

NATION

Suicide prevention hotline to have three-digit number for mental health emergencies: 988

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A three-digit suicide prevention hotline number will soon make seeking emergency mental health help more like calling 911, federal regulators announced Thursday.

When the months-long process is completed, U.S. residents will be able to call 988 for help in a mental health emergency, just as 911 connects people in need to first-responders for other emergencies.

Currently, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline uses a 10-digit number, 800-273-TALK (8255). That number routes callers to one of 163 crisis centers, where counselors answered 2.2 million calls last year.

“The three-digit number is really going to be a breakthrough in terms of reaching people in a crisis,” said Dwight Holton, CEO of Lines for Life, a suicide prevention nonprofit. “No one is embarrassed to call 911 for a fire or an emergency. No one should be embarrassed to call 988 for a mental health emergency.”

It's not a hotline, it's a 'warmline': It gives mental health help before a crisis heats up

A Thursday release from the Federal Communications Commission says formal rule-making on the 988 number has begun — it's a process that started with a congressional statute in 2018 and was the subject of an FCC report released in August.

So far, the FCC has only proposed requiring all telephone service providers to accommodate the 988 number within 18 months. The next step is a comment period on

the implementation, including the project's time frame.

Last year, a USA TODAY investigation reported that more than 47,000 Americans killed themselves in 2017, citing a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report. Since 1999, the suicide rate has climbed 33 percent.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. and is often called a public health emergency.

"There's been so much more put into every one of those causes of death than suicide. ... If you didn't do anything for heart disease and you didn't do anything for cancer, then you'd see those rates rise, too." John Draper, director of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, told USA TODAY last year.

Public health experts say suicide is preventable.

Crisis Text Line provides free, 24/7, confidential support via text message to people in crisis when they dial 741741. National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

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