



February 6, 2025

Honorable Chairman David Rochefort  
Senate Health and Human Services Committee  
Legislative Office Building Room 101  
33 N State St., Concord, NH 03301

RE: NAMI NH Support for SB 255

Chairman Rochefort and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sam Hawkins, and I am the Public Policy Assistant at NAMI NH, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI NH is a non-profit, grassroots organization whose mission is to improve the lives of all people impacted by mental illness and suicide through support, education and advocacy. On behalf of NAMI NH, I am here today to speak in support of SB 255, establishing and developing crisis stabilization services.

It is well known that New Hampshire is facing an ongoing mental health crisis. Here in the Granite State, suicide is the leading cause of death for young Granite Staters ages 10-14, and the second leading cause for those ages 15-34. Further, it is the third leading cause of death for those ages 35-44 and the fourth leading cause for those ages 45-54. The impact of mental illness and suicide ripples through our communities, causing untold losses.

The urgency of this crisis has not been lost on the state – much work has been done in recent years to improve our mental health and crisis response systems. We know that when individuals and families get access to the right services, at the right time, in the right place, fewer folks will end up hospitalized, homeless, or incarcerated, preventing adverse outcomes for the individuals and their families, and crucially avoiding a higher financial burden on the state. One of the greatest tools we have in pursuit of this goal is 988 and the behavioral health crisis services system, made up of our 988 call centers, mobile crisis response, and crisis stabilization centers. This system provides urgent care to Granite Staters in need across the state and reduces the burden on law enforcement resources. It is imperative that the state continue to build upon the momentum of recent investments and successes to continue to improve our mental health and crisis response systems to address the ongoing mental health crisis.

As identified in the final report of the Commission on Behavioral Health Crisis Services, there are several weaknesses in the funding structure for NH 988 and crisis services, which exposes the system to instability and uncertainty. As such, it was recommended that the state establish a more

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stable, ongoing funding model to support all three pillars of the crisis system. This recommendation is reflected in SB 255, which creates a 988 trust fund and applies a small telecommunications surcharge to support the crisis services system.

This model has become increasingly prevalent across the country following the creation of 988 through the signing of the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act in October 2020, a bill that passed both the House and the Senate unanimously. To date, 10 states have implemented a 988 surcharge, as authorized in the Act, and 15 states have established a 988 trust fund. In addition to New Hampshire, another 5 states will consider implementing a 988 surcharge this year. As a similar service, this approach is based upon the model by which 911 has successfully been supported for many years, and has proven successful in helping to provide stability to crisis service systems across the country.

There are many benefits to utilizing the surcharge model. This stand-alone funding mechanism will reduce the need to pull from other state funding streams, and is less vulnerable to changes in the economy or necessary state budget cuts. Further, establishing our own stable funding mechanism reduces reliance on federal funding and ensures that Granite Staters get a Granite State response. When a person calls 988, if our 988 call centers are unable to pick the call within a certain amount of time, the call will be routed out-of-state to a National Backup Center. While this protocol helps make sure that every help seeker is able to speak with a crisis counselor, having calls answered in state will help ensure more efficient and comprehensive access to New Hampshire's own services, connecting people to treatment within their community. Simply put, a telecommunications surcharge is the best funding structure for 988, and affirms the state's commitment that mental health is as important as physical health.

It is important to emphasize again that this is not a new model. For many years, New Hampshire residents have similarly paid a small surcharge to support similar statewide access to emergency services. Similarly, telecommunications service providers have been remitting surcharges to the state for 911 services for many years. This model is proven and successful, not only by other states' implementation of 988, but by the 911 system's long history.

Though SB 255 as introduced does not specify the surcharge amount, we can get an idea through the bill's fiscal note, according to which the current annual cost of the 911 system is approximately \$15 million, funded by a surcharge of approximately \$0.75. Further, the current estimated cost to run the 988 centers annually is about \$7.4 million. With this information, we can infer that the 988 surcharge will be significantly less than that of 911.

Mental illness and suicide affect us all – as individuals, as family members, as members of a community. It is beholden upon all of us to support the systems serving individuals in need throughout the state. If our crisis services system is to continue to provide local support to those

in a mental health crisis and reduce the burden on law enforcement, it requires a sustainable funding mechanism. SB 255 provides a common-sense, proven model for doing so. For these reasons, NAMI NH urges the committee to vote Ought to Pass for SB 255.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samuel C. Hawkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'S'.

Samuel C. Hawkins