



Randy Clarke
Vice President Federal Regulatory Affairs
1099 New York Ave NW Suite #250
Washington, DC 20001
Tel: (703) 220-3133
Randy.Clarke@centurylink.com

July 9, 2020

VIA ECFS

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

Re: Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018,
WC Docket No. 18-336 – Notice of Ex Parte Meeting

Dear Ms. Dortch:

On July 7, 2020 David Bartlett, Vice President for Federal Regulatory Affairs, and I had a discussion by telephone with Melissa Kirkel from the Office of Chairman Pai, and Nick Degani, Senior Counsel to Chairman Pai, to discuss the public draft of the *Implementation of the National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act of 2018* Report and Order (“Draft Order”) scheduled for consideration at the Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) July 16, 2020 Open Meeting.¹

CenturyLink unequivocally agrees with the compelling evidence in the record demonstrating the large-scale public benefits that would result from establishing a 3-digit, nationwide, dialing code for mental health crisis intervention. As CenturyLink has reiterated, we stand ready to do our part to help realize these important, life-saving benefits. But as the record also shows, there are implementation issues that impact the timeline and cost of establishing this 3-digit, nationwide resource, and CenturyLink is very concerned about the abbreviated transition path described in the Draft Order. During the discussion I presented the points below.

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

The Draft Order Fails to Adopt the Reasonable Transition Path Presented by Industry

Throughout this proceeding, CenturyLink has emphasized that while 988 is workable as a nationwide suicide hotline number, wireline service providers would face extreme challenges if 988 were to be designated with an unrealistic implementation runway that fails to consider the substantial challenges facing the legacy wireline industry.² Due to the unprecedented volume of 10-digit dialing transition and translations work needed to enable 988 in all NPAs nationwide, a multi-year, multi-phased transition, such as the one USTelecom has proposed, is essential.³ Indeed, USTelecom presented a plan for a phased-in transition that would have enabled 988 access for 97% of U.S. households within 18 months. And, for the few areas where 988 would not yet be available, the current national suicide hotline would remain an option. The remaining NPAs would have 988 enabled as quickly as possible on a rolling basis after the initial 18-month period. USTelecom and others in the industry reiterated repeatedly that a *nationwide* transition for all exchanges within two years or less would simply not be possible due to technical and operational limitations.⁴ The phased-in approach is achievable, supported by the record, unopposed by the mental health community, and represents a reasonable path forward to overcome the barriers to a nationwide two-year transition that are well-documented in the record.

The Draft Order Ignores the Record and Charts an Unreasonably Fast Path to Nationwide 988 Enablement that the Record Confirms Cannot Be Attained

The Draft Order, unfortunately, takes a dramatically different approach that grossly underestimates the complexity of multiple, simultaneous transitions to 10-digit dialing. CenturyLink has detailed the complexity it will face with this transition, explaining that it has approximately 4500 switches, thousands of which are in NPAs needing to transition to 10-digit dialing.⁵ Switches in over 1100 rate centers will require 10-digit dialing conversions. CenturyLink predicts that, on average, switch translations work necessary for 10-digit dialing conversions will take up to 80 hours for each rate center.⁶ Highly skilled labor is needed to

² See generally Reply Comments of CenturyLink, Inc. filed in WC Docket No. 18-336 on March 16, 2020 (“*CenturyLink Reply Comments*”) and Letter from Randy Clarke, Vice President Federal Regulatory Affairs, CenturyLink to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 18-336, at 2-3 (filed April 9, 2020) (“*CenturyLink April 9 Ex Parte*”).

³ See generally Letter from Kristine Hackman, Vice President Policy & Advocacy, USTelecom The Broadband Association, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 18-336 (filed June 22, 2020) proposing a phased-in transition (“*USTelecom June 22 Ex Parte*”).

⁴ See, e.g., Letter from Kristine Hackman, Vice President Policy & Advocacy, USTelecom The Broadband Association, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 18-336 at 4 (filed July 6, 2020) (“*USTelecom July 6 Ex Parte*”); Letter from Frank S. Simone, Vice President Federal Regulatory, AT&T, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 18-336 (filed July 7, 2020) (“*AT&T July 7 Ex Parte*”).

⁵ *CenturyLink Reply Comments* at 5-6.

⁶ CenturyLink’s prediction of an average of 80 hours of switch translations work being required for 10-digit dialing transitions in each of over 1100 rate centers was incorporated in the *USTelecom June 22 Ex*

perform this work, and as CenturyLink has explained, there are not enough skilled labor resources to perform all of this work in a limited window.⁷ The limited availability of qualified switch technicians will uniquely impact CenturyLink as CenturyLink provides service in all but one of the 87 NPAs that will have to transition to 10-digit dialing and would need to have switch translations technicians available to work on all of these transitions during whatever transition period is established.

