

# 2023



## ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

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**FirstLink**  
4342 15th Ave S  
Ste 201A  
Fargo, ND 58103





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## Mission

To assist people in identifying, accessing, and making effective use of community and volunteer resources.

## Vision

To be the *first link* in linking people and resources 24 hours a day.

## Purpose

- Provide appropriate information and referral of non-profit and government agencies, and for-profit behavioral health
- Provide 24-hour supportive listening to contacts
- Provide suicide intervention by handling contacts from the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Provide education on the topics of mental health, suicide prevention, and wellness
- Provide after-hours telephone support for other human service agencies when their offices close



American Association of Suicidology  
Accredited since 1987



InformUSA  
Accredited since 2009





# Overview of Services

## 24/7 Telephone Support

### ***Information & Referral Services***

2-1-1 Information & Referral Helpline  
Community Resource Directory

### ***Suicide & Mental Health Services***

9-8-8 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline  
Care & Support Program

### ***Contracted Telephone Services***

Statewide North Dakota University System  
Rape & Abuse Crisis Center  
Community Chaplains  
Region IV South Mobile Crisis Teams  
Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network  
Statewide North Dakota Human Service Centers  
Reach for Resilience  
Neighborhood Network

### ***Emergency & Disaster Services***

Child Abduction Response Team (CART)  
Local & Statewide Disaster Response  
Volunteer Coordination

## Community Outreach

### ***Education Programs***

safeTALK  
Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training  
Mental Health First Aid  
Youth Mental Health First Aid  
Suicide Risk Assessment (C-SSRS)

### ***Community Engagement***

Meet FirstLink  
Specialized Presentations on Mental Wellbeing  
Community Coalition/Committee Participation  
Giving Hearts Day  
2nd Annual Youth Film Festival  
FirstLink Annual Breakfast

### ***Public Relations & Marketing***

Social Media  
FirstLink Website  
Agency Newsletter & e-Newsletters  
Digital & Print Advertising  
Visual Media Corespondence

