

## Dear Chairman Ruby and Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Jennifer Illich, and I serve as the Executive Director of FirstLink. I am here today to express my strong support for **SB 2200** and to emphasize the critical need for sustained funding for the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** in North Dakota.

At FirstLink, we proudly answer the **988 Lifeline** 24/7/365, providing **immediate crisis intervention** and connecting individuals with the **resources they need** to navigate difficult moments. Our mission is to ensure **no one faces a crisis alone**.

## The Return on Investment: Saving Lives and Resources

**988 centers like FirstLink provide a cost-effective and life-saving solution for behavioral health crises.** Every day, we **prevent suicides** and ensure individuals receive the support necessary to stay alive. While the value of a saved life is immeasurable, research estimates that each suicide death costs approximately **\$1.5 million** in medical expenses, lost productivity, and emotional toll on families and communities.

In 2024 alone, **112 North Dakotans survived suicide attempts after calling 988**, equating to an estimated **\$168 million in economic savings**.

Additionally, our **collaboration with 911 centers** significantly reduces the burden on emergency services. In the past year:

- **14,190 crises were de-escalated without first responder intervention**—saving valuable emergency resources.
- The average cost of an ambulance response is **\$1,500**, meaning our crisis interventions resulted in an estimated **\$21.3 million in savings**—not including further healthcare expenses that would have followed.

Research consistently demonstrates that strong partnerships between **988 and 911** reduce emergency response strain while providing **more effective, compassionate care** for individuals in crisis.

## Beyond Crisis Intervention: Sustained Support for Recovery

FirstLink doesn't stop at crisis response. Through our **Care and Support Program**, we provide follow-up services for individuals admitted due to suicide attempts or overdoses. **These services help maintain stability, reduce hospital readmissions, and lower long-term healthcare costs.**

Studies show that individuals receiving follow-up support are **significantly less likely** to experience a repeat crisis. Our follow-up efforts include:

- **Regular check-ins**
- **Resource coordination**
- **Emotional support** to keep individuals engaged with appropriate care services

Follow-up interventions are also highly **cost-effective**. Research from the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (2021)** suggests that for every **\$1 invested** in follow-up care, there is a return of **\$1.76 to \$2.43** due to reduced hospitalizations and emergency care.

## **Critical Need for Expansion**

Over the past year, **demand for FirstLink's services has grown significantly**, with call, chat, and text volumes increasing—along with the severity of crises requiring longer intervention times. To meet this need and continue saving lives, FirstLink requires:

- **8 additional full-time crisis counselors in 2025**
- **Expanded office space** to accommodate a growing response team
- **Technology investments** to improve communication, security, and crisis management
- **Funding for operational costs**, including essential software and communication platforms

## **A Call to Action: Vote Yes on SB 2200**

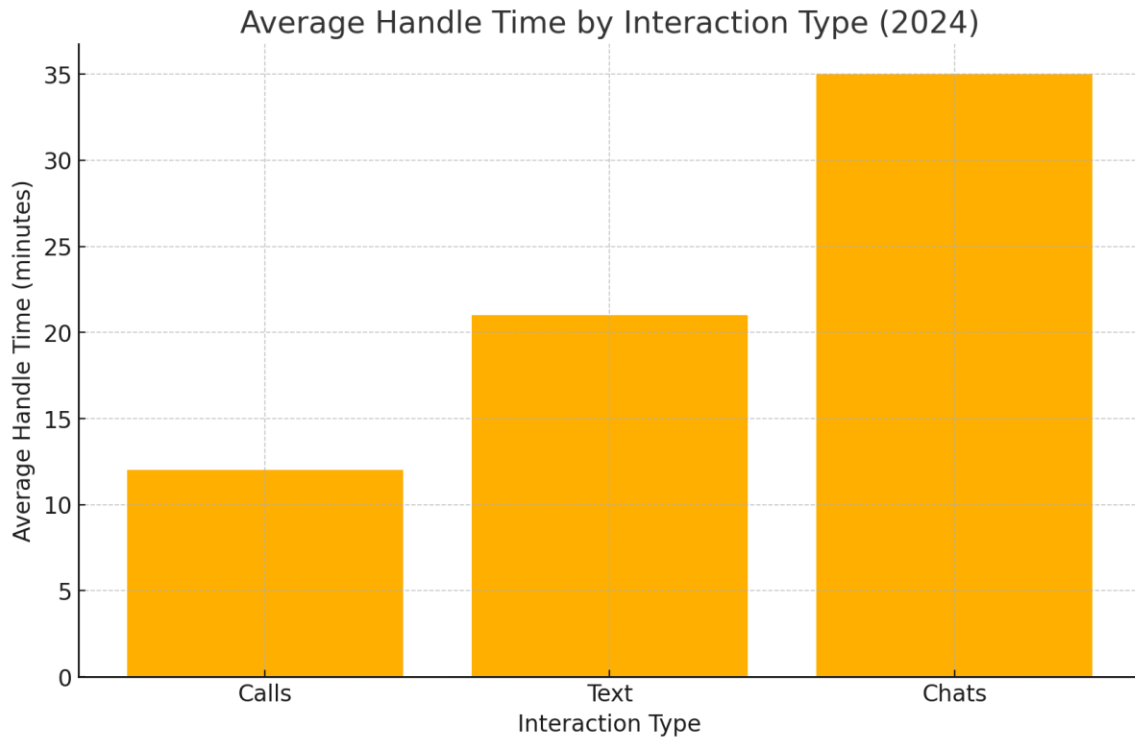
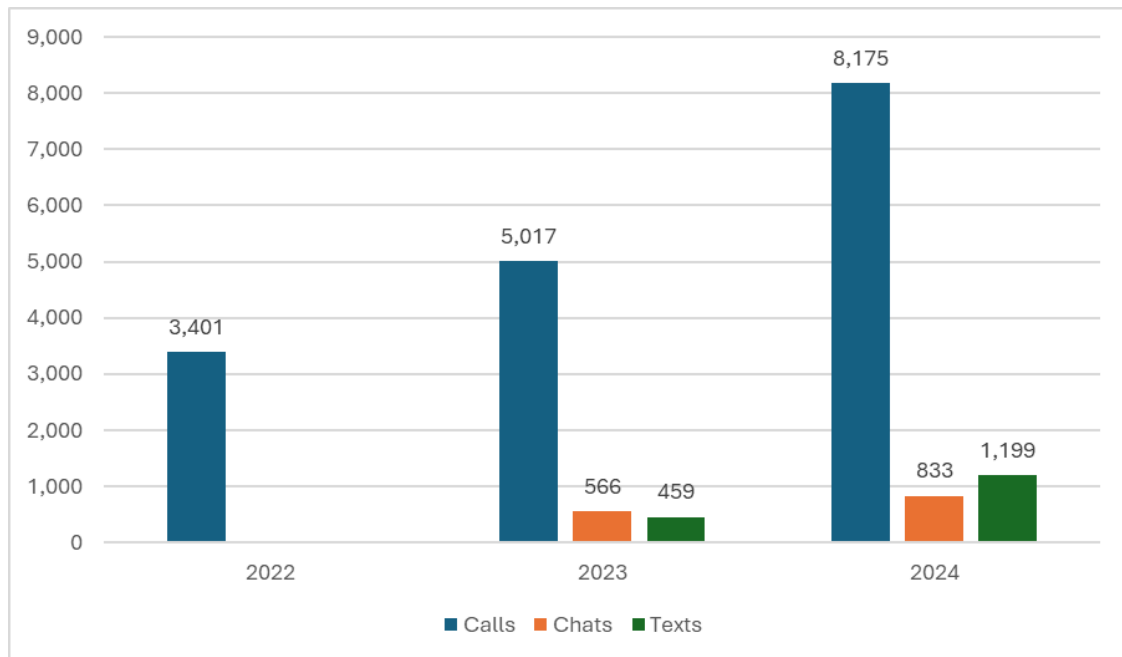
To sustain and expand these **life-saving services**, we urge you to **vote YES on SB 2200**. This bill will provide the necessary funding to ensure that North Dakotans in crisis **continue to receive immediate, expert care when they need it most**.

