October 2026 | 911-988 Interoperability Brief

Innovations at Work: Feedback on a PSAP Readiness Tool to Support 911–988 Interoperability

By supporting 911 public safety answering points (PSAPs) and 988 call center coordination, Clear Pathways, an initiative of Peg's Foundation, 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 a strategy to support interoperability between 911 PSAPs and the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This brief describes the development and testing of the PSAP Readiness Self-Assessment (RSA), designed to assess a PSAP's readiness for collaboration with 988 call centers.

PSAP RSA Overview

Clear Pathways developed the tool to help PSAPs reflect on their current level of readiness to collaborate with 988 call centers and to assist Clear Pathways in tailoring interoperability technical assistance to the PSAPs.[1] The RSA includes four sections that cover key interoperability competencies: partnerships, call identification and processes, training, and data collection and performance management. The RSA results in an overall score and a sub-score for each of the four sections. PSAPs can provide additional information about their responses in unscored open-ended text boxes.

Interoperability Competencies Covered in the RSA

- Partnerships
- Call identification and processes
- Training
- Data collection and performance management

PSAP RSA Testing

In March 2026, the draft RSA was tested by three representatives from the State of Ohio's 911 and 988 offices and two PSAP representatives who have experience collaborating with 988. The purpose of the test was to assess the RSA's face validity among PSAPs. Testers provided feedback on the RSA's utility and usability through written responses and group follow-up discussions facilitated by Mathematica, Clear Pathways' research and evaluation partner.

Summary of Tester Feedback

Overall, testers had positive impressions of the RSA tool's length, level of detail, clarity of instructions, comprehensiveness, scoring system, definition of key terms, accessibility, and helpfulness. Testers thought the RSA would help PSAPs consider their relationships, policies, and level of involvement with 988. Testers found the RSA to be a helpful standardizing tool to gauge varying levels of readiness and encourage PSAPs to consider future priorities for their 911-988 interoperability work.

Face Validity

The **face validity** of an instrument is the extent to which the survey items appear to measure the right concept, not whether they are proven to be accurate. It is a good first step before deeper testing (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018).

1 RSA questions were adapted from the *988 Convening Playbook: Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs)* (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2022), which was developed with input from organizations such as the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) International, as well as from 911 officials from across the nation. The playbook is listed on SAMHSA's website, but the document is no longer publicly available.

Testers provided constructive feedback to ensure that the terms and concepts included in the RSA are familiar and appropriate for PSAPs, resulting in minor wording changes (see Table 1). Testers also recommended changes to make the RSA easier for PSAPs to complete, such as adding more explicit instructions, concrete examples, and open-ended text boxes to explain their responses.

Table 1. RSA Wording Changes

Original word choice	Word choice following tester feedback
"informal relationship"	"developing relationship"
"risk level"	"risk assessment," "triage," "response to different call types"
"lived experience"	"people with direct or personal experience with calling 911 during mental health crisis situations"
"modalities"	"potential types of 988 contact"
"post-hoc," "baseline data"	"call data," "summary data on behavioral health calls"

Key Takeaways for the RSA and Beyond

Group discussions with the RSA testers provided useful information for the tool and 911-988 interoperability efforts in general. Their feedback will help scale interoperability from local to state and national levels. The sections below highlight several key takeaways from the discussions.

Risk assessment versus risk level

The draft RSA included questions about 911 call dispatchers' procedures for determining the "risk level" of behavioral health-related calls. Testers thought that terms such as "risk level" would be familiar to PSAPs who have spent time discussing criteria for transferring calls to 988, such as those who participated in the Clear Pathways Crisis Response Pilot. However, the term may not be familiar to PSAPs in general, especially those with more limited experience with 988 interoperability and/or engaging with behavioral health providers. Additionally, testers noted that 911 call takers must make quick decisions with very limited information and are not specifically trained in behavioral health concepts to the same extent as their 988 counterparts. Testers thought PSAPs would be more likely to use dispatch-related terms, such as "triage" or "risk assessment."

