

April 12, 2023

The Honorable Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, PhD
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary Delphin-Rittmon:

On behalf of the physician and medical student members of the American Medical Association (AMA), I am writing to urge the Department of Health and Human Services, through its Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), to prioritize education and outreach activities for use of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to seniors and other at-risk communities.

Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the United States (2020), and is a public health issue that affects all demographic groups. While all suicides are tragedies, education and outreach on the 988 system should be prioritized to seniors, LGBTQ+ youth, veterans, and other at-risk communities. Seniors are at particular risk due to myriad factors. They are more prone to feelings of grief and loss as friends and family pass away. Feelings of grief can sometimes lead to loneliness or lack of social connections that result in long-term depression. Also, a loss of self-sufficiency and reliance on others to do simple tasks like driving to the grocery store could be a contributing factor. Men over age 65 face the highest risk of suicide while individuals 85 and older (regardless of gender) are a close second.¹ Other at-risk groups include LGBTQ+ youth, who were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers² and veterans. The unadjusted suicide rate among veterans was 31.7 per 100,000, far surpassing any grouping by age.³ **These and other at-risk groups should be prioritized for education and outreach by SAMHSA on the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.**

Also, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made preventing suicide its top clinical priority after several high-profile suicides in the parking lots of VA facilities gained national attention. The VA has developed numerous self-help tools, including information on how to safely store medication and firearms when not in use, and it has placed a suicide prevention coordinator in each of its medical centers. **SAMHSA, in addition to conducting its own outreach efforts on the 988 system, should explore opportunities to coordinate its efforts with the VA given the latter's focus on suicide prevention.**

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>

² <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2019/02/07/feature/the-parking-lot-suicides/>

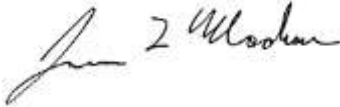
The Honorable Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, PhD

April 12, 2023

Page 2

If you have any questions, please contact Margaret Garikes, Vice President for Federal Affairs, at margaret.garikes@ama-assn.org, or by calling 202-789-7409.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Madara". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "M".

James L. Madara, MD