

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

As the Director of Workforce and Culture at FirstLink, I have the privilege of supporting the individuals who operate the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Information and Referral Helpline. These services are vital lifelines for individuals in crisis, and their success depends entirely on the exceptional people who answer the calls, chats, and texts from those in need. Today, I write to highlight the urgent need for increased funding through House Bill 1012 to expand and sustain our team, ensuring no call for help goes unanswered.

The demand for 988 and 211 services has grown exponentially and so has our staffing. In 2022, FirstLink employed 24 Call Specialists to handle incoming calls, chats, and texts. Recognizing the increasing need, we have expanded our team to over 50 individuals today. While this growth is a testament to the importance of these services and our commitment to meeting community needs, it is still not enough. The volume of interactions continues to rise month after month, with many requiring extended time and care to address complex and urgent crises.

This growth has created both challenges and opportunities. Hiring and training staff to meet the demand requires significant resources. While our team has risen admirably to the occasion, additional funding is essential to keep pace with the needs of our community and to ensure our call specialists have the support they need to continue this lifesaving work.

In North Dakota, where the suicide rate remains above the national average and rural areas often lack access to mental health care, the 988 and 211 services are a critical bridge to support. Every call answered is an opportunity to save a life. However, the current demand for services means that our staff often face heavy workloads, which can lead to burnout if not addressed. Sustained and increased funding would allow us to further grow and develop our team, enhance training, and ensure that our staff are equipped to provide the highest quality care.

Supporting House Bill 1012 is more than a financial decision; it is an investment in the lives and well-being of our neighbors, friends, and family members. It is a commitment to every person who reaches out in their darkest moment, knowing they will find someone ready to listen, assist, and guide them toward safety and hope.

Thank you for your consideration and for recognizing the vital importance of the people behind these services. On behalf of the FirstLink team, I urge you to support House Bill 1012 and help us continue to meet the growing demand for crisis intervention and mental health support in our state.

Sincerely,

Ashley Lemke
Director of Workforce and Culture
FirstLink