

Date of Hearing: April 30, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND CONVEYANCE

Tasha Boerner, Chair

AB 654 (Caloza) – As Amended April 21, 2025

SUBJECT: Homelessness resource telephone system

SUMMARY: Requires Los Angeles County to establish a homelessness resource telephone system to receive telephone calls regarding individuals who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness in order to provide those individuals with resource

Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Defines “homelessness resource telephone system” means a system structured to provide access to resources provided by a local public agency to help address homelessness.
- 2) Declares the need for a special statute to and that a general statute cannot be made applicable within the meaning of Section 16 of Article IV of the California Constitution because of the unique circumstances facing the County of Los Angeles with regard to homelessness.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Warren-911-Emergency Assistance Act, which requires every public agency to have in operation a telephone service which automatically connects a person dialing the digits “911” to an established public safety answering point (PSAP) from any communications device; requires every “911” system to include police, firefighting, and emergency medical, and ambulance services. (Government Code Section 53100 et seq.)
- 2) Designates “988” as the 3-digit dialing code for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) and requires that service providers transmit all calls initiated by an end user dialing “988” to the current toll free access number for the NSPL no later than July 16, 2022, and pay for the costs of doing so. (Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 20-100)
- 3) Establishes the federal National Suicide Hotline Designation (NSHD) Act, designating the three-digit telephone number “988” as the universal number within the United States for the purpose of the national suicide prevention and mental health crisis hotline system operating through the NSPL maintained by the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Veterans Crisis line maintained by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. (Public Law No: 116-172, 10/17/2020)
- 4) Specifies that county mental health services should be organized to provide immediate response to individuals in pre-crisis and crisis and to members of the individual’s support system, on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis and authorizes provision of crisis services offsite, as in mobile services.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal by the Legislative Counsel.

COMMENTS:

- 1) *Author's Statement:* According to the author, "Los Angeles County and communities across California are facing a growing crisis at the intersection of homelessness, mental health, and public safety. AB 654 provides local governments with a new tool - a dedicated homelessness response line - to ensure that people experiencing or at risk of homelessness can be connected to appropriate services more efficiently. This bill is a commonsense step to close a critical gap in our emergency and outreach systems and improve outcomes for some of our most vulnerable residents."
- 2) *Homelessness in California and Los Angeles County:* Based on the 2024 point in time count, 187,000 people are experiencing homelessness on any given night California. Many of those people, 66% or 126,420 are unsheltered, meaning they are living outdoors and not in temporary shelters. Nearly half of all unsheltered people in the country were in California during the 2024 count, and a large part of that population is within Los Angeles County in particular. According to the Greater Los Angeles Homeless County, there were 75,312 homeless individuals in Los Angeles County alone. The homelessness crisis is driven by the lack of affordable rental housing for lower income people. In the current market, 2.2 million extremely low-income and very low-income renter households are competing for 664,000 affordable rental units. Of the six million renter households in the state, 1.7 million are paying more than 50% of their income toward rent. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that the state needs an additional 1.5 million housing units affordable to very-low income Californians. Given the particularly dire impact of homelessness in Los Angeles County, the author's approach to narrow this bill's requirements to that County are reasonable.
- 3) *Homelessness is a problem, will another phone number help?* The high cost of housing is the cause of homelessness in California, and the high cost of housing is due in part to low inventory. California needs an additional 2.5 million units of housing to meet the state's need, including 643,352 for very low-income households and 394,910 for lower income households. While this bill is obviously not intended to address the root causes of homelessness, the author's intent is to connect individuals experiencing homelessness to resources that may provide temporary shelter or other assistance. Under state and federal policies, the "211" number is already designated for this type of purpose.

"211" is a free telephone number providing access to local community services and is available in multiple languages, allowing those in need to access information and obtain referrals to physical and mental health resources; housing, utility, food, and employment assistance; and suicide and crisis interventions. "211" also provides disaster preparedness, response, and recovery during declared emergencies. Upon dialing "211," a caller is routed to a referral service and then to an agency that can provide information concerning social services such as housing assistance and other less urgent situations not currently addressed by either "911" "988", or "311" service.

While "211" is intended to be a resource for individuals experiencing homelessness, in practice there are challenges, especially in Los Angeles County. The City and County of Los Angeles fund the region's LA 211, which is operated by United Way of Greater Los Angeles which maintains and curates a database of approximately 50,000 health and social services available to Los Angeles County residents for free or at a low cost. According to recent

reports, more than 12,500 calls came through from Feb. 1 through Feb. 13, but with just 13 operators, they were only able to answer 38% of them. The number of calls increases significantly during poor weather when people are looking to come indoors. LA 211 has identified major resources challenges and estimates only having one-third of the resources necessary to respond to calls. Nonetheless, this bill does not propose a solution to addressing the existing LA 211 backlog. Instead, this bill as written seemingly proposes to require the County to create a different number for homeless resources specifically.

- 4) *Establishing a 3-digit phone number would require federal approval.* While this bill does not address the specifics of the type of telephone system the County would be required to establish, in general establishing a 3-digit phone number would be difficult or impossible. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has exclusive jurisdiction over telephone numbering in the United States but has delegated specific authority to state regulatory agencies. The policies governing numbering are designed to promote competitive markets and ensure the efficient use of numbers. Given this constraint, the County would likely need to implement a 10-digit phone number, which may be more difficult to remember or utilize for individuals experiencing homelessness. Should this bill move forward, the author may wish to clarify the type of phone system that would be required by the County and to what extent that phone system might be integrated or separate from the existing “211” service.
- 5) *Double referral.* This bill was previously heard in the Assembly Housing and Community Development Committee. The vote was 10-0.
- 6) *Similar/related legislation.*
 - a. AB 3020 (Reyes) of 2024 would have established the 2-1-1 Strategic Advisory Committee, for the general purpose of improving the state’s 2-1-1 system. The bill was held in Assembly Appropriation Committee.
 - b. SB 319 (Ochoa-Bough) of 2023 would have required, upon appropriation, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to develop and administer the 2-1-1 Support Services Grant Program to stabilize, support, and expand 2-1-1 service to all areas of California. The bill was held in Assembly Appropriations Committee.
 - c. SB 74 (Mitchell), Chapter 6, Statutes of 2020, & AB 74 (Ting), Chapter 23, Statutes of 2019, appropriated \$1.5 million for encumbrance or expenditure until June 30, 2024, for payment of claims related to expanding 2-1-1 services to unserved and underserved areas, and appropriated \$1.5 million for liquidation of encumbrances until June 30, 2026, related to expanding 2-1-1 services to unserved and underserved areas.
 - c. SB 1212 (Hueso), Chapter 841, Statutes of 2016, authorized the CPUC to expend up to \$1.5 million from the California Teleconnect Fund (CTF) Administrative Committee to help close telephone service gaps in counties lacking access to 2-1-1 referral service, including implementation of a coordinated publicly owned database.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Supervisor Hilda Solis, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

Opposition

None on file.

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