

# 2025



## ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

---

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

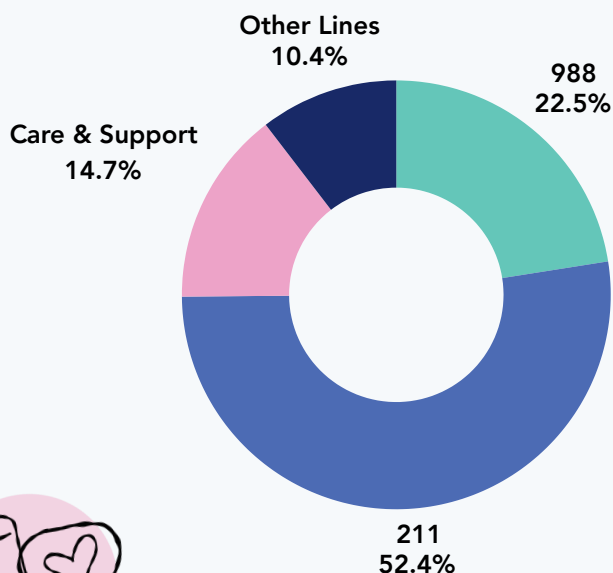


# Table of Contents

1	At-a-Glance Impact   2025
3	Letter from the Executive Director
4	Why This Work Matters
5	Our Purpose, Mission, and Vision
6	How FirstLink Works: One Call, Multiple Pathways
	Core Services:
7	• 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline – Crisis response, system coordination, and impact story
8	• 211 Information & Referral Helpline – Resource navigation, database improvements, and community access
9	• Care & Support: Follow-Up That Saves Lives – Ongoing connection, continuity of care, and outcomes
10	Prevention, Education, and Outreach
11	Financial Update – 2025
12	Board of Directors
13	Annual Community Breakfast
14	Giving Hearts Day 2025
15	Looking Ahead to 2026
16	FirstLink Structure
17	Thanks, and Appreciation

# At-a-Glance Impact | 2025

*In 2025, FirstLink continued to serve as a critical connection point for individuals and families across North Dakota and neighboring Minnesota communities, providing immediate crisis response, trusted resource navigation, and ongoing follow-up care.*



**88,004** total contacts across 988, 211, and Care & Support, and Contracted Lines.

## Contact Breakdown

- **19,806** 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- **46,081** 211 Information & Referral
- **12,947** Care & Support follow-up
- **9,170** Contract/Other Lines

"Contact" includes calls, texts, or chats if applicable.



- **24 hours a day, 365 days a year** availability by phone, text, and chat
- **106** trainings and presentations delivered
- **7,700+** individuals reached through education
- **25,000+ community members reached** through outreach
- **35** community outreach events and booths
- **8** partnered 911 dispatch centers statewide

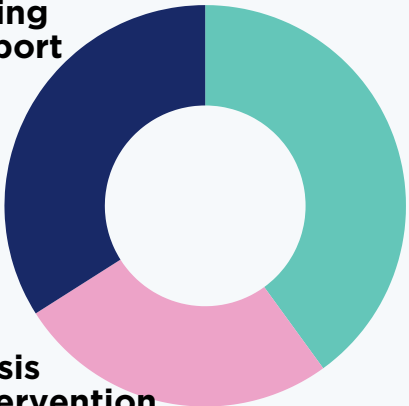
*Every number represents a person seeking connection, and a system designed to respond with care.*

