

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Act of 2018*, Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, WC Docket No. 18-336 (Apr. 25, 2024).

“Government process” isn’t always synonymous with “speed.” It’s true. From seeking public comment, to building consensus amongst industry, advocates, and sister agencies, these proceedings take time. But sometimes, all the pieces align, and we are able to deliver critical results for the American people with real speed. This is just one of the reasons I am so proud of the Commission’s role in designating 988 as the three-digit code for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

Since the nationwide transition to 988 in July 2022, the Lifeline has received and routed 9.6 million calls, texts, and chats.¹ I call that success. Now, our primary responsibility at the FCC is to ensure meaningful access to the Lifeline. We’ve done this by setting forth reliability, resiliency, and outage reporting requirements. And today we continue to do so by following the counsel of mental health advocates and proposing to require a georouting solution for 988. Currently, when a caller dials 988, the call is routed to a crisis center based on the caller’s area code and exchange. (In the event that a center is unable to answer, the call is routed to the Lifeline’s national backup network.) But in a world where the majority of calls placed to the Lifeline are made from wireless phones – the Lifeline Administrator estimates as many as 80 percent of calls placed – and where the area code of a mobile phone frequently doesn’t correspond to the location of the caller, this presents a discrepancy. Mental health and crisis counseling experts advise that connecting callers in crisis with local crisis centers is vitally important. Not only does it ensure that callers have access to nearby public health and safety resources, but local counselors may be more familiar with cultural issues or community stressors in the caller’s area.

Recognizing this, this past summer, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Lifeline Administrator, and other industry partners successfully completed a proof of concept trial of a potential solution for routing wireless calls to geographically appropriate crisis centers. Today, we propose to adopt rules requiring wireless carriers to implement such a solution. This will require cooperation between the wireless carriers originating calls and the Lifeline Administrator that controls the call routing platform. But given the many examples we have of these parties – and others – working together quickly and well for all our benefit, I expect them to do so again here.

I want to thank the Commission staff who worked on this item, and who are a big part of the reason why we’ve been able to move so promptly in our 988 proceedings. This NPRM has my full support.

¹ SAMHSA, 988 Lifeline Performance Metrics, <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/988/performance-metrics> (last visited Apr. 24, 2024).