

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER BRENDAN CARR**

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

Earlier this week, I spent time in Baltimore with Edgar Wiggins and his team at Baltimore Crisis Response. They run a community-based center for mental and behavioral health. Edgar has a passion for helping other people, and he's worked in the field of mental health for over fifty years. He gave me a tour of his center, which is housed in an old nursing home that he bought and rebuilt to provide mental health care in the community. The building includes a call center where counselors and trained specialists answer calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which is 1-800-273-8255.

I had the chance to meet some of the counselors working in that call center, including Elijah. He grew up on Maryland's eastern shore. And from an early age he said he wanted to give back to his community. He has a talent for relating to people. And he invested the time to receive specialized training in the field of mental health. He described the skills that he says all of the counselors at the center demonstrate: compassionate listening, providing perspective, staying present, and talking with people who are going through the darkest times in their lives.

It's not an easy job. And for the hour that I talked with these counselors, there was rarely more than a minute or two between calls to the Lifeline. But Elijah said the best part of his work is hearing back from people, sometimes weeks later, after he stayed on the phone and helped them through a difficult time. He has quite literally made a difference and changed the trajectory of countless lives.

People like Elijah and Edgar offer hope to those in despair, 24 hours a day. And we know that millions of people are in need. Every day, thousands of Americans attempt suicide, and far too many lives are lost. In 2018 alone, 1.4 million adults in the U.S. attempted suicide, resulting in 48,000 deaths. Feelings of isolation and crisis can touch us all, and some of our most vulnerable groups are particularly at risk. LGBTQ youth are four times as likely to contemplate suicide compared to their peers. And we lose over 20 veterans every single day.

That's part of why the Veterans Health Administration partnered with the National Lifeline to create the Veteran Crisis Line. It uses the same 1-800-273-8255 number and allows callers to reach counselors located at one of three specialized call centers. I had the chance this week to meet some of those counselors—Sidney, Dan, and Anthony—on a video call. Each has a service background, and each has seen firsthand the need for mental health resources for our veterans. While 911 dispatchers are trained to coolly assess a situation and quickly direct resources in an emergency, the counselors I spoke with say that they lean more heavily on a different set of skills. They can spend hours on the phone with someone, and they can draw on their own military service to connect with a veteran. One of the counselors, Anthony, talked about the joy he feels when a veteran calls back to let him know that they've "come out of the woods" thanks to his help.

Trained professionals like these are making a difference in the lives of so many Americans, and we must ensure that those in need can easily access these potentially life-saving resources. The record is clear that our action today could help increase awareness and facilitate access to these critical services. As the Baltimore Crisis Response team told me, 988 would be far easier for someone in the depths of a crisis to remember than the current ten-digit Lifeline number.

So I want to applaud Chairman Pai for keeping the agency focused on its critical role in these efforts. The aggressive—but attainable—timetable for deploying 988 that we adopt today will ensure that these resources are more widely accessible as soon as possible. But until then, if you are in crisis, please call 1-800-273-8255 (press 1 for veterans).

Thanks to the staff of the Wireline Competition Bureau for their work on this very important item. It has my full support.