



Clear Pathways' 911-988 Interoperability Strategy

By supporting 911 public safety answering (PSAPs) and 988 call center coordination, [Clear Pathways](#) is working to ensure that people experiencing behavioral health crises have a path to help across Ohio and the nation. Since 2022, Clear Pathways has developed and continuously refined an Interoperability Strategy. This brief, the first of a three-part series, explains this strategy and presents key recommendations for its improvement.

Clear Pathways' Interoperability Strategy

Clear Pathways drafted the Interoperability Strategy using insights from Ohio's 988 and 911 personnel and national evidence-based resources. We conducted a statewide scan of behavioral health call centers preparing to become 988 providers and carried out a 911 call system assessment. We found that while behavioral health call centers transferred calls to 911, they rarely received calls from 911. PSAP personnel shared several barriers to transferring calls, including logistical uncertainty, liability concerns, call center response ambiguity, technological complexity, and hesitation with changing traditional practices.

Ohio's unique status as a home rule state also required consideration. Ohio localities have wide latitude to govern themselves. This creates challenges, such as limited standardization and resource disparities between response areas. Most importantly, it means that Ohio's 255 PSAPs are controlled locally. On the behavioral health side, Ohio has 19 988 call centers managed by different behavioral health organizations (higher than average). Each center must adapt to the unique needs of PSAPs within its coverage area—a complex and time-intensive process.

To advance 911 and 988 interoperability in Ohio, we researched relevant literature and tools. The [SAFECOM interoperability continuum](#) provided crucial guidance, allowing us to identify **governance** and **standard operating procedures** as the essential starting points for 911 and 988 call center coordination in Ohio.

Pilot-Testing and Preliminary Findings

In August 2023, we began a 12-month pilot of our Interoperability Strategy across five diverse Ohio sites. Each site minimally included a PSAP, 988 call center, and an Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) board. Sites formed work groups to develop procedures for transferring calls from 911 to 988. [Mathematica](#) conducted an evaluation of the pilot. While the formal evaluation is pending, Clear Pathways shared preliminary findings at a convening in October 2024.

These preliminary findings from the evaluation allowed Clear Pathways to refine its strategy. The table below pairs the findings with subsequent strategy improvements and their anticipated benefits to sites. By incorporating these insights, sites may streamline 911 and 988 collaboration and accelerate interoperability efforts. Clear Pathways will test these improvements with future sites to build evidence for interoperability best practices.



Interoperability formalizes

interconnectedness between systems so that the connection extends beyond simple coordination to include **formal protocols, procedures, or agreements** that allow for the transfer of calls between 911 and 988 ([Brooks Holliday, 2024](#)).

Barriers to 911-to-988 Call Transfer

- * Logistical uncertainty
- * Liability concerns
- * Call center response ambiguity
- * Technological complexity
- * Hesitation with changing traditional practices

Recommendations, Actions, and Anticipated Benefits

Recommendation	Actions	Anticipated Benefits
<p>Provide continued support and accountability. As a result of their positive experience and progress, participants wanted help with sustaining momentum to ensure call transfers were implemented after the pilot ends.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct quarterly check-ins with sites post-pilot to troubleshoot challenges and expand interoperability efforts • Ask ADAMH boards to facilitate ongoing collaboration between PSAPs and 988 centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure call transfer implementation • Sustain collaboration momentum • Leverage the combination of local, state, and national expertise
<p>Enhance tailored support and interoperability goals. Participants appreciated that the activities and tools used in the pilot addressed their sites' unique operating environments. Some sites felt early activities should better acknowledge their existing partnerships and progress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a site readiness assessment tool • Refine and communicate pilot goals and site expectations • Help sites stay informed about national standards and news from the National Emergency Number Association, Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Save valuable time so sites can get a quick start • Align interoperability planning with existing behavioral health partnerships and efforts
<p>Prioritize peer learning and call center visits. Participants recommended these improvements because they served as key turning points in their work together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate more cross-site interactions, peer learning and community of practice opportunities, and in-person engagement • Help sites plan for 911 and 988 personnel to visit other call centers early in collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance relationships and build trust among partners • Expand knowledge of call transfer strategies • Foster shared problem-solving and decision-making
<p>Provide guidance on when and how to include other partners. Participants valued the perspectives of first responders, mobile crisis teams, and other community partners but were unsure how or when to involve them because many call transfer details are determined by the PSAP and 988.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate the Crisis System Matrix process to support partner engagement¹ • Help call centers involve IT staff early to understand technology and data needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the crisis response continuum so PSAPs and 988 centers have easy access to other community resources • Integrate diverse expertise to ensure a comprehensive and community-centered approach to crisis response
<p>Plan for a longer interoperability development time frame. The experiences of sites in this pilot suggest that 1 year is not enough time to develop and implement a new interoperability strategy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use an 18-month pilot period to help sites complete interoperability development and prepare for implementation • Help call centers initiate Memoranda of Understanding early in collaboration • Encourage sites to begin with low-risk call transfers, then expand criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure commitment to collaboration and interoperability practices • Mitigate early concerns about PSAP liability • Encourage call transfers that are practical for all parties but provide opportunity for expansion

¹ The Local Crisis System Matrix allows communities to identify and understand the roles of system partners in the behavioral health emergency response system and gaps in services. The Matrix serves as a planning resource for system enhancements and service delivery.



About Clear Pathways

Clear Pathways is an initiative of [Peg's Foundation](#) designed to sustainably align systems for improved care to individuals experiencing a behavioral health emergency.

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