

Joseph Niedzwiedski
President and CEO
North Central Mental Health Services, Inc.
Senate Finance Committee
Testimony on HB 96 (SFY 2026-27 Operating Budget)
June 6, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 96, Governor Mike DeWine's executive budget proposal for state fiscal years 2026-2027.

My name is Joseph Niedzwiedski, and I am the President and CEO of North Central Mental Health Services. North Central is a comprehensive, community-based mental health and recovery agency located here in Central Ohio. For the past 52 years we have served all age groups and provided treatment for children, adults and families. In addition to our direct treatment programs, North Central emphasizes the importance of prevention services, including nearly 40 years of providing Suicide Prevention services.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Funding

I want to thank Governor DeWine and the Ohio General Assembly for the recent investments and efforts to develop and strengthen the community behavioral health system of care in Ohio. Your efforts are making a difference.

Additionally, I want to express our strong support for the expansion of 988 and the crisis infrastructure that includes mobile response and stabilization services (MRSS) for youth and new mobile services for adults. However, I want to bring to the committee's attention the need for additional funding for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

Since we began providing 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline services nearly three years ago, we have experienced an ever-increasing demand for service. The growth in call volumes has made it necessary to increase the hiring and training of additional staff to provide immediate assistance to every caller experiencing a crisis.

I would like to share some information that shows the dramatic increases in demand for 988 and Suicide Prevention Services. In January 2023, the call volume was 1,122 calls for the month, in January 2024 North Central responded to 1,744 calls. In the month of April 2025, the number of calls answered was 3,287. North Central anticipates answering more than 40,000 calls for assistance in 2025. Calls are answered around the clock all day, every day of the year. It should be noted that when someone calls 988, they are speaking directly to a service provider and not with a dispatcher. This is an important distinction in understanding that the person answering a 988 call is the one that will provide the necessary service to help that person and that it is not a duplication of 911 services.

For the majority of calls to 988 our staff are able to help the person in crisis to avoid the need for law enforcement and other emergency responders to be dispatched. By providing support to the person in crisis we are often able to avoid the need for emergency department interventions and hospitalizations. North Central's 988 team provides immediate support to work with callers and to prevent a more serious or harmful situation.

It is my understanding that The House reduced the executive budget proposal funding for 988 by a significant amount – down to \$20 million each fiscal year, which is below current operational costs. Calls to 988 increase month-over-month and an actuarial study commissioned by OhioMHAS anticipates a 29% increase in call volume in state fiscal years 26 and 27.

Accordingly, we strongly urge the Senate to increase the appropriation of funds for 988 by restoring the amount to the Governor's executive proposal (*\$34 million in SFY 26 and \$41 million in SFY 27*) to support this critical service and continue saving lives.

Conclusion

Investing in mental health and substance use care, including crisis care, is sound public policy and wise economic strategy. Thank you for your time and consideration and the opportunity to offer this testimony today.