

TESTIMONY
Senate Human Services Committee,
SB 2149
January 17, 2023
Jennifer Illich

Chairman Lee, and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about 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 SB 2149. 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.

On October 16, 2020, President Trump signed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act into law, officially designating 988 as the new, easy-to-remember number for anyone experiencing suicidal ideation, a mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. As you may know, the transition from 1-800-273-8255 to 988 as the nation's suicide hotline officially happened on Saturday, July 16, 2022. This transition represents a historic moment for North Dakotans in crisis, giving them a number to call 24/7. With this new federal designation came many new requirements but unfortunately, no consistent federal funding to implement the new required suicide safety standards.

FirstLink 988 handles a variety of phone calls/text/and chats. These phone interactions can range from looking for a food pantry, diapers, counseling center, needing listening and support, all the way to thoughts or actions taken directly related to suicide. If I pull out only the calls related to suicide, from 2020 to 2021, our call volume related to suicide increased by 19.74%. We talked to 12,915 people in North Dakota in 2020 and to 15,465 people in 2021 about their thoughts or actions related to suicide. The complexity and volume of our calls have greatly increased.

FirstLink, answering the 988 suicide and crisis phone line is part of a long-term effort to build a 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 needs increased support to continue operating 24/7 and meet all of the new requirements of the 988 phone line. With the new federal mandates for the 988 suicide and crisis

phone line came a federal funding one-time planning funding source. But we need a long term funding solution.

As a non-profit our current funding sources are diverse. Our funding comes from current contracts from state and other agencies that pay us a fee to answer their phone lines, United Way of Cass and Clay County, and fundraising events. Unlike other non-profits, we can not charge a fee to the consumers that are dialing 988 for support. Our services are free and offered 24/7/365. Most of our funding sources are not consistent or reliable and make it very difficult to make a long term budget, provide an increase in staff wages, and purchase ongoing upgrades in IT services.

We must add FTE to our team to keep up with the increases in call volume and to meet all of the new requirements that are federally mandated.

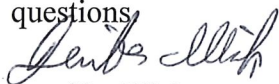
We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help, and to help with staff retention. Our current budget allows us to pay our staff a starting wage of only \$15.00-\$16.00 per hour. We just interviewed a very qualified potential staff working towards her masters in therapy, and she had to pass our employment offer and continue working at McDonald's because she could not afford to take the pay cut. I have many stories of staff leaving or not accepting employment at FirstLink because our wages of our staff that are answering the suicide phone line are lower than working in the food or retail industry.

We need to update our technology services because every second counts when talking to someone that has taken suicide action against their life or is in a behavioral health crisis. We need to add redundancy in our technology and service providers to ensure that our phone lines never go down.

Emergency services like FirstLink 988 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 2149, so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis.

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



Jennifer Illich

Executive Director

FirstLink 701-293-6462 jenniferi@myfirstlink.org

| Annual Budget Needs | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Payroll expenses | \$ 1,622,984.00 |
| Education and outreach | \$ 93,480.00 |
| Operating expense | \$ 202,902.00 |
| Professional fees | \$ 123,966.00 |
| Total | \$ 2,043,332.00 |



2022 Statistical Report
ALL CONTACTS

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| TOTAL # OF CONTACTS | 6,949 | 6,650 | 6,929 | 7,434 | 7,958 | 7,243 | 7,207 | 7,616 | 6,943 | 6,747 | 6,872 | 7,133 | 85,681 | 100% |

| CONTACT TYPE | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Information | 2,550 | 2,728 | 2,800 | 3,175 | 3,560 | 3,026 | 2,757 | 3,110 | 2,752 | 2,463 | 2,593 | 2,854 | 34,368 | 40% |
| Referral | 1,268 | 1,066 | 1,107 | 1,213 | 1,357 | 1,405 | 1,564 | 1,719 | 1,675 | 1,691 | 1,728 | 1,664 | 17,457 | 20% |
| Listening & Support | 1,948 | 1,826 | 1,967 | 1,913 | 1,870 | 1,755 | 1,810 | 1,696 | 1,470 | 1,555 | 1,572 | 1,525 | 20,907 | 24% |
| Crisis Intervention | 1,183 | 1,030 | 1,055 | 1,133 | 1,171 | 1,057 | 1,076 | 1,078 | 1,046 | 1,038 | 979 | 1,090 | 12,936 | 15% |
| TOTAL | 6,949 | 6,650 | 6,929 | 7,434 | 7,958 | 7,243 | 7,207 | 7,603 | 6,943 | 6,747 | 6,872 | 7,133 | 85,668 | 100% |

