Human Services announces launch of 988 emergency number that supplements ND’s behavioral health crisis support

FirstLink will continue to answer 211 helpline for information requests and crisis-related calls

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Human Services’ Behavioral Health Division announced that North Dakota has joined other states in using 988, a new three-digit number that connects people who are experiencing a behavioral health crisis to trained crisis counselors. FirstLink is the centralized call center that will answer 988 calls in North Dakota.

North Dakotans are encouraged to call or text the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline if they are having thoughts of suicide, a mental health or substance use crisis or other emotional distress or if they have concerns for a loved one who may need crisis support. An online chat feature is also available at https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/.

Before the national launch of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline on July 16, North Dakotans could call 211 for 24-hour behavioral health crisis response.

“The nationwide transition to 988 as a three-digit call, text and chat line simplifies access to confidential crisis support and is an important step in strengthening and expanding lifeline infrastructure to respond to people in crisis,” said Laura Anderson, assistant division director. “The long-term goal is to build a robust system that provides crisis care where needed, anywhere in the country.”

FirstLink’s 211 helpline will remain a resource for information and referrals to community resources like food pantries, homeless shelters and other health and human services. Crisis-related calls that are made to 211 will continue to be answered by FirstLink’s trained crisis counselors at this time.

“North Dakota has only one call center that provides behavioral health crisis support to people regardless of which number they may call first. This is a huge advantage to the people we serve,” said FirstLink Executive Director Jennifer Illich. “This single point-of-contact ensures streamlined access to critical help that can make a difference in their lives.”

In 2020, the department’s eight regional human service centers launched a comprehensive 24-hour behavioral health crisis response system that included a three-digit crisis line (211), mobile crisis response services and walk-in stabilization services. The initiative also includes crisis response services for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, which are provided through the Life Skills and Transition Center (LSTC) in Grafton.

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“We have worked hard to promote our statewide crisis behavioral health services to North Dakotans and also to law enforcement and other first responders who help people in stressful situations,” said Rosalie Etherington, Ph.D., chief clinic director for the human service centers. “We encourage people to start using the 988 number, but if they call 211, they will still receive immediate behavioral health crisis support around the clock.”

Callers to 988 who need additional help to de-escalate a crisis will be assisted by a regional human service center mobile crisis response team that will meet an individual where he or she is to provide stabilization, resolution and other supportive services.

The behavioral health crisis response services are benefiting North Dakotans. Calls to the 24-hour crisis line grew from 6,248 calls in 2020 to 8,697 calls in 2021. LSTC’s CARES crisis coordinators provided in-home crisis support to 21 people with developmental disabilities from Jan. 1, 2021 to Oct. 31, 2021.

The department will continue outreach efforts to educate North Dakotans and key stakeholders and partners about the transition to the new 988 number. To learn more about 988, visit www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov/988.

Congress authorized the new 988 emergency number in 2020 to operate through the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline’s network of over 200 local, independent and state-funded crisis centers across the country. The lifeline currently provides live crisis center calling services in English and Spanish and uses Language Line Solutions to provide translation services in over 250 additional languages.

The 10-digit National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-8255, will remain operational. People can access support by either 988 or the 10-digit toll-free number.

The department’s Behavioral Health Division is responsible for reviewing and identifying service needs and activities in the state's behavioral health system to ensure health and safety, access to services and quality services. It also establishes quality assurance standards for the licensure of substance use disorder program services and facilities and provides policy leadership in partnership with public and private entities. Learn more about the division’s work at www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov.

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