

# A Plan to Sustainably Fund the Maryland 988 Trust Fund

Maryland's 988 helplines are a critical and effective resource to keep Marylanders experiencing mental health crises safe and supported. The General Assembly established the Maryland 988 Trust Fund to provide ongoing funding and investments for 988 helplines but has not identified a dedicated funding source. One option that **Maryland leaders should consider is establishing a 988 telecom fee to provide dependable and predictable funding to the 988 Trust Fund and the essential services it supports.**

## Background

The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act established 988 as the universal three-digit number for mental health and substance use crises but left the responsibility for ongoing funding and administration largely to the states.<sup>1</sup> The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline that 988 grew out of historically received very little federal funding, and new investments are needed to expand and strengthen the 988 network.

Increased funding for 988 is critical to ensure no 988 call or text goes unanswered. 988 routes calls and texts that are not answered locally to a backup network of out-of-state providers, but timely, local responses to 988 calls and texts are preferable. Time to answer a call or text along with in-state answer rate are two of the key performance indicators for 988. The expectation from Congress is that states will improve their 988 answer speed and in-state answer rates while also managing increasing call and text volume. In Maryland, calls are up 37% while texts increased ten-fold since the launch of 988 in July 2022. Its average speed to answer is 27 seconds and its in-state answer rate is 90%.<sup>2</sup>

To assist states with their funding responsibilities, Congress authorized the use of a telecom fee to sustain and build their 988 and crisis response system. All 50 states use a 911 telecom fee to fund their 911 systems and a similar funding mechanism can be used to build a high-quality and robust 988 system. As indicated below, eight states have enacted a 988 telecom fee so far.

## The Maryland 988 Trust Fund

Maryland established a 988 Trust Fund in 2022 to provide ongoing funding to Maryland's 988 helplines and crisis response services. The General Assembly appropriated \$17.5 million for the 988 Trust Fund over two years, but a July 1, 2025, funding cliff currently exists. The funding held in the Maryland 988 Trust Fund does not revert to the General Fund and may only be used for two purposes:

1. Designating and maintaining 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline in accordance with the federal National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020; and
2. Developing and implementing a statewide initiative for the coordination and delivery of the continuum of behavioral health crisis response services in the State, including:
  - (i) Crisis call centers;
  - (ii) Mobile crisis team services;
  - (iii) Crisis stabilization centers; and
  - (iv) Other acute behavioral health care services.

<sup>1</sup> Suicide Hotline Designation Act available at [www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/senate-bill/2661/text](https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/senate/bills/2661/text).

<sup>2</sup> Vibrant 988 Broad State Metrics June 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023.



## Maryland 988 Helpline Funding Demands and Funding Options

Maryland leaders must determine how to fund 988 and crisis response services long-term. Based on current usage, the state will need at least \$12 million each year to maintain 988 helpline capacity. More funding will be needed to make any improvements and to respond to increases in call or text volume. Maryland's 988 helplines perform well compared to other states but one in ten calls are still rerouted to backup out-of-state helplines due to lack of capacity. This causes delays in service delivery. Texts to 988 are also an increasing component of helpline services, but only three of Maryland's eight 988 helplines accept texts.

## MARYLAND NEEDS TO INVEST IN 988 AND CRISIS SERVICES TO MAINTAIN AND GROW ITS CAPACITY

### The state has two options:

**1. Allocate general revenue funds each year in the State's operating budget:** This is the approach Maryland has used so far to fund 988 helplines directly and fund the Maryland 988 Trust Fund. Total funding has ranged from \$5 million to \$12 million. Local 988 helplines have been uncertain about how funding will be allocated and how much to expect, which has impeded long-term planning. Uncertainty will likely continue if funding is allocated each year. Funding may also not be sustained over the long-term at the levels needed to build a robust 988 and crisis response system.

**2. Establish a 988 telecom fee:** Legislation to establish a 988 telecom fee would provide 988 helplines with dependable funding while nominally increasing the phone bills of most Marylanders. This funding mechanism has been used by the 911 system for decades to great effect. It is familiar to the public and has broad support. Such a financing mechanism would allow Maryland to expand and strengthen its 988 and crisis response system at a time when demand for mental health services is at an all-time high.

