



February 7, 2025

Re: HB 421 | Public Safety - 9-1-1 Trust Fund - 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention Hotline

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

The Washington County Association of Student Councils (WCASC) is a coalition of high school and middle school student councils dedicated to amplifying the voices of thousands of students within Washington County Public Schools. WCASC strives to create connections among those within the community, providing students access to avenues in which they can become more civically involved at the local level. The mission of WCASC is to elevate the collective student voice by building communities of student leaders, giving students agency to speak their truth, and inspiring students to take action.

WCASC is in support of **HB 421 – Public Safety 9-1-1 Trust Fund - 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention Hotline** and urges the Health and Government Operations Committee to give a favorable report on this bill.

The 9-8-8 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national hotline that is available 24/7/365, and provides one-on-one support for mental health, suicide, and substance-related problems for anyone through calls, chats, and text. Most recent data from North Carolina Health and Human Resources reveal that teenagers aged 13 to 17 are the most frequent users of the 9-8-8 hotline¹. However, even after 2 years of launching, the 9-8-8 hotline has received minimal funding from the federal government, cutting down on an important resource for those who truly need it. A report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention looks at suicide rates of teens from 2011-2021 and discovers that over 20% of teens have seriously considered suicide². This reveals the urgent need for a hotline that can provide immediate and free support for anyone in crisis like the 9-8-8 hotline.

HB 421 authorizes that the 9-1-1 Trust Funds must support expenditures of the 9-8-8 suicide prevention hotline. It creates a separate entity to provide funding for the 9-8-8 suicide prevention hotline out of funds from 9-1-1. The 9-8-8 hotline heavily relies on crisis centers and crisis counselors³, and without enough funding, it is difficult for the hotline to ensure that everyone who reaches out for help will be put into contact with a counselor in a timely manner. Not being able to do so will further diminish the hope of the patients reaching out. Even though 9-8-8 is a national hotline it is sustained by funds from state and local contributors; with the absence of federal funding, there are limits on the hotline from operating and growing. **HB 421** supports more funding for the 9-8-8 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, allowing additional funds for crisis centers and trained counselors to provide crisis intervention, engage in problem-solving, and reduce harmful actions for those who reach out for help. Crisis hotlines like 9-8-8 play a crucial role in mental healthcare across the country, especially for those who are at serious risk.

¹ Athans, E. (2024, August 30). Most frequent users of 988 Hotline are teenagers 13 to 17 years old, data shows.

<https://abc11.com/post/mental-health-hotline-13-17-years-old-most-frequent-users-988-suicide-crisis-data-shows/15248785/>

²Pappas, S. (2023, July 1). More than 20% of teens have seriously considered suicide. Psychologists and communities can help tackle the problem. *Monitor on Psychology*, 54(5). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/07/psychologists-preventing-teen-suicide>

³988 Lifeline. (n.d.). *Our Crisis centers*. Retrieved February 5, 2025, from <https://988lifeline.org/learn/our-crisis-centers/>



As WCASC, our organization has voted to support **HB 421** as it aligns with our legislative platform, which states that:

1. We support: Mental and physical health are equally influential in the learning experience and should be treated as such. (WCASC Legislative Platform, Plank V; A, 3)
2. We support: Availability of wellness centers and educated school health service professionals in all schools, to providing general counseling, drug counseling, suicide prevention, and any other mental health services. (WCASC Legislative Platform, Plank V; B, 1)

HB 421 authorizes the use of 9-1-1 Trust Funds for supporting expenditures of the 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention Hotline, by establishing another separate funding entity. Creating a system where not just students but anyone can reach out to when they are facing crisis issues regarding, suicide, mental health, and substance-related issues. WCASC cherishes this platform that is provided freely to the public and our students. For these reasons, the Washington County Association of Student Council requests a favorable report from the committee. We are infinitely grateful for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Barna Begzad'.

Barna Begzad
President, Washington County Association of Student Councils