

Dear Chairman Headland, Vice Chair Hagert, and the Finance and Taxation Committee,

I am writing to encourage you to support SB 2149, the implementation of a 988 user fee. Working at FirstLink for 4.5 years, I heard daily the struggles of my fellow North Dakotans. I saw the need for a 24/7/365 suicide and crisis phone line many times. I took thousands of calls in my time there and the majority of callers were in some sort of crisis and many felt hopeless with nowhere else to turn for help.

The Covid pandemic has taken a toll on all of our health both physically and mentally. FirstLink and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline have been there 24/7/365 to provide support and they do it incredibly well. I feel lucky to live in a state that has such a dedicated agency doing this amazing work. As someone that has struggled with mental health issues and thoughts of suicide myself, it is so important for there to be the 988 crisis line. I have been the one to send first responders for a welfare check and I have heard firsthand how these calls affect them. 988 allows people in crisis to get the support they need at any time of day and it can and has reduced the number of calls to first responders.

Talking works and just like we know that we can always dial 911 in an emergency, we also need to know that 988 is there for behavioral health emergencies. This number is slowly becoming known throughout North Dakota as the number to call for behavior health emergencies, but it needs funding to make it known to all. 911 is funded with a telecommunications user fee and 988 should be funded the same way.

As a lifelong North Dakotan, I would gladly accept the fees that go along with passing this bill. The importance of this bill highly outweighs the cost! I highly encourage you to make the decision that will help our state and our rural residents get the support they need anytime, anywhere!

Thank you so much!

Emily Carpenter