

TESTIMONY
Human Services Committee
HB 1390
January 25, 2023
Jennifer Illich


Chairman Weisz and Members of the North Dakota House Human Services Committee thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the life-saving work of FirstLink. My name is Jennifer Illich, and I am the executive director of FirstLink. I am here to express support for HB 1390. FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota to answer the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and 211 information and referral phone lines. 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.

Ten years ago, FirstLink took 1,501 calls directly related to suicide, in 2021 we took 15,465 calls related to suicide. The complexity and volume of our calls have greatly increased. For a time that we did not want to come in as number one, North Dakota saw the nation's largest increase in suicide rates from 1999 to 2016, a 58% increase according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When this national report was released, CBS Morning news reached out to me to ask what is going on in North Dakota and why our suicide rate is increasing at such a quick rate. I told them that I could guess using the limited stats that our state had mixed with the trends that we heard on our 988 and 211 phone lines. That was the best information that I could give them without having a suicide fatality review commission. The reporter that called me said that we need to investigate these deaths so we can take action to prevent them and decrease this number. The suicide fatality review commission will help us identify trends to help prevent these crisis situations.

Every day FirstLink's goal is to save lives on the phone. The suicide fatality review commission is a necessary part of our plan to make our communities safer from suicide. The commission needs to be able to identify both risk and protective factors, which will lead to the knowledge needed to recommend policies and protocols to improve the community and system responses to people at risk of suicide.

I hope you will consider supporting HB 1390, so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis. We are working to lower the number of suicide deaths in North Dakota to zero, we must work together to make North Dakota the healthiest state in the nation, as opposed to the state with the most increases in suicide deaths.

I sincerely thank you for listening and for your ongoing support, and I look forward to your questions.



Jennifer Illich

Executive Director

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ND Contacts Directly Related to Suicide

