

Testimony Before the Legislative Management Information Technology Committee

July 8, 2026

Jennifer Illich

Executive Director, FirstLink

Chairman Bosch and members of the Information Technology Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Jennifer Illich, and I serve as Executive Director of FirstLink. Every emergency communication begins the same way. Someone reaches out because they don't know what to do next. Sometimes that call belongs at 911. Sometimes it belongs at 988. Increasingly in North Dakota, those two systems work together, and that is why I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you as you conduct the study directed by Senate Bill 2021.

FirstLink answers North Dakota's 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and 211 Information and Referral Helpline. We also provide after-hours behavioral health crisis support for Behavioral Health Clinics, coordinate mobile crisis handoffs, support hospitals and healthcare partners, and maintain the state's community resource database. In many ways, FirstLink has become the front door to North Dakota's behavioral health crisis system.

The Legislature has invested significantly in building a coordinated behavioral health crisis continuum. Mobile crisis teams, 911 partnerships, hospitals, Behavioral Health Clinics, law enforcement, schools, tribal partners, and community providers all have important roles. Those investments work only if the first conversation connects people to the right response.

Demand has changed dramatically. In 2025, FirstLink received more than 21,000 North Dakota 988 calls, texts, and chats and supported more than 88,000 total contacts across all services. Our specialists complete suicide risk assessments, develop collaborative safety plans, coordinate warm handoffs to mobile crisis, connect people with local resources, and help resolve crises in the least restrictive setting. Last year alone, we coordinated more than 8,300 mobile crisis handoffs, while only 78 of more than 88,000 contacts required an involuntary emergency intervention.

I'd like to share an example from just this past week. A North Dakota law enforcement officer did exactly what agencies across our state have been trained to do. Rather than immediately defaulting to another response, the officer called 988 to coordinate with mobile crisis. Unfortunately, that call rolled to one of our national backup centers because no North Dakota specialist was available. The officer waited approximately

twenty minutes before being told the center could not assist with the request. We later researched the incident and confirmed the call had been answered by a backup center.

I want to be clear: this is not criticism of our backup partners. They provide an essential safety net and protect callers when local centers are unavailable. The challenge is that North Dakota has built something unique. Our local helpline specialists on our ND 988 phone lines know our Behavioral Health Clinics, mobile crisis teams, dispatch centers, hospitals, tribal partners, and local resources. A national backup center cannot fully replicate those relationships. That experience reinforced a simple truth: when North Dakota invests in mobile crisis and 911-988 partnerships, those investments depend on someone local answering the first call.

That is exactly why I believe Senate Bill 2021 is so important. The study language directs Legislative Management to examine emergency communications funding, including behavioral health crisis response, the adequacy of current fee structures, the financial needs of both 911 and 988, and long-term revenue options. I appreciate the committee's thoughtful work because emergency communications now include behavioral health crisis response alongside traditional public safety.

The challenge we face is not commitment or demand, it is capacity. In 2025, more than 5,200 North Dakota 988 contacts flowed to national backup centers because we did not have enough local staff available. Most of those were texts and chats, where demand has grown rapidly. Every local answer strengthens North Dakota's crisis system; every rollover is a missed opportunity to connect someone immediately with a specialist who understands our state.

For the 2027-2029 biennium, FirstLink has submitted a request for additional operational funding to Health and Human Services. The request would add 26 staff members, improve local response capacity, reduce reliance on backup centers, strengthen quality assurance, and support the infrastructure necessary to keep more North Dakotans connected to local care.

As you continue the work assigned under Senate Bill 2021, I respectfully ask that you view 988 as essential emergency communications infrastructure. Just as 911 connects people to fire, law enforcement, and emergency medical services, 988 connects people to behavioral health crisis care. Both save lives. Both require dependable infrastructure. Both require sustainable funding.

