

Dept. of Health Services: New call center expands support for people in emotional distress

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Wisconsin callers to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline are much more likely to speak with a Wisconsin-based counselor with the opening of a new Wisconsin call center funded by a grant from the Department of Health Services (DHS).

“No one should ever have to be alone when they feel hopeless,” said DHS Secretary-designee Andrea Palm. “Adding capacity to handle Wisconsin calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is part of our ongoing effort to ensure the right supports are available at the right time for people in emotional distress. It’s about offering hope and promoting healing. By connecting, listening, and directing help to those who need it, we can reduce pain and save lives.”

Known as the Wisconsin Lifeline, the new call center is managed by Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin under a \$2 million annual grant. It accepts calls originating from communities not covered by one of four existing Wisconsin-based call centers in the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network. All of the call centers accept calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We value the efforts of the four Wisconsin call centers that have been part of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for many years,” Palm said. “They have done an incredible job serving their communities. Their success in de-escalating crisis situations and decreasing emotional stress paved the way for the Wisconsin Lifeline. A local connection results in a better outcome. Wisconsin-based counselors have the expertise and linkages to local resources that callers need. Now, more than ever, it is critical that all Wisconsin callers to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline have access to Wisconsin-based counselors, especially as more people seek help

due to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a network of more than 170 call centers around the country. Callers are routed to a member call center near them based on their phone number. In most cases, calls that are not answered by a local call center roll over to a national backup system. However, in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Lifeline serves as backup to the four locally funded call centers further ensuring calls are answered by Wisconsin-based counselors.

The Wisconsin Lifeline began answering calls in August. In its first week of operation, the percent of Wisconsin calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline that were answered in-state climbed to 85 percent, well above the national benchmark of 70 percent. Prior to the launch of the Wisconsin Lifeline, Wisconsin's in-state answer rate topped out at 30 percent because of the large volume of calls coming from areas outside of the responsibility of the four locally funded call centers.

The Wisconsin Lifeline places Wisconsin in a good position to handle the predicted surge in calls when 988 becomes the new nationwide number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by July 2022. For now, anyone wishing to connect to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline should call 800-273-TALK (8255). The call is free and confidential.

The grant to support this new call center is funded by a portion of Wisconsin's annual share of the federal Community Mental Health Services Block Grant.

September is Suicide Prevention Month. [Everyone can help prevent suicide by learning the warning signs and the five action steps for helping someone who may be suicidal.](#)

Reporters covering suicide should know that research has shown that improper reporting on suicide can contribute to additional suicides and suicide attempts. Visit [Reporting on Suicide\(link is external\)](#) for best practices on how to cover suicide.