# At-a-Glance Impact | 2025

\*across all lines

## Contact Type\*

**Listening & Support**  
34%

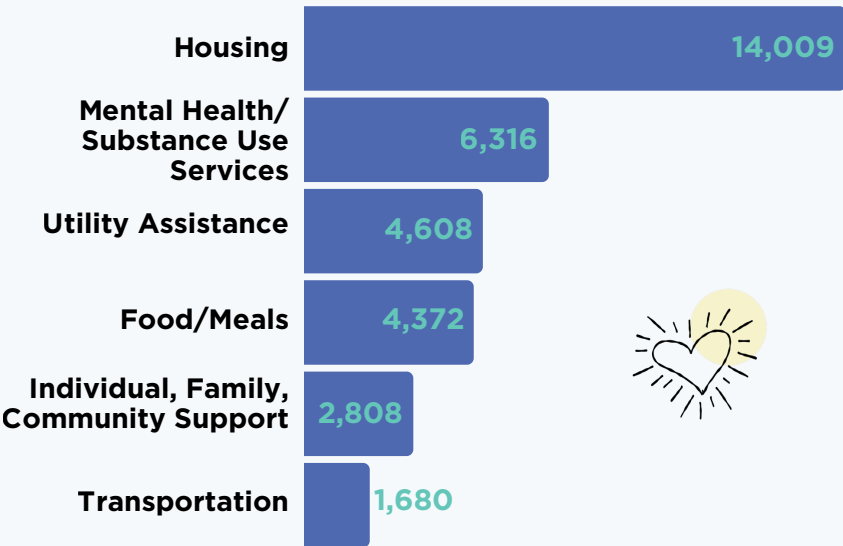


**Information & Referral**  
40%

**Crisis Intervention**  
26%

## Top Resource Needs\*

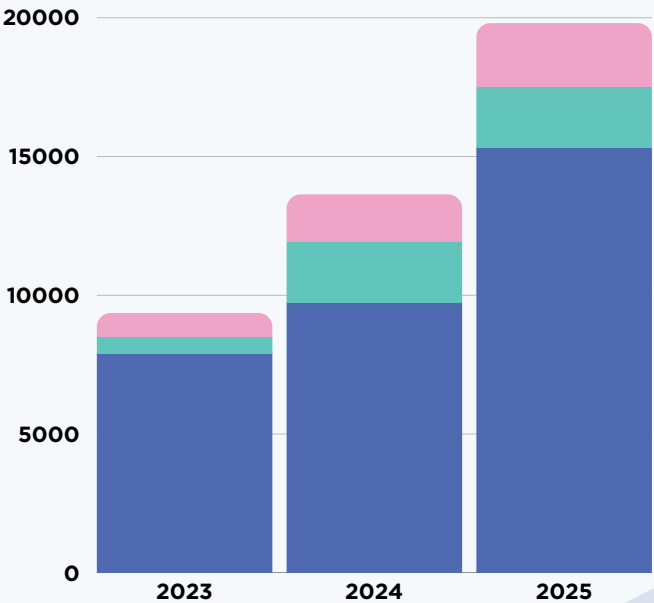
**40,938** resource referrals offered



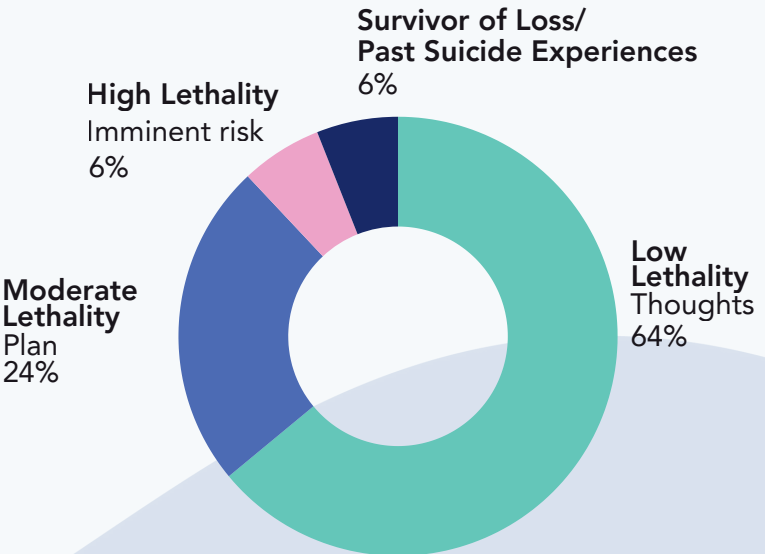
## Suicide Related Interactions

**Help-seekers reaching the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**

● Calls ● Texts ● Chats



## Suicide Needs Breakdown



**Total Suicide Related Contacts (all lines): 18,896**  
Interaction regarding concern for another: **594**



**99.9% rate of success de-escalating crises over the phone.**  
Out of the 88,004 contacts FirstLink had in 2025, only 78 resulted in involuntary emergency intervention



# LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP



Dear Community Partners, Supporters, and Friends,

At FirstLink, connection is more than a service, it is a lifeline.