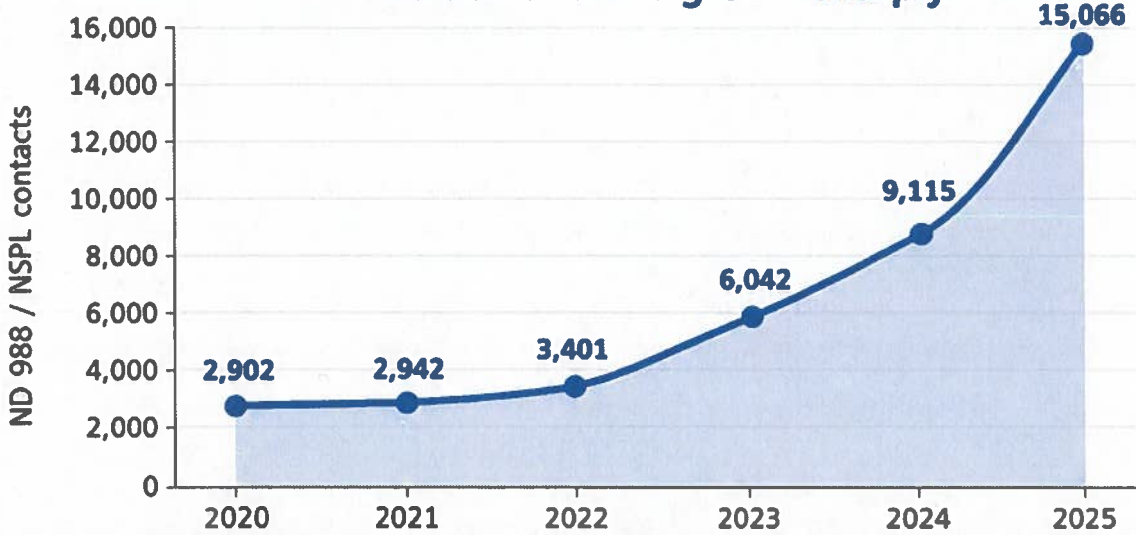
Thank you for your leadership, your service to North Dakota, and the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Jennifer Illich jenniferi@myfirstlink.org 701-293-6462 extension 123

DEMAND IS GROWING FASTER THAN LOCAL CAPACITY.

North Dakotans are reaching out in record numbers.

ND 988 demand has grown sharply



From 2,902 contacts in 2020 to 15,066 in 2025—a 419% increase.

Source: FirstLink historical ND 988/NSPL data.

Nearly **one in four** North Dakota 988 contacts could not be answered locally in 2025.

2025 ND 988 backup rate by contact type

CALLS
9.8%
answered by backup
(1,439)

TEXTS
59.2%
answered by backup
(1,645)

CHATS
60.2%
answered by backup
(2,118)

Source: FirstLink North Dakota Services Report, 2025.

2025 ND 988 CONTACT TYPE SUMMARY

Contact Type	Received	Answered Locally	Flowed to Backup	Backup %	Avg. Duration
Calls	14,717	12,566	1,439	9.8%	11.8 min
Texts	2,781	1,101	1,645	59.2%	38.1 min
Chats	3,517	1,168	2,118	60.2%	25.6 min
Total	21,015	14,835	5,202	24.8%	—

Source: FirstLink North Dakota Services Report, 2025.



988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE
211 INFORMATION & REFERRAL

North Dakota's Front Door to Behavioral Health Crisis Care

We answer. We connect. We save lives.



FirstLink is the front door to North Dakota's behavioral health crisis system.



988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline



211 Information & Referral



Follow-Up Care & Support



Mobile Crisis Coordination



After-Hours Support for ND Behavioral Health Clinics

“ Every conversation is an opportunity to connect someone to the right help at the right time. ”

NORTH DAKOTA'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CRISIS CONTINUUM

One coordinated system. Many partners. Better outcomes.



2025 IMPACT



88,004
total conversations across all services



21,015
North Dakota 988 contacts (calls, texts, chats)



8,309
mobile crisis handoffs coordinated



78
emergency interventions out of more than 88,000 contacts (0.09%)



Connecting people to the right response in the least restrictive setting.



Five Things Every Legislator Should Know About North Dakota's 988 System



1 FirstLink is the front door to North Dakota's behavioral health crisis continuum.

We answer 988 calls, texts and chats and 211 information requests, provide follow-up care and support, coordinate mobile crisis handoffs, support hospitals and partners, and connect people to local resources. FirstLink is the first conversation on the path to the right help.



2 988 works alongside 911— not instead of it.

911 responds to emergencies for life, safety and property. 988 connects people to behavioral health crisis care. Together, they are both essential parts of North Dakota's emergency communications system.



3 Demand has increased 419% since 2020.

North Dakota 988 contacts have grown from 2,902 in 2020 to 15,066 in 2025. More North Dakotans are reaching out, and they need someone local to answer.



4 More than 5,200 North Dakota contacts rolled to backup centers in 2025 because of staffing limitations.

Nearly one in four 988 contacts (24.8%) could not be answered locally. Most were texts and chats, where demand is growing fastest. Every rollover is a missed opportunity to connect someone with a specialist who knows our communities and resources.



5 Local answers strengthen North Dakota's crisis response system.

When someone local answers first, we can quickly coordinate with Behavioral Health Clinics, mobile crisis teams, law enforcement, hospitals, tribal partners and community providers—so more people get the right help, in the right place, at the right time.



988 is essential emergency communications infrastructure.
It connects people to hope, help and healing.