

December 10, 2018

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.

Dear Madam,

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley appreciates the opportunity to comment on the current effort undertaken by the Federal Communications Commission to study the feasibility of designating a three-digit number to the National Suicide Hotline and to assess the effectiveness of the current National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In Greater Boston, our United Way is fighting to create financial opportunity for individuals and families and help ensure educational success for children and youth. We place a high priority in our funding on fostering social and emotional well-being, disrupting the cycle of poverty through a two-generational approach, and helping to ensure families are able to meet their basic needs such as heat, housing, food and quality childcare.

We acknowledge efforts are needed to create a safe place for all people to call – especially underserved or marginalized populations. Our organization has an 80-year history of reaching out to people in need and today we partner with over 3,000 companies, 260 community-based organizations and over 42,000 individual donors and volunteers to drive systemic changes to solve our community’s toughest problems like mental health and crisis.

We encourage the FCC to consider our 211 work here in Massachusetts as a vital partner in increasing access to suicide prevention and intervention services. Since the FCC designation of 211 in 2000, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley has invested over $3 million to the success of 211. In 2017, Mass 2-1-1 answered over 171,000 calls for help and responded to over 250,000 web searches on the companion Mass211.org.

Over 43,000 of the calls made to Mass 2-1-1 in 2017 were people calling for our Mental Health/Suicide Prevention program Call2talk, which is fully integrated with the statewide Mass 2-1-1 platform. Of those calls, 21% were assessed to be at some level of risk for suicide, 77% were in search of a human connection, validation and active engagement with someone to work with to navigate their emotional pain, and 89% reported reduced anxiety level at the end of the call.

In Massachusetts, we recently partnered with Crisis Text Line to provide access to free, 24/7 support and information via text message. We have established our own keyword (C2T) for this service and our promotion efforts and usage has earned us access to the National Dashboard Platform.

Our integration of Call2Talk and 211 has worked well and could be looked at as a model for other regions. Another three-digit code may erode the simplicity of a single point of access for community help. Despite concerted efforts by numerous social services, and multiple hotlines, in our community to educate and market the distinctions, a person in crisis will likely always reach for the most familiar or most accessible number. Our 211 receives calls that are better suited for 911, and our 911 partners often receive calls that we can best answer. We recommend that resources should be invested to improve a unified single point of access with a blended partnership of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and United Way’s 211 services. We believe in the power of partnership to address gaps, not duplicate services, and will be a valuable partner in the fight against suicide.

You can learn more about our work at Mass211.org and can reach my office for additional questions or discussion at 617-624-8100. Thank you for your time in addressing this important issue and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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Michael K. Durkin

President and CEO

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

