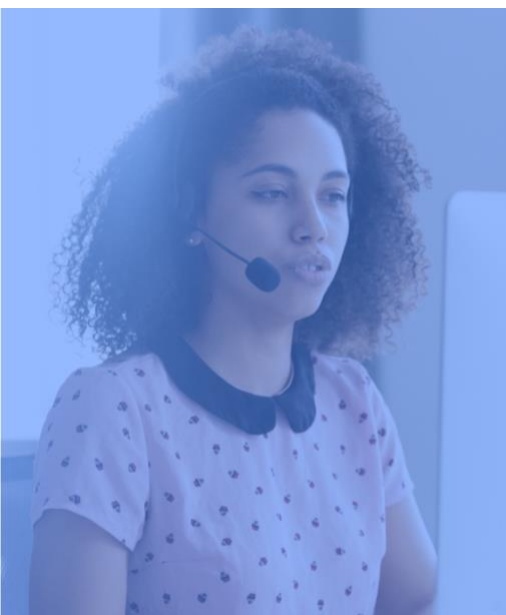


988 SUICIDE AND CRISIS
LIFELINE CENTERS'

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

APRIL 2023



DISCLAIMER

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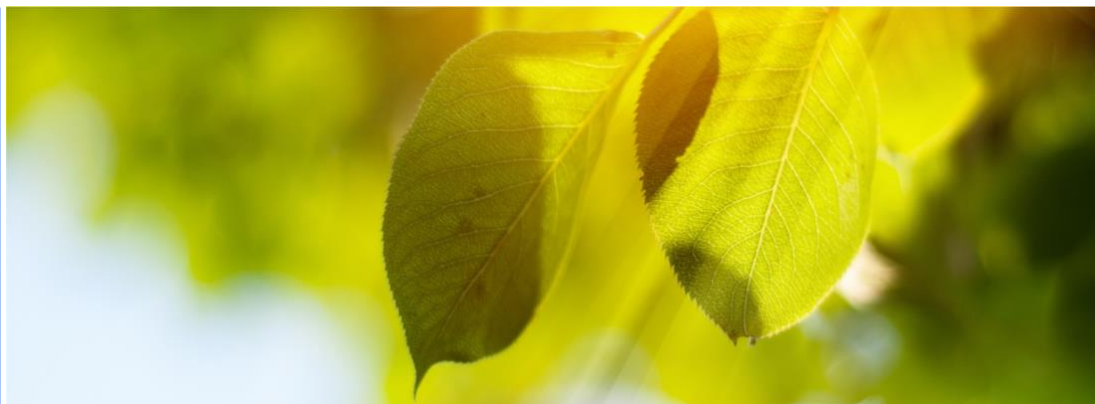
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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

On July 16, 2022, the new 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988 Lifeline) became available across all access points across the United States. 988 Lifeline provides direct connection via call, chat, or text to compassionate, accessible care and support for anyone, anytime and anywhere who is experiencing behavioral health-related distress or experiencing a suicidal crisis. The 988 Lifeline is a national network of over 200 local, independent crisis centers providing free and confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the U.S. and territories. Crisis contact centers in the 988 Lifeline network are an entry point to the continuum of crisis care services. Crisis counselors at the crisis contact centers will talk, text or chat with an individual about their concerns, and provide emotional support and crisis interventions in order to help keep the individual alive and safe. As needed, the crisis counselor may make a referral to mental health resources or a local mental health professional for ongoing care. In cases where speaking, chatting or texting with a crisis counselor is not sufficient to ensure a person's safety, crisis counselors may make a referral to a mobile crisis team to the location, or in cases where mobile crisis teams are not available contact 911 to send an emergency response team. Numerous studies have shown that most callers are significantly more likely to feel less depressed, less suicidal, less overwhelmed, and more hopeful after speaking to a 988 Lifeline crisis counselor. The crisis counselors are the superheroes who save lives. They are part of a larger team of heroes who ensure the operation of the crisis contact centers 24/7/365. They oversee the expansion of the call centers, hire staff, conduct staff training, ensure the operation of the equipment, analyze and report data, and so much more. They are part of a transformation of the crisis care system which is taking place now and for the foreseeable future. However, changes and growth do not come without challenges.