In 2025, individuals and families across North Dakota and neighboring Minnesota communities reached out to FirstLink during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives. They called, texted, and chatted not just for information, but for reassurance, understanding, and hope. Because of your partnership and support, FirstLink was there, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

This annual report reflects a year of continued growth, deepened collaboration, and strengthened systems of care. From expanding coordination between 988 and 911, to increasing access to follow-up Care & Support, to reaching thousands through education and prevention, FirstLink continued to focus on what matters most; ensuring people are not alone.

We are deeply grateful to our staff, volunteers, board members, partners, and funders. Your commitment makes it possible to respond with compassion, professionalism, and care, no matter where someone lives or how they reach out.

As you read this report, we invite you to reflect not only on the numbers, but on the human stories behind them. Every contact represents a person seeking connection. Every partnership represents shared responsibility. Together, we are building safer, stronger, more connected communities.



With gratitude,  
**Jennifer Illich**  
Executive Director, FirstLink



## Why This Work Matters

In North Dakota and parts of Minnesota, asking for help is not always easy. Long distances, harsh weather, and workforce shortages can make mental health care feel out of reach, especially in rural communities. For many people, there is no nearby clinic, no immediate appointment, and no one to turn to in the middle of the night. In those moments, a phone call, text, or chat may be the only lifeline available.

At the same time, both North Dakota and Minnesota continues to experience higher rates of suicide and suicide attempts than many other parts of the United States. Behind these statistics are real people, neighbors, coworkers, parents, and teens that are facing overwhelming stress, isolation, and pain. The need for support that is immediate, compassionate, and easy to access has never been greater.

FirstLink exists so that geography does not determine whether someone receives help. By providing any hour, any day crisis intervention, trusted resource navigation, and ongoing follow-up through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the 211 Information & Referral Helpline, and Care & Support, FirstLink ensures that help is always within reach. No matter where someone lives or how they reach out, they are met with connection, care, and hope.



## Help for Everyone. Anytime. Anywhere.

- Free, confidential support, always at no cost to those seeking help
- Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- Phone, text, and chat options to meet people where they are
- Support provided through:
  - 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
  - 211 Information & Referral Helpline
- Coordination with Human Service Centers (HSC)
- Partnerships with NDUS, BCBS, and community agencies
- FirstLink serves people of all ages, backgrounds, identities, and communities, urban, rural, frontier, and tribal, because crisis does not discriminate, and neither does care.





## Our Purpose, Mission, and Vision

### Purpose

FirstLink exists to keep communities connected. We ensure individuals and families have access to compassionate support, timely intervention, and trusted resources—especially during moments of crisis.

Through 24/7 response to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Information & Referral Helpline, FirstLink provides suicide intervention, supportive listening, and connections to nonprofit, government, and behavioral health services. FirstLink also partners with human service agencies to provide after-hours support when offices are closed.

Beyond answering calls, texts, and chats, FirstLink strengthens communities through education, outreach, and training focused on mental health, suicide prevention, and wellness, recognizing that strong connections save lives and help prevent crisis before it begins.

### 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.



American Association of Suicidology  
Accredited since 1987



InformUSA  
Accredited since 2009



# HOW FIRSTLINK WORKS:



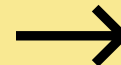
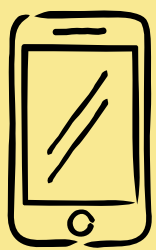
## One Call, Multiple Pathways

FirstLink serves as a central access point within North Dakota's behavioral health crisis system.

Individuals may reach out directly through 988 or 211, or be connected through 911 dispatch, or Human Service Center Offices. FirstLink Call Specialists screen for suicide risk, assess needs, and triage to the appropriate level of support. When needed, FirstLink coordinates warm handoffs to State Mobile Crisis teams for in-person intervention, while remaining involved to ensure continuity of care.

For many individuals, support continues beyond the initial contact through FirstLink's Care & Support Program. Follow-up phone calls, supportive texts, and handwritten caring cards mailed to participants help reinforce connection, reduce isolation, and support safety over time.

