

Chairman Nelson and Members of the House Appropriation Committee – Human Resource Division,

As you deliberate on House Bill 1012, I urge you to prioritize the continued and increased funding for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Information and Referral Helpline. These services are not merely numbers on a budget line; they are lifelines for individuals in North Dakota who are struggling to find hope in the darkest moments of their lives.

At FirstLink, which operates both the 988 Lifeline and the 211 Helpline, we see firsthand the growing and urgent need for these critical resources. Month after month, more North Dakotans are reaching out—by call, chat, or text—seeking support in moments of overwhelming despair. Many of these calls come from individuals on the brink of giving up, carrying the unbearable weight of loneliness, fear, and pain. The complexity of these interactions is increasing, often requiring extended time and deep compassion to guide people toward safety and hope.

The reality of suicide in North Dakota is devastating. Suicide remains one of the leading causes of death in our state. According to the CDC, over 130 North Dakotans died by suicide in 2021. These aren't just numbers; they are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, neighbors, coworkers, and friends. They are people whose absence leaves a permanent void in the lives of those who loved them. Each life lost to suicide represents unfulfilled dreams and potential, leaving families and communities grappling with profound grief and unanswered questions.

For rural communities in North Dakota, the stakes are even higher. Access to mental health care is often limited or unavailable, leaving individuals with few options for immediate help. The 988 and 211 helplines provide a critical bridge, offering free, confidential, and lifesaving support to anyone, anywhere in the state, regardless of their circumstances.

Mental health crises touch every demographic, cutting across lines of age, gender, and socioeconomic status. No one is immune, and no one should feel alone in their struggles. Supporting House Bill 1012 is more than a fiscal decision—it is a declaration that we value life and are committed to being there for those in crisis. This funding ensures that every call is answered, every plea for help is heard, and every chance to save a life is taken.

We cannot turn away from the rising tide of need. Every moment of connection is a chance to prevent tragedy and offer hope to someone who feels lost. By funding the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Helpline, we make a tangible investment in saving lives and fostering a community where no one feels forgotten or alone.

Thank you for recognizing the vital importance of these services. We urge you to support House Bill 1012 and ensure these lifelines remain available for all North Dakotans. Together, we can build a state where fewer families endure the pain of losing a loved one to suicide and where everyone knows there is someone to turn to, no matter what.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Illich
Executive Director, FirstLink

