

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI**

Re: *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018*, WC Docket No. 18-336.

Earlier this year, I traveled to Toledo, Ohio to visit a mental health crisis center. Among others, I met with counselors who speak with those who are struggling with suicidal thoughts. Their dedication to helping those in need was inspiring. And to me, it reinforced the need for the FCC to do everything possible to support their important work, and to do our part to address America's suicide crisis.

Unfortunately, suicide affects an ever-increasing number of Americans' lives. Our nation's suicide rate is at its highest point since World War II. In 2018 alone, suicide claimed the lives of more than 48,000 Americans, or about one death every 11 minutes. Many more think about or attempt suicide. In 2018, almost 11 million adults in the United States seriously thought about suicide, and over 3 million made a plan for it.

And suicide disproportionately impacts at-risk populations. More than 20 Veterans die by suicide every day. LGBTQ young adults contemplate suicide at a rate almost four times higher than heterosexual young adults. And a recent report found that suicide attempts among African-American teens skyrocketed 73% between 1991 and 2017. And suicide rates are higher in rural America and among Native Americans.

But this unfortunate fate is preventable. Suicidal thoughts don't inevitably lead to action. Help is available, and it can be effective. For example, the Lines for Life crisis center in Portland, Oregon reports that its counselors can de-escalate 95% of suicide-related phone calls without the intervention of emergency services. I heard a similar story during my visit to Toledo. A timely match of someone struggling with someone who can help can make all the difference.

This is why the FCC's action today is so important.

We are designating 988 as the 3-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Establishing the easy-to-remember 988 as the "911" for suicide prevention and mental health services will make it easier for Americans in crisis to access the help they need. Indeed, experts predict that it will result in millions more Americans receiving the intervention services they desperately need. And when more Americans receive these services, we know that more lives will be saved.

Additionally, this achievement, and all the efforts to publicize 988 in the time to come, will reduce the stigma in our society surrounding suicide and mental illness. I can't put it any better than Lenny Mendonca did. Lenny is a former senior partner at the McKinsey consulting firm, Chief Economic and Business Advisor to the Governor of California, Harvard graduate, and has accomplished pretty much everything you can in life. But three months ago, he abruptly resigned from his position with the State of California. Earlier this week, he explained why in a powerful op-ed: he faced severe depression and anxiety. And he also explained why he was speaking out, with words highly relevant here: "Far too often, people suffer these illnesses with shame and without support. . . . Well-meaning friends discouraged me from sharing my diagnosis of anxiety and depression. They said in so many words that it would end my career. While I respect their counsel, I categorically reject it. I talk about my mountain biking injuries and the metal plate in my left leg as a badge of honor. Why should I hide a similar injury to the most important—and yet vulnerable and least understood—organ in my body, my brain? What does it say about me that I have a mental health issue? It says that I am human. . . . Hiding my diagnosis breeds shame." I couldn't agree more. And my hope is that by establishing a government-backed 988 suicide and mental health three-digit dialing code, on par with the 911 dialing code that all Americans know, we will send a powerful signal that there's nothing shameful about seeking help in times of crisis—that it's a sign of strength, not of weakness. We will let people know that they are not alone.

Turning to some specifics, this Order requires voice service providers to transmit 988 calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by July 16, 2022—the earliest technically-feasible date for nationwide implementation of 988. Some phone companies urged us to roll out 988 on a phased-in basis. But we believe that a uniform implementation date will minimize potentially deadly consumer confusion that could result from having 988 available in some, but not all, areas. And we reject calls for a longer implementation period. The record indicates that we can get this done in two years, and the importance of the issue suggests that we must get this done by then. It is literally a life-and-death issue.

I want to thank our partners at the Departments of Health and Human Services and Veterans Affairs for their valuable assistance and coordination on this issue. They will now have the lead role when it comes to educating the public regarding 988 and preparing the Lifeline to handle the expected increase in calls to this vital resource for Americans in crisis, and I am confident that they will get the job done. Thank you as well to the Members of Congress who passed the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act that kickstarted this process—in particular, Senators Cory Gardner and Tammy Baldwin, former Senator Orrin Hatch, and Congressmen Chris Stewart and Seth Moulton.

And I want to take a moment and recognize the Commission staff for their dedicated and passionate work on this item: Pamela Arluk, Justin Faulb, Jesse Goodwin, Heather Hendrickson, Alex Hobbs, Lisa Hone, Daniel Kahn, Melissa Kirkel, Celia Lewis, Kris Monteith, Zach Ross, and Michelle Sclater of the Wireline Competition Bureau; Allison Baker, Tavi Carare, Paula Cech, Stacy Jordan, Alec MacDonnell, Giulia McHenry, Eric Ralph, and Emily Talaga of the Office of Economics and Analytics; Monisha Ghosh of the Office of Engineering and Technology; Diane Burstein, Eliot Greenwald, Robert McConnell, Michael Scott, and Suzy Rosen Singleton of the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Michael Carlson, Terry Cavanaugh, Doug Klein, Elizabeth Lyle, Rick Mallen, Linda Oliver, and David Senzel of the Office of General Counsel; Brenda Boykin, Ken Carlberg, John Evanoff, David Furth, and Michael Wilhelm of the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau; and Erin Boone, Ben Freeman, and Jennifer Salhaus of the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau.