



COMMITTED TO SERVING THE VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & SEXUAL ASSAULT

FAMILIES FIRST, INC.

October 5, 2026

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Secretary, U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington DC 20590

Re: Madison Street Bridge Expansion Project – Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) Grant Application

Dear Secretary Duffy:

This letter is to express the strong support of Families First, Inc. for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's Madison Street Bridge Expansion project in the City of Whiteville, Columbus County, North Carolina. The project will improve the Madison Street (US 701 Bypass) crossing over Soules Swamp by extending the existing bridge and adding a second bridge. These improvements will help the roadway to better handle heavy rainfall and flooding events, keeping this important connection open for residents, business, emergency responders and travelers.

Flooding is a recurring issue along Madison Street and throughout downtown Whiteville during heavy rainfall events. Improving the bridge crossing would reduce flooding in the area and allow rainwater to recede more quickly after heavy rainfall events. As a result, the project would help reduce road closures, improve access to downtown Whiteville, and provide more reliable travel for all roadway users during and after heavy rainfall events.

Specifically, for Families First, Inc. the importance of the Madison Street Bridge Expansion project can be summarized by the following:

- Access to critical services: Families First, Inc. provides essential services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault throughout Columbus and Bladen Counties. Reliable access to our offices is particularly important because many of the individuals we serve are experiencing a crisis and may be seeking assistance to safely leave an abusive situation. When flooding closes the roadway and isolates the downtown area, it can prevent or significantly delay survivors from reaching our offices and accessing safety planning, advocacy, emergency assistance, transportation, housing assistance, and other critical services. Families First has also experienced flooding at our own office on two occasions, resulting in closures lasting several weeks while we recovered and restored our operations.

- Significant impact on nonprofit operations and revenue: Families First also operates a downtown thrift store, which generates essential unrestricted revenue to support our domestic violence and sexual assault programs. During previous major flooding events, the store was forced to close for more than two weeks, and 100% of its inventory was lost due to flood damage. These losses directly reduce the resources available to provide services to survivors and their children. During the two major flooding events in 2016 and 2018 alone, Families First lost more than \$10,000 in anticipated revenue. Additional revenue has been lost as a result of smaller flooding events and repeated closures.

- Disruption of transportation and access throughout the community: When flooding occurs in this area, the downtown district can become effectively isolated from other portions of the community. A significant rainfall event—even one occurring over a relatively short period of time—can make the bridge and surrounding roadway impassable. This disrupts normal traffic patterns, restricts access to businesses and essential services, and creates significant hardship for residents, employees, customers, and visitors. The duration of these disruptions can range from several hours to multiple days and, in more severe circumstances, substantially longer.

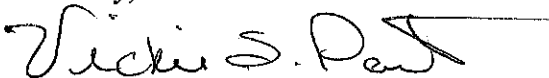
- A public safety and community resilience concern: The full economic and human cost of these flooding events is difficult to quantify. The impacts extend beyond lost business revenue to include missed work, interrupted services, lost inventory, transportation barriers, and delayed access to essential resources. For Families First, the consequences can be especially serious because the people we serve may already be facing circumstances involving immediate threats to their safety and well-being. A transportation route that becomes impassable can mean that a survivor cannot reach an advocate, obtain emergency assistance, access shelter or other resources, or safely leave an abusive environment when help is needed.

For these reasons, Families First, Inc. considers the proposed bridge improvements to be a critical investment in the safety, accessibility, economic vitality, and long-term resilience of our community. We strongly encourage support for NC DOT's federal grant application and believe that addressing this recurring flooding problem will provide substantial and lasting benefits to the residents, businesses, nonprofits, and visitors who rely upon this vital connection.

The Madison Street Bridge Expansion project represents a strategic investment in transportation resilience, mobility, public safety, and long-term vitality of downtown Whiteville and Columbus County as a region. I respectfully urge your full consideration and support for funding that will allow North Carolina DOT to advance and complete this important project, providing lasting benefits to the city of Whiteville, Columbus County, and southeastern North Carolina.

Thank you for your consideration of this meritorious grant and your commitment to our Nation's critical transportation system.

Sincerely,



Vickie S. Pait
Executive Director