The Draft Order ignores the compelling challenges detailed in the record and sets an unreasonably short and rigid two-year period to transition to 10-digit dialing in *all* of the 87 NPAs that will need to transition to enable 988. Rather than addressing the inconvenient (but factual) truths raised by CenturyLink and others about the substantial and time-consuming switch translations work they will have to perform in order to make 988 operational, the Draft Order either flatly disregards those truths or wishes them away with blithe assertions about “economies of scale” and “lessons learned” from past implementations.⁸ The Draft Order divines that these vague efficiencies will somehow help speed the transitions here to some undefined degree, along with compressed consumer education periods that, as AT&T points out, fail when subjected to scrutiny.⁹ And, as AT&T astutely observes, the stark reality is that *the Draft Order would give the industry less than 24 months to transition all 87 NPAs* (since time will be needed for the NANPA to finalize a transition plan which will come out of the two-year implementation period), which amounts to *10 more NPAs than have been transitioned in the last 24 years combined*.¹⁰

The Draft Order is utterly bereft of any information explaining how these expected “efficiencies” would be realized such that the proposed two-year timeframe could be met. Nothing in the record suggests a two-year timeline is possible, and to the contrary, much in the record plainly states a two-year timeline is not possible.¹¹ Reasoned decision-making requires more than what the Draft Order provides.

Parte with an inaccurate sum of “at least 20,000 hours of translations time” required. *US Telecom June 22 Ex Parte* at 5, fn. 16. The accurate number of switch translations time required to perform 80 hours of translations work in over 1100 rate centers is at least 88,000 hours. Consequently, the “at least 20,000 hours of switch-translation time” reflected in note 252 of the draft order reflects this inaccuracy. *See Draft Order* at fn. 252. As part of its review on the compliance burden that would result from a two-year transition period, CenturyLink has determined that the number of rate centers, rather switch numbers, is its main driver for labor hours that will be required to complete 10-digit dialing transitions.

⁷ *See, e.g., CenturyLink Reply Comments* at 6.

⁸ *Draft Order*, ¶ 58.

⁹ *See AT&T July 7 Ex Parte* at 3-5.

¹⁰ *See AT&T July 7 Ex Parte* at 3.

¹¹ *See, e.g., USTelecom June 22 Ex Parte* at 3, *CenturyLink April 9 Ex Parte* at 3, *Comments of AT&T filed in WC Docket No. 18-336 on February 14, 2020 at 2 (“AT&T Comments”)*.

The Draft Order Fails to Recognize that Implementation of a Three-Digit Suicide Hotline Using an N11 Number Is Fundamentally Different – and Easier – Than Implementation Using 988

CenturyLink presented alternatives to the Commission that would have allowed it to avoid the operational challenges associated with using 988, a number that older PSTN switches were not designed to recognize as a complete dialed number, as a three-digit suicide hotline number. Specifically, CenturyLink explained that to the extent the Commission’s priority is a solution that can be ubiquitously deployed quickly, 211 could be deployed throughout its territory within six months.¹² To be clear, if the Commission adopted 211 during its July 16th meeting, it could be operational in early 2021. This is consistent with the NANC Report that explained how expanding 211 would be the most expedient and beneficial means to provide easy access to suicide prevention and mental health crisis support services.¹³

The Draft Order wrongly (because 988 is not an N11 number) cites prior timelines for implementation of N11 numbers as an indicator of how long implementation of 988 should take.¹⁴ The point that a N11 number would be more streamlined and require less time and effort to enable as a three-digit suicide hotline number than a non-N11 number was initially made in the NANC Report.¹⁵ As AT&T pointed out, implementation of N11 codes does not require transitioning to 10-digit dialing and the Commission’s adoption of a 24-month transition to implement 811 undermines adoption of the same transition timeline to enable 988 nationwide and to complete 87 ten-digit dialing transitions.¹⁶ Regrettably, as with the alternative of reaching 97% of households in 18 months via 988 with the remaining NPAs to be reached on a rolling

¹² See *CenturyLink Reply Comments* at 2; *CenturyLink April 9 Ex Parte* at 4.

¹³ See NANC’s Report and Recommendation on the Feasibility of Establishing a 3-Digit Dialing Code For a National Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline System, Section 7.5 (finding expanding, rather than repurposing, 211 to be the most expedient and beneficial means to provide easy access to suicide prevention and mental health crisis support service). <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10531153709624/Final%20NSHIA%20Report%20May%2010%202019.pdf>. (“NANC Report”).