This coordinated approach ensures individuals receive the right support, at the right time, in the least restrictive way possible.

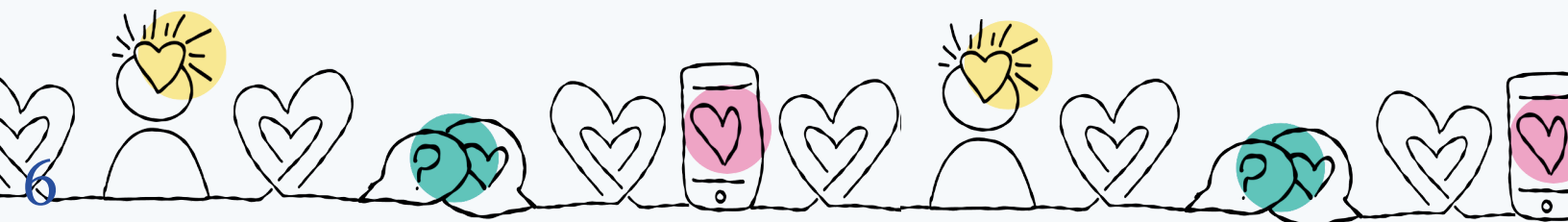


**Contact FirstLink**  
on 988 or 211

**Screening &  
Triage**

**Mobile Crisis  
& Resources**

**Care & Support  
Follow Up**

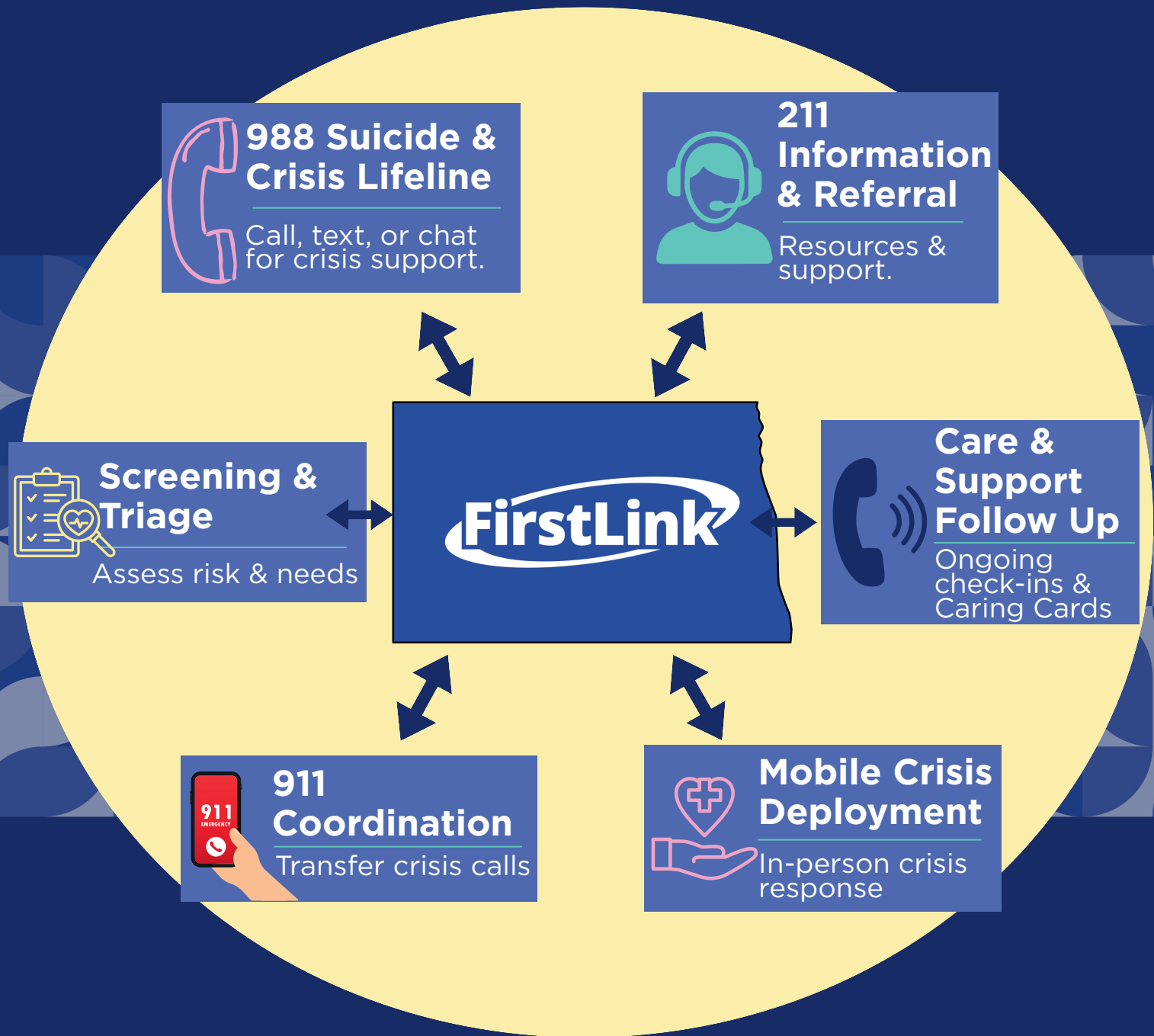


# How FirstLink Works:

## One Call, Multiple Pathways



A central access point for North Dakota's Behavioral Health Crisis System



The **right support**, at the **right time**, in the **least restrictive way**.

## Core Services: 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

In 2025, FirstLink continued to strengthen the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline as a trusted, accessible entry point for behavioral health crisis care across North Dakota and surrounding communities. As awareness of 988 continued to grow, FirstLink focused on ensuring the service functioned as an integrated part of the broader emergency response and behavioral health system.

A key focus in 2025 was deepening coordination between 988 and 911 dispatch centers. When individuals experiencing a mental health crisis contact 911, dispatchers can now live-transfer eligible calls directly to FirstLink. This allows callers to receive specialized crisis support without unnecessary law enforcement involvement and helps ensure individuals receive the right level of care at the right time.

