

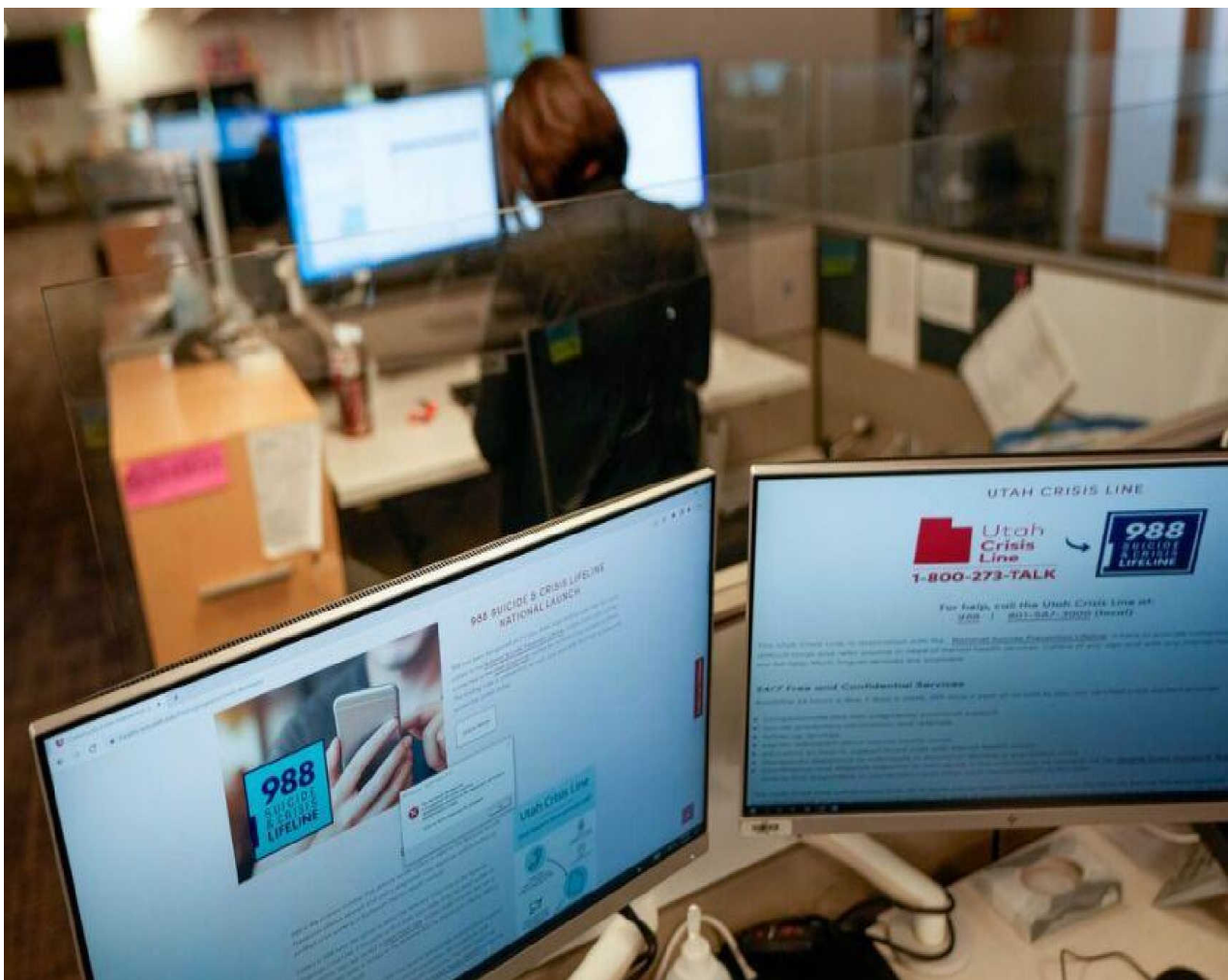
The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI Launches Dedicated 988 Crisis Call Center, Ending Reliance on National Backup Network

Virgin Islanders calling or texting 988 will now reach a dedicated territory call center instead of the national backup network. Officials say the service handles mental health, substance-use and suicide concerns, with about 70 USVI calls monthly in 2026.