| DAY OF THE WEEK | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Sunday | 686 | 602 | 642 | 658 | 829 | 604 | 709 | 504 | 579 | 704 | 533 | 494 | 7,544 | 9% |
| Monday | 1,384 | 1,064 | 976 | 1,154 | 1,521 | 1,167 | 1,043 | 1,526 | 1,035 | 1,347 | 1,188 | 1,091 | 14,496 | 17% |
| Tuesday | 1,105 | 1,175 | 1,288 | 1,086 | 1,509 | 1,102 | 1,240 | 1,444 | 1,163 | 1,069 | 1,240 | 1,098 | 14,519 | 17% |
| Wednesday | 1,068 | 1,105 | 1,255 | 1,158 | 1,163 | 1,282 | 1,090 | 1,393 | 1,075 | 983 | 1,295 | 1,097 | 13,964 | 16% |
| Thursday | 933 | 960 | 1,216 | 1,123 | 1,164 | 1,385 | 1,051 | 1,084 | 1,323 | 1,019 | 1,038 | 1,390 | 13,686 | 16% |
| Friday | 933 | 1,069 | 886 | 1,371 | 1,038 | 1,031 | 1,287 | 1,064 | 1,215 | 893 | 953 | 1,205 | 12,945 | 15% |
| Saturday | 840 | 675 | 666 | 884 | 734 | 672 | 787 | 601 | 553 | 732 | 625 | 758 | 8,527 | 10% |
| TOTAL | 6,949 | 6,650 | 6,929 | 7,434 | 7,958 | 7,243 | 7,207 | 7,616 | 6,943 | 6,747 | 6,872 | 7,133 | 85,681 | 100% |

| CONTACT LOCATION | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| North Dakota | 4,917 | 4,851 | 5,039 | 5,732 | 5,790 | 5,280 | 5,205 | 5,341 | 4,662 | 4,525 | 4,715 | 4,918 | 60,975 | 71% |
| Minnesota | 1,197 | 992 | 1,094 | 1,046 | 996 | 920 | 1,186 | 1,255 | 1,219 | 1,220 | 1,144 | 1,177 | 13,446 | 16% |
| Locations outside ND + MN/Unspecified | 835 | 807 | 796 | 656 | 1,172 | 1,043 | 816 | 1,020 | 1,062 | 1,002 | 1,013 | 1,038 | 11,260 | 13% |
| TOTAL | 6,949 | 6,650 | 6,929 | 7,434 | 7,958 | 7,243 | 7,207 | 7,616 | 6,943 | 6,747 | 6,872 | 7,133 | 85,681 | 100% |

| GENDER | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|------------|
| Female | 3,890 | 3,673 | 3,745 | 3,930 | 3,936 | 3,489 | 3,693 | 3,961 | 3,566 | 3,564 | 3,627 | 3,806 | 44,880 | 52% |
| Male | 2,463 | 2,358 | 2,501 | 2,556 | 2,909 | 2,879 | 2,776 | 2,774 | 2,520 | 2,328 | 2,397 | 2,382 | 30,843 | 36% |
| Non-Binary | 84 | 76 | 91 | 73 | 85 | 102 | 85 | 112 | 78 | 48 | 41 | 40 | 915 | 1% |
| Other | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 18 | 2 | 26 | 46 | 0% |
| TOTAL | 6,437 | 6,107 | 6,337 | 6,559 | 6,930 | 6,470 | 6,554 | 6,847 | 6,164 | 5,940 | 6,067 | 6,254 | 76,666 | 89% |

| AGE RANGE | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-----|
| 0-5 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0% |
| 6-17 | 398 | 330 | 323 | 231 | 227 | 212 | 166 | 107 | 134 | 170 | 239 | 234 | 2,771 | 3% |
| 18-35 | 2,190 | 2,079 | 2,150 | 2,113 | 2,259 | 1,985 | 1,819 | 2,180 | 1,963 | 1,827 | 2,006 | 2,014 | 24,585 | 29% |
| 36-65 | 3,459 | 3,313 | 3,384 | 3,871 | 4,093 | 3,574 | 3,897 | 4,019 | 3,576 | 3,561 | 3,504 | 3,664 | 43,915 | 51% |