During December 2022 and January 2023, NASMHPD conducted a workforce analysis of 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline crisis contact centers in seventeen states through a series of focus group meetings and interviews. The Directors within the crisis contact centers shared their perspectives to assist us in identifying main themes as well as to provide insight into the difficulties they face. The purpose of this report was to identify challenges and barriers and to make short- and long-term recommendations that would benefit the crisis contact centers directly and in turn benefit the crisis system. It is also intended to provide information for federal partners, 988 Lifeline administrator, Vibrant Emotional Health (VEH), state behavioral health agencies (SBHAs), state licensing boards, and all crisis contact centers in the 988 Lifeline network to assist with their future planning and efforts to help resolve the workforce challenges and barriers. All key recommendations aim to expand the workforce pipeline as well as focus on retaining staff. It was an honor to have the opportunity to meet and discuss the issues with these extremely talented and dedicated individuals. It is our hope that these recommendations will make a positive difference for them and in the transformation of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and help save lives.



ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES AND TECHNOLOGY

CONTACT CENTER ADMINISTRATION

CHALLENGE: New and different administrative responsibilities (i.e., for staff in non-counselor positions), the increase in the volume of contacts, and hiring and onboarding new employees created a major challenge in the area of administration.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: A playbook on how to create a new contact center or assume new responsibilities as an existing center would be very helpful as the number of crisis contact centers continues to grow, e.g., staff ratio information, what factors are dictated by contact volume, etc.

HIRING ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

CHALLENGE: Lack of adequate funding and capacity to hire administrative staff (e.g., HR directors, supervisors, trainers, public relations, IT/telecom staff, data analysts) as quickly as needed, or at all.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Standard templates for job descriptions and advertisements could be developed to assist centers. Job descriptions could be collected from all centers, reviewed, and common items identified and created into job description templates. The template could easily be customized by a Center to accommodate their needs.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Flexibility within new federal and private grants to fund administrative positions needed to support the operations of the center such as supervisors, follow-up coordinators, data analysts, and quality assurance staff.

SUPERVISION

CHALLENGE: Access to supervision is critical and important for follow-up and quality assurance on all shifts, but organizing supervision for remote workers is difficult. Supervision is critical for reducing burnout rates as crisis counselors may feel more confident if they know someone is available 24/7 who can answer questions and provide support. This can help crisis counselors adhere to best practices and improve self-care due to the availability of debriefing.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The ability to listen in real-time to calls and review chats and texts for remote staff is important. Also, the ability to provide prompts, debriefs, and other support between crisis conversations will help new employees.
 - Understand common work from home challenges and make clear what is not acceptable
 - Set clear remote work productivity standards
 - Identify and provide the right tools, including a real time communication platform and easy access to all needed resources
 - Set aside specific days, times, and methods for supervision, mentoring, and team interaction
 - Follow up with remote employees regularly
 - Create a video or tip sheet with suggestions for remote employees
 - Remember to actively listen to staff
 - Continuously communicate with your team
 - Celebrate successes
 - Find ways to keep remote staff involved with the agency, their coworkers, and the work
 - Promote healthy boundaries between work and personal life

More detail is available for 988 Lifeline crisis contact centers regarding guidance for remote work.

2. The Society for Human Resources Management offers [tips](#). Purdue University developed an extremely comprehensive [Guide to Managing Remote Teams](#).

STAFFING SHORTAGES

CHALLENGE: Supervision hours often become a tradeoff when there are staffing shortages.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Staffing must accommodate various types of leave as well as adequate supervision. As important as it is at this time, it will be difficult until a full workforce is realized. Consider using experienced workers to mentor new staff providing at least some support/communication when supervision is not possible.

GRANT WRITING

CHALLENGE: Grant writing is a special skill that needs to be developed by administrative staff as grant funding is critical for some centers whose funding is insufficient or unstable.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Grant writing workshops and other grant technical assistance should be provided within the 988 Lifeline network.
2. It is advisable to have two or more staff trained such that overlapping grant timeframes or staff loss would not become a crisis.
3. SAMHSA has [resources](#) on grant writing and should expand on future resources (e.g., webinars).

