

# North Dakota

## Suicide Reporting in Journalism



### EDITOR'S NOTE

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Call or Text [988](tel:988) or chat [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

North Dakota Suicide Reporting in Journalism is a report put out by Faye Seidler, a North Dakota based suicide prevention advocate and measures two key factors.

## Key Factors in North Dakota Suicide Reporting in Journalism

- The Amount of Stories Involving Suicidality in North Dakota
- The Frequency 988 is Featured in These Stories



The goal of this report is to assess how frequently we are practicing good hygiene when it comes to reporting on stories around suicidality, with the intention of reducing suicide contagion, otherwise known as the "[Werther Effect](#)" within journalism.

Suicidality is multifactorial and complex, so too is the impact reporting can have on individuals. This report is intended to open discussion, provide resources, and call to action more considerations within reporting. It's intended to help and support good reporting, not condemn reporters. While we do find room for improvement, it's not due to journalists being irresponsible or harmful. We have fantastic journalists, but there are some missed opportunities that can be capitalized on.

# METHODOLOGY

The primary means to find reporting that mentioned suicide was using [Google Alerts](#) set to "Suicide" and "North Dakota." This report also pulled any story that was circulating across social media, within suicide prevention advocacy groups, or through individuals in the prevention community sharing stories with Faye Seidler.

This report did not capture every story involving suicide and will discuss other limitations in the collection process. It also captured non-traditional media or news, such as [reports from the North Dakota Health and Human Services](#). The main qualifying condition was either a story written by or specifically to the North Dakota population that the public could easily access. While not all stories would be considered journalism, non-traditional ways to get information are still important to include.

Further, efforts by the author and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to reach out and advocate for 988 inclusion, means that stories may have been edited to include 988 after initial reporting. Future reports will better capture and reflect this.

**DATA  
COLLECTED**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Publication</b>   | Place article was hosted                            |
| <b>988 Presence</b>  | Data on if article had 988, old 988 number, or not  |
| <b>988 Placement</b>   | Data on if 988 was placed at top, middle, or bottom |
| <b>Story Type</b>  | Data on if story was awareness, suicide, or event   |
| <b>Headline</b>  | Headline of the Story                               |
| Raw Data Can Be Found: <a href="https://www.fayeseidlerconsulting.com/state-data.html">https://www.fayeseidlerconsulting.com/state-data.html</a> |   |

# KEY DATA

*Over 8 Months, 103 Stories Featured the Topic of Suicidality*

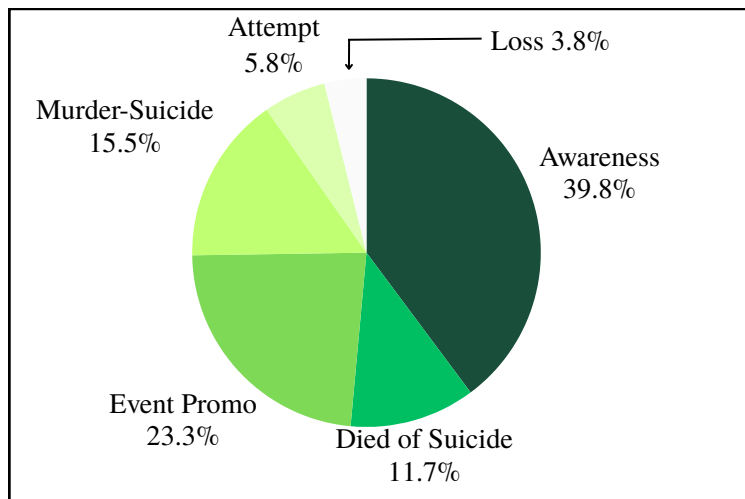
*Only 15.5% of Stories in North Dakota are Considered Best Practice*

*55% of Stories on Suicidality Do Include 988 Somewhere in Them*

**Table 1. Total Stories by Story Type - 103 Total**

|           |                          |   |
|-----------|--------------------------|---|
| <b>41</b> | Awareness                | Generally talking about suicidality as a concept/health concern |
| <b>24</b> | Event Promo              | Generally promoting an event about or around suicidality        |
| <b>16</b> | Murder-Suicide           | Predominately about a murder-suicide                            |
| <b>12</b> | Died of Suicide          | Directly reporting about someone who died of suicide            |
| <b>6</b>  | Suicide Attempt          | Stories featuring someone who attempted suicide                 |
| <b>4</b>  | Survivor of Suicide Loss | Direct reporting about grief associated with loss from suicide  |

