

Dear Financial and Taxation Committee,

I am reaching out to encourage support for SB 2149.

Working at the FM Coalition to End Homelessness, I have seen the need for a 24/7/365 988 suicide and crisis phone line many times. The homeless services area in Fargo-Moorhead utilizes Firstlink for our housing screenings in order to streamline and centralize the process of finding housing for those in crisis. Because of Firstlink, direct service providers can spend their time focused on helping those experiencing homelessness, instead of using it to refer individuals to other services. Our providers in the FM area are overworked, underfunded, and understaffed. Passing this bill would help to strengthen the entry point for those we are serving and our system overall.

Everyone knows to dial 911 for a medical emergency, it is slowly becoming known throughout North Dakota to dial 988 for behavioral health emergencies. 911 is funded with a telecommunications user fee, this should be no different for 988.

Ten years ago, FirstLink took 1,501 calls directly related to suicide, in 2021 they took 15,465 calls related to suicide, this number went up to 19,000 in 2022. The complexity and volume of their calls have greatly increased. They need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay their staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help. They need updated technology and equipment to make sure that they are ready, willing, and able to answer the 988 and 211 phone lines 24/7/365. SB 2149 would make this all possible.

Again, I want to thank you for your support. Let me know what questions you have about our service or needs.