## Administration

### ***Development***

Fundraising  
Grant Writing  
Strategic Planning

### ***Financial***

Budget  
Audit  
Financial Reporting  
Accounting

### ***Human Resources***

Benefit Management  
Staffing & Employee Retention



# ADMINISTRATION



Board of Directors  
Organizational Chart  
Funding Update  
Operations Update

# Board of Directors



**Kyle Veum**

Vice Chair of Internal Board



**Hollie McLean**

Board Chair  
Vice Chair of Governance



**Thomas Tweten**

Vice Chair of External Board



**Kristi Clifton**

Governance



**Sarah Aaberg**

Governance



**Timothy Briggeman**

Governance



**Chelsey Matter**

Internal



**Darren Schmidt**

Internal



**Dave Lund**

External



**Elizabeth Medd**

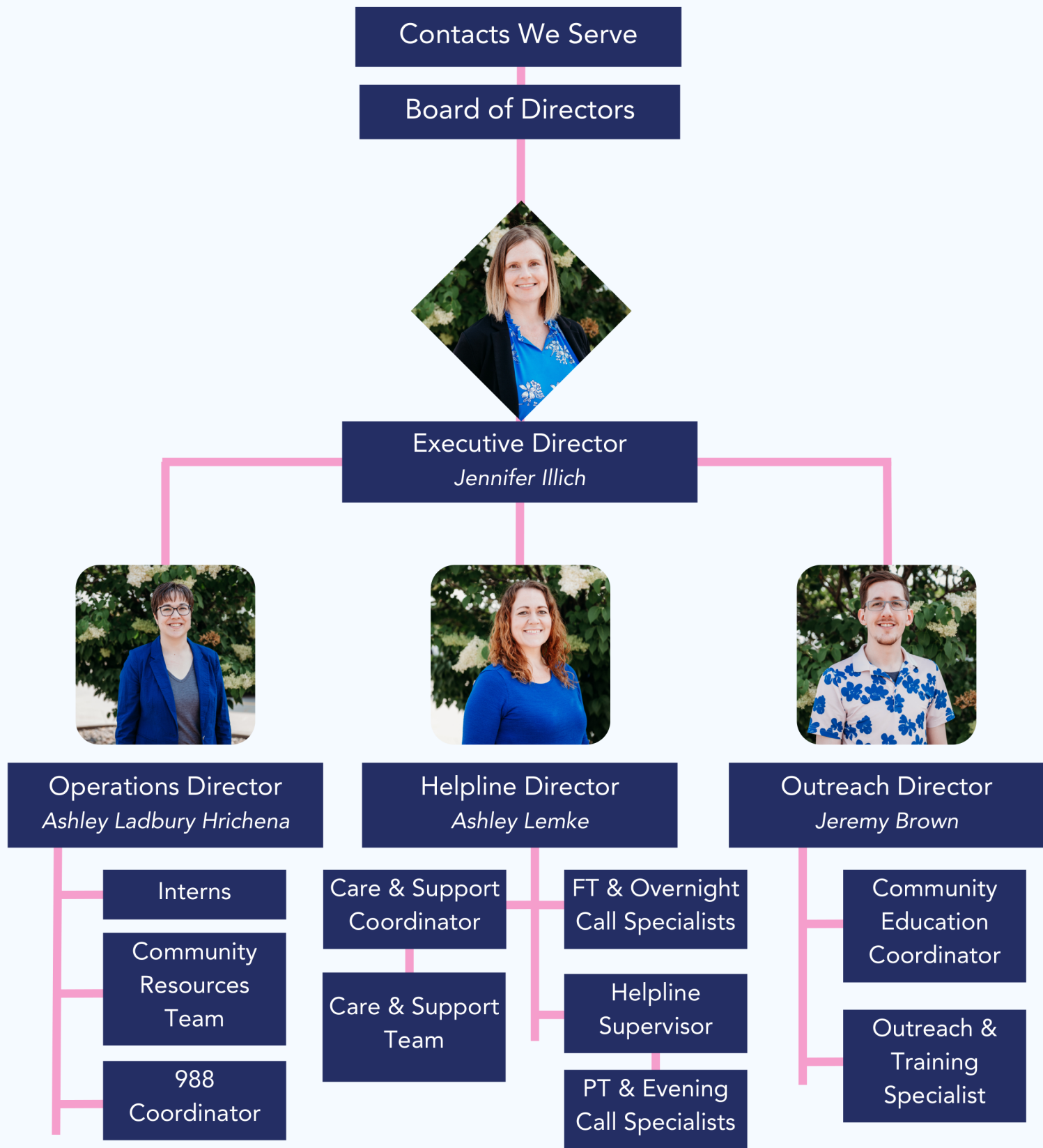
External



**Blaise Kautzman**

External

# Organizational Chart



# Financial Update

FirstLink is fortunate to have diverse sources of funding to ensure that we can fulfill our mission. **Funding sources include:**

- Government grants & contracts
- Foundational grants
- Corporate contributions
- Contract fees for phone support
- Training fees for community education programs
- Individual donations and gifts

In 2023, FirstLink received a much-needed expansion of funding provided by the North Dakota state legislator to power the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

We want to thank all of our supporters for being a part of team FirstLink and the contributions that have been made to drive our vision forward. Together, we can ensure that **hope is on the line.**







Staff training featuring CARES team

FirstLink team attending TEDxFargo

## Operations Update

After focusing on our move in 2022, we used 2023 to focus on improving our operations in our new office space. **In 2023, we were able to start answering 988 chat and texts 24 hours a day!** We have also been working to improve our IT systems and phone service.

In 2023, FirstLink worked with the administrator of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, Vibrant Emotional Health, to align our suicide safety policies with national standards. This ensures all people who reach out to 988 receive consistent service regardless of which call center they connect with. Vibrant also released a new online learning portal in 2023. All FirstLink staff were able to take the new courses to help improve our knowledge of active engagement, suicide assessments, sending emergency services, handling 988 chat and text interactions, and taking care of ourselves as call takers.

