

# U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Bipartisan reform to create three-digit suicide prevention hotline signed into law

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin’s bipartisan legislation to designate a three-digit phone number (9-8-8) for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline has been signed into law.

The *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act* will help ensure states have the flexibility to strengthen local crisis call centers and save lives. Baldwin introduced this bipartisan reform in October 2019 with Senators Cory Gardner (R-CO), Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Jack Reed (D-RI). On May 13, 2020, the Senate unanimously passed Baldwin’s bipartisan legislation and in September 2020, the House of Representatives passed Baldwin’s *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act*.

“In America, we lose about 45,000 people every year to suicide, including more than 6,100 veterans, making it one of the leading causes of death in this country,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “We need to do everything we can to prevent suicide and that means improving the tools we have to help people who are suffering from depression or other mental health concerns. I’m very proud our bipartisan legislation has finally been signed into law, so we can make it as quick and easy as possible for Americans in crisis to get the help and support they need through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and the Veterans Crisis Line. I urge the Federal Communications Commission to move expeditiously to implement this change and get 9-8-8 up and running.”

“As the first explicitly LGBTQ-inclusive bill to ever unanimously pass the House and

Senate, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act of 2020 not only makes history, but will also undoubtedly save countless lives,” **said Sam Brinton (they/them), Vice President of Advocacy and Government Affairs for The Trevor Project.** “Our research shows that 40% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide in the past twelve months. This legislation addresses this crisis by requiring – for the first time – specialized services for LGBTQ youth. The Trevor Project is grateful to Senators Gardner and Baldwin and commends their leadership in championing the expansion of vital suicide prevention resources.”

The current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Veterans Crisis Line are 10-digits, which is a barrier to Americans in crisis seeking support. The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act directs the FCC to designate 9-8-8 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, and allows veterans to press “1” after dialing 9-8-8 to be routed automatically to the Veterans Crisis Line for veteran-specific mental health support. Death by suicide is a severe problem in the veteran community with about 17 veterans committing suicide every day, on average. In 2017, in Wisconsin for example, one out of every five people who died by suicide was a veteran.

The bipartisan legislation also recognizes that certain groups, including LGBTQ youth, Native Americans and people in rural areas, are at greater risk of suicide. It requires the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to report to Congress on its plans to facilitate specific training programs for serving these communities through the hotline, as well as how best to implement a process so that callers from these and other high-risk populations can access specialized services.

Until the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) finalizes the technical implementation of 9-8-8 as the nationwide number, anyone seeking help should still call 1-800-273-8255.

## **Background:**

- In September 2020, the House of Representatives [passed](#) Baldwin’s National Suicide Hotline Designation Act.
- Baldwin and Gardner [sent a letter](#) to House leadership in July 2020 calling the U.S. House of Representatives to pass S. 2661 without delay and wrote, “As

*our country is facing an unprecedented challenge in responding to COVID-19, this three-digit hotline would play a critical role in saving the lives of many vulnerable Americans who are facing mental health emergencies during this period of isolation and uncertainty.”*

- In July 2020, [48 mental health groups](#) sent a letter to House leadership calling for swift passage of S. 2661 and wrote, *“This bicameral, bipartisan legislation is urgently needed and, under your leadership, could save lives.”*
- On May 13, the Senate [unanimously passed](#) Baldwin’s National Suicide Hotline Designation Act.
- Baldwin [sent a bipartisan letter](#) to Senate Majority Leader McConnell and Senate Minority Leader Schumer requesting \$80 million to support critical suicide prevention activities amid the public health crisis that is upending the social and financial stability of countless Americans.
- In April 2020, Baldwin [led a bipartisan, bicameral call](#) to include the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act in the next COVID-19 relief package.
- Every single commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) endorsed S. 2661 at a hearing held by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in June 2020.
- In December 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to designate 9-8-8 as the three-digit number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline.
- Nearly 50 mental health organizations and [veterans support organizations](#) announced their support and urged Congress to pass the *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act*.
- In [October 2019](#), Senators Baldwin, Gardner, Moran, and Reed introduced the *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act*, which designates 9-8-8 for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline and ensures states have the flexibility to strengthen local crisis call centers. The bill ensures states are able to collect fees for the line, similar to the way they do for the 911 emergency line, and requires reports to Congress to help ensure effectiveness and operability of the line.
- In August 2019, the FCC released their report, which found that a national three-digit line would improve suicide prevention and recommended a simple number that Americans could dial in times of crisis: 9-8-8.
- In 2018, Baldwin voted for the *National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act*, which directed the Federal Communications Commission to evaluate using a three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.



An online version of this release is available [here](#).