Comment on National Suicide Hotline Improvement Act

I have mixed feelings about the feasibility of a three-digit code devoted to suicide prevention alone. To spend the money to convert from the Lifeline number to a three-digit code WITHOUT increasing support to the individual crisis centers that answer these calls would be insult on top of injury. The centers are already woefully under-funded and I worry that if Congress devoted more funds to the new number, they might not also be motivated to increase funding to the centers themselves.

Secondly, we already have the problem that callers do not realize they are being routed locally (most of the time, anyway). With a three-digit number, would people understand that any better than they do now?

Would a three-digit number change the existing problem that calls are routed by area code? As our society becomes increasingly mobile, bringing their cell phone numbers with them as they relocate, do we have good data on whether callers are sometimes unable to receive local referrals because they have been routed to the “wrong” area?

I would like to see:

More resources (state and federal) to support existing crisis centers.

           Resources devoted to improving the crisis response system, as with Crisisnow.com in which people are diverted FROM a police/emergency room system and are instead transported to appropriate mental health care.

A movement to persuade mental health providers to list the Lifeline or local crisis number on their outgoing voicemail INSTEAD of saying to go to an emergency room or call 911. There is no evidence that their callers do either of those things, and we know for a fact that simply waiting in the ER is not conducive to mental health!

More capacity for the people who answer existing non-crisis lines (such as 211) to be trained to recognize signs of crisis and respond appropriately

Funding to help reduce the waiting time, which Lifeline estimates to be an average of 88 seconds when the call must roll over to a backup center. That must seem like a lifetime to a desperate person ( I just ran 88 seconds on my stopwatch and it is a LONG time).

If changing to a three-digit calling system distracts us from achieving any of the above, then I am not in favor. If there is some argument that persuasively indicates that the change will help achieve greater funding and capacity, great. But this bill places all the attention on a single problem, that people aren't able to memorize the Lifeline number. Three digits are much easier than 10 but are we trying to solve the wrong problem here?