FirstLink also played a central role in suicide risk screening and coordination with State Mobile Crisis services. When higher levels of support were needed, Call Specialists facilitated warm handoffs and supported deployment of in-person crisis services, while maintaining continuity of care.

In 2025, FirstLink responded to **19,806** total 988 contacts across phone, text, and chat. The vast majority of interactions were resolved through de-escalation, safety planning, and voluntary engagement. Fewer than **0.4%** required involuntary emergency intervention, highlighting the skill, training, and clinical judgment of FirstLink's Call Specialists.

### 988 Impact Story

After a difficult day, a help-seeker contacted 988 feeling hopeless and alone. The Call Specialist provided space to talk openly, helped identify protective factors, and collaborated with the caller to create a short-term safety plan. The caller later shared that being listened to, without pressure, helped them regain a sense of control and hope.



## Core Services: 211 Information & Referral Helpline

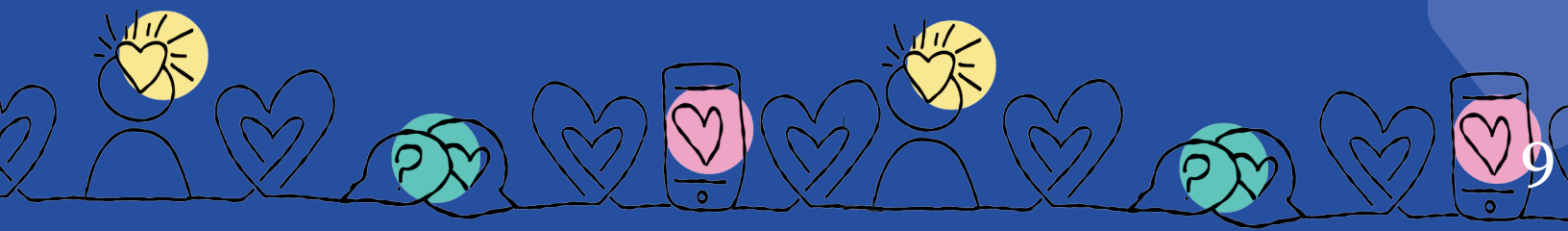
In 2025, FirstLink focused on strengthening how people access help, not just the volume of information available.