**Figure 1. Types of Stories in ND News**



**Table 2. Stories Featuring 988**

|                    |    |     |
|--------------------|----|-----|
| Mentioned          | 44 | 43% |
| Old Number/Not 988 | 5  | 5%  |
| Not Mentioned      | 54 | 52% |

**Table 3. Placement of 988 in Story**

|        |    |     |
|--------|----|-----|
| Top    | 16 | 36% |
| Middle | 7  | 16% |
| Bottom | 26 | 59% |

**Table 4. Breakdown of Story Type by Best Practice**

| Story Type      | 988    | Yes | Yes (Old) | No | Total |
|-----------------|--------|-----|-----------|----|-------|
| Awareness       | 63.4%  | 25  | 4         | 12 | 41    |
| Event Promo     | 25.0%  | 6   | 1         | 17 | 24    |
| Murder-Suicide  | 12.5%  | 2   | 0         | 14 | 16    |
| Died of Suicide | 33.3%  | 4   | 0         | 8  | 12    |
| Suicide Loss    | 100.0% | 4   | 0         | 0  | 4     |
| Suicide Attempt | 50.0%  | 3   | 0         | 3  | 6     |

# DISCUSSION

*Only 17% of People Know 988 Is the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline*

This is national data, North Dakota may be higher or lower.

## Key Points of Discussion

1. Journalism Has a Role to Play in Suicide Prevention
2. Suicide Contagion is Not Limited to Suicide Stories
3. Further Data and Considerations Are Needed

## Discussion on Journalism and Suicide Prevention

### 988 AWARENESS

**83%** of people don't know who to call when experiencing a mental health crisis. Adding 988 to a story is a simple means to increase protective factors, reduce suicide contagion, and improve suicide prevention literacy for the general population. (1)

### PLACEMENT DIFFICULTIES

Journalism's central conceit is don't "bury the lede." This is often at conflict with best suicide prevention practices of including 988 at beginning of story. We only had **36%** of stories include 988 at the beginning. This often means publications will instead include it either at the middle **16%** or more likely at the bottom **59%**. (Table 3)

### SENSATIONAL HEADLINES

According to American Press Institute, **40%** of Americans report reading more than just the headlines and less than that read the full story. Valley News Live featured a story with the headline: "**Youth Suicide up 71%.**" What might a person struggling with mental health feel about that? (2, 3)

### INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

According to the North Dakota Newspaper Association no suicide contagion training is required nor provided for any journalist. However, the North Dakota Chapter for the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention does host free training yearly. Newspaper editors also have a difficult time understanding opportunities for training are not advertisements for trainings.

# The News Rarely Reports 988 if the Story is Association with Crime

## Suicide Contagion Is More Than Suicide Stories

### HARMFUL NEWS

In Fargo, a mass shooting happened, however, reporting did not include information on trauma response or 988. It did share highly detailed timelines of murder and death, pictures of guns and ammunition, and eventually live footage of the event. Local publications were asked to include 988 at the time and they declined. Separate guidelines exist for Shootings.(4)

### MENTAL HEALTH VS CRIME

Grand Forks Herald Headline reads, “Woman dies days after suicide attempt at Lake Region Correctional Facility.” This is a story about suicide, but includes no 988 information. This follows a pattern of not including 988 in crime stories, such as with the mass shooting in Fargo or high speed chase with Ian Kramer in December. (5, 6)

### EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

One is not immune from the emotional devastation of stories because they’re reporting on them. Yet, reporters have virtually no training on secondary trauma or the systems of harm reduction that other professions have. Taking suicide contagion seriously means protecting journalists.

### INSTITUTIONAL CONFLICTS

North Dakota is already burdened with newspapers closing, turnover, and burn out. A newspaper page only has so much space, stories are complex, and weighing public need of information, marketability of stories, and deadlines is often an impossible task. Non-media professionals should strive for support over hindsight criticism. (7)

## Further Data and Considerations Are Needed

### DATA LIMITATIONS

The data used to create this report was not a comprehensive look at every story involving suicidality within North Dakota due to no funding. Larger organizations could afford monitoring services to capture data more thoroughly. We also don’t know how many people in North Dakota know that 988 is a service and encourage organizations research that.

### DATA OPPORTUNITIES

Additional study should be done on high trauma/violence stories, as contagion is possible there as well.

A rubric should be created to make a fair and consistent determination of quality of articles mentioning suicide. While this was attempted in this report, it was determined to be beyond the scope of the author.