Your support will allow FirstLink to **save more lives, reduce emergency response costs, and provide long-term assistance** to those in need.

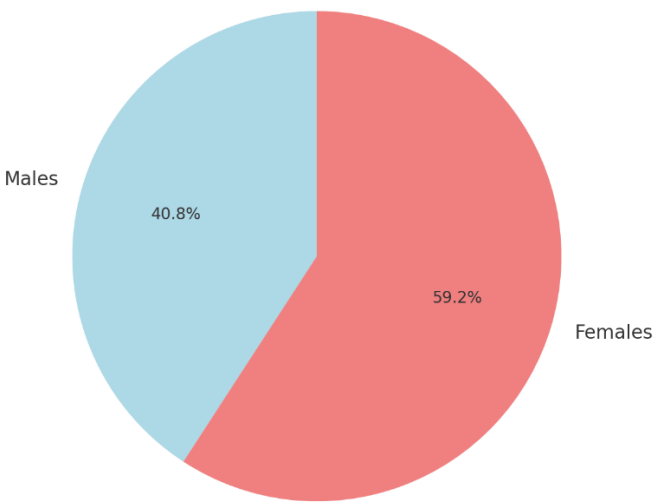
Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Sincerely,**

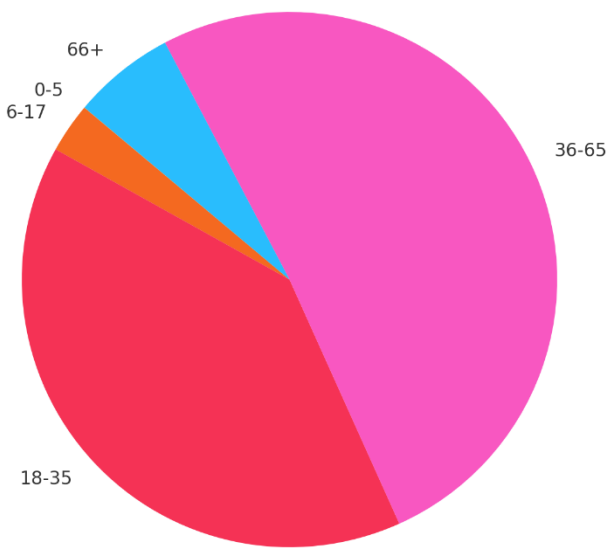
Jennifer Illich  
**Executive Director**  
**FirstLink**



Percentage of Males and Females in 2024



Age Distribution (2024)



<b>Add 8 Full-Time Equivalent Staff to Team FirstLink</b>	
Description	Annual Expense (\$)
Medical Plan Premiums	76,800
office rent and cam fees	58,100
Payroll	420,000
Payroll Taxes Expense	45,100
<b>Total</b>	<b>600,000</b>

# Help is **3** Numbers Away

