

U.S. Sen. Baldwin, colleagues: Call for establishing 9-8-8 suicide hotline in next COVID-19 relief package

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin is helping lead a bipartisan, bicameral push in Congress with 22 U.S. Senators and 17 U.S. Representatives to include the *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act* in the next COVID-19 relief package. Baldwin's bipartisan legislation would designate 9-8-8 as the three-digit number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline. [Baldwin introduced this bipartisan legislation](#) with Senators Cory Gardner (R-CO), Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Jack Reed (D-RI).

"We write to request the inclusion of S. 2661/ H.R. 4194, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, in the next COVID-19 relief package. The creation of this three-digit dialing code is essential in order to address the growing suicide crisis across the United States," wrote the lawmakers. "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. Suicide does not discriminate between rural and urban areas or by income, and it causes heartbreak and loss in communities in every single one of our states. We must ensure that we are doing everything we can to prevent these devastating outcomes from occurring, especially in these trying times as grief and uncertainty encompass our nation."

Baldwin's *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act* designates 9-8-8 as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which would include the Veterans Crisis Line for veteran-

specific mental health support. The current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Veterans Crisis line is 10-digits long, which is a barrier to Americans in crisis seeking support. The bill includes a report to improve support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth and other high-risk populations.

Background:

- 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.
- 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 [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.
- Nearly 50 mental health organizations and veterans support organizations announced their support and urged Congress to pass the *National Suicide Hotline Designation Act*.
- The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation [unanimously passed](#) Senator Baldwin's bipartisan bill to designate 9-8-8 as the national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline in December 2019.
- 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.

The full letter is available [here](#) and below. An online version of this release is available [here](#).

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

We write to request the inclusion of S. 2661/ H.R. 4194, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, in the next COVID-19 relief package. The creation of this three-digit dialing code is essential in order to address the growing suicide crisis across the United States. 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. Suicide does not discriminate between rural and urban areas or by income, and it causes heartbreak and loss in communities in every single one of our states. We must ensure that we are doing everything we can to prevent these devastating outcomes from occurring, especially in these trying times as grief and uncertainty encompass our nation.

In 2018, Congress acted in a bipartisan fashion to pass the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act, directing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to evaluate using a three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In August 2019, the FCC released its report, which found that a national three-digit line would improve suicide prevention, and it recommended a simpler number that Americans could dial in times of crisis: 9-8-8 and has moved forward with an official Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. Right now, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a ten-digit long number for anyone contemplating suicide, and this lack of accessibility serves as a barrier to Americans seeking immediate help in a mental health crisis.

When someone is suffering from a heart attack or medical emergency, everyone knows to call 9-1-1, but for mental health emergencies, an easy-to-remember number does not exist. Because of this, we took bipartisan, bicameral steps to introduce or support S. 2661/ H.R. 4194 to designate 9-8-8 as the universal telephone number for a national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline and to ensure states are able to support call centers as they deal with new levels of call volume. S. 2661 passed the Senate Commerce Committee on December 11, 2019 with unanimous support and is cosponsored by a bipartisan group of 33 senators, and H.R. 4194 passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Subcommittee on Communications and Technology on March 10, 2020 with unanimous support and is cosponsored by a bipartisan group of 135 members of

Congress.

The National Suicide Hotline Designation Act is not just smart policy that will save lives, but it is also a statement that our government recognizes our country's mental health crisis and is working across party lines to address it. On April 4, 2020, reports show that one call center in the network had only 22 crisis calls related COVID-19 in February and that number grew by over 8,000% to 1,800 in March. Increasing the accessibility of life-saving services for people facing mental health crises will be a key step in fighting for a tomorrow in which Americans in crisis know they are not alone.

As our country is working together to address this virus, it is crucial that mental health support is at the forefront of all of our minds. Because of this, I urge you to include S. 2661/ H.R. 4194, the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act, in the next COVID-19 relief package to ensure the expansion of accessibility to this life-saving hotline. Thank you for your continued support and leadership on this issue.