OPERATING POLICIES

CHALLENGE: The crisis contact centers have multiple sets of operating policies for a variety of support lines overseen by a variety of funders (states, Vibrant, private foundations, etc.).

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: A single procedure manual could be developed for all lines managed by a crisis contact center by reviewing the requirements of each type of support line and identifying the commonalities. Items that fall outside of standard procedures could be identified by a note indicating a difference.

TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT

CHALLENGE: The crisis contact centers' workforces cannot perform their jobs without technological support or acquiring the technological skills themselves.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Explain why technology is needed and keep employees in the loop as decisions are made regarding new technology.
2. Include the users (staff) in selecting new technology.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Use technology to improve work environments for employees.



Boys Town National Hotline, Nebraska

Knowledge of telecommunications systems and information technology (IT) is an important element of 988 contact center operations and having leadership and/or staff with this expertise can be a huge benefit to the workforce. The director of Boys Town National Hotline, Mike Klemme, has a background in contact center management, product management, and telecom IT. His background supports Boys Town in identifying opportunities to address operational gaps through people, processes, and/or technology solutions, as well as leveraging workforce management best practices to use historical data and current trends to forecast future needs. Klemme's understanding of the journey that a call, text, or chat takes as it routes between carriers, vendors, platforms, and ultimately to the Boys Town Crisis Counselors, helps the center to place measurement in the areas of the call-flow to identify what is needed for the team to better answer as many calls as possible and help external partners by creating awareness of opportunities for improvement in the call flow.

TECHNOLOGY TRAINING

CHALLENGE: Technology has become increasingly complex thus requiring more training and specialized staff and/or skills (e.g., information technology and telecom). Centers have lost staff due to anxiety and frustration related to the technology.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Sometimes staff learn better from other staff who are familiar with it than from the IT technology staff. On a regular schedule ask staff to identify aspects of the technology that present the greatest problems for them and consider refresher training or perhaps even revamping the technology.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Adoption of technology will be more agreeable to staff, and more manageable for the trainers, by breaking the workforce into groups and the material into shorter training courses.
2. Make technology training interesting/fun and stressless, demonstrate how it is practical, and allow adequate time to learn it.

CHAT/TEXT TECHNOLOGY

CHALLENGE: Chat and text are new technologies that require training for staff. Also, the volumes of text and chat contacts are overwhelming the centers' current technology.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Data on text and chat growth demonstrates that text and chat are modalities of strong growth for contacting the 988 Lifeline and are therefore a priority for training crisis counselors on the new technology. When onboarding a new employee, the crisis contact centers may want to train on chat and text first. Chat/text clinical training was added to Vibrant's learning portal during February 2023. This training, along with all the clinical trainings, is provided at no cost to crisis contact centers in the 988 Lifeline network.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Chat/text equipment will move to the Unified Platform. All applications used to access the platform are web-based so there is nothing to download onto center computers. For chat/text centers and for any phone centers moving to the Unified Platform, the items that will need support include: a solid internet connection; security software (to protect against malware, etc.); and center-owned devices (rather than crisis counselors using personal devices).

COMPLEX DATA COLLECTION PLATFORMS

CHALLENGE: Centers have lost staff due to the use of new complex data collection platforms.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Training is part of the solution. Data collection does not need to be complex. Develop simple user-friendly systems or reprogram existing ones to be more user-friendly.

FUNDING FOR SUPPORT ROLES

CHALLENGES:

- Funding for support roles (admin, HR, IT, etc.) is increasingly difficult to obtain and typically not covered by federal, state, or other grants.
- Grants are welcome, but come with considerable inflexibility, e.g., differences in pay for identical positions.

