

TESTIMONY
SB 2012
March 16, 2023
Jennifer Illich

Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

My name is Jennifer Illich, and I am the executive director of FirstLink. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the life saving work of FirstLink. I am here to express support for SB 2012. **FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota to answer the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline, the 211 information and referral phone lines,** and answer the human service crisis phone lines after hours. FirstLink services are imperative to build a strong mental health system that provides the care, support, and services needed to help people build better lives throughout North Dakota.

FirstLink answering these phone lines is part of a long-term effort to build complete mental health and suicide prevention crisis response system in North Dakota. The overwhelming majority of callers can be stabilized over the phone. Those who need more support are connected to appropriate mental health services. **FirstLink serves as a hub of information** and a connector to other non-profit and behavioral health centers. We screen and triage for open access, subacute stabilization centers and **deploy mobile crisis units for the Human Service Centers throughout North Dakota.**

FirstLink's 988 suicide and crisis phone line and 211 information and referral phone line are overseen by two different national agencies. **Both phone lines have separate national accreditations** and best practices, and rules and regulations to follow.

FirstLink's budget can be confusing due to the nature of our phone lines. We receive separate funding for each phone line from different state departments. With this divide in funding, each departments pays some of what FirstLink needs for our total funding needs. **In reality, we have not had enough funding from any of the departments.**

FirstLink's budget needs have drastically increased in the past 2 years due to many factors.

Overwhelming increase in our call volume

- **Pulling all call types**
 - * **71,325 people supported in 2020**
 - * **83,976 people supported in 2021**
 - * **85,681 people supported in 2022**

Looking at only the numbers related directly to suicide calls:

- **10 years ago, we handled 1,501** calls directly related to suicide
- We talked to:
 - * **12,915 people in North Dakota in 2020**
 - * **15,465 people in North Dakota in 2021**
 - * **In 2022, this number increased to over 19,000 people directly related to suicide.**

- **REQUIRED** that we must now have fiber optic phone lines. **We had to move our entire operation** because our previous location only had traditional, copper wire service.
 - We handle a variety of different call types, so this new fiber optic phone service line is set up to handle all crises. A definite positive.

- **REQUIRED to add redundancy to our vendors:** we are now **required** to have 2 phone service providers, 2 internet companies, free-standing generators, and professional-grade surge protectors.

FirstLink needs increased financial support to continue operating 24/7/365 and meet all of the new requirements of the 211 phone line. We must add FTE to our team to keep up with the increases in call volume. We need to update our technology services because every second counts when talking to someone that is suicidal or in a behavioral health crisis. We need to add redundancy to ensure that our phone lines never go down. We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help and to help with staff retention.

I am reaching out for support of that financial help that we need to continue answering the 211 phone lines and for that we can continue answering the phone lines after hours for the Human Service Centers.

Currently, we were trying to get funding from SB 2149, which was to add a tax user fee similar to how 911 is currently funded. Yesterday, the House Finance and Taxation committee amended SB 2149 to remove the cell phone fee and replace it with a general fund appropriation to support the 988 crisis stabilization fund at an amount of 2 million dollars for the biennium. This amendment to this bill is moving forward with a fraction of our original proposed budget needs which was 4 million dollars for the biennium. This means that we need funding from this budget funding source to cover part of our financial needs.

Emergency services like FirstLink need a base funding source that is sustainable and protected from budget cuts at a funding rate that can support the agency.

I hope you will consider supporting SB 2012, so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis.

I sincerely thank you for listening and for your ongoing support. I did include a fact sheet, stats and current and projected budget needs on the online platform.

I look forward to your questions.

Jennifer Illich
Executive Director
FirstLink
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FirstLink services

FirstLink is a free, confidential service available to anyone 24/7/365 for listening and support, referrals to resources/help, and crisis intervention. FirstLink answers the 211 helpline, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, and communicates via the text line 898-211.

FirstLink is a unique non-profit in that we serve the entire state of North Dakota, we are available 24/7/365 for phone support, we work with every population, and **we never charge the consumer for the phone support service.**

Suicide support services

- Incoming calls directly related to suicide
- Incoming calls from people who are worried about others related to suicide
- Care and Support follow-up program, calls, carding cards, caring text
- Education and awareness classes in the community
- National accreditation through American Association of Suicidology (AAS)

Behavioral health support

- Non-judgmental listening and support
- Validate concerns

Information and referral

- Community directory with over 5,500 services
- Information reached by dialing 211 or 988, texting zip code to 898211, and posted to website
- Live connections as appropriate
- National accreditation through Alliance and Information Referral System (AIRS)

Community Education

- FirstLink presents suicide prevention and intervention trainings to community members, agencies and youth.