2022 Statistical Report
ALL CONTACTS

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| NDUS - Mayville State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Minot State | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0% |
| NDUS - NDSCS | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0% |
| NDUS - NDSU | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0% |
| NDUS - UND | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Valley City State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Williston State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| TOTAL | 788 | 686 | 674 | 787 | 771 | 661 | 412 | 719 | 691 | 720 | 687 | 749 | 8,345 | 10% |

CONTACT METHOD

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-----|
| 2-1-1 Helpline | 3,911 | 3,472 | 3,743 | 4,066 | 4,338 | 4,045 | 4,229 | 4,479 | 4,126 | 4,169 | 4,137 | 4,105 | 48,820 | 57% |
| 2-1-1 Texting | 47 | 40 | 49 | 54 | 60 | 54 | 62 | 72 | 75 | 66 | 75 | 96 | 750 | 1% |
| BCBS Medicaid Expansion | 47 | 42 | 29 | 18 | 24 | 26 | 19 | 17 | 22 | 13 | 15 | 16 | 288 | 0% |
| 988 Crisis Support Line | 467 | 522 | 461 | 437 | 502 | 434 | 509 | 477 | 501 | 514 | 494 | 506 | 5,824 | 7% |
| Standing Rock Suicide Lifeline | 7 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 10 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 42 | 0% |
| Military Service Center | 4 | 7 | 13 | 20 | 15 | 22 | 25 | 26 | 5 | 11 | 19 | 7 | 174 | 0% |
| HSC - Southeast | 311 | 369 | 488 | 564 | 570 | 462 | 367 | 323 | 243 | 221 | 241 | 395 | 4,554 | 5% |
| HSC - Badlands | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 10 | 5 | 14 | 8 | 12 | 12 | 7 | 76 | 0% |
| HSC - North Central | 48 | 70 | 33 | 42 | 44 | 24 | 18 | 38 | 29 | 38 | 27 | 57 | 468 | 1% |
| HSC - Northeast | 63 | 52 | 32 | 51 | 51 | 48 | 18 | 28 | 33 | 30 | 97 | 132 | 635 | 1% |
| HSC - Northwest | 67 | 34 | 24 | 36 | 20 | 27 | 37 | 29 | 34 | 46 | 52 | 48 | 454 | 1% |
| HSC - South Central | 62 | 54 | 49 | 62 | 87 | 77 | 54 | 45 | 49 | 41 | 56 | 83 | 719 | 1% |
| HSC - West Central | 118 | 152 | 96 | 195 | 104 | 124 | 111 | 127 | 108 | 87 | 142 | 126 | 1,490 | 2% |
| HSC - Lake Region | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 33 | 37 | 38 | 22 | 53 | 48 | 250 | 0% |
| RACC | 277 | 275 | 182 | 154 | 207 | 164 | 180 | 235 | 234 | 201 | 208 | 317 | 2,634 | 3% |
| Region IV South | 79 | 90 | 123 | 89 | 102 | 72 | 88 | 70 | 95 | 110 | 78 | 89 | 1,085 | 1% |
| NDUS - Bismarck State | 19 | 8 | 8 | 12 | 25 | 9 | 11 | 21 | 14 | 11 | 4 | 10 | 152 | 0% |
| NDUS - Dakota College | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Dickinson State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Lake Region State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| NDUS - Mayville State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 11 | 0% |
| NDUS - Minot State | 19 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 92 | 0% |
| NDUS - NDSCS | 5 | 17 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 9 | 72 | 0% |
| NDUS - NDSU | 67 | 54 | 47 | 38 | 36 | 37 | 26 | 48 | 53 | 38 | 45 | 31 | 520 | 1% |
| NDUS - UND | 1 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 24 | 0% |
| NDUS - Valley City State | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0% |
| NDUS - Williston State | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| Care & Support Program | 1,271 | 1,304 | 1,465 | 1,503 | 1,678 | 1,531 | 1,331 | 1,480 | 1,202 | 947 | 969 | 943 | 15,624 | 18% |



2022 Statistical Report
ALL CONTACTS

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | Totals | % |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Unknown/24-hour Administrative | 53 | 76 | 65 | 72 | 67 | 45 | 69 | 29 | 52 | 154 | 134 | 98 | 914 | 1% |
| TOTAL | 6,949 | 6,650 | 6,929 | 7,434 | 7,958 | 7,243 | 7,207 | 7,616 | 6,943 | 6,747 | 6,869 | 7,128 | 85,673 | 100% |