



**New Jersey Association of
Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc.**

February 3, 2022

The Honorable Joseph F. Vitale, Chair
Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee
569 Rahway Ave.
Woodbridge, NJ 07095

Testimony on S311

Dear Chairman Vitale, Vice-Chair Madden and Members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee:

On behalf of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) and its members, I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in regard to S311, a bill to establish a Core Behavioral Health Crisis Services System.

NJAMHAA is grateful to Senators Vitale and Gopal for sponsoring S311, which takes advantage of the opportunity to integrate a comprehensive crisis response system into New Jersey's current continuum of care while meeting the federal requirement to implement a 988 crisis call center by July 1st of this year.

While most recognize the adverse impacts on mental health that the pandemic has inflicted on our citizens, it is not as widely known that New Jersey and the nation were suffering both a suicide and opioid epidemic even before COVID arrived. Now, more than ever, the need to build a comprehensive mental health crisis system – one that is recognized as an essential service just like police, fire and Emergency Medical Services - is critical.

New Jersey is fortunate to have so many invaluable resources on which to build such a system. The Psychiatric Emergency Screening Services and Children's Mobile Response and Stabilization Services programs are but two. Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) and Early Intervention Support Services programs (EISS) are two more important resources that a crisis response system may rely on. EISS programs are urgent care-like walk-in centers currently operating in 11 counties, but with an RFP already issued to expand this program to all counties, thanks to new funding provided in the FY2022 budget which we are very grateful for. And the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services has earmarked supplemental SAMHSA block grant funds from the December 2021 federal Omnibus bill for the development of six regional crisis stabilization centers that will provide an important component to a comprehensive, accessible system.

The 988 call center will work with all of these existing resources to assist individuals in mental health crises to avoid harm and connect with an appropriate level of care, both initially and for follow up services. We recommend that the mobile crisis teams, preferably located in some of the aforementioned community-based programs, such as EISS, CCBHCs and community-based screening centers, include a licensed professional and certified peer.

NJAMHAA not only fully supports S311, but believes it will fill gaps in the current system of care, will result in better outcomes for the individuals served and will improve the bottom-line for the state, counties, localities, and other stakeholders as it reduces emergency room visits and criminal justice involvement.

NJAMHAA looks forward to continuing to work with the Legislature, Administration and Departments as the 988 crisis response system is designed and implemented.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debra L. Wentz". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D.
President and CEO