Any organization who is doing data collection on this, should also be working to improve conditions and communication between any news source, writers, and mental health. The goal of this report is to create better outcomes, not simply monitor how bad or good journalism might be doing.



# END NOTES - Author

This is an informal look at 988 reporting with significant limitations on the data collection. While including 988 resources in stories is important, this report is not intended to shame reporters, media, or journalism. Nobody sets out to write a story intending to harm and while some stories did raise red flags, the vast majority of reporting was generally good. The goal is to improve conversation and support journalists, not dictate writing.

Conversely, the fourth estate can be understandably grumpy about criticism. Most things that hit public consumption are highly scrutinized and criticized, so how do suicide prevention advocates prove we're different than the rest of the noise they hear? That said, I think an unhelpful deflection to a report like this is taking the slide down the slope to ask what is next; content warnings, on call therapists, or PG ratings to columns?

The goal is not to fundamentally change journalism nor soften stories, but to create reasonable opportunities when stories have a reasonable capacity to harm. I almost became a journalist. I have nothing but a deep respect and appreciation for the fourth estate. I sincerely hope this report is useful for both journalists, editors, and suicide prevention advocates.

Thank you,  
*Faye Seidler*

***Please Email [fayeseidler@gmail.com](mailto:fayeseidler@gmail.com) for Any Corrections!***

## Discussion References

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## To Cite this Report

Seidler, F (2023) *North Dakota Suicide Reporting in Journalism*. Faye Seidler Consulting. [Fayeseidlerconsulting.com](https://www.fayeseidlerconsulting.com)

**Table 5. Publication Table: Every Source**

| Publication           | 988  | Yes | Yes (old) | No | Grand Total |
|-----------------------|------|-----|-----------|----|-------------|
| Bismarck Tribune      | 50%  | 4   | 1         | 5  | 10          |
| General Aviation News | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| Governor's Office     | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| Grand Forks Herald    | 75%  | 2   | 1         | 1  | 4           |
| KFGO                  | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| KFYR                  | 29%  | 5   | 0         | 12 | 17          |
| Knox                  | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| KVLY                  | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| KVRR                  | 60%  | 3   | 0         | 2  | 5           |
| KX News               | 53%  | 5   | 3         | 7  | 15          |
| Minot Air Force Base  | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| Minot Daily News      | 20%  | 1   | 0         | 4  | 5           |
| NDHHS                 | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| News Dakota           | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 2  | 2           |
| Sanford Health        | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| The Dickinson Press   | 67%  | 4   | 0         | 2  | 6           |
| The Forum             | 62%  | 8   | 0         | 5  | 13          |
| The Hot Dish          | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| The Inforum           | 50%  | 1   | 0         | 1  | 2           |
| The Jamestown Sun     | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| The Spectrum          | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |
| Times Record          | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 2  | 2           |
| UND Today             | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| US 103.3              | 100% | 1   | 0         | 0  | 1           |
| Valley News Live      | 50%  | 5   | 0         | 5  | 10          |
| WDAY 93.1FM           | 0%   | 0   | 0         | 1  | 1           |

**Table 6. Publication Table: National vs Local Coverage**

| Publication        | 988 | Yes | Yes (old) | No | Grand Total |
|--------------------|-----|-----|-----------|----|-------------|
| National           | 37% | 8   | 2         | 17 | 27          |
| Local (All)        | 51% | 36  | 3         | 37 | 76          |
| Local (Just Major) | 55% | 29  | 3         | 26 | 58          |

**Table 7. Publication Table: ND Major News Publications**

| Publication         | 988 | Yes | Yes (old) | No | Grand Total |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----------|----|-------------|
| Grand Forks Herald  | 75% | 2   | 1         | 1  | 4           |
| The Dickinson Press | 67% | 4   |           | 2  | 6           |
| The Forum           | 62% | 8   |           | 5  | 13          |
| KVRR                | 60% | 3   |           | 2  | 5           |
| KX News             | 53% | 5   | 3         | 7  | 15          |
| Bismarck Tribune    | 50% | 4   | 1         | 5  | 10          |
| Valley News Live    | 50% | 5   |           | 5  | 10          |
| KFYR                | 29% | 5   |           | 12 | 17          |
| Minot Daily News    | 20% | 1   |           | 4  | 5           |

