



## “Utah is leading the nation on mental health with two new initiatives”

By Matt Sandgren | Monday, May 16, 2022

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Suicide is the second leading cause of death among American teenagers — [in Utah, it's No. 1](#).

It's time to change that.

The good news is, hope is on the horizon. This summer, 988 — the new [three-digit national suicide hotline](#) — will go live in every state in America. The idea for 988 was born right here in Utah. Add to this a groundbreaking mental health program that is being considered in our state legislature, and it becomes clear: Utah is fast becoming a global leader in mental health policy.

With May being Mental Health Awareness Month, it's particularly timely to consider [988 and its Utah origins](#). The story begins nine years ago when Utah State Sen. Daniel Thatcher received a phone call from a panicked friend. This friend had a 15-year-old son who was suicidal and needed immediate attention. He had taken his boy to the emergency room but they had been turned away. “Where do I take him? And what do I do?” the desperate father asked Thatcher.

Thankfully, Thatcher knew exactly where to go and what to do. He referred his friend to the University Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of Utah (now the [Huntsman Mental Health Institute](#)), where the young man made a full recovery. Thatcher was grateful he could help his friend, but the experience also left him unsettled by the realization that most people experiencing suicidal thoughts don't know where to turn in their moment of crisis.

Even more unsettling, Thatcher discovered Utah had [23 different suicide crisis hotlines](#), with several of them going straight to voicemail. There had to be an easier way to consolidate these emergency numbers under one umbrella — and thus, the idea for a three-digit suicide hotline was born.

In 2014, Thatcher joined forces with [Utah State Rep. Steve Eliason](#) to draft a bill that would designate 311 as Utah's official mental health crisis hotline. As a mental health advocate himself, Eliason was a powerful partner in this effort, meeting with men and women across the state to learn how they could tailor this legislation to the needs of individuals in crisis. For months, however, the proposal faced significant resistance in the legislature. That's when Sen. Orrin Hatch stepped in.

In November 2016, Thatcher invited Hatch over to his house for pecan pie. Between bites, [he shared with Hatch his frustrations](#) that the bill he and Eliason had sponsored wasn't gaining more traction. Hatch's response? "Dan, you're thinking too small." In that moment, Hatch recognized the brilliance behind a three-digit suicide hotline and decided it was time to take this idea to the national stage.

Hatch knew he needed a partner in the U.S. House of Representatives to rally a bipartisan coalition around this cause. And so, he reached out to one of his closest friends and allies in the Utah delegation, Rep. Chris Stewart.

Stewart had established himself as an effective, no-nonsense lawmaker in the House, which is why he was regularly Hatch's go-to partner on his top legislative priorities. The two worked hand in glove on a number of critical issues – from federal lands and defense spending to religious liberty and mental health. They shared not only a strong working relationship but a deep personal friendship as well.

In short, Hatch knew Stewart was the kind of person you go to when you need to get the job done. That's why he went to the congressman to bring the vision of a three-digit suicide hotline to life. Together they drafted [the National Suicide Prevention Hotline Act](#), which would establish 988 as the emergency number for Americans struggling with suicidal ideation. After Hatch retired in 2019, it was Stewart who carried the bill across the finish line the following year.

Starting this summer, [988 will go live in every state across the country](#). This number has the potential to save thousands of lives, helping countless Americans find the help they need when they need it most. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline Act ranks among the most significant pieces of bipartisan legislation to pass Congress in the last decade. And it was a Utah-led effort from the start, going back nearly a decade ago when Thatcher first had the idea for a three-digit hotline.

Through 988, Utah has pioneered an innovative and more efficient way to get emergency services to friends and families in need. But our work on mental health policy doesn't stop there.

Last year, [the Orrin G. Hatch Foundation hosted a symposium](#) with Stewart, then-Chairman of the FCC Ajit Pai, and mental health advocates Heidi Swapp and David Kozlowski to generate new ideas for improving mental health among teens. This discussion led to the creation of a policy working group comprised of the Hatch Center, Thatcher, Eliason, and Dr. Mark Rapaport from the Huntsman Mental Health Institute to make mental health education a staple in our schools in the same way physical education is today.

Thatcher and Eliason took the findings from the working group and introduced the [Behavioral Health Curriculum Program](#) (SB171), which directs the Huntsman Mental Health Institute to work directly with the State Board of Education to develop elementary and secondary education classes on mental health. Both Thatcher and Eliason demonstrated extraordinary skill and leadership in building bipartisan support for this legislation. Utah Gov. Spencer Cox signed the bill into law on March 24, 2022. This multiyear program will draw on the expertise of educators, child psychiatrists and trained therapists to build a cutting-edge behavioral health curriculum.

This curriculum will equip students of all ages with the cognitive tools they need to manage their mental and emotional health – not only in their youth but well into adulthood.

Like 988, the idea behind mental health education has the potential to be scaled on a national level. Utah plays an essential role in our democracy as a policy incubator – and this bill is yet another opportunity for Utah to lead the country on mental health policy.

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