

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

My name is Jennifer Illich, and I am the Executive Director of FirstLink. I am here today to express my strong support for SB 2200. FirstLink proudly answers the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, providing 24/7/365 crisis intervention services to individuals across North Dakota. Our mission is to offer immediate support and connect those in crisis with the essential resources they need.

FirstLink, like 988 centers nationwide, serves as a cost-effective solution for behavioral health support. We save lives from suicide every day and ensure individuals receive the assistance necessary to stay alive. While it is impossible to place a monetary value on a life saved, research suggests that the economic cost of a single suicide death in the United States is approximately \$1.5 million, factoring in medical expenses, lost productivity, and the profound impact on families and communities. In 2024, 112 North Dakotans called 988 during a suicide attempt and survived, resulting in an estimated cost savings of \$168 million.

We are proud to collaborate with 911 centers to alleviate the growing demands on first responders. Through our intervention, 14,190 crises were successfully de-escalated without requiring first responder involvement. Given that the average cost of an ambulance response is \$1,500, this resulted in a total estimated cost savings of \$21.3 million. This figure does not even include the additional healthcare expenses that would have incurred.

Research consistently highlights that integrated partnerships between 988 and 911 can significantly reduce the strain on emergency services while providing more tailored support to help-seekers in crisis.

Beyond immediate crisis intervention, FirstLink partners with healthcare providers and internal referrals to offer follow-up services through our Care and Support Program. This program assists individuals admitted due to suicide attempts and overdoses, helping them maintain stability and reducing hospital readmissions, ultimately saving thousands of dollars for our state. Studies show that individuals who receive consistent follow-up support are significantly less likely to experience recurrent crises. Our follow-up services include regular check-ins, resource coordination, and emotional support to ensure individuals remain engaged with appropriate care services.

Furthermore, research indicates that follow-up interventions are highly cost-effective. For every dollar invested in follow-up calls to at-risk individuals, there is an estimated return of between \$1.76 and \$2.43 (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 2021). These programs not only prevent suicide attempts but also reduce the financial burden associated with emergency department visits and inpatient treatment.

FirstLink's call, chat, and text volume has increased substantially over the past year, and the severity of call interactions has also risen, requiring longer engagement times with individuals in crisis. To sustain our life-saving work, FirstLink requires:

- Hiring 8 full-time employees (FTEs) in 2025
- Expansion of office space to accommodate our growing crisis response team.
- Investment in technology improvements to enhance communication and cybersecurity measures.

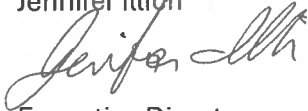
- Coverage of operational costs for vital computer programs and communication platforms to support the expanded team and maintain service quality.

I urge you to vote yes on SB 2200 to ensure continued, secure, and adequate funding and expansion of these critical services. Your support is vital to sustaining and enhancing FirstLink's ability to provide life-saving assistance to North Dakotans in crisis.

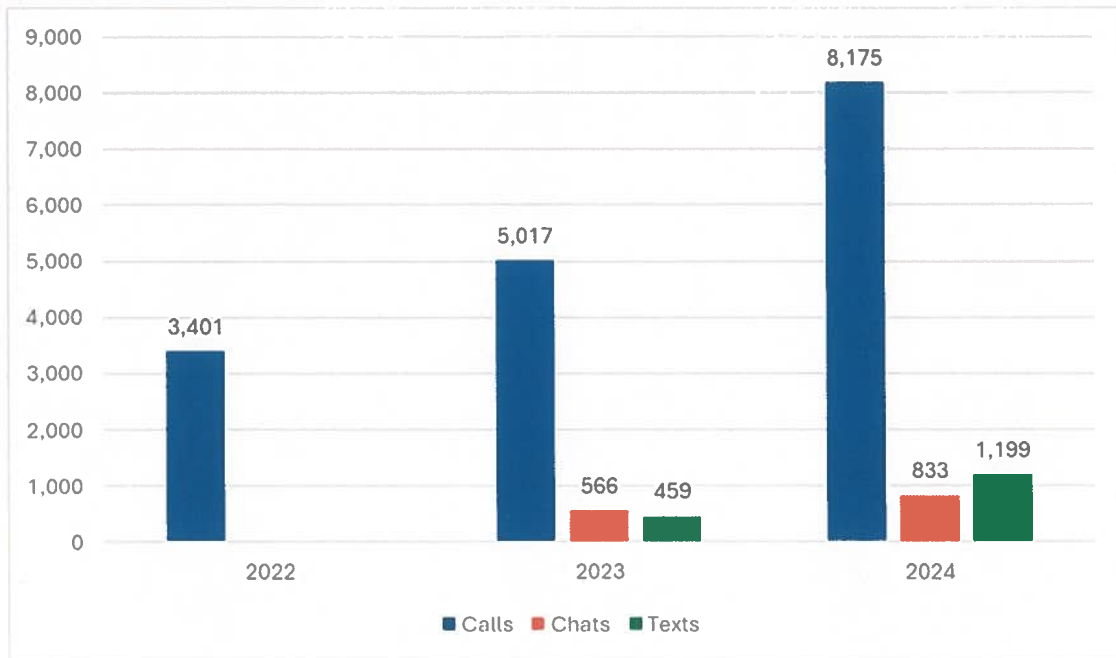
Thank you for your time and consideration.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

