

# The Need for a Unified Platform for the 988 Network

Since its inception in 2005, Vibrant Emotional Health has served as the administrator for the SAMHSA-funded National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network. This network is a decentralized network that connects over 190 locally-managed crisis centers across the country through a single phone number, 1-800-283-8255. In July 2022, 988 will be accessible to everyone in the U.S. as a new dialing code for the Lifeline network.

In 2020, Vibrant Emotional Health proposed to SAMHSA that for 988 to fully realize its potential to better support all people in suicidal and mental health crisis in the United States, it will be essential for all 988 network providers to be operating on the same technology platform with updated communications capabilities to accommodate current and future needs of the Lifeline network. Such a platform must:

- enable consumers with a choice for how they want to be served (phone, text, chat, follow-up, etc.);
- assure equitable and efficient connection to counselors across all channels and services for populations;
- allow for seamless coordination with local crisis, emergency response and receiving services for individuals requiring urgent care;
- facilitate follow-up and community resource linkages for persons needing continuing support after contacting 988;
- unify provider data collection and reporting so that effectiveness and efficiencies can be continuously monitored across all service channels, and consumer crisis needs and service demands can be measured across all communities nationally; as well as
- ensure that all counselors responding to 988 contacts have access to the same training, resources, announcements, etc.

A unified technological platform will allow all 988 providers, the network administrator and SAMHSA to better assure efficient access to quality care for all residents in the U.S. and territories, no matter where, when and how they are seeking to be helped.

## How a Unified Platform for the Network Enhances Service Access, Efficiency & Accountability?

There are numerous benefits to all 988 network providers operating from a unified communications platform will provide:

- More efficient connection to care for persons in crisis and reduced wait times through recognition of (and routing to) first available counselors at network centers.
- The ability to connect people in crisis directly to counselors with experience and skills relevant to their concerns, where needed (“skills-based routing”);
- Interoperability across channels (ability to transfer between modalities such as calls, chats and texts, warm transfers, etc.) and between services (connections to follow-up care, mobile crisis teams, 911 linkages, crisis/emergency receiving facilities, etc);
- Equal access to counselor tools and referral resources across the network;
- Uniform data collection and analytics across the network, allowing greater insight into populations reached, problems reported, services utilized, and quality assurance; and
- Standardization of the consumer experience of 988 across all crisis centers and modalities, ensuring that people in crisis receive the same high level of care and support regardless of how they contact 988.

## How 988 Providers Operating on Separate Platforms Affects 988 Access, Efficiency and Accountability?

At this time, it is not mandatory for centers to adopt this system. However, the more centers are utilizing the Unified Platform system, the greater the platform’s effectiveness as a tool for the network and the people we serve. Using multiple platforms across the 988 system creates a lack of consistency and visibility into the network’s operations that results in:

- Inefficiencies in routing and longer wait times to connect people in crisis due to an inability to identify available counselors at network crisis centers;
- Separate data feeds owned by centers create inconsistencies that prevent (or delay) accurate insights on needed platform improvements, problem and service trends of 988 users, and undermine comparative quality of care analyses across network centers;
- Lack of consistency in service provided across the network, as people in crisis are routed through different systems with varying requirements and user experiences;
- Less reliability at higher costs, due to maintaining incongruent systems requiring idiosyncratic upgrades, while yielding greater inefficiencies across the network.

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## Will the Unified Platform be mandatory for all centers when it is phased in during 2023?

Vibrant understands that not all centers will be able to transition to the Unified Platform in the short term. At this time, it is not mandatory for centers to adopt this system. The focus now is to build a platform alongside our state and center stakeholders that will meet the needs of all centers in the 988 network, and evolve to meet the service needs of all persons seeking care across all service channels for years to come. A fully utilized Unified Platform will increase routing efficiencies and greater interoperability with PSAPs, MCTs, and population-based services across channels throughout the network. It will also result in a more uniform experience for persons contacting the service, and streamlined and uniform training experiences and support tools for counselors across centers.

## What is needed now for crisis center communications systems to prepare for 988 in FY22?

The existing system for routing crisis center calls will remain in place until 2023. For crisis centers that plan to adopt the Unified Platform, Vibrant will collaborate with you to import your historical data to the new system upon system launch, create the necessary permissions to access the platform, and train your staff on its use. It is anticipated that there will be no cost to centers or states for the initial build of the Unified Platform system toolset and functionality. Vibrant Emotional Health is building strategies to reduce the cost of implementation with the goal of no out-of-pocket costs for implementation, which may include additional funding from SAMHSA.

Network centers committed to operating their own systems will be asked to dedicate technology resources to assuring that our systems are seamlessly integrated with theirs, in order to assure consistent and optimal experience for all 988 users in crisis, regardless of which service channels they choose to access for help. A center's systems (Contact Center System and CRM) must include a robust API set providing real time access to system status and data collection. Centers maintaining their own operating systems will need to efficiently collect and report the same data as required of all centers on the Unified Platform to assure accountability and quality assurance across the network as well as log into the Unified Platform for resources, announcements and training tools.

Centers dedicated to maintaining separate systems are strongly encouraged to participate in Vibrant's Unified Platform Advisory Committee, so they can better assure seamless integration between our platform and theirs.

If a center is considering modifying, upgrading, or purchasing new reporting technology, we advise waiting until Spring 2022 to see if Vibrant's Unified Platform will meet their needs.

***Thank you for your support of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. We look forward to continuing our collaborations with crisis centers, states, and partners to provide timely and effective emotional support for those in suicidal crisis and emotional distress, when, where, and how they need it.***

For questions or concerns, please reach out to [988inquiries@vibrant.org](mailto:988inquiries@vibrant.org).