

Chairman Headland and Members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee,

My name is Ashley Lemke, and I am the Director of Workforce and Culture at FirstLink. I am here today to express my strong support for Senate Bill 2281 and urge you to give this bill a Do Pass recommendation.

As an organization dedicated to supporting the well-being of individuals and communities across North Dakota, FirstLink understands the devastating impact tobacco use has on public health, workforce stability, and overall quality of life. Tobacco-related illnesses continue to be a leading cause of preventable death in our state, contributing to chronic health conditions such as heart disease, cancer, and lung disease. These health burdens not only affect individuals and families but also place significant strain on our healthcare system and economy.

A key strategy to reducing tobacco use—particularly among young people—is increasing tobacco taxes. Research consistently shows that higher tobacco prices serve as a deterrent, preventing youth from starting and encouraging current users to quit. Senate Bill 2281’s proposed tax increase on cigarettes, cigars, alternative tobacco products, and electronic smoking devices is an evidence-based approach to curbing tobacco use and fostering a healthier North Dakota.

At FirstLink, we recognize that health and well-being are critical to a thriving workforce and community. By passing this bill, you have the opportunity to take meaningful action that will not only save lives but also reduce long-term healthcare costs and improve workforce productivity. I urge you to support Senate Bill 2281 and take a stand for public health.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ashley Lemke  
Director of Workforce and Culture  
FirstLink