

Georouting FAQs

General Questions

What is georouting vs. geolocation?

Georouting is a way of directing phone calls locally without including the caller's precise location information in the transferred call data. When a person calls the 988 Lifeline, their call would be sent automatically to a crisis call center near their physical location. With georouting, the routing and service providers would not receive detailed information about the exact "pinpoint" location of callers.

Geolocation is a more general term that refers to a person's precise geographical location. In most cases, that location information is associated with the device a person accesses a service from. A widely-familiar example of geolocation is the usage of smartphone precise GPS location to provide local services in Apps. The 988 Lifeline has no plans at this time to implement geolocation.

When will georouting launch?

SAMHSA and major U.S. wireless carriers expect to begin rolling out georouting in Fall 2024. SAMHSA, the 988 Lifeline network administrator (Vibrant Emotional Health), and major U.S. wireless carriers have been working collaboratively on technology upgrades, tests, and rollout planning. Georouting will be activated on a rolling basis with each wireless carrier.

How do calls to 988 get routed?

Starting in Fall 2024, people who call 988 will be connected to a nearby crisis call center if their phone carrier has implemented georouting. Callers who use a wireless carrier for which georouting is not active will be connected to the nearest 988 crisis call center based on the defined location of the first six digits (area code and prefix) of the caller's phone number, regardless of the actual location of the caller. Calls that are not answered locally within a set amount of time get answered by 988's national back up network.

Why is local response important?

By connecting callers to centers well-versed in their community's specific services and local resources, georouting helps enhance the relevance and quality of care available to each caller.

Many crisis center directors, advocates, people with lived experience, and state and local behavioral health care leaders have expressed the need for calls to be answered by centers within a caller’s state.

There are three key reasons for this:

- **Community Care:** Having residents receive local community resources helps improve connections to care and build trust in the system.
- **Safety:** In imminent risk situations where emergency dispatches and rescue procedures are needed, many 988 Lifeline centers have relationships with their local Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) to streamline this process.
- **Funding:** State and local appropriations are tied to expectations around serving state and local community populations. To budget, scale and size programs appropriately, it is vital to fully understand resource needs and utilization in these communities.

How will georouting impact caller privacy?

Georouting does not include a caller’s precise location information in any data that is sent throughout the 988 network. The goal is to help people in crisis reach support local to where they are calling from. Georouting simply makes it more likely than in the past for a caller to reach a local crisis center.

Does 988 use geolocation?

Geolocation, or receiving pinpoint information for dispatch during an emergency, is not enabled for 988 and is not under active consideration.

Will SAMHSA add precise location (geolocation) to the 988 Lifeline in the future?

Georouting is SAMHSA’s first focus on system call-routing improvement while protecting people’s privacy. In the future, SAMHSA may continue conversations around the use and necessity of precise caller location with states, grantees, communities, and partners. The 988 Lifeline recognizes the balance and work required to build and maintain trust for people in crisis while also helping them locally in times of need.

What about smaller wireless carriers?

SAMHSA is committed to helping all U.S. wireless carriers implement georouting. Once the large carriers have activated georouting, SAMHSA and Vibrant Emotional Health (Vibrant) will be able to share tested implementation strategies with small U.S. carriers.

How does the FCC's proposed rulemaking affect georouting implementation for 988?

In April 2024, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) published a notice of proposed rulemaking to require all wireless carriers to implement georouting for calls to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. SAMHSA will continue working with the 988 Lifeline administrator and major U.S. wireless carriers to implement geo-routing this year while the rulemaking process progresses.

Operational Questions**What will be the volume impact to local crisis centers when georouting is put in place?**

SAMHSA and Vibrant are working to forecast contact volume shifts at each 988 crisis contact center and have started sharing this information with impacted crisis contact centers. Information sharing will continue through early September.

Will the impact study account for seasonal shifts in volume?

Vibrant's traffic impact study is comparing carrier georouting data from July 26 to August 23, 2024, to live routing data. Because this is a finite period of time, the analysis will not account for local seasonality shifts that crisis contact centers may experience. As centers and states evaluate the results of the impact study, they should consider their own known seasonality variables to make informed decisions on how best to plan for potential volume shifts.

How will Vibrant work with crisis contact centers most impacted by the change?

Vibrant is modeling the impact of this routing change at both a network and individual center level, identifying and categorizing centers by level of impact.

Vibrant has scheduled conversations with the first wave of impacted centers and their state representatives for the week of August 19th. Vibrant sent preliminary data to these centers on August 9, in preparation for the meetings. The goal of these meetings is to provide context and visibility to these centers and to discuss mitigation strategies.

The remaining centers will receive communication starting the week of August 19th on their increased/decrease in volume based on the preliminary data. In late August, Vibrant will email out network communications that update the full network on the progress of georouting and information about their center data.

What happens if my center isn't ready with additional, trained staff by the launch date?

Vibrant is working closely with each center to develop mitigation strategies that will support the centers during the transition period until centers can fully hire and train the necessary staff.

Vibrant and SAMHSA are also working to support the national backup centers to be able to handle an influx of flow-out volume when georouting is activated. If a center is not ready for any forecasted increase in volume, current routing structures will ensure that unanswered local volume is routed into the national backup center network. Additionally, centers can control routing hours of operation and geography as needed if an urgent change needs to be made by submitting a 988 Routing Request Form.

Will there be additional funding for centers that are significantly impacted?

