

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Ensuring the Reliability and Resiliency of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline*, PS Docket No. 23-5; *Amendments to Part 4 of the Commission’s Rules Concerning Disruptions to Communications*, PS Docket No. 15-80; *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018*, WC Docket No. 18-336, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (January 26, 2023).

Our important work designating 988 as the three-digit dialing code for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline has, critically, tracked the trajectory of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This wasn’t the intent, of course – the FCC first issued its report to Congress recommending that a three-digit code be used for the Lifeline in 2019. But I note that we adopted our report and order officially designating 988 as that code – requiring all covered providers to make all changes necessary to make it a reality – in July 2020. That was only months into an unprecedented health crisis that, in addition to claiming lives, was compounding the mental health issues that so many Americans manage every day.

Mental health issues are a great leveler. They cut across race, class, age, gender – that much is clear. But at the same time, CDC data shows that suicidal thoughts and attempts are particularly high among vulnerable and underserved members of our society, including LGBTQ+ youth, veterans, Native Americans, and Black Americans.¹ The same week that we issued our 988 order, just a few weeks after George Floyd’s death, I convened a panel discussion on the role of the media and communications technology in addressing Black mental health.² Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus’ Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, spoke passionately about the significant disparities in access to mental health care. We heard from academics, advocates, and media leaders who are working to address this issue – from ensuring that the media elevates an accurate narrative of Black mental health, to promoting new ways to access telehealth services.

As a citizen, a Commissioner, and a Black parent, I continue to care deeply about the role the FCC has to play in this conversation. And I’m proud to approve the FCC’s actions to support access to the 988 Lifeline. The proposal we approve today – extending the reliability and resiliency requirements that apply to 911 to 988 – makes eminent sense. People who call 988 are experiencing an emergency, just like people who call 911. 988 delivers a life-saving service, again like 911 does. And when 988 is down, we need to be able to act quickly to maintain the public’s access to its services, just like we do with 911. These proposed rules would do just that.

Thank you to the staff of the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau for their work on this important item. It has my strong support.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Disparities in Suicide,” <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/disparities-in-suicide.html#print> (last visited Jan. 23, 2023).

² Federal Communications Commission, “Commissioner Starks Hosts ‘Thriving While Black: The Role of the Media and Communications Technology in Addressing Black Mental Health,’” July 13, 2020, <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/events/2020/07/commissioner-starks-hosts-thriving-while-black-role-media-and>.