### The Case for the 988 Telecom Fee

Maryland is well-positioned to establish a 988 telecom fee and continue building a highly effective 988 and crisis response network. The advantages of this approach are numerous:

- **Predictable, dependable funding:** 988 built upon Maryland's existing crisis helpline network, which has been underfunded for years and significant system-wide improvements are needed. A dedicated 988 telecom fee would provide a predictable funding stream that state and local leaders can depend on to plan for long-term 988 and crisis response system improvements. This approach has served Maryland's 911 system well, allowing for routine system improvements and the implementation of digitally enabled NextGen911 services. Variable annual amounts of general revenue funds will make long-term planning difficult and ultimately reduce the impact of 988 helplines.
- **Familiarity with the funding mechanism:** A 988 telecom fee is a similar funding mechanism used by the 911 Trust Fund, an approach telecommunications carriers and the State Treasurer's Office are already familiar with. It would also be familiar to the public and would make intuitive sense as a funding source. Using some other revenue source or excise tax to fund the 988 Trust Fund may be more difficult to implement and more challenging for the public to understand the rationale.
- **Broad public support:** A recent statewide poll showed that Marylanders overwhelmingly supported the 988 helpline and were willing to pay a nominal monthly fee to fund it. Statewide, 79% of Marylanders were willing to pay an extra \$0.25 per month on their phone bill to ensure the 988 helpline is fully staffed and available 24/7. This support was over 85% for Black Marylanders and residents of Baltimore City and the DC Metro. No group in the state showed less than 66% support, including statewide Republicans and residents of Western Maryland and the Eastern Shore.<sup>3</sup> Other funding sources or funding through general tax dollars would be unlikely to have the same support.

- **Little financial impact for most Marylanders:** A nominal 988 telecom fee would have a minimal impact on most households. At \$0.25 per month, per line, a single person would pay \$3.00 each year and a family with four cell phone lines would pay \$12 per year. Such a fee is easily affordable in most cases.
- **Options to protect low-income Maryland households:** For Maryland households who are earning lower incomes, the 988 telecom fee can be structured to limit or eliminate its impact. One option is to exempt households who participate in federal low-cost phone programs. Another option is to reduce or eliminate the 988 telecom fee for prepaid phones that are more likely to be used by low-income residents.

### State 988 Telecom Fee Policy Options

Maryland is not the first state to enact a 988 telecom fee. Each 988 telecom fee that has been established is distinct and Maryland can design a policy that works best for its unique circumstance.

#### STATES WITH 988 TELECOM FEES

State	Year Fee Established	Fee Amount per Month	Administering Body	Revenue Estimate
Colorado	2021	Up to \$0.30	988 Crisis Hotline Enterprise	\$6m at \$0.18
Nevada	2021	Up to \$0.35	State Board of Health	\$13m at \$0.35
Virginia	2021	\$0.08-\$0.12	Department of Taxation	\$10m
Washington	2021	\$0.40	Department of Health	\$45m
California	2022	\$0.08-\$0.30	Office of Emergency Services	\$55 m at \$0.08
Minnesota	2023	Up to \$0.25	Department of Health	N/A
Oregon	2023	\$0.40	Oregon Health Authority	N/A
Delaware	2023	\$0.60	Department of Health and Social Services	N/A

### Policy Recommendation: Establish a Telecom Fee of at least \$0.25

The state has strong 988 helplines but further improvements are needed to improve the timeliness and reliability of the network. The availability of mobile crisis teams and crisis stabilization centers also varies tremendously across the state. Pending regulations will allow mobile crisis teams and stabilization centers to be reimbursed by Medicaid but other funding will be needed to support this transition and fill gaps.

Maryland should consider establishing a 988 telecom fee of at least \$0.25 per month, per line to provide dependable and predictable funding to the Maryland 988 Trust Fund. A 988 telecom fee of \$0.25 would generate approximately \$15-20 million annually that can support ongoing funding for 988 helplines, key helpline investments, and start up funds for targeted crisis service expansion. This funding mechanism would give the 988 and crisis response system adequate funding with which to plan and relieve pressure on general revenue funds at minimal cost to Marylanders.

<sup>3</sup>Gonzalez Poll, June 2023

<sup>4</sup>National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). "988 Crisis Response State Legislation Map." <https://reimaginecrisis.org/map/>. Accessed Aug 4, 2023.

