



**Testimony to House Committee on Energy, Utilities, and  
Telecommunications on Sub House Bill 2281**

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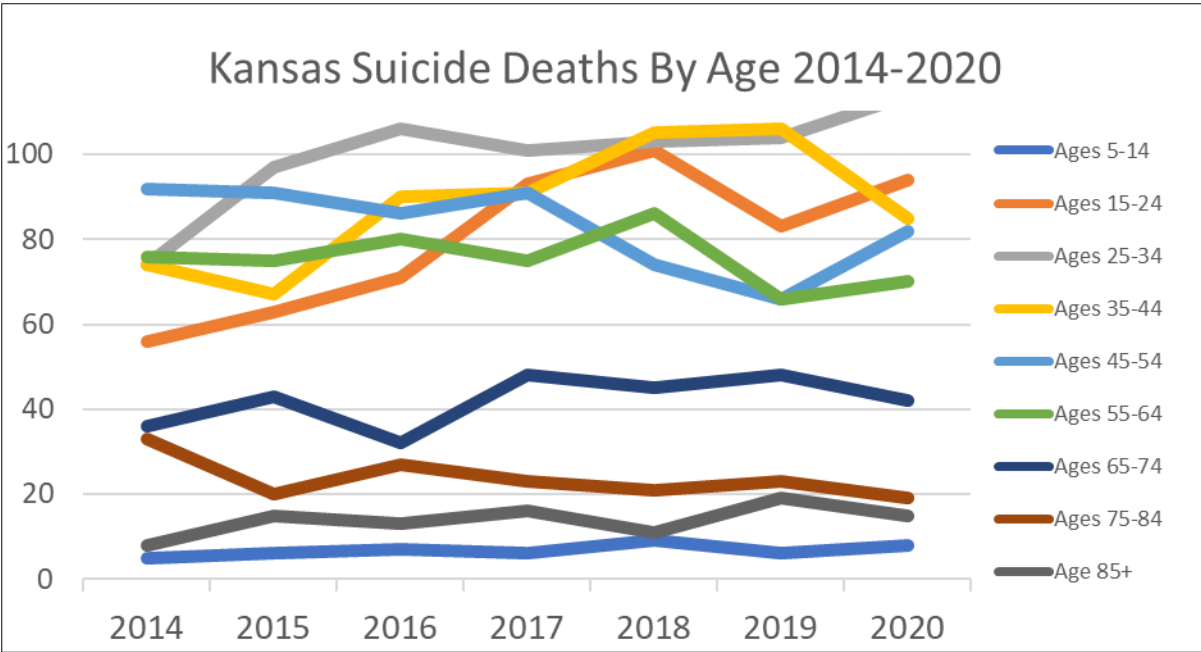
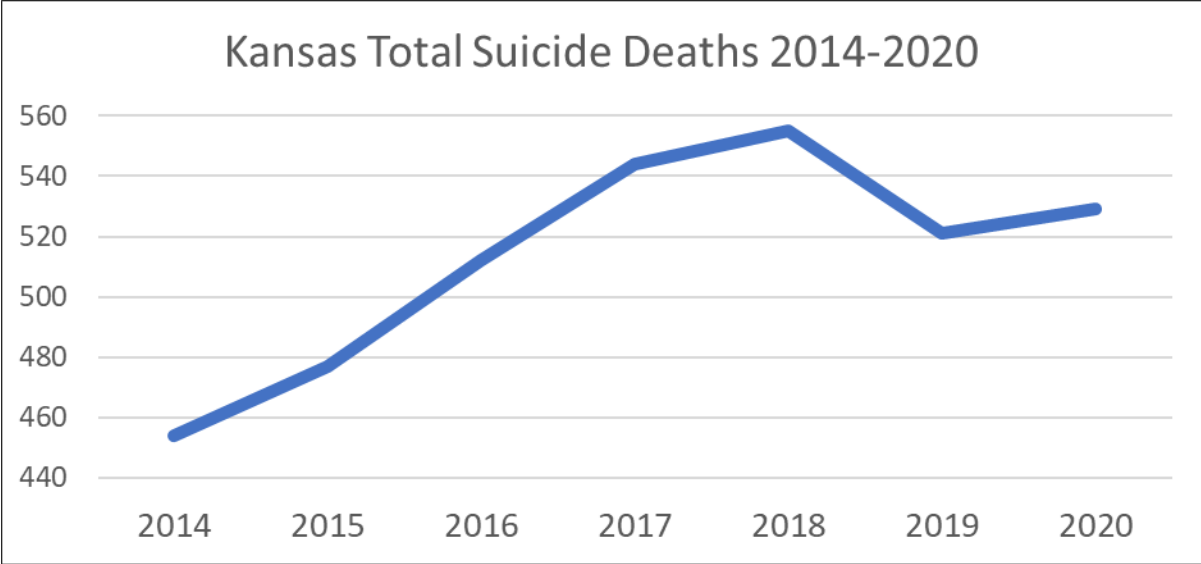
Chair Finch and members of the Committee, my name is Michelle Ponce, and I am the Associate Director for the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc. Our Association represents the 26 licensed Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) in Kansas that provide behavioral health services in all 105 counties, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. As part of licensing regulations, CMHCs are required to provide services to all Kansans needing them, regardless of their ability to pay. This makes the community mental health system the “safety net” for Kansans with mental health needs.

We appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee today in support of Sub HB 2281, establishing 988 as the suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline in Kansas.

CMHCs across the state are actively involved in prevention efforts at the local level and will partner with hotline centers to ensure individuals in need are connected to services and supports, including crisis response and stabilization.

The statistics around suicide, and especially youth suicide, are of great concern for our Association. For several years now, we have referred to the rate of death by suicide as a public mental health crisis.

According to the *2020 Kansas Annual Summary of Vital Statistics* from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), the overall number of suicides increased by eight, or 1.5 percent, from 2019 to 2020 by.<sup>1</sup> The report states, “Although the single-year change in rate was not statistically significant (confidence intervals for the rates for 2019 and 2020 overlap), the 2020 suicide rate was one of the three highest in the last twenty years.” Further, the second leading cause of death of people aged 15 to 44 remains suicide. Based on the reported numbers from 2014 to 2020, our state experienced a nearly 70 percent increase in deaths by suicide in the 15 to 24 age group.



The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) is a national network of local crisis centers that provides support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. The NSPL will transition from a 10-digit phone number to 988 by July of 2022, making it easier for individuals to know what number to call when in crisis.

The 2021 Legislature allocated funding for initial start-up costs, but there is a need for ongoing, sustainable funding. Once the 988 NSPL phone number is implemented, Kansas should identify an appropriate long-term mechanism funding, such as fees via cellular phone bills to support increasing the in-state answer rate and ensure that callers are connected to in-state crisis and

stabilization resources. This is also a recommendation of the Mental Health Modernization and Reform committee.

Moving forward, we also support creation of a 988 Coordinating Council to monitor 988 services and recommend future enhancements, as necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today, and I will stand for questions at the appropriate time.

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<sup>1</sup> Kansas Department of Health and Environment. (2020). *Annual summary of vital statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.kdhe.ks.gov/DocumentCenter/View/15354/2020-Annual-Summary-PDF>