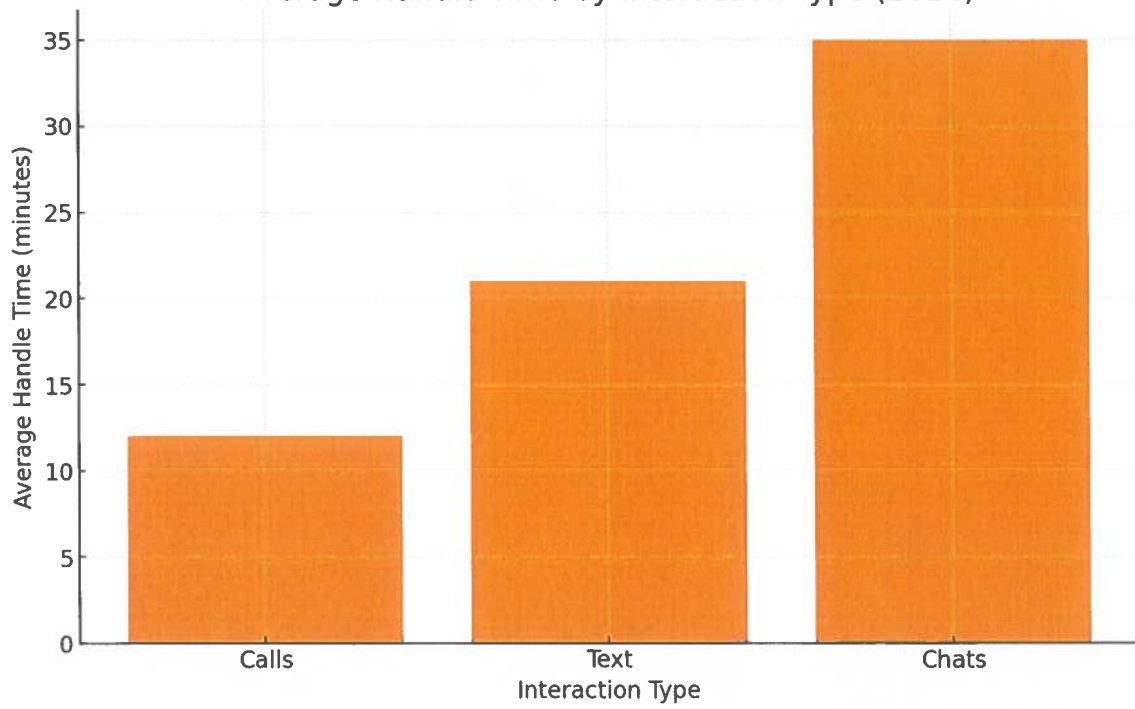
Jennifer Illich

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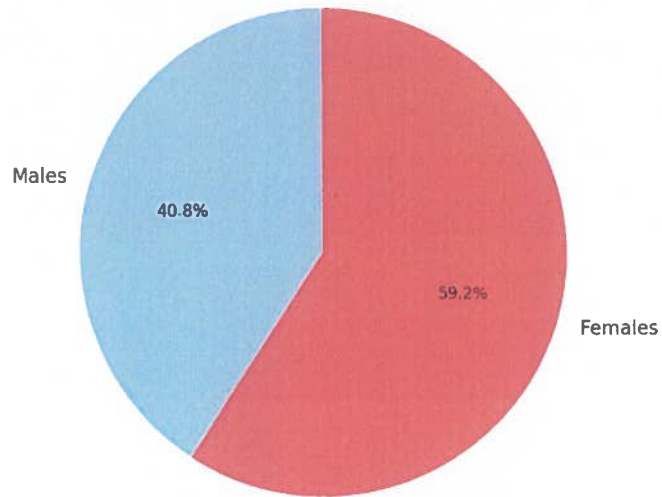
Executive Director
FirstLink



Average Handle Time by Interaction Type (2024)



Percentage of Males and Females in 2024



Age Distribution (2024)