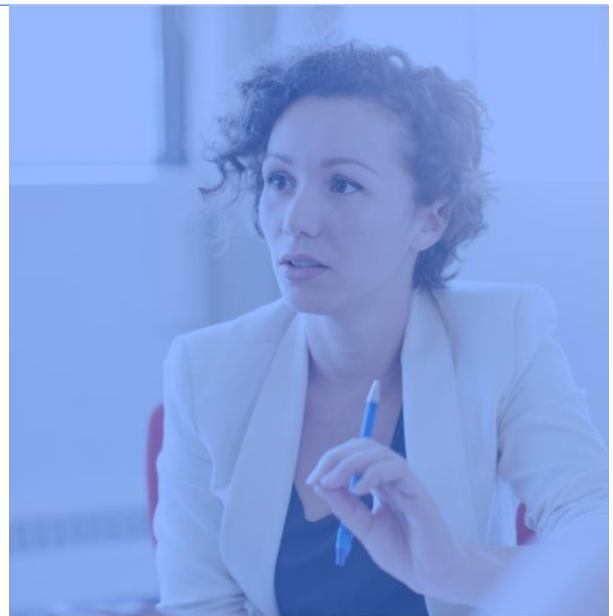
SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Grants available from public and private funders are useful for startup/one-time costs. Competitive grants are the highest risk for a return in that a considerable amount of time can be used writing a grant for which thousands of organizations have submitted proposals, making the chances of receiving an award small. Developing templates or other stock language that can be used multiple times across grants may help crisis contact centers save time.
2. Deliver the message regarding the narrow/inflexible nature of grants by asking associations to communicate the importance of funding that adjusts for volume and flexibility to their state members, state and federal agencies, and large private funders.
3. Hosting open houses for groups such as the police department, EMS, 911, legislators, businesses, philanthropies, etc. may alert them to your needs (financial, space, etc.) and open some avenues for funding or other types of assistance.

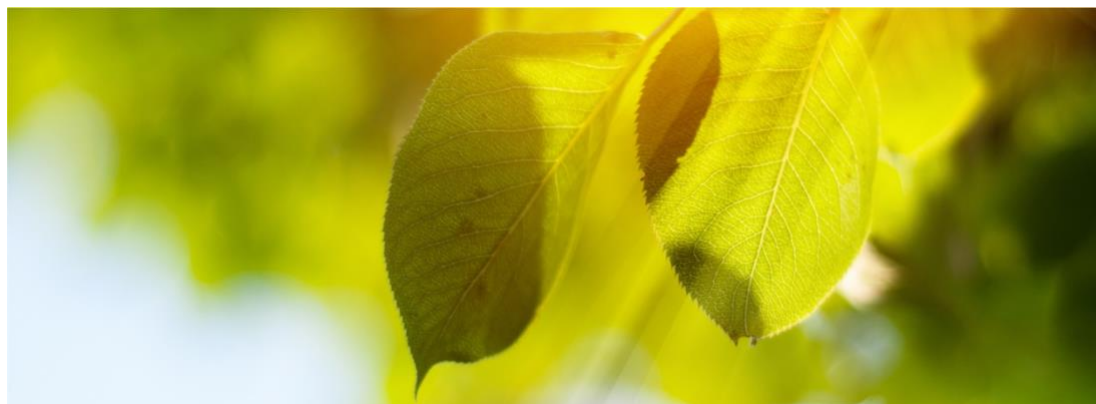
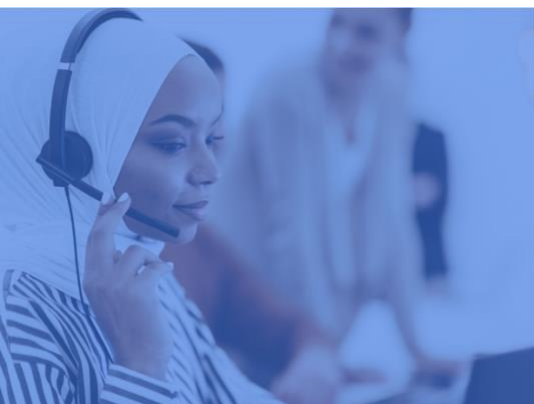


Fair Chance Licensing Act

As mental health conditions have been criminalized, excluding candidates who are otherwise qualified and well suited for the role may increase and exacerbate the workforce shortage. According to the [National Employment Law Project \(2016\)](#), approximately 70 million Americans with a criminal background face hiring barriers for licensing and occupational certification positions, which are required for one in four jobs. The primary barriers are the criminalization of mental illness and the fact that background checks are required for occupational certifications and licenses for many behavioral health professions such as licensed professional counselors, nurses, social workers, and certified peer specialists.



