



Media Release

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92% of British Columbians want 9-1-1 to refer mental health calls to crisis lines

Vancouver, BC - Are we sending the right people into crisis situations when crisis hits? News stories highlight long waits for police and ambulance response alongside stories of over-response by police to mental health crisis. With climate emergencies and pandemic needs driving a need to conserve our in-person interventions, 92% of British Columbians support a fourth dispatch option for 9-1-1: mental health crisis services.

“Sending mental health calls to crisis lines makes the most sense: we are a low-impact, low-cost, highly effective service that takes the time to work with people towards solutions. We routinely talk to folks in the midst of panic attacks, psychotic episodes, and suicidal crisis to help them get back in control of their own lives, without police or hospital intervention. We are an emergency service; our volunteers are first responders for mental health crises,” states Stacy Ashton, executive director of the Crisis Centre of BC.

Most 9-1-1 mental health calls are third party: people calling who are concerned about family members, neighbours, colleagues, or strangers. These are the calls that prompt wellness checks from police - but these are also calls that crisis lines handle daily.

“Our volunteers do outreach calls to people others are concerned about, without needing to respond in a police car. Police are an excellent resource when crime or violence is involved, but people in mental health crisis are rarely violent if we collaborate with them towards solutions rather than demand compliance.”

Crisis lines operate through 1-800-SUICIDE and 310-6789, but these numbers are not as well-known as 9-1-1. “If the only phone number you can remember while you are in crisis is 9-1-1, you should be able to connect to a crisis line that way,” says Ashton, “Reaching out for help should be easy and intuitive.”

Integrating crisis line support into 9-1-1 would allow more people in a non-physical crisis to be connected directly with support. The fourth option would provide an essential mental health service and enable those in crisis to get appropriate help quickly.

“Natural disasters create sudden and major stressors for folks - they may be separated from family, lose their source of income or their home, and worry about their future,” says Ashton. “Emergency response services need to be integrated in order to provide the best care possible to British Columbians in crisis.”

Enhancing the existing 9-1-1 services and adding the fourth option will require funding. Almost three-quarters (71-73%) of British Columbians are willing to financially support these changes through a levy being added to their monthly cellphone bill. 9-1-1 levies are already in place in Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

British Columbians are ready to put their vote towards reducing wait times for 9-1-1, BC Ambulance, and police response by shifting mental health calls to mental health crisis lines: a commitment to improving mental health crisis response will affect the vote of 60% of British Columbians in October’s municipal elections and 70% in the next provincial election.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please reach out:

- Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code required)
- Anywhere in BC 1-800-SUICIDE: 1-800-784-2433
- Online Chat Service for Youth: www.YouthInBC.com (Noon to 1am)
- Online Chat Service for Adults: www.CrisisCentreChat.ca (Noon to 1am)

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Survey Methodology

- 1,002 residents of British Columbia aged 18 or older were surveyed online using Leger's online panel, LEO, from June 3 to June 5, 2022.
- Using data from the 2016 Census, results were weighted according to, age, gender, and region in order to ensure a representative sample of the population in British Columbia.
- No margin of error can be associated with a non-probability sample. However, for comparative purposes, a probability sample of 1,002 respondents would have a margin of error of $\pm 3.1\%$, 19 times out of 20.