

Dear Chairman Ruby and Members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Jennifer Illich, and I serve as the Executive Director of FirstLink. I am here today to express my strong support for **SB 2200** and to emphasize the critical need for sustained funding for the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** in North Dakota.

At FirstLink, we proudly answer the **988 Lifeline 24/7/365**, providing **immediate crisis intervention** and connecting individuals with the **resources they need** to navigate difficult moments. Our mission is to ensure **no one faces a crisis alone**.

The Return on Investment: Saving Lives and Resources

988 centers like FirstLink provide a cost-effective and life-saving solution for behavioral health crises. Every day, we **prevent suicides** and ensure individuals receive the support necessary to stay alive. While the value of a saved life is immeasurable, research estimates that each suicide death costs approximately **\$1.5 million** in medical expenses, lost productivity, and emotional toll on families and communities.

In 2024 alone, **112 North Dakotans survived suicide attempts after calling 988**, equating to an estimated **\$168 million in economic savings**.

Additionally, our **collaboration with 911 centers** significantly reduces the burden on emergency services. In the past year:

- **14,190 crises were de-escalated without first responder intervention**—saving valuable emergency resources.
- The average cost of an ambulance response is **\$1,500**, meaning our crisis interventions resulted in an estimated **\$21.3 million in savings**—not including further healthcare expenses that would have followed.

Research consistently demonstrates that strong partnerships between **988 and 911** reduce emergency response strain while providing **more effective, compassionate care** for individuals in crisis.

Beyond Crisis Intervention: Sustained Support for Recovery

FirstLink doesn't stop at crisis response. Through our **Care and Support Program**, we provide follow-up services for individuals admitted due to suicide attempts or overdoses. **These services help maintain stability, reduce hospital readmissions, and lower long-term healthcare costs.**

Studies show that individuals receiving follow-up support are **significantly less likely** to experience a repeat crisis. Our follow-up efforts include:

- **Regular check-ins**
- **Resource coordination**
- **Emotional support** to keep individuals engaged with appropriate care services

Follow-up interventions are also highly **cost-effective**. Research from the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (2021)** suggests that for every **\$1 invested** in follow-up care, there is a return of **\$1.76 to \$2.43** due to reduced hospitalizations and emergency care.

Critical Need for Expansion

Over the past year, **demand for FirstLink's services has grown significantly**, with call, chat, and text volumes increasing—along with the severity of crises requiring longer intervention times. To meet this need and continue saving lives, FirstLink requires:

- **8 additional full-time crisis counselors in 2025**
- **Expanded office space** to accommodate a growing response team
- **Technology investments** to improve communication, security, and crisis management
- **Funding for operational costs**, including essential software and communication platforms

A Call to Action: Vote Yes on SB 2200

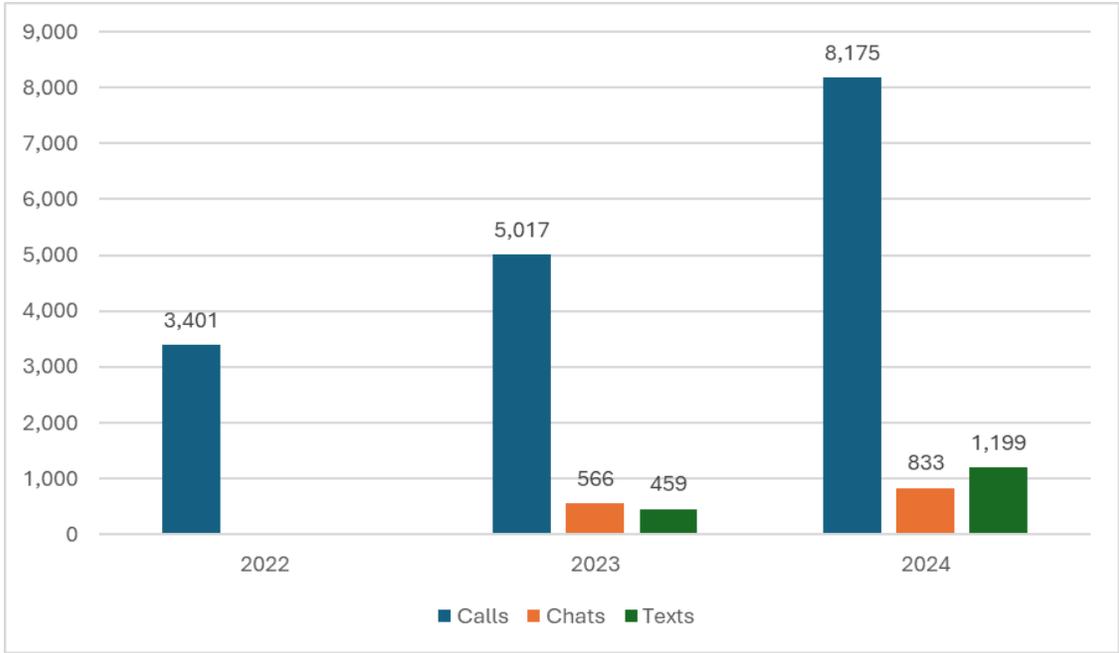
To sustain and expand these **life-saving services**, we urge you to **vote YES on SB 2200**. This bill will provide the necessary funding to ensure that North Dakotans in crisis **continue to receive immediate, expert care when they need it most**.