¹⁴ See Draft Order at fn. 249.

¹⁵ See *NANC Report* Section 4.1 (noting “an advantage [of N11 codes] is that the N11 architecture is an established abbreviated dialing plan, recognized by both switch manufacturers and the public at large), Section 4.12.3 (describing the disadvantages of establishing a new, non-N11 code), and Section 7.3.2 (explaining TDM networks may need as much or longer time to implement [988 over repurposing an N11 code due to] 10-digit dialing or post dial delay/inter-digit timeout, where necessary. Also, in Section 7.5 the NANC Report recommended expanding, not repurposing, 211 as the three-digit code: “the NANC has found it technically feasible to recommend the “expansion” of the existing 211 code, if a 3-digit code is to be established. Expansion of the 211 code would be the most expedient and beneficial in providing easy access to suicide prevention and mental health crisis support service to help address what has become a national health crisis.”

¹⁶ See *AT&T July 7 Ex Parte* at 5.

basis, the Draft Order rejects the alternative of implementing 211 – an actual N11 number – as the three-digit suicide hotline code nationwide.

The Draft Order Wrongly Suggests that the Ongoing IP Transition Will Speed and/or Coincide with 988 Implementation

The Draft Order states that “carriers with legacy switches have represented that they have been in the midst of an IP transition involving extensive updates to their TDM-based networks, technology that they have repeatedly claimed will be obsolete very soon.”¹⁷ From this point, the Draft Order states that the Commission believes “consistent with providers’ oft-repeated statements on progress made in transitioning legacy networks, that a July 16, 2022 deadline provides sufficient time to require all covered providers to upgrade and translate switches on their network.”¹⁸ As a threshold matter, IP transitions completed in one part of a network do not create IP capabilities in other TDM parts of the network. Moreover, it is unrealistic to suggest – and far beyond the scope of this proceeding – that carriers that have not yet fully transitioned to IP will be able to do so in the next two years. As AT&T notes, “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.”¹⁹ The larger IP transition has no bearing on whether providers are going to be able to implement 988 on the expedited timeframe set forth in the Draft Order.

If the Commission Does Not Adopt USTelecom’s Reasonable Phased-In Implementation Proposal the Draft Order Should Be Amended to Acknowledge and Account for the Implementation Challenges Detailed in the Record

For all the reasons discussed above and presented in the record, the Commission should adopt USTelecom’s proposal for phased-in implementation of 988. Doing so would enable 988 to serve as a three-digit suicide hotline number for 97% of U.S. households within 18 months, with the remaining areas enabled on a rolling basis as quickly as possible. However, to the extent the two-year timeline in the Draft Order remains immutable, rather than improperly dismissing the well-documented challenges to nationwide 988 deployment within two years, CenturyLink agrees with AT&T that the Commission should push back the start of the two-year timeline. The two-year timeline should start only after the NANPA has developed (with industry input), and the Commission has published, a transition schedule for the 87 NPAs that must move to mandatory 10-digit dialing. Alternatively, if the Commission does not delay the start of the two-year timeline until the NANPA has developed this transition schedule, it should adopt USTelecom’s proposal and require the NANPA to develop, based on input from covered providers, and make public an implementation schedule within 30 days of adoption of this

¹⁷ Draft Order, ¶ 60.

¹⁸ *Id.* ¶ 60.

¹⁹ *See AT&T July 7 Ex Parte* at 6.

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch

July 9, 2020

Page 6

order.²⁰ Further, the two-year timeline should start after issuance of a final Commission order that provides detailed language explaining the criteria for wireline providers to obtain waivers of the two-year timeline.²¹ CenturyLink also agrees with USTelecom that in the event that the Commission adopts a two year implementation period for 988, there should be a “check-in” on implementation at the one-year mark to determine if the transitions remain on-track or if additional time or other measures may be warranted.²²

Please address any questions to the undersigned.

Sincerely,

/s/ Randy Clarke
Randy Clarke

cc: Nick Degani
Melissa Kirkel

²⁰ See *USTelecom July 6 Ex Parte* at 2, 5-6. The Commission could accomplish this change by amending the second sentence of Draft Order, ¶ 53 to read as follows: “We direct the North American Numbering Plan Administrator to develop, based on input from covered providers, and make public within 30 days of adoption of this Order, an implementation schedule that will allow all covered providers to meet the transition deadline in an efficient manner that best accounts for the challenges each covered provider faces.”

²¹ See *AT&T July 7 Ex Parte* at 7.

²² See *USTelecom July 6 Ex Parte* at 6.