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## NJ Senate Health Committee Advances Bill to Establish Core Behavioral Health Crisis System, Fund Mental Health & Suicide Hotline

*S311 would coordinate crisis services around the new federally designated hotline, 988.*

North Brunswick, NJ. Feb. 10. The NJ Senate Health, Human Services, and Senior Citizens Committee unanimously advanced bill S311 to support the state's rollout of the nationwide 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Crisis Hotline.

"A mental health crisis deserves a mental health response," said NAMI NJ executive director, Meredith Masin Blount, who testified in favor of S311 alongside NJ's leading behavioral health associations. "The time is now for our policymakers to reimagine how New Jersey responds to people in mental health and suicidal crisis. 988 gives New Jersey the opportunity to reimagine emergency responses to **mental health** crises."

Starting July 16th, 988 will serve as the three-digit number for suicide prevention and mental health crisis, designated by the Federal Communications Commission and Congress.

The bill passed on February 3rd would support the nearly two million New Jerseyans who are affected by a mental health condition. Sponsored by Sen. Joseph Vitale, the committee chairman, and Sen. Vin Gopal, the bill would establish a core statewide behavioral health crisis system, including call centers, mobile crisis response teams, and stabilization services.

S311 would boost efforts to respond to mental health crises with licensed mental health professionals and certified peers versed in the linguistic and cultural norms of their communities.

According to the [Treatment Advocacy Center](#), one in four fatal police encounters involve people with untreated mental illness. Of those, one in three were people of color. People with mental illness are booked into the nation's jails about 2 million times every year -- often for exhibiting symptoms of their mental health condition. (Source: [Psychiatric Services](#)) Further, a [special report](#) from the Department of Justice found 37% of jail inmates have a diagnosed mental illness, and 26% showed signs of serious psychological distress.

To maintain the statewide behavioral health system, S311 will also require the NJ Department of Human Services to establish a "9-8-8 System and Response Trust Fund Account." Consistent with federal law, the bill would require DHS to establish a monthly statewide 988 fee on mobile services bills to support the costs of maintaining 24/7 988 call centers. Such a fee would resemble the one consumers already pay for local 911 services and would not apply to those receiving benefits from the federal Lifeline program. According to a [national poll commissioned by NAMI](#) and conducted by Ipsos, 73% of respondents would be willing to pay a fee to support 988 crisis response services. When respondents were told that 911 fees average \$1.00 a month, willingness to pay increased to 78%.

With demand for mental health services skyrocketing, the creation of a core behavioral health crisis system – with call centers, community based mobile crisis teams, and psychiatric stabilization programs – cannot come soon enough. While S311 has passed the Senate Health, Human Services, and Senior Citizens Committee, it will need to clear the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, as well as its counterpart, A2036, in the Assembly

Health and Budget Committees. NAMI NJ urges the Senate and Assembly to support a true crisis standard of care and pass S311/A2036.

For more information, contact Advocacy Engagement Manager, Matthew Camarda, at 732-940-0991 ext. 115 or [advocacy@naminj.org](mailto:advocacy@naminj.org).

*NAMI NJ, founded in 1985, is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families who are affected by mental illness through programs of support, education and advocacy. Visit us at [www.naminj.org](http://www.naminj.org).*

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