Health / **Published On September 08, 2026 05:14 PM /**

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Employees work inside a mainland 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline call center, illustrating the type of locally based crisis-response operation the U.S. Virgin Islands is preparing to build.

Virgin Islanders calling or texting 988 for help with mental health challenges, substance-use concerns, emotional distress or thoughts of suicide will now be connected to a dedicated territory crisis center instead of relying on the national backup network, following the launch of the new service Tuesday morning.

The Department of Health established the center through an agreement with Protocol Services Inc., described by Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion as “one of the nation’s leading behavioral health crisis intervention providers.” Until now, 988 contacts originating in the Virgin Islands were routed through national backup centers because the territory did not have a dedicated center of its own.

The national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline connects people experiencing mental health or substance-use crises with trained counselors. Each state has at least one crisis center serving its residents.

Deputy Health Commissioner Steele said the Virgin Islands center went live at 9 a.m. Tuesday and is accepting both telephone calls and text messages.

“You can call 988 if you’re experiencing emotional distress, mental health or substance use concerns, thoughts of suicide, or if you’re worried about someone else,” he said.

Commissioner Encarnacion emphasized that family members, friends and others can also call when they are concerned about someone experiencing a crisis.

“Sometimes we expect individuals that are actually going through the crisis to pick up the phone and call. Many times they cannot, so they depend on you that’s around them to help.”

Health officials stressed that contacting 988 does not automatically result in an emergency response.

“Not every contact needs an ambulance, a police officer, or an emergency intervention,” Mr. Steele said. “Sometimes a person in need just needs a trained person to listen, or to figure out where to address them for counselling.”

Depending on a caller’s circumstances, counselors can provide information about services the person can access afterward or directly connect the caller with an appropriate resource. “With the individual’s consent, the center can also support follow-up and continuity of care,” Mr. Steele explained.

Protocol will also be required to coordinate with the territory’s behavioral-health system and emergency responders and maintain service during hurricanes and power outages, according to Commissioner Encarnacion.

A direct emergency-response connection with the territory’s 911 system is still being developed. Mr. Steele said the Department of Health and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency will establish protocols governing transfers when a 988 caller requires emergency assistance.

“We will be developing the protocols that will guide those handoffs, and we will not consider that connection fully operational until the process has been fully tested,” he said.

Health officials expect significant use of the new service. Since January, the Virgin Islands has generated an average of approximately 70 calls per month to national 988 backup centers, according to Mr. Steele.

“Those numbers represent people in our community who have made decisions to seek help.”

He said use could increase as more residents become aware that a dedicated 988 service is now available for the territory.

DOH is also conducting outreach aimed at particular groups, including young people and veterans. Services specifically for the LGBTQ community will be “coming back online shortly,” Mr. Steele said.

The territory’s 988 service can provide assistance in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the Virgin Islands population.

The launch comes during September’s Suicide Prevention Month. Commissioner Encarnacion also announced three suicide-prevention walks intended to raise awareness and reduce stigma surrounding suicide and mental-health crises.

The first is scheduled for September 10 on St. Croix, beginning at the Marley Homes housing community and ending at the clock tower on Strand Street. A September 17 walk on St. John will begin at the Band Stand in Cruz Bay and continue to Dolphin Market.

On September 24, the St. Thomas walk will begin at Roy Lester Schneider Hospital and end at the Farrelly Justice Center. Each event is scheduled from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

“Together, we can continue building a culture where reaching out for help is met with compassion,” Commissioner Encarnacion concluded.

Virgin Islanders seeking crisis support for themselves or someone else can call or text 988