

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018*, WC Docket No. 18-336, Report and Order (November 18, 2021).

For many of the populations most at risk for suicide, including young people, minority communities, veterans, and people with disabilities, texting is a crucial way to communicate. I am pleased to approve today's decision because Text-to-988 will save lives in vulnerable and underserved communities by taking advantage of this vital communications channel.

The actions we take today are urgent. Centers for Disease Control data shows that serious psychological distress, major depression, and suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents and young adults have increased significantly in recent years.¹ The suicide death rate among people 10 to 24 years old for the years 2016 to 2018 was a staggering 47.1 percent higher than the 2007 to 2009 rate.² Death by suicide among Veterans has also rapidly increased.³ LGBTQ+ youth are nearly five times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth.⁴ Additionally, during the COVID-19 lockdown, suicide rates among Black people doubled.⁵ Studies also found an increased risk of suicide among deaf and hard of hearing people when compared to those without hearing loss.⁶

The free and confidential emotional support provided by the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can make all the difference for people in distress, and three-digit texting to 988 will remove barriers to accessing that help. Nearly 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone.⁷ Research indicates young people prefer communicating by text and are more likely to forgo psychological support when talking in person or over the phone.⁸ And the ability to text to the Lifeline will present significant benefits to disabled communities who may have difficulties calling the Lifeline, including the deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, and people who have speech disabilities.

Access to the Lifeline can't wait. With substantial support among commenters, today's decision will require covered providers to implement texting to 988 by July 16, 2022—the same deadline we have set for three-digit dialing to the Lifeline. This uniform deadline will help to prevent confusion and facilitate unified outreach campaigns. I thank the many individuals and organizations, including the staff of the Wireline Competition Bureau, who are hard at work making text-to-988 widely available as soon as possible. This is life-saving work.

¹ See *supra* para. 12.

² *Id.*

³ See *supra* para. 13.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ See *supra* n. 2 (citing Denise Mann, *Pandemic Tied to Higher Suicide Rate in Blacks, Lowered Rate in Whites: Study*, U.S. News & World Report (Dec. 17, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-12-17/pandemic-tied-to-higher-suicide-rate-in-blacks-lowered-rate-in-whites-study>).

⁶ See *supra* para. 14.

⁷ See *supra* n. 238.

⁸ *Id.*