



Chairman and Committee Members,

My name is Cindy Miller, and I have been the Executive Director at FirstLink for over 13 years. Today, one of the greatest needs we have in the state is knowing where to go for help and hope to assist those who need behavioral health/addiction/financial support. In general, most people do not know where to go for help. Sometimes our own providers do not realize what other providers offer. Yes, sometimes we operate in silos. So, when they need to send their client/patient to a different type or level of service...for example, one of their clients needs other resources like food, utility assistance, or listening and support when their doors are closed... what is available? Think how difficult this would be as a parent, co-worker, or as a case worker to need help for your loved one or client and not know where to turn.

FirstLink 211 has both nonprofit and for-profit human service, addiction, and behavioral health resources in our database. FirstLink has the 211 data base in place, with over 5,500 services listed in it, and this is continually growing. This includes addiction, behavioral health, shelters, food pantries, support groups, financial assistance, to name just a few of the thousands of services. Imagine if everyone knew about this service, and if everyone shared the resources with us in their communities. Because we are only as good as the information that is shared with us.

I have attached a map with the number of calls we received from each county in 2020. I want to note that hundreds of callers from North Dakota would not disclose their location. (I lived 20 years in a small community in North Dakota and know how easily someone could figure out who you are from that community. With the stigma associated with many concerns, I can understand their reluctance to share their location.) This map shows that many people know about us, and yet more awareness is needed of this free 24-hour service to anyone across the entire state. 211 is now available in 94% of the United States, like 911 it is an important number to know and can save lives. In North Dakota, we are blessed to have the same call center answering our 211 calls and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. I really want to encourage you to stop adding new numbers that can be exceedingly difficult to remember. Did you know that recently the state started several new numbers for the community to dial for assistance, but these lines were only available M-F 8-5. Why is this? FirstLink can help screen these calls and citizens can remember 211 easier than these new 10 digits numbers.

In another year we will be able to dial 988 to reach the National Suicide Lifeline. What a blessing that will be. Imagine dialing 1-800-273-8255 when you are in a suicidal crisis. We need to make getting help easier- this year has been tough enough, why are we making it even more difficult to get help? It is important to remember you do not have to be a therapist to be therapeutic- as you have seen with peer support. Remember First Link is always there.

FirstLink also offers texting as another option for those seeking support. Texters just need to text their zip code to 898-211 and we can assist whether they need resources, are in a crisis, or are having suicidal thoughts. We have also placed flyers in the schools to remind students to text ND4me to 898-211. (As many do not know their zip code.) In 2020 we had 5,664 text interactions.

**Dial 2-1-1 or
text 898-211**



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I am on several local and statewide committees, and I am amazed at how often many members across the state are unaware of all the services FirstLink provides. In fact, every session someone will tell me that they have never heard of 211. It is imperative that we continue making the entire state aware and educated about this free lifesaving 24-hour resource. FirstLink is that place. FirstLink 211 is required to update our resources once a year, so this database will always remain current. Many times, a grant or funder will give funding for a resource list, and then it is never updated. FirstLink 211 already compiles this list and keeps it current.

In 2020, we handled 71,325 contacts from people looking for resources, listening and support. These contacts came from all 53 counties and was our highest call volume in 50 years of service. FirstLink is the only call center who is designated by the public service commission as the 211 provider/database for the entire state, and the only National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the state.

In North Dakota, workforce staffing is an issue. Finding appropriate staff, and training them, can be a challenging task. FirstLink's initial requirements include 80 hours of intensive training, monthly in-services, 4-hours annually of Military trainings, and quality assurance call monitoring. Imagine taking a call from someone who is suicidal, homeless, in a domestic violence situation, is struggling with addiction, is hearing voices, and does not want their employer or commanding officer to know about their struggles. These are just a few of the calls we receive every day. Now imagine getting paid \$12.50/hour to handle these calls- that is what we start PT staff at today. The goal for all 211's nationwide for 2020 was to have the minimum wage at \$15 an hour. For example, other 211 staff across the nation are paid an average of \$44,000 a year to be a database coordinator, while ours at FirstLink is making \$32,000. The reality is even if you are totally committed to our mission and vision, you still need to eat and pay your bills. The state needs qualified local people saving the lives of our friends and neighbors. This is important work – requiring specific skills and should be compensated at a higher wage.