Your support will allow FirstLink to **save more lives, reduce emergency response costs, and provide long-term assistance** to those in need.

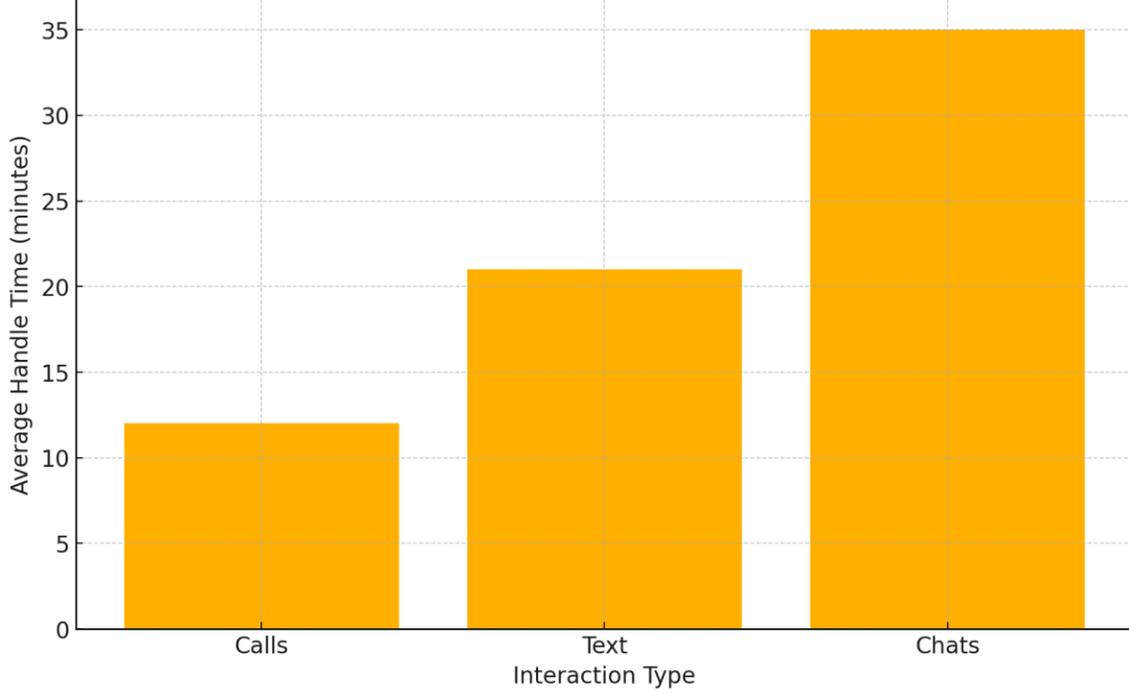
Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

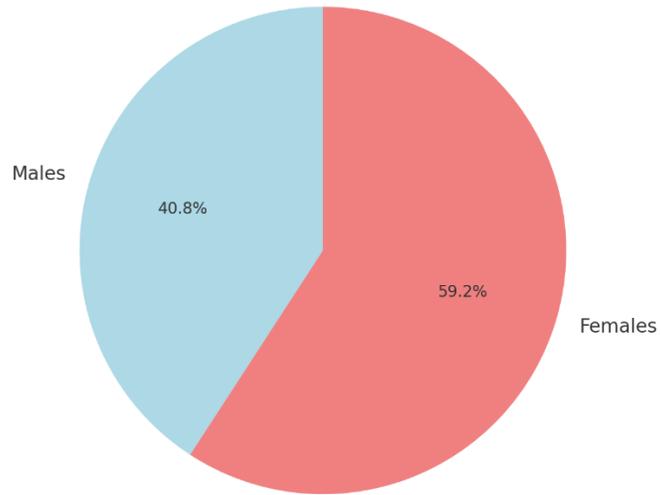
Jennifer Illich
Executive Director
FirstLink



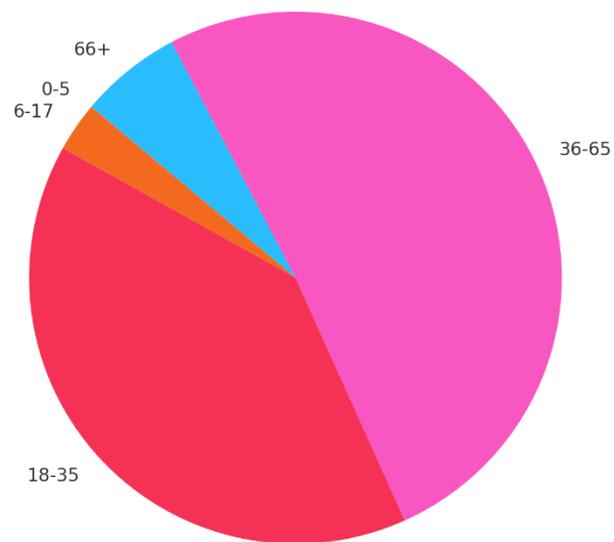
Average Handle Time by Interaction Type (2024)



Percentage of Males and Females in 2024



Age Distribution (2024)



Add 8 Full-Time Equivalent Staff to Team FirstLink	
Description	Annual Expense (\$)
Medical Plan Premiums	76,800
office rent and cam fees	58,100
Payroll	420,000
Payroll Taxes Expense	45,100
Total	600,000

Help is 3 Numbers Away

