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Marlene H. Dortch  
Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12<sup>th</sup> St. SW  
Washington, D.C. 20554

Re: *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018*, WC Docket No. 18-336

Dear Ms. Dortch:

At its July Open Meeting, the Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) will consider a draft Report and Order (“Draft Order”)<sup>1</sup> in this docket that would give all service providers two years (until July 16, 2022) to transition 87 Numbering Plan Areas (“NPAs”) to mandatory 10-digit dialing and to begin routing all calls made nationwide using the three-digit dialing code 988 to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Veterans Crisis Line (“Lifeline”). AT&T supports the Commission’s efforts to implement a single, easy to use three-digit dialing code for nationwide access to the Lifeline and agrees with the compelling evidence in the record, supported by sobering statistics, that simplified access to the Lifeline is needed and offers the promise of significant benefits. And, the Commission rightfully seeks the earliest possible implementation date for 988. Yet, the Draft Order’s arbitrary July 16, 2022, implementation date for all networks strays from the record.

The record overwhelmingly demonstrates that 988 can be implemented within 18 months in wireless and VoIP networks nationwide and in wireline networks where a transition to mandatory 10-digit dialing is not required, which in total represents about 97% of all homes in the United States. It also overwhelmingly shows that selecting 988 as the three-digit dialing code for the Lifeline comes with trade-offs, namely the 87 seven-digit dialing NPAs where NXX 988 is used must first transition to mandatory 10-digit dialing and completing all of those transitions within legacy wireline networks will take much longer than two years. These facts are unchallenged in the record. Nevertheless, the Draft Order would adopt an arbitrary two-year deadline based on mistaken assumptions, unsupported conclusions, and expectations untethered to historic experience.

The Draft Order would assign the North American Numbering Plan Administrator (“NANPA”) to develop, with input from providers, and coordinate the two-year schedule to implement 10-digit

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<sup>1</sup> Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018, WC Docket No. 18-336, Report and Order, FCC-CIRC2007-01 (rel. June 25, 2020) (“Draft Order”).

dialing in the affected 87 NPAs.<sup>2</sup> This process puts the cart before the horse. Neither NANPA nor providers (nor any other commenter for that matter) offered evidence in the record that legacy wireline providers could transition their networks in all 87 of these NPAs to 10-digit dialing in two years. In fact, legacy wireline providers demonstrated the exact opposite, that the substantial hours needed to perform translations on legacy wireline switches and allow for consumer education and outreach justifies a phased-in transition to 10-digit dialing and 988.

The Draft Order minimizes the complexities of transitioning 87 NPAs to 10-digit dialing within two-years by claiming that “[p]roviders routinely manage 10-digit dialing transitions in multiple area codes simultaneously[,]”<sup>3</sup> citing to 77 NPA transitions overall, 11 transitions in 2001, and seven transitions in 2017.<sup>4</sup> These statements are misleading. All of these transitions had overlapping, staggered (rather than simultaneous) implementation schedules, with different mandatory 10-digit dialing start dates.<sup>5</sup> In addition, because these NPAs transitioned across the country, their impacts were spread among multiple wireline providers (i.e., those providers operating in the transitioning NPAs). No single wireline provider transitioned all 77 NPAs, all 11 NPAs in 2001, or all seven NPAs in 2017. AT&T’s extremely experienced team cannot even recall completing more than five overlay projects in one year. Also, the 77 NPAs referenced were transitioned to 10-digit dialing over a period of *24 years*, an average of just over three NPAs a year across the whole industry since the first transition in 1996. This Draft Order, if adopted as released, would give providers less than 24 months (after deducting the time for NANPA to develop an implementation plan) to transition 87 NPAs, *10 more than have been transitioned in 24 years*.

The Draft Order acknowledges that a single NPA typically transitions to 10-digit dialing over 13 months (six months for network preparation, six months for consumer education and permissive dialing, and one month to activate the new area code) and then provides a series of suspect reasons why it expects providers “to be able to speed 10-digit dialing implementation significantly compared to the past.”<sup>6</sup> Those reasons do not withstand scrutiny. First, the Draft Order argues that the 13-month timeline can be shortened due to the absence of state public utility commission (“PUC”) action.<sup>7</sup> But, a state PUC order typically kicks-off, and thus precedes, the 13-month implementation timeline. Thus, a lack of PUC action affords no reduction in the typical 13-month implementation timeline.