We conducted community trainings in 2020 to over 6,000 people, including ND EMS workers, NDSU extension agents across the state, Minot State University, Circle of Nations school, Spirit Lake Nation, ND Cares, Schools, CIT, Senior Centers, Service Clubs, Various IOP's, Standing Rock Government offices, and salon schools to name a few.

Our contacts increased almost 19% in 2020 from a record 60,148 in 2019 to a new record 71,325 in 2020. Crisis intervention contacts were 7,938 in 2020 and contacts related to suicide in 2020 were 12,873. FirstLink is also supporting the 8 regional human services centers across the state and handled 12,352 of their calls and needed to contact their on-call staff only 2,498 times. Please help by continuing to support FirstLink's 211 helpline and crisis line coverage with the Human Service Centers, care and support program, and the Suicide Lifeline.

People in North Dakota need to know where to go for help and hope in getting connected with services, or where to go to talk to someone who genuinely cares and wants them to feel supported and empowered in whatever life may throw at them. We have been here 24 hours a day for 50 years... no closures because of storms, floods, Covid-19. We are always here because crisis does not stop at certain times or days of the week. Thank you for your support of FirstLink for many years.

Sincerely,



Cindy Miller-FirstLink Executive Director



What services does FirstLink offer?

FirstLink operates North Dakota's 2-1-1 Helpline and is the only call center to answer the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for all of North Dakota.

24 hours a day FirstLink provides:

- Listening and support – a nonjudgmental, supportive, listening ear
- Information and referral to government human service, behavioral health, and addiction resources
- Suicide support services: Care and Support Program, suicide education outreach in schools, suicide prevention training

Common referrals include, but are not limited to: (Over 5,500 services)

- Addictions/Behavioral Health
- Disasters
- Emergency Shelters
- Financial Assistance
- Military/Veteran Support
- Support Groups

Who needs FirstLink?

- All people...anytime, anywhere in North Dakota
- People who need resources and referrals
- People who are negatively impacted by the economy or disasters
- People with mental health concerns
- People from rural communities where few resources may be available
- People from large communities where many resources may be available

FirstLink makes a difference:

- These calls saved North Dakota law enforcement, fire departments, and dispatch centers, hundreds of hours of time. By calling FirstLink, these departments did not need to dispatch help or spend time deescalating citizens.
- FirstLink gives social service agencies a place for their clients to call for listening and support on evenings and weekends.

Why invest in FirstLink?

2-1-1 is a free, easy to remember, three-digit number that is available 24/7 to the ENTIRE state of North Dakota. Now is the time to enhance the investment in 2-1-1, so that more citizens are educated about

211. This will ensure that all citizens have information about services available to them and will have the ability to talk with someone 24 hours a day. FirstLink is connected to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. All FirstLink staff are trained in suicide and crisis intervention skills. FirstLink is the only call center in the state of North Dakota that takes calls on this designated suicide lifeline. Local people helping local people.

FirstLink provides valuable trainings to N.D. citizens including Mental Health First Aid, Applied Suicide Interventions Skills Training, safeTALK, which are all evidenced-based trainings. We worked with NDSU Extension, ND Emergency Medical Services Association, military bases, and many others to provide trainings across the state.

FirstLink’s current funding sources:

FirstLink receives funding from the North Dakota Department of Human Services and Field Services, the United Way of Cass-Clay and Souris Valley United Way. FirstLink works with contract agencies for funding which includes NDUS, Military Service Center, community chaplain program, Rape and Abuse Crisis Center, and Reach for Resilience, to name a few. FirstLink writes grants, holds fundraising events, and works closely with area foundations for funding. A high percentage of our funding goes directly to staff salaries to have appropriate staff trained and ready to take phone calls 24/7.

FirstLink’s History

It was FirstLink’s 50’s anniversary in 2020. FirstLink’s Hotline started in 1970 to ensure people have 24-hour listening, support, information, and referral about community resources. In 2010, the Public Service Commission designated FirstLink as the 2-1-1 provider for the entire state of North Dakota. FirstLink is accredited with both (AAS) American Association of Suicidology and (AIRS) Alliance of Information and Referral Systems.

Stats





