

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018*, WC Docket No. 18-336, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (April 22, 2021).

Ensuring Americans have access to mental health resources during times of crisis is imperative, especially as the pandemic continues. Today's Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking starts the process of supporting text messaging to 988, the three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Texting is a vital communications medium for many of the populations most at risk for suicide, including young people, minority communities, and individuals with disabilities. Throughout the pandemic, texting has been essential for mental health support. At the onset of the pandemic in April 2020, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reported a one thousand percent spike in text messages from Americans seeking crisis counseling compared to the previous year.¹

Expanding access to mental health resources is critical for communities of color. Suicide remains the second most common cause of death among teenagers and young adults,² and suicide rates are rising at an alarming rate among Black youth in particular. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide is the second leading cause of death for Black children between the ages of 10 and 14 and the third leading cause of death for Black children between the ages of 15 and 19.³ Research indicates that Black children 12 years old and younger are more likely to die by suicide than their white peers and suggests that a lack of access to mental health resources may explain the disparity.⁴ Moreover, preliminary studies in Illinois, Maryland, and Connecticut determined suicide rates among Black Americans and other people of color rose during the pandemic despite the overall suicide rate decreasing.⁵

This moment presents the opportunity to elevate an accurate narrative about mental health in communities of color and save lives. I am pleased to approve this FNPRM because text-to-988 can ensure our most vulnerable populations can more readily access the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's life-saving resources. I thank the staff of the Wireline Competition Bureau for their hard work preparing this FNPRM.

¹ Paige Winfield Cunningham & Paulina Firozi, *The Health 202: Texts to Federal Government Mental Health Hotline Up Roughly 1,000 Percent*, The Washington Post (May 4, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-health-202/2020/05/04/the-health-202-texts-to-federal-government-mental-health-hotline-up-roughly-1-000-percent/5eaae16c602ff15fb0021568/>.

² Angela Liang & Paul Nestadt, *Suicide Risk in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, John Hopkins Medicine (Feb. 13, 2021), https://www.hopkinsguides.com/hopkins/view/Johns_Hopkins_Psychiatry_Guide/787393/all/Suicide_Risk_in_the_COVID_19_Pandemic.

³ Joshua Gordon, *Addressing the Crisis of Black Youth Suicide*, National Institute of Mental Health (Sept. 22, 2020), <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/director/messages/2020/addressing-the-crisis-of-black-youth-suicide.shtml>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Roni Caryn Rabin, *U.S. Suicide Declined Over All in 2020 but May Have Risen Among People of Color*, The New York Times (Apr. 15, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/health/coronavirus-suicide-cdc.html?referringSource=articleShare>.