Lived experience engagement

The RSA included several questions asking whether PSAPs intended to engage people with lived experience of behavioral health conditions in developing their call-handling procedures and protocols for collaborating with 988. Gathering input from people with lived experience is a common practice among behavioral health providers and Clear Pathways. However, testers emphasized that this concept is unfamiliar to most PSAPs and might conflict with the regulations PSAPs must follow. Testers thought that PSAPs would have concerns about liability, re-traumatization, and the general public's limited technical understanding of PSAP roles and procedures.

Testers recommended that Clear Pathways collaborate with engaged PSAPs to develop a feasible strategy for gathering input on 911-988 interoperability from people with lived experience. Testers suggested introducing PSAPs to the idea of engaging people with lived experience in low-pressure roundtable discussions or to gather input on additional long-term policy-level decisions, rather than on specific agency protocols.

Behavioral health call coding standardization

Expanding 911-988 interoperability will require standardizing codes for behavioral health-related 911 calls, but implementation will take time. During the RSA group discussions, testers discussed the difficulty of standardizing 911 call codes, which are currently defined at the local level. Testers suggested that administrators developing standardized call codes at the state and national levels could consider leveraging existing data reporting requirements. For example, testers noted that while there is currently no universal Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) or Case Management Software (CMS) for the State of Ohio, there are standard fields in CMS systems for reporting crime data to the national Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) administered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). These existing fields could serve as a starting point for developing a uniform national reporting system for behavioral health-related calls.

Dispatcher experience and expectations

Testers shared enthusiasm for spreading awareness of 911-988 interoperability, potentially through annual statewide training sessions for 911 dispatchers. They cautioned that 911 dispatchers are trained to handle a wide range of emergency calls using strict protocols, and PSAPs do not expect them to detect and respond to behavioral health-related conditions with the same level of expertise as 988 call takers or behavioral health providers. They emphasized that dispatchers make quick decisions with limited information. Further, behavioral health aspects of calls are often not immediately apparent and may not be identified until after first responders make in-person contact. Clear Pathways and others engaged in 911-988 interoperability efforts should consider the nuances of dispatcher experiences and expectations during 911-988 call transfer discussions, especially those related to data collection and call coding.

Next Steps

Clear Pathways has revised the RSA in response to tester feedback and is incorporating the feedback into its broader 911-988 interoperability technical assistance strategy. Currently, the interoperability strategy is being expanded through the Behavioral Health Emergency Response Initiative (BHERi), a multi-state collaboration designed to develop transformational, sustainable approaches to community crisis response. Clear Pathways is using the RSA tool in its recruitment efforts to tailor technical assistance activities to the needs of each participating PSAP. The RSA is also used in the evaluation of technical assistance activities to assess readiness at follow-up intervals to determine whether there are changes in readiness over time.

Clear Pathways is currently engaging in a behavioral health call coding discovery phase to further refine its interoperability strategy and inform future technical assistance. The discovery phase includes the following:

- Capturing recent research on local and national coding standards and practices
- Analyzing available behavioral health call data
- Engaging with partners to better understand constraints and emerging solutions

Clear Pathways will continue to use and refine the RSA, with the goal of developing it into a tool that may be used more widely than Clear Pathways technical assistance. Clear Pathways is also working collaboratively with diverse partners to develop a feasible approach for gathering input from community members with lived behavioral health experience to incorporate into the broader 911-988 interoperability technical assistance strategy.

References

American Psychological Association. (2018, April 19). *APA dictionary of psychology: Face validity.* https://dictionary.apa.org/face-validity

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2022). *988 convening playbook: Public safety answering points (PSAPs).* National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD). https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/988/988-convening-playbook-public-safety-answering-points-psaps

CLEAR PATHWAYS
An Initiative of Peg's Foundation

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 crisis.

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