



# News Release

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Contact: [Communications](#)

## Nation's first Native and Strong Lifeline Launches as Part of 988

*New crisis line is first in the nation dedicated to serving American Indian and Alaska Native communities*

**OLYMPIA** – Washington's Native and Strong Lifeline is now live –the first program of its kind in the nation dedicated to serving American Indian and Alaska Native people. Operated by Volunteers of America Western Washington (VOA), one of our state's three 988 crisis centers, this line is available for people who call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and is specifically for Washington's American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Calls are answered by Native crisis counselors who are tribal members and descendants closely tied to their communities. The Native and Strong Lifeline counselors are fully trained in crisis intervention and support, with special emphasis on cultural and traditional practices related to healing.

"It is exciting to be launching the Native and Strong option for American Indian and Alaska Native citizens in Washington state. The opportunity has been needed to meet the crisis needs of our people for many, many years," said Marilyn M. Scott, Chairman of the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe. "It will be nice for our people to be served by individuals who understand what our trauma experiences are and assist with getting the help that they need."

"American Indians suffer from higher rates of suicide and mental health crises stemming from intergenerational trauma caused by the aggressive assimilation efforts of the federal government and religious institutions," said Leonard Forsman, Chairman of the Suquamish Tribe. "We applaud the Washington State Department of Health's recognition of these challenges and of the need for our people to receive culturally appropriate care in times of crisis."

Forced relocation, land dispossession, assimilation, and other traumas inflicted on indigenous peoples are still strongly felt in Native communities today. While the Native and Strong Lifeline is not meant to reconcile or undo the violence and traumas of the past, it does offer a new culture for healing that centers the lived experiences, traditions, and wisdom of Native people. The all-Native crisis counselors and staff are a testament to this indigenous-centered approach.

*"I chose to work for Native and Strong because suicide rates in Indian country are incredibly high and I want to remind my people that resilience is instilled into them. We, as the clinicians, get to be the voice many of us needed to hear. If I can save a life with a conversation, then I am happy to talk to as many people as I can." – Heaven Arbuckle, Tulalip*

*"I want to help someone - a son, a daughter, a brother, or sister - so no other parent must feel the loss of a child alone. I don't want a parent to go through what I am going through, and that's why I am doing this kind of work." – Robert Coberly, Tulalip*

*“I am honored to be working within our Native community to cultivate good mental health and carry forward the wisdom of our ancestors into the world we now face.” – Susan J., Shawnee, Swinomish and affiliated Snoqualmie*

*“Native people are often overlooked in this country. I feel proud and humble at the same time to be a part of Native and Strong Lifeline; that I may help Native people overcome the generational trauma that they experience daily. Also, it is my hope that I can be the voice on the other end of the line that can make a difference in Native women’s lives so that they feel they have a voice that could result in them not disappearing and becoming yet another statistic.” – Susan David, Upper Skagit and Iowa descendant*

“Across the board, we need more tribal-specific providers to create a more equitable and culturally responsive behavioral health care and crisis system,” said Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health. “A tremendous thank you goes to our tribal leaders and communities, service providers at the frontlines of behavioral health work, the Washington State Health Care Authority, our legislators, and other partners across all levels of governance in helping transform how mental health services are provided for American Indian and Alaska Native people throughout the entire continuum of care.”

The Native and Strong Lifeline is integrated into the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline system](#) in Washington state. When someone calls 988 Lifeline from a Washington state area code, they will hear an automated greeting that features different options, such as the Veterans Crisis Line and the Spanish Language Line. Callers can now choose option 4 to be connected to the Native and Strong Lifeline.

Among Washington state residents in 2020, non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native people had a 34 percent higher suicide rate than the general population. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the barriers to care that Native communities face. As a result, during the pandemic, American Indians experienced higher suicide and overdose attempt rates – at least two times higher than that of non-American Indians.

In addition to the Native and Strong Lifeline, the Washington Indian Behavioral Health Hub is a statewide central resource line developed to meet the needs of tribes and tribally affiliated people who may need help navigating the complex behavioral health system. VOA also administers the Hub. The Hub assists tribal agencies, health care professionals, hospitals, and in- and outpatient programs as well as families and individuals. For more information, call the Hub directly at 1-866-491-1683.

For more information on the Native and Strong Lifeline and 988 Lifeline, visit [www.doh.wa.gov/988](http://www.doh.wa.gov/988).

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