

988 Center Level Cost Estimates



In July 2022, 988 will become the national three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. As the administrator of the Lifeline since its inception in 2005, Vibrant Emotional Health knows that a national three-digit phone number can improve access to vital crisis services, extend the national reach of suicide prevention efforts, and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and getting help. Most importantly, 988 will help to save lives.

To fully meet the promise of 988, expanded infrastructure and resources are needed to consistently deliver on the strategic tenets of universal and convenient access, high quality and personalized experience, and connections to local resources and follow-up that Vibrant recommends. Activating 988 without ensuring the right infrastructure and resources are in place could result in people slipping through the cracks and lives harmed or lost. The role of crisis centers is a vital component of meeting the vision and mission of 988, offering connections to communities, visibility into best practices, integration into public health and safety systems, and promotion of local suicide prevention awareness and engagement activities.

As states plan for 988 and consider how to meet the potential new volume demand, we should also better understand how to standardize quality and performance across the network. Vibrant is pleased to share **center-level cost estimates** from a national best practice perspective. The center-level cost models were created with the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI), a global consulting firm with expertise in contact center customer experience and optimization, whose clients include U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, Independence Blue Cross, AmeriHealth, Sentara Healthcare, Covered CA, State Farm, USAA, and others. Inputs were informed by SAMHSA Best Practices in Behavioral Health Crisis Care, contact center industry best practices, feedback from crisis center staff, historical data from the Lifeline, and projected future activities necessary to 988 operations. Over forty analyses were conducted to understand the impact of key variables on costs, including potential volume growth and varying degrees of network centralization and size. The cost models represent averages across the network, and costs will vary between states. Technical assistance will be available as part of the state planning grants issued by Vibrant.

Factors that Influence Cost and Key Model Assumptions

The work of crisis centers is unique in its sensitivity, incorporation of clinical best practices, and direct impact on people's lives and cannot be compared to most other types of call center work. Due to these unique clinical requirements and necessary focus on building emotional connection and support, several elements differentiate crisis centers from standard call centers and are reflected in Vibrant's costs:

- More time engaging with callers due to the intense and personal nature of the conversation, resulting in longer handle times;
- More time for initial onboarding and training, and more hours for training refreshers and skill-building;
- Greater dedication to supervision and debriefing, and lower supervisor to counselor ratios to promote ongoing training and support;
- Balanced workdays, including wellness supports and programming, to avoid burnout and improve retention.

The below table presents the many variables that affect cost, along with key assumptions that reflect Vibrant's understanding of crisis centers' needs both administrative and clinical.

Variables	Impact on Cost	Model Assumptions
Service Modalities	Multiple modalities require infrastructure development and expertise in centers; handle times may be longer, so more staff are needed to maintain performance levels.	Calls, chats, and texts
Handle time	Longer contacts require more staff to maintain performance levels; Handle times may change depending on breadth and scope of services.	20 minutes
Volume	More contacts decrease cost because counselors are not idle; more calls increase overall costs because more staff and infrastructure are needed to meet demand.	9M contacts offered in the first year of implementation
Staffing		
→ Number and type of staff	More staffing requires increased funding for salaries, benefits, and other costs.	Robust staffing plan based on best practices
→ Paid vs. volunteer	Paid staff require salaries and fringe. Volunteers do not but still have costs related to training, supervision, management, retention.	All paid staff
→ Training and Support	More time spent on onboarding and refresher trainings, case conferencing and debriefs improve quality and retention, but require more staff to maintain service levels.	105 hours of initial training and 15 hours/month of coaching, debriefs, training, etc.
→ Remote work	A flexible remote work policy allows for reduced capital, facilities, and maintenance costs.	Allowed as volume grows
KPIs	More aggressive KPIs require more staffing and quality improvement functions and thus, increase costs.	85% answered in 20 seconds or less
Network size	More centers increase costs as each center will require infrastructure, with some duplicated costs. Figuring the total number of FTEs to answer projected contact volume is the most cost-efficient approach.	National network of 75 to 200 centers
Routing	Centralized routing allows for more efficient staffing but may lack local context.	Local routing to nearest center

Considering these numerous factors and conditions, Vibrant estimates that, **for the first year of 988 implementation only**, a national average of costs per contact *may* range from approximately \$65 per contact to \$95 per contact. **However, every state and U.S. Territory has unique characteristics and a national average may not be reflective of local or state level 988 costs.** For example, states with very low call volume, or states with high costs of living, or states with many centers or only one call center, will have costs that may be **significantly higher or lower** than the range provided here. Vibrant is providing national average ranges only as a broad example. State-specific cost analysis will be provided mid-spring 2021 by Vibrant.

Vibrant strongly recommends that states collaborate with their local crisis centers and stakeholders to determine how the factors outlined in this document, and others, may affect their cost calculations. This estimate is based on a standard industry forecasting tool that incorporates expected shared and dedicated expenses, including salaries and benefits of contact center employees, equipment, occupancy costs including rent and utilities, and other expenses. This cost excludes telecom charges paid by the Lifeline.



For Vibrant's recommendations regarding 988, please visit vibrant.org/988.

