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Suicide and Crisis Lifeline sees uptick in calls following launch of 3-digit number, 988

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UPDATED ON: AUGUST 28, 2023 / 7:14 PM / CBS SAN FRANCISCO

CBS NEWS
BAY AREA



The nationwide Suicide and Crisis Lifeline experienced a huge uptick in calls and texts after the launch of its 3-digit number, 988, last year.

But officials said there are some much-needed improvements and a remaining lack of awareness of the helpline.

Many of the people who pick up the calls are from the same local communities where the calls are coming from. For Jim Giffen, walking among redwoods is one way he takes a break to catch his breath after calls that can be extremely intense as people cry out for help.

"When a fellow human being reaches out in a dark time, I want to be able to volunteer my time to be that someone," said Giffen.

He volunteers to answer calls. Federal officials said there's been a 35% surge to 988, in its first year of operation compared to its 10-digit line.

For Giffen, it's personal.

"I have members of my family who struggle and continue to struggle with addiction," said Giffen.

KPIX visited Buckelew Programs in Novato last year as it launched the 3-digit line. It's one of 12 call centers across California that are part of the national network.

The past year, 1 percent of their calls were considered "high risk of suicide."

"We have the ability to give them help and steer them in the right direction in many cases," said Giffen.

But awareness of compassionate call-takers, the service they provide, and help connected to it remain a challenge. Only 18% of adults in the country are aware of 988, according to a survey released by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

"Part of the outreach this past year and nationwide outreach is helping to reduce the stigma about reaching out for help," said Buckelew Programs CEO Chris Kughn.

The 50-year-old nonprofit runs 988 for most of the North Bay.

"We've been able to help people de-escalate from crisis situations. The next step is to get them access to the right level of service in their local community," said Kughn.

Those services include a wide range of mental health and substance use treatment programs including counseling for children, teens and adults. And getting connected to much-needed help often starts with a conversation with a caring, and compassionate call-taker like Jim.

"They don't know me. They'll never know me. I don't know them. But It's two human beings with one person reaching out and another trying to be there for them," said Giffen.

Texting service at the call center in Novato goes live in mid-September as the rollout continues across the state and country.

Buckleup Programs is looking to hire or train volunteers. They said there's a severe lack of mental health professionals to work for their mobile crisis response teams.

Kenny Choi



When Kenny Choi jumped into the backseat, he never thought he would be introducing his ride share driver to National Public Radio. The hour-long ride to the airport turned into a conversation that included politics, the economic divide, and the cultural differences between the East Coast and the West Coast.



First published on August 28, 2023 / 7:34 PM

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