A major milestone was the transition to a new database management system designed to improve efficiency, accuracy, and ease of use for both staff and the communities we serve. This upgrade allows Call Specialists to search resources more quickly and confidently while ensuring the public-facing Community Directory is easier to navigate, more intuitive, and mobile-friendly for help-seekers.

FirstLink continued to expand and refine its Community Directory, adding **81** new programs in 2025. Behind the scenes, staff verified information across **4,666** programs from approximately **2,022** agencies, ensuring accuracy at the moments when people rely on this information most.

Access to support remained available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Community members could dial 211 to speak directly with a trained Call Specialist or text their ZIP code to 898211 to receive resource information by text. These options reduce barriers to help, particularly for individuals in rural areas or those with limited internet access.

In addition to resource navigation, 211 continues to serve as a point of listening and emotional support. Many individuals contact FirstLink not only for information, but for reassurance, problem-solving, and support during stressful or uncertain situations.



## Care & Support: Follow-Up That Saves Lives

FirstLink's Care & Support Program provides free, confidential, and ongoing follow-up support for individuals experiencing mental health challenges or recovering from a crisis.

In 2025, the program continued to see strong demand. **12,949** Care & Support contacts were made. FirstLink received more than **1,800 referrals**, with over **630 individuals accepting ongoing follow-up care**. Referrals came primarily from 988, 211, and trusted healthcare partners across North Dakota, including emergency departments, behavioral health providers, and hospitals that refer patients to FirstLink for continued support after a crisis.

Care & Support includes regular phone calls, supportive text messages, and handwritten caring cards mailed to participants. These consistent points of connection provide reassurance, reduce isolation, and reinforce that individuals are not alone after leaving a hospital, clinic, or crisis setting. Research and best practices consistently show that follow-up contact after a crisis helps reduce suicide risk and supports healing and recovery over time.

Throughout the year, Care & Support staff focused on building trust, strengthening connection, and supporting emotional and physical safety beyond the initial moment of crisis. By working closely with healthcare providers and community partners, FirstLink helps ensure continuity of care during a critical transition period. As the program continues to evolve, FirstLink remains committed to expanding follow-up services and deepening partnerships to meet growing community need.

One participant shared that the combination of phone calls and kindness helped her feel valued and seen, not just during the crisis, but afterward.

Another participant described how meaningful it was to receive a handwritten card in the mail.

Caring calls helped participants stay grounded, talk through stressors, and feel less alone.



# PREVENTION, EDUCATION, AND OUTREACH



In 2025, FirstLink expanded its community impact through focused education and outreach. Our team delivered **106 trainings and presentations**, reaching over **7,700 individuals** and providing more than 345 hours of mental health and suicide-prevention education across North Dakota and neighboring Minnesota communities.

FirstLink also participated in **35 community outreach events and booths**, reaching over **25,000 community members**, increasing awareness of 988, 211, and prevention resources while strengthening local partnerships.

Through evidence-based trainings, including **safeTALK**, **ASIST**, and **Adult and Youth Mental Health First Aid**, FirstLink continued to equip individuals and organizations with practical tools to support mental wellbeing and respond to crisis with confidence.



## Training Participant Reflections



"This training gave our team practical tools we can actually use at work and at home."

"I didn't realize how powerful simply checking in and staying connected could be."

"I walked away more confident, knowing I don't have to have all the answers to help someone."

Following FirstLink trainings, 97% of participants reported feeling comfortable screening for suicide, an essential skill for early intervention and prevention.