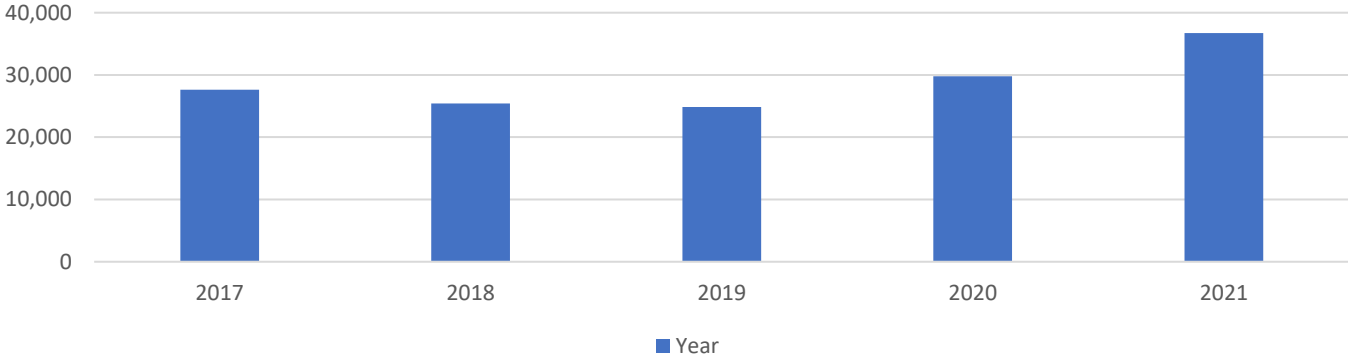
Website: myfirstlink.org

Community Directory <https://prd.icarol.com/landing.html?token=22978899-2ed3-4b35-8687-8773159d829b&cssMode=Publish&orgNum=2318&db=2318>

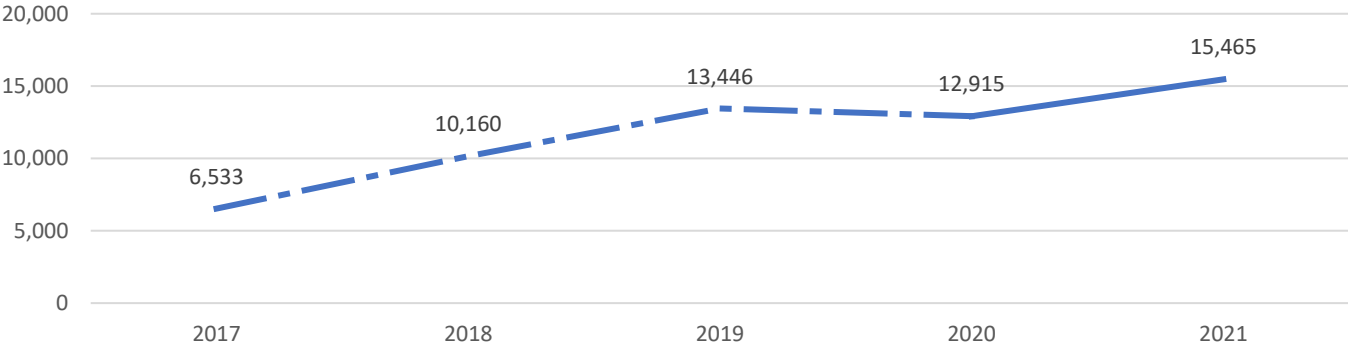
PROPOSED 988 FirstLink 23-25 biennium budget		CURRENT 988 FirstLink 21-23 Biennium Budget	
Payroll expense	3245968	Payroll expense	2461168
Education and outreach	186960	Education and outreach	158,900
Operating expense	405804	Operating expense	246,000
Professional fees	247932	Professional fees	149,500
Total	4086664	Total	3015568
Budget Breakdown		Budget Breakdown	
Payroll Expense		Payroll Expense	
Payroll	2550000	Payroll	1950000
Payroll Taxes Expense	390150	Payroll Taxes Expense	298350
Simple IRA Employer Exp	76500	Simple IRA Employer Exp	58500
Medical Plan Premiums	226318	Medical Plan Premiums	151318
Workers Comp Insurance	3000	Workers Comp Insurance	3000
Total	3245968	Total	2461168
Education and Outreach		Education and Outreach	
Training Seminars	12000	Training Seminars	12000
Travel	32900	Travel	32900
Annual Breakfast	18000	Annual Breakfast	10000
Annual Film Festival	18000	Annual Film Festival	10000
988 ads	64060	988 ads	62000
Printing, training material, posters	6000	Printing, training material, posters	6000
Mailing	6000	Mailing	6000
Books	30000	Books	20000
Total	186960	Total	158900
Operating Expense		Operating Expense	
Postage meter rental	7000	Postage meter rental	7000
Copier lease	10000	Copier lease	8500
Office rent	174000	Office rent	36000
Postage, caring cards	4000	Postage, caring cards	37000
Printing fees, internal policies, binder info	4000	Printing fees, internal policies, binder info	3500
Telephone	77804	Telephone	60000
Office supplies	42000	Office supplies	35000
Technology, monitors, computers	70000	Technology, monitors, computers	45000
Employee recruitment fee	10000	Employee recruitment fee	8000
Volunteer-staff recognition	7000	Volunteer-staff recognition	6000
Total	405804	Total	246000

Professional Fees		Professional Fees	
Equipment maintenance support (internal and external phone lines, generator, IT)	53932	Equipment maintenance support (internal and external phone lines, generator, IT)	47,500
Service fees (database management program fees such as iCarol, iSolved, Prevention Pays, maintenance, IT and phone support)	70000	Service fees (database management program fees such as iCarol, iSolved, Prevention Pays, maintenance, IT and phone support)	50,000
Dues, orgnaization memberships (AIRS, AAS, NDANO)	60000	Dues, orgnaization memberships (AIRS, AAS, NDANO)	52,000
Professional fees (IT support, phone support, database management support, repair vendors, insurance)	64000	Professional fees (IT support, phone support, databmanagement support, repair vendors, insurance)	60,000
Total	247932	Total	209,500

FirstLink's Total ND Contacts from 2-1-1 and 988 phone lines



ND Contacts Directly Related to Suicide



Resrouces Given Out