Since occupational licensing standards are set at the state level, many states have enacted “Fair Chance” licensing laws to address this hiring barrier as a strategy to expand their workforce. The [Council of State Governments](#) reports that several states have adopted laws focused on best practices to expand licensing opportunities for individuals with a criminal background. For example, Rhode Island passed the [Fair Chance Licensing Act](#) which prohibits state licensing boards from denying applicants an occupational license if the crime or conviction is not substantially related to the license being sought. The [Restoration of Rights Project](#) includes a state-by-state analysis of employment and licensing laws and codes for each state’s occupational regulations.



SCOPE AND PRACTICE

IMPACT OF LICENSING ON HIRING AND RETENTION

CHALLENGE: Licensing requirements are different across the states and are changing regularly. Some SBHAs and/or licensing boards have imposed a requirement that centers hire only those with a master's degree in a related field, and in some cases only licensed clinicians. This increases recruitment challenges and is not always critical for job performance. For example, some state boards do not recognize 988 call, chat, and text contact response as applicable for licensing hours. Some of the difficult rules that are being imposed by various states include:

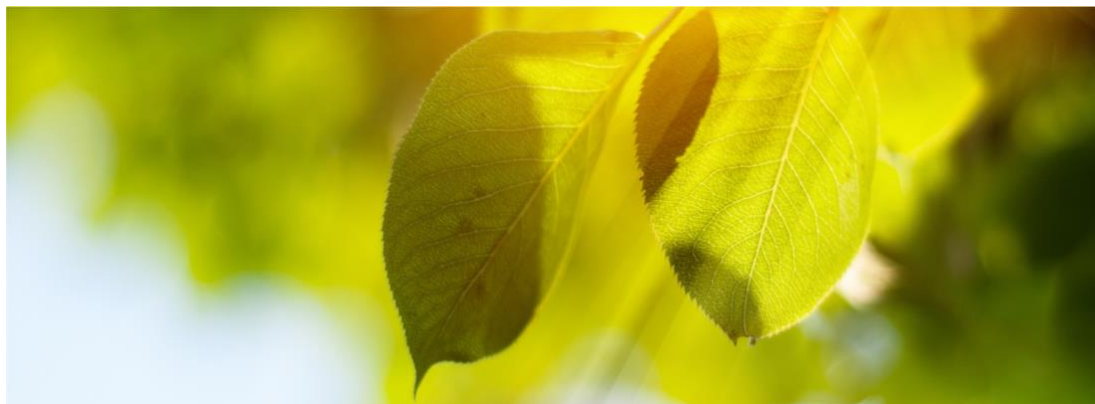
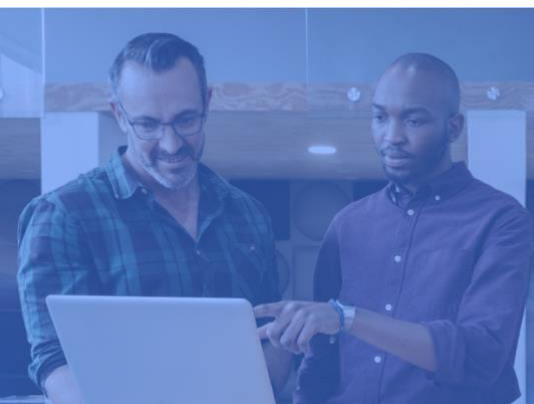
- a requirement for a license clinician to activate a Mobile Crisis Team;
- 24/7 clinical supervision requirements (either onsite or by phone). This applies to individuals in graduate school or with a master's degree, so they leave. It seems strict because previously a trained crisis counselor without hours or degrees had been acceptable;
- a Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) is only permitted to hire call counselors that have a master's degree or higher-level education in a related field;
- the need for clinical hours for graduate school students; and
- interns are permitted to only work in the office rather than remotely.