FirstLink Outreach Team

Skyler Manney, LSW

Evelyn Kenkel



# Strengthening the System Through Partnership

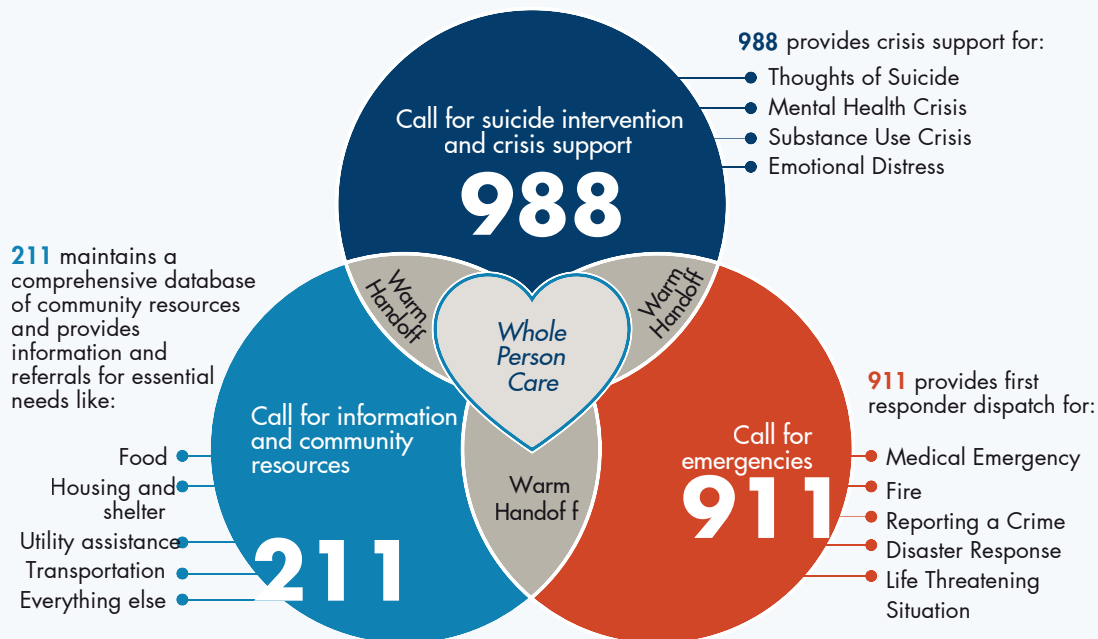
FirstLink's impact is made possible through collaboration and shared responsibility.

Key partners include:

- 911 dispatch centers across North Dakota, enabling live transfer of behavioral-health-related calls
- State and regional Mobile Crisis teams, supporting in-person crisis response
- Healthcare systems and hospitals, referring individuals to Care & Support
- Behavioral health providers and human service agencies across the state
- BCBS and NDUS connecting those they serve to 24/7 support

Together, these partnerships ensure crisis response is coordinated, compassionate, and effective, from first contact through follow-up care.

## Help is 3 Numbers Away



## Financial Update - 2025

FirstLink continues to steward resources responsibly to ensure uninterrupted, high-quality services for individuals and families across North Dakota and parts of Minnesota. Funding decisions are guided by a commitment to sustainability, accountability, and the growing demand for crisis and support services statewide.

Primary funding sources include:

- Government grants and service contracts
- Foundation and philanthropic grants
- Corporate partnerships and sponsorships
- Contract fees for agency support services
- Training fees
- Individual donations and community gifts

FirstLink's financial practices are overseen by a volunteer governing Board of Directors and supported by annual independent financial audits conducted by Widmer Roel, along with regular financial review and established accountability processes. As call, text, and chat volumes continue to increase, sustained public and community investment remains essential to maintaining timely, life-saving support for all communities, regardless of geography.



**Widmer Roel**  
CPAs | Business Advisors

# Board of Directors

FirstLink is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors who provide fiduciary oversight, strategic guidance, and accountability to ensure the organization fulfills its mission with integrity and transparency. Board members bring diverse professional experience and a shared commitment to strengthening crisis response, suicide prevention, and community wellbeing across North Dakota and neighboring Minnesota communities. Through regular financial review, policy oversight, and leadership support, the Board plays a critical role in sustaining FirstLink's 24/7 services and long-term impact. The Board meets regularly and serves without compensation.



Sarah Aaberg  
*Vice-Chair, Governance*



Kyle Veum  
*Board Chair/Vice-Chair, Internal*



Dave Lund  
*Vice-Chair, External*

## **Governance** (L to R)

Kristi Clifton  
Ashley Schmidt  
Timothy Briggeman



## **Internal** (L to R)

Chelsey Matter  
Darren Schmidt  
Sandra Buchholz



## **External** (L to R)

Elizabeth Medd  
Kathryn Norby  
Becky Engle





# Community Engagement and Gratitude

## Annual Breakfast

On May 1 2025, FirstLink hosted its 16th Annual Community Breakfast at the Hilton Garden Inn in Fargo, bringing together community members, partners, funders, and leaders for a meaningful conversation about mental wellbeing and suicide prevention.

