

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI  
TO THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH'S HILL DAY**

**JUNE 23, 2020**

Thank you for that introduction, and thank you to the National Council for Behavioral Health for allowing me to join you this afternoon. I'm very grateful that you were able to squeeze the FCC into your schedule, because I have some big news to announce today. And it's big news that you and so many others have helped make possible.

On November 19, 2019, I was honored to take part in an event at the National Council's headquarters with representatives from the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Health and Human Services, Congressional officials, and leading mental health advocates. At that event, I announced that the FCC would be pursuing a plan to make 988 a national 3-digit number to access suicide prevention and mental health services.

I come before you today to say that we have kept that promise. A few hours ago, I sent my fellow Commissioners the final rules that would effectively establish "988" as the "911" for mental health emergencies. The Commission will vote on these rules in three weeks, on July 16. If they are adopted, all Americans will be able to reach the suicide prevention hotline through 988 by July 2022.

This is necessary. This is right. And this will save lives.

Let me share a few reasons why we must take this action.

First, suicide and mental health disorders are on the rise in America and have reached historic levels. In 2018, we lost 48,000 Americans to suicide. That's one death every 11 minutes. Since 1999, there's been a 35% increase in suicides. Today's suicide rates are the highest we've seen in the United States since World War II. On top of that, there are an additional 1.4 million Americans a year who attempted suicide.

The numbers are particularly disturbing for many at-risk populations. The suicide rate for Veterans is about 1.5 times higher than the general population. Every day, an average of 20 Veterans die by suicide.

Perhaps the most disturbing trends involve young people. From 2007 to 2017, the suicide rate spiked 56% for young people aged 10 to 24, and suicide is now the second most common cause of death for teenagers and young adults. In particular, LGBTQ youth contemplate suicide at a rate over four times higher than heterosexual youth. And a recent report showed that suicide attempts among black teens skyrocketed 73% between 1991 and 2017.

Too many people feel that they are alone—that there is no way out.

But there is. Which brings me to the second reason why the FCC is taking action to establish 988: Suicide is preventable.

Suicidal thoughts don't inevitably lead to action. Help is available, and it can be effective. When people get assistance, they are less likely to die by suicide. Just one example: The Lines for Life crisis center in Portland, Oregon reports that they can de-escalate 95% of suicide phone calls without the intervention of emergency services. I heard of similar success this past January when I visited Rescue Mental Health and Addiction Services in Toledo, Ohio. The administrators and call-takers I met are doing heroic work to help people who are struggling with suicidal ideation and mental health issues. They handle thousands of calls each year from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, reminding callers in moments of need that they are not alone.

A third and related reason for FCC action is that when we make it easier for people in need to seek help, many will do so.

As I mentioned last time around, in 2017, the rapper Logic released a song about suicide. The song's title, 1-800-273-8255, is the phone number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. After the song's release, there was a 27% increase in the number of calls to the Lifeline, and Lifeline website visits were up by roughly one-third. Each time Logic performed the song on a major platform like the Grammys or the MTV Video Music Awards, calls surged into the hotline.

I believe the past is prologue. And that's a good thing for those who need help. For consider this: in 2018, about 2.2 million calls were made to the Lifeline. That same year, almost 11 million adults in America seriously thought about suicide and over 3 million made a plan for it. Millions of Americans who need help are suffering in silence. 988 will make it easier than ever to reach out for help.

That brings me to my last point about why this is such a big deal. Too many people with mental health issues never seek the help they need. A big reason why is that we wrongly think of mental health as different from other health issues. The average delay between the onset of symptoms for mental illness and seeking treatment is eight to ten years. But why? You would never wait eight years to call a doctor if you broke your leg. The truth is as unfortunate as it is simple: Despite real progress, there is still a stigma attached to mental illness. A CBS poll last year found that 9 in 10 Americans think there is stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness. That prevents too many people from reaching out and pushes them into isolation.

Now think about how everyone knows to call 911 in the case of an emergency. If people know that 988 is there for those who need someone to talk to, it could not just save lives, but change minds. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration put it well: designating a 3-digit code to reach the Lifeline would send "the message that mental health crises and suicide prevention are of equivalent importance to medical emergencies." Amen to that.

In a nutshell, that's the "why" behind my determination to have the FCC take action. Let me say a little about the "what."

Again, the bottom line is that we are establishing 988 as the national number for a suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline. Calls to 988 would be directed to the Lifeline, where trained counselors do heroic work day in, day out.

The other key detail to know is that this number will go into effect nationwide by July 16, 2022. I agree with The Trevor Project's comment's that "[t]he longer the delay the more likely it is we will lose individuals who don't know where to access help." That is why establishing the earliest possible effective date was important to me. Many of the phone companies that will have to modify their networks and cover the costs pushed for a deadline of three years or more. I flatly rejected these calls to slow down. After studying the technical issues, our staff and I eventually settled on July 2022 as the earliest possible date for nationwide implementation.

Now, we know that some carriers can beat that deadline in some markets, so we considered staggering the implementation deadlines. But that could cause deadly consumer confusion. Having 988 available in some but not all areas would risk failed attempts to reach 988 by callers who may think it's active in their area when it's not. That could harm them and, in the aggregate, could erode trust in the Lifeline. So we settled on one nationwide deadline.

I'll be candid with you: I know that two years might seem like a long way off. I sometimes feel that way too in my heart. But in my head, I know that our most important mission is to make 988 work. And I promise you that I and our highly dedicated staff have pulled out every stop to push this deadline to the earliest possible date.

One last point on timing. Last November, I said that "[o]ur goal and our expectation is that we can finish the process next year," and by that, I meant the process of adopting final rules. Well, even with a pandemic that kicked us out of our offices in March, we've finished drafting final rules before 2020

even reached the halfway point. I want to thank the incredible staff of the FCC, particularly Nirali Patel in my office and the Wireline Competition Bureau, led by Chief Kris Monteith, for all they've done.

Of course, we couldn't have come this far this fast without the help of groups like the National Council. So I want to close by saying thank you to everyone out there who contributed to this process. Thank you to our partners at the Departments of Health and Human Services and Veterans Affairs. And thank you to the Members of Congress who passed the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act that kickstarted this process.

The CEO of one crisis center once said, "[t]he hurdle we've always had is getting people to know how to find us." In three weeks, the FCC is ready to take the biggest action ever to remove that hurdle. Establishing 988 as a hotline for suicide prevention and mental health services will make it easier for people to talk about their struggles and seek the help they need. And it will reduce the stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness.

We are sending a message to millions of our fellow Americans who are hurting: You are not alone. You do not have to bear these burdens yourself. Help is out there. And soon, it'll only be three digits away. Soon, we'll be able to say, "It's not too late. Dial 988."