

988 Center-Level Cost Estimates



Introduction

In July 2022, 988 will become the national three-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Lifeline). As the administrator of the Lifeline since its inception in 2005, Vibrant Emotional Health (Vibrant) 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.

Crisis centers play a vital role in meeting the vision and mission of 988. To support the development of infrastructure and capacity for 988, Vibrant is pleased to share **center-level cost estimates**—total “all in” costs incurred by Lifeline crisis centers to operate the centers and provide services. These estimates and any assumptions do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, and policies of the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Factors that Affect Cost

Vibrant contracted the International Customer Management Institute to create different budgetary scenarios using a standard industry forecasting tool called the Erlang model. The tool incorporates many different everyday contact center expenses to calculate an overall cost per second of service. Inputs include:

- Dedicated personnel (i.e., crisis workers and their supervisors)
- Shared management (i.e., center director, HR manager) that support other programs in addition to 988
- Dedicated capital (assets employed for the sole use of 988)
- Shared capital (assets used by multiple programs administered by the network center)
- Dedicated expenses (computer hardware/software, consultants)
- Shared expenses (expenses incurred to support the network center, i.e., rent, utilities, equipment)

The cost model assumes that 988 centers will be expected to implement specific enhancements to standardize quality across the network, including standardized training, data reporting, key performance indicators (KPIs), and quality assurance initiatives, among other shared activities. The network operator would pay expenses for these activities. The model also assumes that specific centralized resources (i.e., telecom charges, network back-up services, specialized services and technology) would be administered and paid for by the network operator.

The model also reflects the unique nature and demands of crisis center work. Crisis center work 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. As such, Vibrant's center-level cost projections reflect:

- 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 dedicated hours for training refreshers and clinical coaching
- 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 following table shows the design assumptions that reflect Vibrant's understanding of crisis centers' administrative and clinical needs. The assumptions are also informed by SAMHSA National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care,

contact center industry best practices, feedback from crisis center staff, historical Lifeline data, and projected future activities necessary to 988 operations.

Type	Variables	Impact on Cost	Model Assumptions
Volume and Scope	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.	Volume for first 12 months of 988 implementation
	Service Modalities	Multiple modalities (e.g., phone, chat, text services) require infrastructure development and expertise in centers; handle times may be longer, so more staff are needed to maintain performance levels.	Inbound and outbound, 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
Service Standards	KPIs	More aggressive KPIs require more staffing and quality improvement functions and thus, increase costs.	85% of contacts connected in 20 seconds or less
Workforce and Logistics	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, and retention.	Counselor salaries are based on current Bureau of Labor Statistics averages for social workers. All counselors are paid and professionalized.
	→ 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
	→ Remote Work	A flexible remote work policy allows for reduced capital, facilities, and maintenance costs.	Allowed as volume grows
	Network Size	More centers increase costs as each center will require infrastructure, with some duplicated costs.	National network of approximately 200 centers
	Routing	Centralized routing allows for more efficient staffing but may lack local context.	Two models: “Independent” model routes an individual to their nearest local crisis center; “Centralized” model routes to the first available counselor in the individual’s home state, which might not be the nearest local center. The second model option applies to states with multiple centers.

Considering these numerous factors and conditions, Vibrant estimates that, **for the first year of 988 implementation only, center-level costs will be \$441 million—or a national cost per contact is \$79. Every state and U.S. territory has unique characteristics, and costs will vary.** 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 expenses that may be **significantly higher.**

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. If you have questions regarding this document, please reach out to 988inquiries@vibrant.org. For more information on Vibrant’s recommendations regarding 988, please visit vibrant.org/988.

