

Dear Financial and Taxation Committee,

I am reaching out to encourage support for SB 2149.

Working at FirstLink, I have seen the importance of a 24/7/365 suicide and crisis phone line on a daily basis. We provide much needed listening and support for individuals who are experiencing mental and behavioral health crises, including but not limited to those struggling with suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

Everyone knows to dial 911 for a medical emergency. It is slowly becoming known in North Dakota and throughout the nation that you can dial 988 for behavioral health emergencies. 911 is funded with a telecommunications user fee. We pay fees to ensure that 911 services are available to us in the event we need them, whether we use them or not. This should be no different for 988. I would hope this is a service I will never have to use, but also, I would be happy to pay a small fee to ensure it's available if there comes a day when I would need it – much like 911.

Ten years ago, FirstLink took just over 1,500 calls directly related to suicide. In 2021, we took over 15,000 calls related to suicide, and this jumped to over 19,000 in 2022. The complexity and volume of calls we receive have greatly increased. It is anticipated this will only continue to grow as 988 is more widely advertised. We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce. In order to do that, we must be able to pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help. We also need updated technology and equipment to make sure that we 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. I hope that everyone is able to see the importance of this bill and why it is a necessity to all those in North Dakota.

Thank you,

Ashley Lemke
FirstLink Helpline Director