March 31, 2022

The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz The Honorable Michael Rodrigues

Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means

24 Beacon Street, Room 243 24 Beacon Street, Room 212

Boston, MA 02133 Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante The Honorable Cindy Friedman

Vice Chair, House Committee on Ways and Means Vice Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means

24 Beacon Street, Room 42 24 Beacon Street, Room 208

Boston, MA 02133 Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Todd Smola The Honorable Patrick O’Connor

Ranking Minority Ranking Minority

House Committee on Ways and Means Senate Committee on Ways and Means

24 Beacon Street, Room 124 24 Beacon Street, Room 419

Boston, MA 02133 Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairs Michlewitz and Rodrigues, Vice Chairs Ferrante and Friedman, The Honorable Todd Smola and The Honorable Patrick O’Connor, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means:

 **Re: MAMH Support for $10M for 988 Implementation (4513-1026) in the FY22 Supplemental Budget**

On behalf of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH), thank you for your ongoing leadership in addressing the needs of people with behavioral health conditions and their families.

We write to urge you to support $10M of funding for 988 crisis system planning and implementation in the FY22 Supplemental Budget (4513-1026). This amount provides an opportunity to ensure the Commonwealth’s preparedness for 988 crisis line activation, which will take place on July 16, 2022.

The *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act*, enacted in October 2020, established the three-digit phone number, 988, to accept calls from people in behavioral health crisis. The vision of the federal law is a reimagined behavioral health crisis and suicide prevention system. Callers will be routed to a regional or local call center where call center operators work with individuals to de-escalate the crisis, providing immediate support either telephonically or, when necessary, in person, such as through mobile crisis teams. Once de-escalated, 988 could then connect people to services to reduce the likelihood of future crises. States who have adopted integrated models of behavioral health crisis response report handling 80% of calls telephonically and police are required for backup rarely. Massachusetts should strive to match these metrics.

To do so, Massachusetts needs to hire and train behavioral health counselors to staff 988 phone lines. Funding is also needed to make the one-time investments to stand up the 988 crisis response system. For example, we must make technological investments in call center infrastructure to handle expanded call volumes, establish mobile crisis intervention dispatch from 988 call centers, integrate with 911 and the EOHHS Roadmap, including the Roadmap’s Behavioral Health Help Line. Call center operators also need enhanced training to handle behavioral health crisis calls beyond suicide prevention, such as someone calling for support for a loved one with acute onset psychosis or someone who is exhibiting significant clinical deterioration from a chronic behavioral health condition. Increased funding is also needed to bolster our 988 infrastructure so that more calls can be handled by in-state call center operators versus being transferred to a national call center at Vibrant Emotional Health or abandoned.

As you may know, EOHHS has been working to establish a 988 system in Massachusetts, providing funding to the state’s five suicide prevention call centers to train paid staff and volunteers for this expanded focus and beginning to address the demands of integrating two new phone lines: 988 and the Roadmap’s Behavioral Health Help Line. This initial work is essential and urgent. The tasks are complex and extend across state agencies and across communities.

Substantial financial support can make these tasks doable. While all crisis system functions associated with the envisioned 988 reform won’t be fully implemented by July 2022, investments made now will promote greater initial success and, thus, propel buy-in for the new 988 system. Individuals with behavioral health concerns currently have few options when in crisis, other than calling 911. Many end up in emergency departments where waits grow longer and longer. The state is investing in community-based crisis service alternatives. 988 is key to this process. Investment now in keeping people in the community will improve behavioral health and save public monies in the longer run. **Please support the inclusion of $10M for 988 in the FY22 Supplemental Budget.**

Thank you very much for your consideration of this budget item. Please do not hesitate to be in touch should you have any questions or would like additional information at dannamauch@mamh.org.

Sincerely,

 

Danna Mauch, PhD

President and CEO

c: The Honorable Ronald Mariano, Speaker, Massachusetts House of Representatives; The Honorable Karen Spilka, President, Massachusetts Senate; The Honorable Adrian Madaro and The Honorable Julian Cyr, Chairs, Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use, and Recovery