Some state policies are also tightening rules by requiring that all employees with a bachelor's degree be replaced by employees with a master's degree.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS: Addressing these issues on a state-by-state and board-by-board basis should be considered a long-term solution. Recommendations are:

1. Education regarding the role of crisis counselors and their role in providing emotional support to individuals experiencing a mental health or suicidal emergency is needed across all stakeholders, including licensing boards and other state policymakers within the SBHA and the state legislature. This clarity regarding roles, combined with many areas of the country facing mental health provider shortages, would reduce the chances of provider "territorial" issues with scope of practice issues.

2. The crisis contact centers should inform state policymakers of the difficulties that these rules create for them. The SBHA should simultaneously inform the coordinator who oversees the boards (social work, psychology, etc.) of the issues and the health officer (to whom the coordinator usually reports). In addition, the SBHA may need to brief the coordinator and the health officer about the new 988 number and the important role the centers play as an entry door to the crisis service continuum. The centers should request an audience with the coordinator and the relevant board staff of the various boards to request that the board staff take the issue to the boards at their monthly meeting or that the center and/or SBHA be able to do so. It would be advantageous to also provide the problem in writing such that no relevant points are lost in communication. If the coordinator or the board staff do not take the issue to the boards, the centers can write directly to the board chairperson. Note: This would not be considered a good first step because it would catch staff off guard and potentially delay any discussion.
3. Request that the state health department or a legislator submit a bill requiring the board to take action. Grandfathering should be considered as an option.



TRAINING

SERVICE QUALITY AND BURNOUT

CHALLENGE: Training is key to service quality for the crisis contact centers and is also key to averting staff burnout and attrition.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Incorporate components of training that are complex or challenging, such as:
 - Add refresher trainings, which are shorter versions of the initial training
 - Embed interactions and accessible content via a micro-learning burst (a 1- to 5-minute pop-up) for review when logging in/out of the system
 - Use built-in compliance via an easy access system for staff to review and sign off on required training material on completion
 - Add Level 2 trainings, which are refresher courses that go more in depth for crisis counselors taking calls, texts, and/or chats
 - Add trainings with short practice scenarios
2. Use the following resource: SAMHSA's Evidenced-Based Resource Guide, *[Addressing Burnout in the Behavioral Health Workforce Through Organizational Strategies](#)* which addresses the six drivers of burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values.

COMPLEX TRAINING

CHALLENGE: Counselors are trained with the 988 Lifeline curriculum in addition to any training the center provides, including for different support lines or positions.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Utilize Vibrant’s 988 Lifeline modular training, which can be easily incorporated into contact centers’ existing training curriculums. This has the benefit of allowing for easy comparisons of differences between or among various types of support lines.

ONBOARDING

CHALLENGE: Despite the benefits of a thorough onboarding process, training the workforce is intensive. The average onboarding time for centers interviewed was 5-7 weeks.

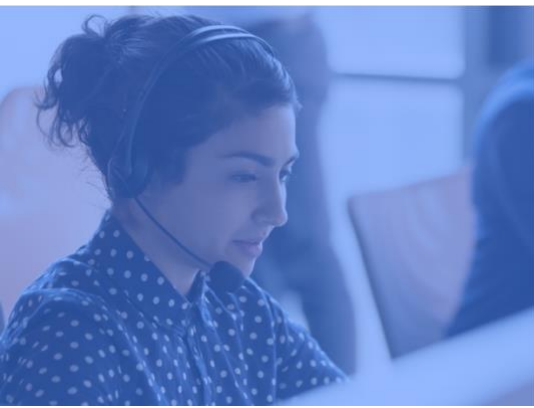
SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Implement a multi-phased, multi-component training approach so that crisis counselors can better retain what is in the training, and feel supported as they begin answering calls, texts, and/or chats. This also enables faster onboarding.
2. The Vibrant Standards, Training, and Practices Committee (STP) is focused on creating online trainings to address the need to train counselors quickly.

REMOTE WORKER ACCOMMODATIONS

CHALLENGE: Requirements to be in-house hampers new hires who are only interested in remote work. Also, unfortunately, it does not guarantee that the new employee will continue to work beyond the training period.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: In-person training can be adapted as a Zoom meeting thus enabling remote individuals to participate in real-time.