In 2023, four of our team members passed the InformUSA Community Resource Specialist exam for individual certification. InformUSA certification demonstrates excellence in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and work-related behaviors in the field of Information & Referral. **FirstLink now has five InformUSA certified Community Resource Specialists.**



# SUPPORT SERVICES




Telephone Support Update  
9-8-8 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline  
Community Resources Update  
Care & Support Program

## Telephone Support Update

Throughout the past year, FirstLink has witnessed a remarkable surge in the demand for mental health support across all lines, in addition to steady growth in contacts requesting information for local community resources on the 211 Information & Referral Helpline. This demand called for a substantial expansion in staffing from 16 full-time and 10 part-time staff at the beginning of 2023, to 25 full-time and 16 part-time by year-end.

This increase in staffing has significantly reduced the average wait time for callers who reach FirstLink. The most notable improvement to wait times being on the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. **In January 2023, 988 calls were answered by one of our Call Specialists within an average of 43 seconds, a figure that was impressively slashed to just 31 seconds by December.**

A decorative dark blue line that starts on the left, loops into a heart shape, then continues as a wavy line across the middle, loops into another heart shape, and ends on the right.

"I appreciate you talking to me tonight. You helped give me good ideas and it helps to wipe away negative thoughts from my head."

"FirstLink is my social support. You are very special people and really help. A Call Specialist saved my life a few years ago."

FirstLink has proven to be accessible, responsive, and effective at offering support and safety planning to help-seekers in our service area. Our Call Specialists are able to provide crucial, and sometimes life-saving, support, and resources to those in need. **From saving lives to providing invaluable resources, our commitment to being a lifeline for those in need is evident in the heartfelt expressions of gratitude from those we've supported.**

# 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline



Rachel, 988 Coordinator

With all the improvements surrounding the **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**, FirstLink took action to ensure we remain diligent in following best practices for our center and delivering quality service to help-seekers.

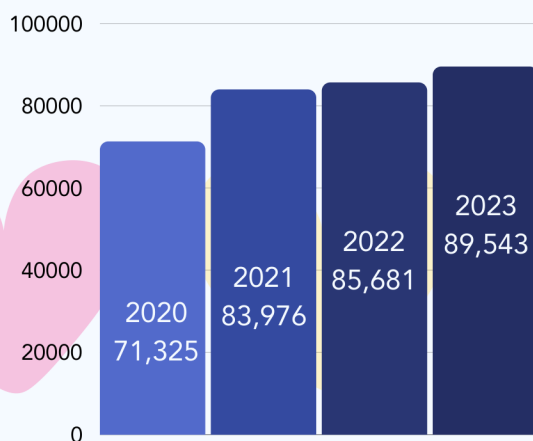
Rachel has been with FirstLink for nearly 2 years. She began as an intern, then joined the Community Resource team, before being promoted to 988 Coordinator. This role is new to FirstLink and includes implementing staff trainings, reviewing interactions for quality assurance, and upholding policy requirements from Vibrant Emotional Health. We have seen major advancements in all aspects of the 988 Lifeline thanks to Rachel's hard work.

Comparing 2022 to 2023, **FirstLink saw a 61% increase in 988 contacts, including chats, texts, and calls.** In addition to the increase in volume, we were able to maintain less than .01% of crisis interactions resulting in involuntary emergency intervention. Not only does this show the expertise and immense training that our Call Specialists undergo but emphasizes the value of 988. Each successful 988 contact through FirstLink reduces the burden on local emergency first responders and ensures those seeking help receive the least-invasive and most appropriate intervention.

