

# ASSEMBLY HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

## STATEMENT TO

### **ASSEMBLY, No. 1847**

with committee amendments

# **STATE OF NEW JERSEY**

DATED: FEBRUARY 3, 2020

The Assembly Human Services Committee reports favorably and with committee amendments Assembly Bill No. 1847.

As amended by the committee, this bill would require the Commissioner of Human Services, in consultation with the Commissioners of Health, Community Affairs, and Children and Families, to establish and maintain, on a 24 hour a day basis, a toll-free Mental Illness Resource telephone hotline service. The hotline would be operated separately and apart from the State's existing social services information hotline, the State's existing mental health and developmental disabilities services hotline, and any community-based suicide hotlines.

The Mental Illness Resource Hotline would be used to receive and respond to calls from persons who are experiencing, or are seeking help for another individual who is experiencing, a non-emergency mental health issue or non-emergency mental health crisis. Hotline staff would be required to promptly identify, and either refer or directly connect callers to, appropriate State and local programs, services, health care and mental health care professionals, and other resources that can be accessed by the caller and used to address, mitigate, and potentially eliminate the non-emergency mental health issue or crisis. To the extent practicable, each caller is to be referred to, or connected with, programs, services, professionals, and other appropriate resources that are available in the same county or region of the State in which the person experiencing the mental health issue or crisis is a resident.

If a caller to the Mental Illness Resource Hotline provides any information indicating that suicide may result from the mental health issue or crisis that is the subject of the call, hotline staff will be required to deem the call to be of an urgent and emergency nature, and will be prohibited from providing the caller with referrals to resources, as provided by the bill. Instead, hotline staff will be required to immediately effectuate a warm hand-off of the caller to staff at the New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline in order to ensure that the caller is provided with direct mental health assistance on an emergency basis. A warm hand-off is to involve the use of phone conferencing technology, and the bill requires the staff member transferring the call

to: 1) remain on the line and accessible to the caller during the transfer of the call; 2) formally introduce the caller to the staff member at the Suicide Prevention Hopeline who receives the transferred call; and 3) summarize, for the receiving staff member, the information that necessitated the transfer of the caller to the Suicide Prevention Hopeline. At no time during a warm hand-off may a caller be placed on hold.

The bill would require the Mental Illness Crisis Resource Hotline to be staffed by licensed or certified professional counselors, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and social workers who have particular training and knowledge in the institutional and community-based programs, services, and other resources that are available throughout the State to assist persons who are experiencing a non-emergency mental health issue or crisis, and their families. The hotline is to be staffed by persons with diverse ethnic backgrounds, including persons who speak both English and Spanish. The commissioner will also be required to ensure that the hotline either employs or contracts with translators and bi- or multi-lingual health care professionals who can be made available to assist callers, upon request, or when needed.

The commissioner will be required to engage in a public awareness campaign, using all available media, to inform the public about the availability and purpose of the Mental Illness Resource Hotline. The campaign is to include a component that is specifically designed to inform children and young adults in elementary school, high school, and institutions of higher education about the availability of the hotline. Posters, signs, and other promotional materials used in this component of the public awareness campaign are to employ the use of language that is understandable by, and appropriate to, children and young adults. Any promotional materials used in the public awareness campaign are to be made available in both English and Spanish.

The bill would require the Departments of Human Services, Health, Children and Families, Community Affairs, Education, and Law and Public Safety to each prominently display the phone number for the Mental Illness Resource Hotline on the departments' respective Internet websites.

The bill would additionally require the Commissioner of Human Services, in consultation and coordination with the Commissioner of Health, to develop a system that requires and enables the staff of any health or human services-related hotline in the State (including the Mental Illness Resource Hotline established under the bill) to immediately connect callers to other appropriate State or federal hotlines, as needed to address the callers' stated needs and issues. The hotline connection system is to ensure, to the greatest extent practicable, that: 1) whenever a person calls a health or human services-related hotline in the State that is inappropriate to their

needs, the hotline staff will immediately and directly transfer the caller to another appropriate hotline, without ending the call; and 2) whenever a caller to any hotline provides information indicating the intention or potential for suicide, the hotline staff member receiving the call will immediately facilitate the warm hand-off of the caller to the New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline, in accordance with the warm hand-off procedure outlined in the bill. The establishment of this type of hotline connection system will prevent instances where a person seeking help is denied assistance because the hotline is not appropriate for the person's needs.

This bill was pre-filed for introduction in the 2020-2021 session pending technical review. As reported, the bill includes the changes required by technical review, which has been performed.

#### COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS:

The committee amended the bill to clarify that the hotline being established is intended for non-emergency referral purposes only. The amendments change the name of the hotline from the "Mental Illness Crisis Resource Hotline" to the "Mental Illness Resource Hotline" in order to clarify that the hotline is intended to act as a resource referral line only, and not as a crisis response hotline. The amendments additionally provide that, if any caller provides information indicating a possibility of suicide, hotline staff is to effectuate a warm hand-off of the caller to the New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline. The amendments describe the procedure that is to be used in facilitating the warm hand-off.

The amendments further provide that, in establishing the hotline connection system pursuant to section 2 of the bill, the Commissioner of Human Services is to ensure, to the greatest extent practicable, that, whenever a caller to any State hotline provides information indicating the intention or potential for suicide, hotline staff will immediately facilitate the warm hand-off of the caller to the NJ Suicide Prevention Hopeline, in accordance with the warm hand-off procedure specified in section 1 of the bill.

The amendments also include a new subsection providing for the administrator of the Mental Illness Resource Hotline to collect and analyze depersonalized data relating to the nature and resolution of the calls received by the hotline in order to track the success of the hotline's operations and identify trends in mental health service needs and outcomes. The new subsection further requires all hotline staff to comply with all applicable laws, rules, and regulations related to the protection of individual and patient privacy and confidentiality, and to engage in practices that ensure the security of collected information.

Finally, the amendments make some technical changes to correct punctuation and to add a missing definition.