Second, the Draft Order would expect providers to recognize time savings due to synergies in educating consumers, economies of scale and lessons learned regarding the logistical and technical

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 29-30, ¶¶52-53.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 28, fn 234.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 28, ¶51 and fn 234.

<sup>5</sup> The Commission also recognizes the need for staggered implementation schedules for 10-digit dialing transitions arising from this proceeding. *Id.* at 30, ¶53.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 32, ¶58.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 29, ¶52, 32, ¶58.

processes, extensive industry experience implementing transitions, and performing outreach in tandem with technical implementation.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence in the record, including from the NANPA or providers, to support the existence of these synergies and economies of scale or how much time they would save in the typical 13-month timeline. Even if some of these speculative synergies or economies of scale occur, there is no record that they would be such a force multiplier to allow legacy wireline providers to transition 87 NPAs (or even 50 NPAs in AT&T's case) to mandatory 10-digit dialing in less than two years, just 9 months more than is allowed for a transition of a single NPA.<sup>9</sup> At best, these reasons are unrealistic and at worse, they are a mirage:

- The Draft Order provides no clue as to the genesis of its expectation that lessons will be learned in logistical and technical processes, the type of lessons they believe providers can learn, or what logistic or technical processes currently are not implemented efficiently. Wireline carriers have operated and performed translations on their legacy switches for decades and transitioned NPAs to 10-digit dialing for decades (77 NPAs dating back to 1996), making it highly unlikely that significant time-saving processes and efficiencies remain to be realized. Likewise, expectations of additional, untapped time savings arising from extensive industry experience are pure conjecture.
- The suggestion that performing outreach in tandem with technical implementation will generate additional synergies mistakenly assumes that their current six-month timelines are discrete and consecutive. In reality, those tasks are already performed in tandem during the 13-month transition period.
- Some reduction of the customer education/permissive dialing period may be needed in any implementation schedule. But, shortening it by a sufficient amount to transition all 87 NPAs in less than two years could have serious implications for residents of the transitioning NPAs, especially public safety, government, and enterprise customers of wireline providers. During the permissive dialing period, customers not only get used to dialing 10-digits, but more significantly, use the time to reprogram safety systems, alarms, PBX's, fax machine calling lists, speed dialers, private entry access systems, auto-dialers and out-dialing lists on personal computers. Customers must also update stationery and checks to include 10-digit numbers, let all family, friends and business associates know about their 10-digit number, teach children their 10-digit telephone number and how to dial home, and educate elderly relatives and friends on the need to dial 10-digits. The Commission should not underestimate the time needed to

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 29-36.

<sup>9</sup> The Draft Order rejects AT&T's and other commenters' "assertions based solely on past timelines that the need to transition to 10-digit dialing in some areas of the country justifies a longer (or significantly longer) implementation timeframe." *Id.* at 32, ¶58. This statement is a gross simplification of commenters' positions, as AT&T and other industry commenters did not base their proposed implementation timelines "solely on past timelines," created an extensive record demonstrating that the need for translations on legacy wireline switches, consumer education, and customer software work are the primary reasons a longer phased-in timeline is needed, and are in the best position to know how long those efforts will take.

accomplish these tasks and should not assume that a substantially shorter timeline is possible for customer education, outreach, and permissive dialing absent a solid, comprehensive record, which does not exist in this proceeding.

- Similarly, some reduction in the network preparation timeline may be needed. But, shortening it in the amount needed to meet the two-year timeline in the Draft Order is both unrealistic and risky to the stability of wireline networks. Issues that are not present with seven-digit dialing do unexpectedly arise when a transition to 10-digit dialing occurs and wireline providers will still need time to discover and resolve them before 988 implementation. While the Commission can assess the timing of technological transitions, it is not intimately involved in typical 10-digit dialing transition processes and should defer to industry experts who are the most knowledgeable, especially like this case where there is unanimity in the record among commenters who know and have experienced the challenges associated with a 10-digit dialing transition.