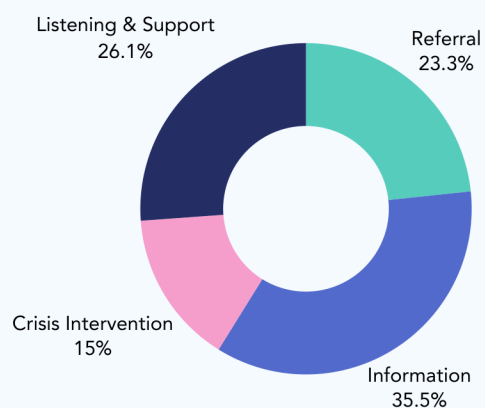
To further our effort of creating suicide-safer communities across North Dakota, Rachel and FirstLink's Operations Director, Ashley, have been working together to build partnerships with local 911 dispatch centers. FirstLink is currently partnered with the Red River Regional Dispatch Center serving the Fargo-Moorhead area. This partnership helps with providing over the phone support by trained Call Specialists at FirstLink before dispatching further resources such as medical or police for mental health crises. We have already begun reaching out to other North Dakota dispatch centers to provide information about our services and hopefully build a partnership with them.



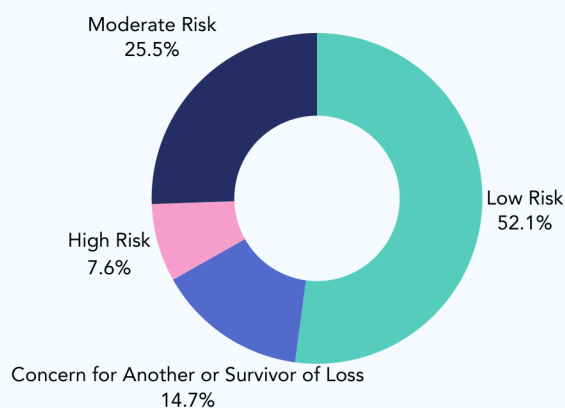
## Total Contacts\*



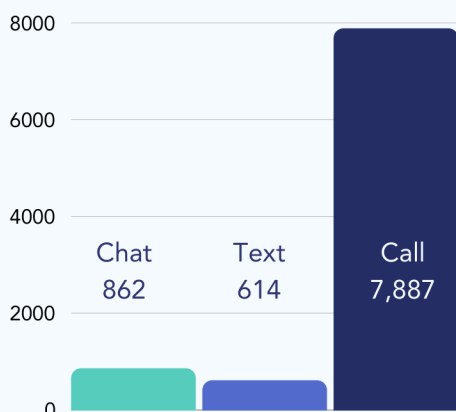
## Contact Type\*



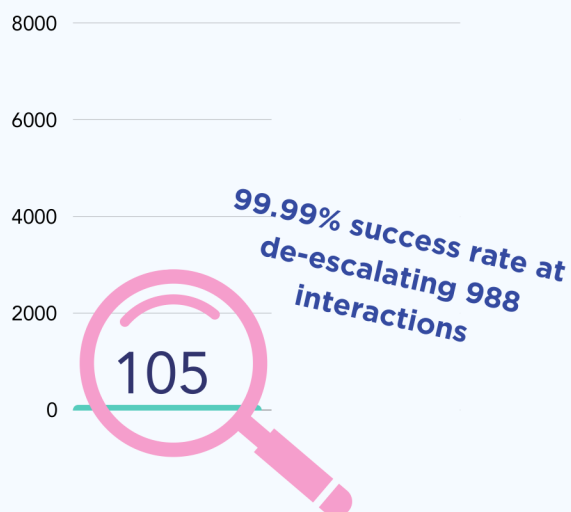
## Suicide-Related Contacts\*



## 988 Lifeline Contacts



## 988 Lifeline interactions resulting in involuntary rescue



View more statistics  
such as help-seeker  
demographics online!