This year's breakfast focused on the growth and impact of FirstLink's Care & Support Program, highlighting the importance of follow-up care after a suicide crisis. Attendees learned how timely outreach, through calls, texts, and caring connections, can reduce isolation, increase safety, and save lives.

The program featured nationally recognized suicide-prevention leader Dr. John Draper, who shared research, national context, and policy insights underscoring the life-saving value of follow-up support. Ty Hegland, CEO of Prairie St. John's, spoke to the clinical and human impact of partnership, emphasizing how collaboration strengthens continuity of care and improves outcomes for individuals.

families. Trinity Weber, FirstLink's Care & Support Coordinator, offered a powerful frontline perspective, bringing to life what follow-up looks like for the people we serve. Through this annual event, FirstLink not only shared impact, it inspired action, deepened partnerships, and reaffirmed a shared belief: connection and follow-up save lives.

**Trinity Weber**  
Care and Support  
Coordinator,  
*FirstLink*



**Ty Hegland**  
CEO, *Prairie St. Johns*



**Dr. John Draper**  
Crisis Intervention & Suicide  
Prevention Expert



**Jeremy Brown**  
Director of Operations, *FirstLink*

# Giving Hearts Day 2025

Giving Hearts Day was a powerful reminder of what our community can accomplish together. Because of your generosity, FirstLink nearly reached its goal: support that allows us to be there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, providing help, hope, and connection.

## Giving Hearts Day gifts directly support:

- Around the clock crisis intervention through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- 211 Information & Referral services
- Follow-up Care & Support
- Training and outreach that strengthen prevention statewide

Donate at [myfirstlink.org/give](https://myfirstlink.org/give)

Thank you for standing with FirstLink and helping ensure help is always just a call, text, or chat away.



# FirstLink



**GIVING  
HEARTS  
DAY**

# Looking Ahead to 2026

## Building Capacity

### Building Capacity

FirstLink will continue expanding local answering capacity for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline through strategic staffing growth, enhanced supervision, and ongoing training. These efforts ensure timely, high-quality response across phone, text, and chat, meeting increasing demand while maintaining compassionate, person-centered care.

## Strengthening Continuity of Care

### Strengthening Continuity of Care

In 2026, FirstLink will further integrate coordination with 911 dispatch centers and State Mobile Crisis services, reinforcing seamless transitions between crisis response and in-person support. The Care & Support Program will continue to grow in partnership with healthcare providers, and work to include schools, expanding follow-up services that promote safety, connection, and recovery beyond the initial crisis.

### Ensuring Sustainability

Sustaining this work requires continued investment in both people and systems. FirstLink will prioritize workforce wellbeing, retention, and professional development, while advancing data and technology infrastructure to improve efficiency, reporting, and access to accurate community resources. Ongoing funding diversification and responsible stewardship will remain essential to supporting long-term service delivery.

Together, these priorities position FirstLink to meet growing community needs while preserving the compassion, reliability, and community-centered approach that define our work, today and into the future.

# FirstLink Structure



FirstLink's structure is designed to support 24/7 responsiveness, strong supervision, and coordinated systems of care across crisis, resource navigation, and follow-up services.





# Thank You!

FirstLink is deeply grateful to our staff, volunteers, board of directors, funders, partners, and community members. Behind every call, text, and chat is a trained professional responding with compassion, skill, and care, often during life-changing moments. Your trust, collaboration, and support make it possible to sustain a highly skilled, resilient workforce and deliver reliable, high-quality services across our region.

FirstLink is a critical part of the behavioral health and crisis response system in North Dakota and neighboring Minnesota communities. Together, we are ensuring that help is accessible, coordinated, and available when it matters most.

**Every hour. Every day. We are keeping communities connected.**

Behind every number is a person, and a system designed to respond with care, skill, and connection.