Third, the Draft Order would reduce the transition timeline by the one-month spent activating the new NPA during a typical NPA transition because “these transitions do not involve a new area code.”<sup>10</sup> While 988 may not be an NPA, it is still a new code that legacy wireline providers must add to their switches. Switch translations to add 988 take no less time than those translations performed to add a new NPA. Translations for a transition to 10-digit dialing and to enable 988 can be performed in parallel but will take more time than performing only one of those tasks. Thus, there is no significant time savings here. In addition to translations needed for 10-digit dialing, AT&T estimates three hours per switch on average to add 988 to each of its 2,241 legacy wireline switches, totaling 6,723 hours.

Fourth, even assuming meaningful synergies and economies of scale occur, the analysis in the Draft Order undercuts a finding that 87 NPAs can be transitioned to 10-digit dialing in less than two years. The Draft Order would acknowledge that “transitioning to 10-digit dialing involves both the technical work needed to implement 10-digit dialing as well as educating consumers about the transition,”<sup>11</sup> that based on past transitions “covered providers will need significant time to devise and enact a plan for prompt implementation across so many areas,”<sup>12</sup> and that the shortest ongoing NPA transition schedule is nine months.<sup>13</sup> Yet, it makes a titanic leap of surmising that 87 NPAs can be transitioned to 10-digit dialing throughout legacy wireline networks in less than two years (after the NANPA transition plan). The following examples further demonstrate the challenges:

- A nationwide implementation schedule transitioning nine NPAs concurrently every six months (33%+ quicker than the shortest ongoing transition schedule and 50%+ quicker than the typical transition schedule) would require about 10 staggered transitions (i.e., 87

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 29, ¶52.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 30, ¶55.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 32, ¶58.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

$\div 9 = 9.67$ ), running consecutively, and take an estimated 60 months to complete (i.e.,  $9.67 \times 6 = 58$  months). AT&T's June 22, 2020, *ex parte* letter provides an example of a similar 10-digit dialing transition schedule for AT&T's 716 legacy wireline switches covering 50 NPAs.<sup>14</sup> A nationwide implementation schedule transitioning the historical maximum of 11 NPAs<sup>15</sup> concurrently every six months would require about eight staggered transitions (i.e.,  $87 \div 11 = 7.9$ ), running consecutively, and still take an estimated 48 months to complete (i.e.,  $7.9 \times 6 = 47.5$  months).

- Even if AT&T alone transitioned to 10-digit dialing in 12 NPAs per year over multiple consecutive years—one more than the whole industry has transitioned in any single year, it would still take over four years to complete the transition in all 50 seven-digit dialing NPAs with NXX 988 where AT&T provides wireline service (and in all 716 legacy wireline switches).

The Draft Order observes that the Commission has historically implemented N11 codes nationwide in six to 24-month timeframes.<sup>16</sup> But N11 implementation does not require a transition to 10-digit dialing (or the switch translations needed to make that transition) and thus has no bearing on how quickly legacy wireline providers can enable 988 nationwide. If anything, the Commission's adoption of a 24-month 811 transition<sup>17</sup> that did not require 10-digit dialing demonstrates the unreasonableness of the same timeline to enable 988 nationwide, where 87 NPA transitions to 10-digit dialing are required. In fact, the proposed two-year implementation timeline for 988, which would start immediately, would be shorter than the 811 implementation timeline, which was calculated from Federal Register publication.

The Draft Order also notes the resolution of initial Commission and industry concerns that physical upgrades or replacements of legacy wireline switches would be needed to accommodate 10-digit dialing and 988. Those concerns proved unwarranted, as industry can accomplish both with switch translations. This positive development does not mean that there is suddenly an abundance of experienced switch translations technicians or that those technicians can perform the translations needed to transition to 10-digit dialing in 87 NPAs (or even the 50 NPAs affecting AT&T) within two years. To the contrary, the record is abundantly clear that the need for switch translations necessitates a phased-in transition to 10-digit dialing in those 87 NPAs. AT&T has explained that it takes about 75 hours on average per switch to perform the translations on AT&T's 716 legacy wireline switches to transition to 10-digit dialing, totaling 53,700 hours. Translations on AT&T's 2,241 legacy wireline switches to implement 988 take about an additional three hours on average

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Vonda Long-Dillard, Associate Director, Federal Regulatory Relations, AT&T Services, Inc., to Marlene Dortch, Secretary, Federal Communications Commission, Appendix, WC Docket No. 18-336 (filed June 22, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Draft Order at 28, fn 234.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 31, fn 249.

