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**Becerra: 'Failure Is Not An Option' For 9-8-8 Suicide Prevention Hotline**

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Stakeholders are cheering the planned Saturday (July 16) launch of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's new, easier-to-remember phone number, but the Biden administration, states and localities say there's still more work to be done to grow the country's overall mental health crisis care response.

"Just like when we saw the Apollo rockets launch, and there was a lot of expectation. With 988, there's just a tremendous amount of expectation," HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra said during a roundtable in a Philadelphia community mental health center. "And just like with Apollo, it was life and death, and 988 is life and death so we want this to go well. Failure is not an option."

The Biden administration announced in December that the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline would transition nationally in July from a 10-digit number to an easier-to-remember phone number, 9-8-8. This means people can call or text the new three-digit number any time inall states and territories beginning Saturday. The new number will also be useful for veterans dealing with a mental health crisis as they can dial 9-8-8 then press 1.

While officials don't know exactly what will happen once the phone number becomes easier to remember, SAMHSA estimates the current 4 million to 5 million calls a year could at least double.

Experts say the new number will be vital as the country exits three years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found in 2020 there was one death by suicide every 11 minutes and suicide was the second leading cause of death for young Americans aged 10 to 14 and 25 to 34.

This increase has prompted concerns among stakeholders that states do not have a robust crisis care system that will be able to support their residents when 9-8-8 goes live nationally. But the administration insists it's doing as much as possible to help states prepare, especially with its $432 million investment to build call center staff and back-up center capacity.

"The success of 988 depends on our continued partnership with states, as the federal government cannot do this alone," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Administrator Miriam Delphin-Rittmon said in a statement. "We urge states and territories to join us and invest further in answering the call to transform our crisis care response nationwide."

Becerra said the next steps are for states to set up 9-8-8 call centers in different languagesif they haven't already and to work on assuring hotline callers that their privacy will be protected.

Over time, Federal Communications Commission Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel said the agency will start collecting data to improve caller experience like it has done for 9-1-1 calls. This involves triangulating cell towers to figure out who calls, where they call from and how to make it more precise.

"So we're starting this tomorrow, but that's not the end of things," Rosenworcel said during the roundtable with Becerra. "It's the start of learning, how we can improve this technology so we can meet people where they are and get them the help they need most." *-Dorothy Mills-Gregg* (dmillsgregg@iwpnews.com)