Chelsy & Alyssa, Community Resources Team



## Community Resources Update

FirstLink's Community Resource Team had a very busy 2023! In August, our team transitioned from a 3-person department down to a 2-person team. Even with that change, we have remained steadfast in our commitment to expand FirstLink's Community Resource Directory. **In 2023, over 190 programs were added to our directory, all of which are accessible to the public by calling 2-1-1, texting your zip code to 898-211, or searching online at [www.myfirstlink.org](http://www.myfirstlink.org)!**

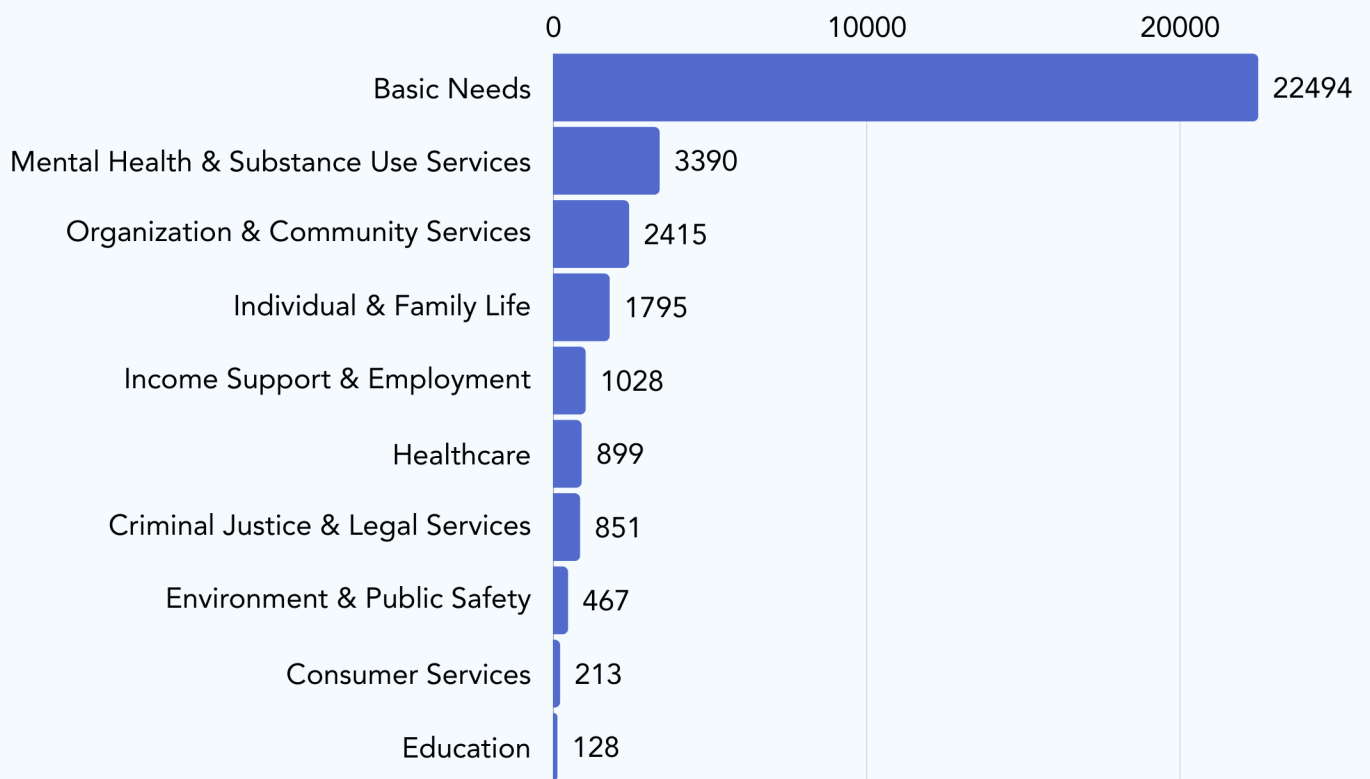
Over 170 of the added programs were services offered by non-profit organizations in our service area. A focus for our team this year was identifying physical and occupational health services, and mental health resources, accessible to those in more rural areas, with an emphasis on the Western side of our great state of North Dakota.

With such a vast directory of resources, our team prides themselves on maintaining a high level of accuracy. Ideally, every single one of the over 5,400 programs in our directory are updated at least once each year. Our team gathers this information using a few different methods, beginning with an automated verification request. This request is sent via email and provides a link for agencies to review and update their own information. One of our Community Resource Administrators will then connect with those who did not respond to the automated message by individual email, phone call, site visit, or verifying information through public listings such as websites, social media, newspapers, etc.