<sup>17</sup> *The Use of N11 Codes and Other Abbreviated Dialing Arrangements*, CC Docket 92-105, Sixth Report and Order, 20 FCC Rcd 5539, 5552 (2005).

per switch, 6,723 hours in total. This work, as well as other previous planned and business as usual translations work unrelated to 988, is performed by the same limited group of experienced translations technicians. The Draft Order represents that it accounts for these workforce challenges “by ensuring adequate time for the transition”<sup>18</sup> but that is certainly not the case.

Lastly, the Draft Order erroneously suggests that providers will benefit from transitioning to an all IP-based network within the two-year timeline to implement 988 nationwide.<sup>19</sup> Again, the record tells a different story. Moving to an all IP-network to accommodate the transition to 10-digit dialing “would add *unnecessary* costs to the implementation of 988 by service providers”<sup>20</sup> and no provider is pursuing that option at this time. Also, nothing in the record suggests that within two years a sufficient amount of IP network equipment would be available to transition all providers to an all IP-network in areas requiring mandatory 10-digit dialing or that all providers could make those transitions and reliably route 988 calls to the Lifeline by July 16, 2022. This type of major commitment requires years of planning, budgeting, and development. While AT&T may benefit from transitioning to an all IP-based network *once that transition is complete*, those benefits do not constitute evidence that the transition can be completed within an unrealistic two-year timeline.

AT&T urges the Commission to proceed in the manner supported by the record, requiring 988 routing to the Lifeline within 18 months for wireless and VoIP networks nationwide and wireline networks where a transition to mandatory 10-digit dialing is not required and establishing a five-year phased-in transition schedule in the 87 seven-digit dialing NPAs with NXX 988. AT&T shares the Commission’s desire for a simple path to 988 implementation that avoids confusion and believes that confusion can be minimized under such a plan without ignoring the record. But, to be sure, no path is without complexities. Each potential three-digit code and implementation schedule has trade-offs, as evidenced by the absence of consensus among commenters on which code should be designated<sup>21</sup> and the Commission’s planned rejection of the North American Numbering Council recommendation to repurpose 211. Any potential confusion can be remedied by clear consumer education and outreach that provides predictable implementation dates. It would better serve the public to adopt a rational, deliberate phased-in implementation schedule that wireline network providers can predictably meet and that can be clearly communicated to the public in a tailored manner rather than adopt and communicate a single, but overly ambitious, nationwide 988 implementation date for all services that cannot be met. The later would likely require future modification and thus, merely sow more confusion. In any event, no matter the overall timeline, tailored consumer communications about 988 implementation and its scheduled timeline (likely by NPA) will be needed due to the staggered manner in which implementation must occur.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Draft Order at 36, ¶¶64.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 33-34, ¶¶60-61.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 26-27, ¶49 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 10, ¶19.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 30, ¶53.

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If the Commission nonetheless proceeds with adoption of the two-year 988 implementation timeline for all services, that timeline should start only after the NANPA has developed (with input from industry), and the Commission has published, the appropriate transition schedule for the 87 NPAs that must move to mandatory 10-digit dialing. Otherwise, the NANPA process would consume valuable portions of the two-year implementation timeline that providers will need. And, the Commission should retain the existing guidance in the Draft Order that the NANPA must develop the implementation plan after receiving input from providers, including accounting for each provider's unique challenges.<sup>23</sup> A final Order would also provide detailed language explaining how legacy wireline providers can justify a waiver of the two-year timeline, as it will inevitably be needed.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

/s/

Frank S. Simone

Vice President-Federal Regulatory

cc: Austin Bonner  
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<sup>23</sup> *Id.*