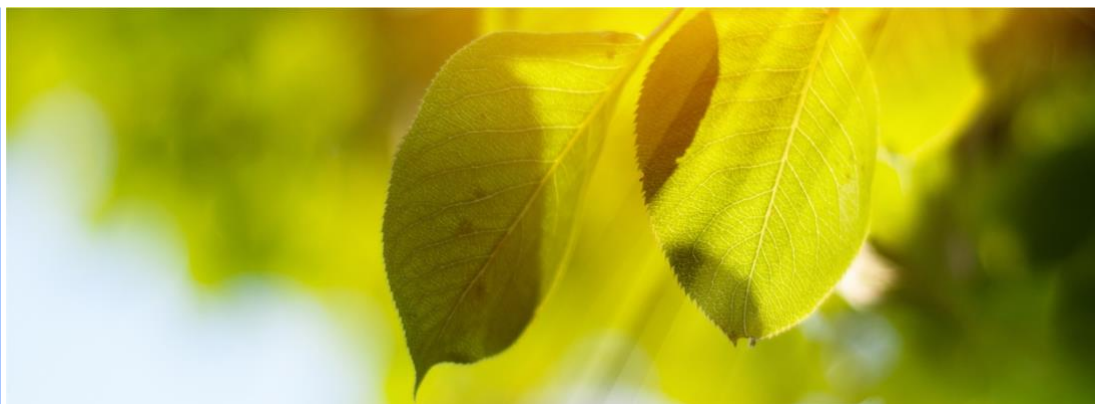
SALARIES

HIRING AND RETENTION

CHALLENGE: Salaries are both a hiring and retention issues. As with most salaries in public health, salaries at a majority of (but not all) crisis contact centers are not competitive with the market. Some centers lose staff due to higher salaries offered by other organizations. Centers also report the challenge of hiring experienced professional staff at entry level wages.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Low salaries as well as the inability for staff to obtain licensing hours places crisis contact centers in the position of being the “great exporter” of talent. Adequate sustainable funding is needed to allow crisis contact centers to be competitive in the job marketplace.
2. Higher reimbursement levels for services that are payable by public and private insurers would also allow crisis contact centers to allocate more of their funds to salaries.
3. Incentives such as overnight and weekend shift bonuses, scholarship programs, sign-on bonuses, paid leave, and improved health insurance benefits should be considered by all contact centers as a cost-effective recruiting tool.



WORK ENVIRONMENT

SHIFT WORK

CHALLENGE: Night shifts and weekends create the greatest hiring challenges. During these shifts transportation may be more difficult, and safety a concern, but the conflict with family life is the major impediment.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Allowing for flexibility in schedules and length of shifts has been an effective strategy for some crisis contact centers. For example, one center has staff that work three 12-hour shifts and a Sunday 8-hour shift, which allows for personal time.
2. Centers may consider stipends to assist with the extra cost of transportation for night and weekend shifts. A cab or transportation service such as Uber would address safety and geographic accessibility but is more costly than public transit.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: It may be possible to offer a higher shift differential or a greater number of vacation days.

REMOTE WORK

CHALLENGE: Remote work is a preference for a large percentage of the workforce, but some crisis contact centers are not permitted by the state to offer remote opportunities and for others remote options are limited.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATION: The inability to offer remote work should be negotiated. It is widely used in all industries. Assuring the supervisors' abilities to monitor remote work should help alleviate concerns. Noting that remote work creates a wider hiring pool (e.g., employees with medical conditions and those living in high traffic areas) could also be useful.



First Choice Services West Virginia's Second Chance Hiring Program

"Our organization knows that people who are struggling can recover." Lata Menon, MSW, CEO of First Choice Services, shared that hiring people with lived experience of the criminal justice system, substance use, and/or mental health challenges is an integral part of their workforce. To effectively be a second chance employer, it is essential to understand, destigmatize, and create solid supports for all employees, including having policies and procedures in place to address any relapse or other challenges that any employee might experience. People with the right orientation to the work and a commitment to openness in their approach can be trained to be excellent counselors, regardless of education level.