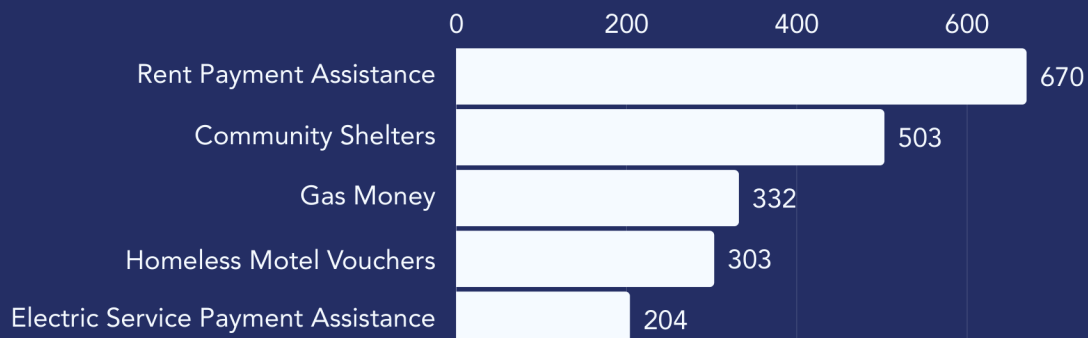
Using these methods, and a lot of teamwork!, we were able to complete an annual verification on 5,408 resources in 2023. **This is 99.07% of the listings in our directory**, and a 17% increase from the resources verified in 2022.

We want to remind our supporters and help-seekers that FirstLink's resource directory is public! You do not need to call or text FirstLink to access helpful resource information. By visiting our website, anyone with internet access can search our user-friendly online resource directory. Using this tool, anyone can search for resources by type, location, or utilize our helpful guided search feature to assist in navigating any need.

### Resources Offered in 2023



### Top Unmet Needs




## Care & Support Update

FirstLink's Care & Support Program is here to support the emotional and physical safety of those with mental health concerns. This could include depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, concerning substance use, or any other challenge.

**The Care & Support Team provides free and confidential listening and support on an ongoing basis. Support is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.**

Studies have shown that crisis center have advantages that help them provide follow-up care to those who benefit from extra support. This follow-up can be critical to preventing future relapses, readmission to intensive care, or reattempting suicide. Research has shown that preventative interventions of this nature have stopped individuals from dying by suicide 79.6% of the time, and **kept them safe 90.6% of the time.**

This year, the Care & Support team welcomed three new team members! Lauren and Jenna joined the team to offer support to program participants as Care & Support Specialists. In August, we also welcomed Trinity Weber as the new Care & Support Coordinator! Trinity has been focused on outreach by strengthening relationships with current partners and reaching out to new facilities to begin working together. Trinity has been able to spread awareness and utilization of the program by presenting to the community about the awesome services available to those in need.



"These calls help me track time, because I can lose that when I'm depressed, and I realize I am actually getting better. I have gone from not seeing tomorrow and not wanting to wake up in the morning to having a plan and going back to school. I'm so glad to have this program because it helped me be honest, reach out for help, and acknowledge my feelings around suicide."



## Partnerships & Referrals

The Care & Support Team accepts internal referrals from interactions on the 211 Helpline and 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, along with other contract phone lines answered by FirstLink when appropriate.

We also partner with clinics, hospitals, and mental health providers across North Dakota and Minnesota for external referrals.

The process of partnering and sending referrals to the Care & Support Program is simple. Please reach out to our Care & Support Coordinator, Trinity, at [trinityw@myfirstlink.org](mailto:trinityw@myfirstlink.org) for more information.



## 2023 At A Glance

**10,709** total **contacts**

**1,759** **referrals** made



**913** **caring cards** sent

**732** **accepted** follow-up



COMMUNITY OUTREACH



Trainings & Education  
Community Engagement  
2023 Events

## Trainings & Education

2023 was a year of tremendous growth for FirstLink's Community Outreach Team! We began 2023 with just an Outreach Director, but soon welcomed two new team members to help meet the demand of training and community engagements, including a Community Education Coordinator and Training & Outreach Specialist. By expanding the team, we can reach a wider audience for each outreach event we provide or attend.