If a crisis contact center anticipates a need for increased funding based on inbound volume, they should work directly with their funder to assess current and future funding requirements.

How will the call flow operate with georouting?

When someone calls 988 from a wireless phone connected to a cellular network, the carrier operating the cell tower will use the tower’s location data to define a broad area. This geographic area is then conveyed to 988’s routing platform so 988 calls can be routed to the 988 crisis contact center that serves that geographic area. If local centers are unable to answer the call, the help seeker will be routed to a 988 national back-up center. Once a call reaches the 988 local network, the routing process works the same way as before the implementation of georouting.

If a number can’t be georouted, how will that call be routed?

In these cases, routing will default back to using the area code of the phone number.

Will georouting work for roaming calls, texts, VOIP, or chat?

The first focus in launching georouting is for wireless calls made to 988. VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) such as Google Voice and Text Now, and roaming calls are not included in this year’s georouting launch. Because of its complexity, text messaging is also not included in this year’s georouting launch. SAMHSA, Vibrant, and carriers have begun discussions on how to handle routing for the other methods of contacting 988. A person who chats with 988 enters their ZIP code online before starting their chat. The ZIP code is used to route that person to a nearby contact center.

How will centers know which calls are or aren’t georouted?

A majority of voice calls are expected to be georouted once the technology has launched with the three major U.S. wireless carriers. Once a carrier activates georouting, the 988 Lifeline network will turn on georouting for that carrier, following testing and analysis. If crisis contact centers are receiving out-of-state area codes to a local center after georouting launches with the

three major carriers, the center should assume that the call has been georouted. Centers should always have PSAPs verify the location during an emergency service intervention request. A center will not receive any georouting location data.

Will georouting change emergency service dispatch processes?

The 988 Lifeline network does not have access to a caller's precise location and that will not change with the implementation of georouting. Local crisis counselors should continue to collaboratively work with the person in crisis to assess their situation and location. Regardless of the caller's phone number, if a crisis counselor can't confirm the caller's location with them, the counselor should contact the PSAP nearest to the crisis contact center. This is a process change, as crisis contact centers have previously been using the PSAP locator tool for out-of-state phone numbers. 911 will still need to verify the 988 caller's location in coordination with carriers when 988 callers require emergency intervention and support.

Crisis contact center counselors should use the PSAP locator tool in these situations:

- The caller is within the crisis contact center's service territory and is served by a PSAP that is different from the one closest to the crisis center.
- A third-party person is calling about a person at imminent risk who is outside of the center's service area.
- The center is providing 988 service in one of the national networks (e.g. LGBTQI+, Spanish-language, National Backup, Videophone)

How should centers handle familiar callers who are now routing to a new crisis contact center?

A familiar caller is a person who reaches out to 988 regularly for support. Georouting will cause familiar callers who were previously being routed based on area code to now route to the crisis contact center nearest their physical location. This means that familiar callers may begin talking with a new center. Crisis counselors should help familiar callers get comfortable with the change and reassure them about the center's ability to provide support. Centers may choose to develop familiar individual care plans on a case-by-case basis. Example responses for talking about these changes with familiar callers will be available on Vibrant's Network Resource Center. Vibrant is available to provide support to centers for callers with particularly complex needs. Centers can email AskSTP@Vibrant.org to ask for this help.

If a person is located on the border of another state (technically closer to a different state’s crisis contact center), which center would they be routed to?

The call could be routed to either state. The routing is dependent on the cell tower nearest the person calling.

Will the process of transferring a call to another center remain the same?

Yes, the warm transfer process will remain the same. The need for transferring should significantly decrease, as most callers will now be connected with their closest local center.

Will there be any impact on specialty lines such as the Veterans Crisis Line, Spanish, or LGBTQI+?

No, there will be no impact on the Veterans Crisis Line, the Spanish line, or the LGBTQI service since those are all national subnetworks.

Are tribal areas impacted by georouting?

Calls from within tribal reservations will route by the same county boundary areas of all calls.

Are U.S. territories impacted by georouting?

Most calls from the U.S. territories will route by area code, while some may be georouted. This is based on who owns the cell towers in the territories and agreements in place with cell tower owners and wireless carriers.

What happens to U.S. citizens who dial 988 from Canada or Mexico or who are georouted to a Canadian or Mexican-based cell tower based on their border location?

If a call is serviced by a cell tower in Mexico or Canada, the routing depends on the carrier. Calls from Mexico may not work since Mexico is not part of the North American Numbering Plan (NANP) and doesn't have a 988 service. Calls from Canada, which is a NANP member, will be routed to the Canadian 988 service.

Will georouting require a state/territory to use the Vibrant Unified Platform?

No, this solution does not require states to join the Unified Platform. Routing is done independently from the platform that crisis contact centers use to accept calls.

How will the implementation of georouting affect the state’s routing system?

Vibrant Emotional Health, the 988 Lifeline Network Administrator, maintains routing tables for each state and center, enabling the network routing platform to determine the appropriate destination for calls. Vibrant can adjust routing logic for individual states or centers based on the state or center’s specific preferences and requirements. This means that Vibrant can update

the appropriate destination to specify which crisis contact centers are designated to receive calls from specific states and counties.

Will consideration be given to this volume impact for centers in terms of the repercussions for challenges to centers' call answer rates and time to answer?

Vibrant is prepared to support centers who experience volume impact and cannot maintain expected service levels as a result. Each of these scenarios will be handled on a case-by-case basis.