**Table 8. Publication Table: ND Major Publications Minus National News**

| Publication         | 988 | Yes | Yes (old) | No | Grand Total |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----------|----|-------------|
| Grand Forks Herald  | 75% | 2   | 1         | 1  | 4           |
| The Dickinson Press | 67% | 4   |           | 2  | 6           |
| The Forum           | 62% | 8   |           | 5  | 13          |
| KVRR                | 60% | 3   |           | 2  | 5           |
| Valley News Live    | 60% | 3   |           | 2  | 5           |
| KX News             | 57% | 3   | 1         | 3  | 7           |
| Bismarck Tribune    | 50% | 2   | 1         | 3  | 6           |
| KFYR                | 43% | 3   |           | 4  | 7           |
| Minot Daily News    | 20% | 1   |           | 4  | 5           |



# JOURNALISM AND MEDIA SUICIDE PREVENTION PRINT OUT

## REPORTING ON A SUICIDE IN NORTH DAKOTA?

### INCLUDE

Editor's note: If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call or Text [988](tel:988) or chat [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)

### REVIEW

Best Practice, Research, and Suggestions: <https://reportingonsuicide.org/>

### ASK

Sam Christopherson - American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Area Director ND  
Email: [schristopherson@afsp.org](mailto:schristopherson@afsp.org) | Phone: 701-371-1194

### AVOID

- Sensational headlines or exaggerating details like suicide attempts are "Sky-Rocketing"
- Overly specific details like means, location, or method of suicide
- Presenting suicide as unavoidable, hopeless, or unpreventable.
- Speculation, presenting suicide as simple, or as the result of a single cause

## SUICIDE PREVENTION ORGANIZATIONS ND



## SAFE REPORTING TRAINING IN NORTH DAKOTA

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention North Dakota Chapter puts on a Safe Reporting Saves Lives Training each year for free: <https://afsp.org/safereporting/>  
Contact: Sam Christopherson | Email: [schristopherson@afsp.org](mailto:schristopherson@afsp.org) | Phone: 701-371-1194

## SUICIDE PREVENTION ORGANIZATIONS IN NORTH DAKOTA

| ORG                         | FOCUS                             | DESCRIPTION  |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| <a href="#">FirstLink</a>   | 988 & 211 Hotline                 | Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, data, community directory, training, and more.<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:jeremyb@myfirstlink.org">jeremyb@myfirstlink.org</a>                             |
| <a href="#">AFSP</a>        | Data & Advocacy                   | Hosts events, provides training, data, and advocates.<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:schristopherson@afsp.org">schristopherson@afsp.org</a>   |
| <a href="#">NDSPC</a>       | Training & Advocacy               | Hosts Annual Conference + Hope Cafe. Advocates & networks across state.<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:ndsuiicidepreventioncoalition@gmail.com">ndsuiicidepreventioncoalition@gmail.com</a> |
| <a href="#">SOS</a>         | Upstream Youth Suicide Prevention | Works with schools to teach upstream suicide prevention models<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:dan@sourcesofstrength.org">dan@sourcesofstrength.org</a>                                      |
| <a href="#">HHI</a>         | LGBTQ+ Suicide Prevention         | LGBTQ+ Resource Directory for North Dakota.<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:fayeseidler@gmail.com">fayeseidler@gmail.com</a>   |
| <a href="#">ND HOPES</a>    | Suicide Prevention Rural          | 5-year grant project to reduce suicide within rural/western North Dakota<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:info@ndhopes.com">info@ndhopes.com</a>  |
| <a href="#">TEARS</a>       | Survivors of Suicide Loss Support | "Healing TEARS" Support group for those who have experienced a suicide loss<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:TEARSGFND@gmail.com">TEARSGFND@gmail.com</a>                                     |
| <a href="#">C&amp;C SPC</a> | Advocacy                          | Collection of suicide prevention advocacy partners in Class/Clay County<br>Media Contact: <a href="mailto:Sarah.KempTabbut@va.gov">Sarah.KempTabbut@va.gov</a>                                 |

### NORTH DAKOTA GOVERNMENT

Melissa Markegard - ND HHS Suicide Prevention Administrator: [mmarkegard@nd.gov](mailto:mmarkegard@nd.gov)  
 • <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/behavioral-health/prevention/suicide>  
 • <https://www.hhs.nd.gov/988>

Kodi Pinks - Unit Director of Surveillance and Data Management: [kpinks@nd.gov](mailto:kpinks@nd.gov)

### PROFESSIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION ADVOCATES IN NORTH DAKOTA

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Faye Seidler - North Dakota Suicide Prevention Advocate

Email: [fayeseidler@gmail.com](mailto:fayeseidler@gmail.com) | Website: <https://www.fayeseidlerconsulting.com/>

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