

## United Way Worldwide

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June 7, 2019

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch  
Secretary  
Office of the Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: WC Docket No. 18-336 and CC Docket No. 92-105 regarding the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018, specifically the

Dear Madam Secretary:

United Way Worldwide (UWW) leads the global network of 1,800 United Way agencies and works closely with the 240+ United Way and non-United Way agencies that provide 211 services throughout the United States and in Canada. As the largest publicly-funded charity and non-government funder of human services in the U.S., United Way is committed to ensuring that every person in every community has access to services and resources that will mitigate, prevent, and ultimately reduce the rate of completed suicides in this country. UWW strongly believes that the best way to save lives and connect people in need to services is to leverage and improve the assets of all stakeholders to create a single, cohesive crisis intervention ecosystem through 211, as recommended by the North American Numbering Council (NANC).

The existing network of crisis response centers, leadership, and deep expertise of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) are critical to the expansion of this vital service, as is the ability to address a person's needs holistically. We recommend a collaborative solution that connects 211s and NSPL centers, leveraging technology, training, and local partnership to provide people in need with immediate support. There are already many examples of this type of collaboration and joint infrastructure:

- In Louisiana, three agencies answer 211 calls but only one, VIA LINK is a crisis center. When residents of Louisiana dial 211, they are first asked if they are experiencing emotional distress and want to be connected to a crisis counselor. If they are, they are directed to VIA LINK. Otherwise, they are directed to their local 211 agency. This enables 211 to be promoted as the line for *all help*, whether crisis or not.
- In Massachusetts and Arizona, the statewide crisis services have merged with 211 in recent years to create one, cohesive 211 service that connects individuals to a crisis response specialist first and foremost, or to a 211 specialist for all other services and resources.
- In Houston, the United Way of Greater Houston operates a strong 211 that does not have specialized crisis response services. By partnering with The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities), callers are connected with the right person to help them regardless of whether they call 211 or a 1800 number.
- In Florida, 60% of the 211s are blended crisis centers and answer both NSPL and other crisis response hotlines. 211s across the state are now working together to operate the statewide MyFLVet crisis hotline for veterans, with 211 promoted as the place to call.



The 211 network receives over 12 million calls annually from people in need and is continuously improving its infrastructure, service levels, and partnerships to serve more people better and faster. There are several key facts about the 211 network that should be taken into consideration while reviewing the recommendation of the North American Numbering Council (NANC) recommendation regarding the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Improvement Act:

- Currently, the network of 211s across the U.S. answer approximately 1 million calls annually related to suicide and mental health crises. Of those, 150,000 (15%) are specifically related to suicide ideation.
- Over 30% of 211 agencies are already blended crisis centers (agencies that provide both 211 and crisis intervention services). Almost 40% of all 211 agencies either answer NSPL calls as a contracted center or operate a local or statewide suicide prevention or mental health crisis hotline.
- All 211 specialists are trained to assess, triage, and properly handle any type of call. Many 211s that do not have crisis intervention specialties have developed close relationships with their local crisis centers and facilitate a safe, successful warm transfer when needed.
- The 211 network has extensive experience successfully providing specialized services and operating crisis related hotlines. In addition to those that answer NSPL and local crisis hotlines, there are twenty-five 211s that operate opioid addiction hotlines; twenty-four that provide homelessness coordinated entry services; twenty that have specialized veterans support services; and twelve that operate domestic violence hotlines.
- Call routing for 211 is based on the caller's current location, not the phone number of the device from which they are calling. This ensures that the caller is connected to as local a resource as possible, regardless of their phone number.
- Collectively, the 211 network has over 900,000 community resource records about services locally, statewide, and nationally. UWW is working closely with the network to create a unified national community resource platform which can then be leveraged by every 211 and partner agencies to provide people with local assistance.

Reducing the rate of suicide in the U.S. by improving access to high-quality prevention and support services is critical. Through the existing infrastructure of both 211 and NSPL, we can provide Americans with a single 3-digit number to call for any need. A significant increase in the funding currently provided to NSPL and crisis centers across the country will be necessary to increase capacity, expand training, and adequately market the resource. With support of the FCC, 211 can continue to be the place to call for *any* help, including emotional distress and mental health crises.

United Way is grateful for your thoughtful consideration of this complex issue.

Thank you,

Mary B. Sellers  
U.S. President  
United Way Worldwide