be added to the system. Currently, calls are routed based on the caller's area code, so that if someone located in Centre County has a California area code, their call would be routed to California, where the call center would not have access to information and resources for where the caller is currently located. Since Penn State University is part of our community, geo-location would surely dramatically increase our call volume due to the 48,000 students who live here 9 months of the year, most of whom are out of county or out of state.

In order to meet the increase in call volume and in order to create an effective statewide system, 988 call centers need a long-term, sustainable source of funding. While federal funding was authorized to support the launch of 988, there is no clear long-term plan for the federal government to support 988. Given this, there is a need for states to identify their own revenue streams to fund call centers. Call centers need funds for staffing, technology, and training to ensure we are prepared to handle the expected surge in calls so that we can provide timely and effective crisis intervention.

Finally, I want to end by sharing a story of a life that was saved because of 988. John shared his story with me at a community event where Centre Helps had a resource table. It was a hot day and John was handing out bottles of water to people, in honor of his father, who had passed away the previous month. His father had always been kind to others and John wanted to pass that kindness along. John said that he missed his dad a lot but he had built a strong support network to help him in his grief. Then he paused and sighed and told me that it hadn't always been that way and asked me if I would like to hear his story. John then told me that he had struggled with depression for a long time but after a series of devastating and unforeseen events he had reached the point where he wanted to end his life. He was walking down the

very street we were standing on toward a high-rise building, planning to jump, when he had the thought that he needed to write letters to his children before he died. He decided that he would go home to write the letters and then come back tomorrow to end his life. As he was writing the letters he remembered an article he had seen in the local paper about 988. He called 988 and was connected to our hotline counselor who was trained to help John find a connection to life, his children. The counselor pointed out to John that he had gotten through the day and John concluded that the counselor was right, he had gotten through today and that if he got through today, he guessed he could get through tomorrow. John repeated that message to himself every day for many months while he followed up on the resources and referrals that the hotline counselor had provided for him and one day at a time, things got better.

There are many more stories of help and hope out there, stories that exist because of 988 call centers. This bill is a way for you and other legislators to make a difference and save lives in communities across the Commonwealth. I am grateful for your time and attention to this important public health issue.

Sincerely,
Denise Herr McCann
Executive Director
Centre Helps