FirstLink continues to offer a wide variety of trainings on the topics of mental health, suicide, self-care, de-escalation, and more. These trainings include both national and internationally recognized trainings as well as trainings curated by our experienced staff.

To meet our ongoing goal of creating suicide-safer communities, FirstLink offers several standardized trainings developed by LivingWorks Education, including **safeTALK** (Suicide Alertness for Everyone) and **ASIST** (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training).

FirstLink also offers **Adult & Youth Mental Health First Aid**, both in-person and virtually. Mental Health First Aid is a standardized workshop, developed by the National Council on Mental Wellbeing. We are so proud to share that, in 2023, **FirstLink facilitated an Adult MHFA workshop in all 8 regions across North Dakota, reaching a total of 419 participants.**



**safeTALK**



**ASIST**



**Mental Health FIRST AID**  
from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

## 2023 At A Glance

**118 trainings** held  
**3,000 learners**  
reached



**471 hours** of outreach  
**6,705 booth**  
attendees



# Community Engagements

Beyond trainings, FirstLink was able to provide an array of opportunities for our community to connect with us at booths or community events! **2023 was a monumental year of fostering connections with the communities we serve and other agencies offering support.**

FirstLink was able to attend various events throughout the year, including Youthworks' "We've Got You Covered" back-to-school clothing drive, and the Fargo-Moorhead Pride in the Park event. One of the biggest events we attended was the North Dakota Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference in Bismarck! FirstLink was very grateful to be invited to host a booth and attend this conference, allowing us to connect with over 700 individuals!

All of the events we've been able to attend have offered a great opportunity to experience the passion of those wanting to help their communities, meet and connect with other agencies or professionals, and to learn how FirstLink can continue to create supportive, suicide-safer communities in North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota.

**This includes a recent effort to become more involved in the high schools within our service area.** FirstLink began hosting booths to connect with students during passing times and lunch hours, reaching Sheyenne High School and Discovery Middle School in Fargo in 2023. We plan to continue collaborating with local schools and have already made arrangements to connect with students at West Fargo High School and Oak Grove Lutheran School in 2024.

**We are looking forward to another year of creating suicide-safer communities,** dispelling misinformation and stigma surrounding mental health challenges, and connecting with our community to share about FirstLink's life-saving services!



*NDSU Welcome Week Block Party*



*FM Pride in the Park*



### **Giving Hearts Day was February 9th 2023**

Giving Hearts Day is North Dakota's 24-hour online giving event. Giving Hearts Day is FirstLink's biggest fundraising day of the year. **Thanks to our generous donors and community supporters, we were able to exceed our goal and raise over \$45,000!** We want to thank everyone who helped us reach our goal. Your support has enabled us to be there 24 hours a day to provide help and hope to all those struggling in our communities.

**Giving Hearts Day 2024 is Thursday, February 8th.** We have a bold goal to raise \$60,000 to help support our work of offering hope and connection 24 hours a day.



**Giving Hearts Day**

### **The 2nd Annual Youth Film Festival was April 13th, 2023.**

High school and college students across North Dakota and Minnesota submitted films to break through the silence and break down the stigma surrounding mental health.

**Check out the 2023 films at [bit.ly/FLFilms23](https://bit.ly/FLFilms23)**



### **FirstLink's**

**13th Annual Breakfast was May 4th, 2023.**

We welcomed guest speaker Dennis Gillan from the Half-a-Sorrow Foundation

Every year, we bring our supporters, stakeholders, and members of the community together to talk about mental wellbeing and suicide. In 2023, we heard from Dennis about surviving suicide loss.

**The 14th Annual Breakfast is May 1st, 2024 at the Hilton Garden Inn in Fargo.**

We will be joined by Jill Nelson from NDSU to discuss resiliency and strengthening our ability to cope when life takes it's toll.