

Dear Chairman Barta, and Members of the Industry and Business Committee,

As a former Executive Director with 15 years of firsthand experience in overseeing crisis intervention services, I am writing to strongly urge your support for HB 1012. This bill is vital to securing the continued and increased funding for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Information and Referral Helpline. Having been deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of these services, I have witnessed the growing demand for support and the lifesaving impact these helplines have on our community.

FirstLink, which operates both the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline and the 211 information and referral helpline, has seen consistent increases in call, chat, and text volumes. Beyond the sheer number of interactions, the nature of these engagements has become increasingly complex, requiring more time and specialized attention from trained staff. On many occasions, these calls involve individuals who are already in the process of contemplating or attempting suicide, making immediate response and low answer times absolutely critical. Delays in response can mean the difference between life and death. To meet these challenges, we urgently need additional Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employees to ensure timely and effective support.

Over my tenure, I observed a significant increase not only in the volume of calls but also in the duration of each interaction. People in crisis often need extended conversations to feel heard, understood, and guided toward safety.

These longer interactions, while essential, also highlight the pressing need for expanded resources and staffing to maintain the level of service our community relies on. Without adequate funding, we risk overburdening existing staff and jeopardizing the quality and timeliness of the support provided.

North Dakota continues to face sobering mental health challenges. Suicide remains a leading cause of death in our state, with more than 130 lives lost in 2021 alone—a figure that tragically exceeds the national average. This reality underscores the importance of bolstering mental health resources, particularly in rural areas where access to care is often limited. By fully funding the 988 and 211 helplines, we affirm our commitment to ensuring that no one in crisis feels abandoned or without hope.

I have seen firsthand how these lifelines save lives, provide comfort, and connect individuals to critical resources. I urge you to support HB 1012 and ensure the funding necessary to sustain and expand these essential services. The people of North Dakota are counting on us to prioritize mental health and crisis intervention.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Cindy Miller
Former Executive Director, FirstLink
15-Year Advocate for Crisis Intervention Services