TEXT AND CHAT VOLUME

CHALLENGE: The volume of text and chat has become overwhelming for some Centers.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: As previously mentioned, text and chat are a growing communication preference for individuals in crisis and must be addressed urgently. The increase in the texts/chats should drive the increase (using ratios) in the number of staff needed to respond and should be addressed in funding/budgets.

EVOLVING NEEDS OF CONTACTS

CHALLENGE: A new challenge for contact centers is the increase in the variety of needs of 988 contacts, e.g., co-occurring mental health and substance use, gender identity, etc.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Update staff training and skills to increase competence in all types of behavioral health issues including substance use, gender identity, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and emotional distress.
2. Since the crisis contact centers' past focus has been primarily mental health, staff may have inaccurate or outdated information regarding individuals with substance use disorders (SUD). Additional training on SUD may be helpful for staff.

MANAGING CULTURE CHANGE

CHALLENGE: Unhappy staff are pushing back or resigning.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Remember that change is difficult and more so for some people than others. Be sure staff know that leadership understands the change may be difficult, but everyone will adjust together.
2. Keeping staff in the loop regarding new plans and rationale for changes helps them feel more comfortable and feel a part of the improvement to the system. Including them will help the transition.
3. Provide staff with satisfying tasks, even if they are small, that staff can be proud of to feel that they are more a part of the change.

4. With 988 implementation, include staff in decision-making by providing opportunities for input from staff about the organizational change, such as working on special projects. Supervisors and leaders should provide regular check-in points to ensure bidirectional feedback. Leadership needs to drive the change and convey their support.

OPERATING MODEL

CHALLENGE: Staff are uncomfortable with the move from being small, often primarily volunteer organizations, to adopting a more corporate-like model, including adapting to managed care policies.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. There are more lives to be saved and improved and no one has those skills nor understands the urgency better than the crisis counselors answering 988 contacts. They are dedicated and will adapt for the cause. Help staff understand that the challenges they face every day in helping others are far more complex than changing to corporate-like models.
2. Help staff understand the big picture and how even “going corporate” can still be staff oriented. Encourage the sharing of ideas and implement the ideas if possible and logical. Use group discussions and/or a suggestion box.
3. Provide staff with the information and opportunity to join learning communities, such as the [988 Crisis Jam Learning Community](#). By participating in learning and other professional development opportunities, staff may obtain a better understanding and connectivity to their work.
4. Hold an onboarding meeting with members of 988 leadership to encourage the new center. This could help ease the transition.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATION: Find creative ways to educate and amplify the work of crisis contact centers as many stakeholders and the general public may be unaware of the great work crisis centers provide to their communities and beyond.



PROMISING PRACTICE

Lines for Life YouthLine Long-Term Workforce Pipeline

Lines for Life launched a youth-serving crisis support line, YouthLine, in 2000 because they believed that the voices of peer-to-peer connection are more powerful to youth in crisis. Located in Portland, Oregon, the program started with 9 youth volunteers and has since grown to over 130 volunteers ranging in age between 15 to 24 years old.

Recruitment occurs organically through word-of-mouth referrals, social media, and presentations at high schools. After completing 70 hours of training, the youth counselors respond to calls, chats, emails, and texts 7 days a week from 4 pm to 10 pm PT. They are continuously supervised and supported by at least two Lines for Life clinical staff.

YouthLine offers stipends to eligible youth counselors to diversify the volunteer pool to be more reflective of the greater Portland youth demographics. Through a generous private donation, the stipends eliminate potential barriers for some youth volunteers such as transportation and reduced wages from missing work.

"This direct volunteer experience is nothing like teens would get anywhere else in the field, without a master's degree," said Morgan Lee, YouthLine Assistant Director of Youth Development, Training, and Quality Assurance. The skills they learn volunteering can be applied to their day-to-day living and future positions in the mental health and crisis services field. Lee shared that many former youth counselors return to Lines for Life through college internships and post-graduation stepping into roles for the adult crisis line, administrative support positions (e.g., finance, quality assurance), volunteer coordinators, and YouthLine supervisors.

