

TESTIMONY
Finance and Taxation Committee,
SB 2149
March 13, 2023
Jennifer Illich

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

My name is Jennifer Illich, I am the Executive Director of FirstLink, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today about the life saving work of FirstLink 988.

I am here to express support for SB 2149. FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota to answer the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline for all of North Dakota. We are a non-profit that has been providing phone support for 52 years in our state.

On October 16, 2020, President Trump signed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act into law, officially designating 988 as the new, easy-to-remember number for anyone experiencing suicidal ideation, a mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. As you may know, the transition from 1-800-273-8255 to 988 as the nation's suicide hotline officially happened on Saturday, July, 16, 2022. This transition represents a historic moment for North Dakotans in crisis, giving them a short number to dial 24/7, seven days a week. With this designation act came the ability for state's to charge a 988 user fee to support this 24/7/365 service. Since then, just like 911, 5 states have put this user fee funding into effect, (Washington, Virginia, Colorado, Nevada, and California).

FirstLink answering the 988 suicide and crisis phone line is part of a long-term effort to build complete mental health and suicide prevention crisis response system in North Dakota. The overwhelming majority of callers can be stabilized over the phone. Those who need more support are connected to appropriate mental health services. FirstLink serves as a hub of information and a connector to other non-profit and behavioral health centers. We screen and triage for open access, subacute stabilization centers and deploy mobile crisis units for the Human Service Centers throughout North Dakota.

FirstLink needs increased support to continue operating 24/7 and meet all of the new national requirements of the 988 suicide and crisis phone line. We must add FTE to our team to keep up with the increases in call volume. We need to update our technology services because every second counts when talking to someone that is suicidal or in a behavioral health crisis. We need to add redundancy to ensure that our phone lines never go down. We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help and to help with staff retention. All these things bring up the need for secure and stable funding, which this bill will provide.

With this new phone number came many new national recommendations for FirstLink to follow when answering the 988 phone line, but unfortunately, it came with only a one-time funding grant that ends in April of 2024. Everyone knows to dial 911 for medical emergencies. Everyone is now dialing 988 for behavioral health support. We handle a lot of different calls, this phone line is set up to handle all crisis, and we are glad when people call before thoughts of suicide enter their minds. But if I pull out just the calls related to suicide from 2020 to 2021, our call volume related to suicide increased by 19.74%. We talked to 12,915 people in North Dakota in 2020 and to 15,465 people in 2021 about their thoughts or actions related to suicide. In 2022, this number increased again to talking to over 19,000 people directly about suicide.

The complexity and volume of our calls have greatly increased. We need to have a diverse and culturally competent workforce and pay our staff professional wages to provide quality service to those reaching out for help. We need updated technology and equipment to make sure that we are ready, willing, and able to answer the 988 phone lines 24/7/365.

North Dakotans dial 911 for medical emergencies, this program is funded with a telephone user fee, it makes sense and it works. North Dakotans dial 988 for behavioral health support. This program should be funded with a telephone user fee, it makes sense and it will work.

I hope you will consider supporting SB 2149, so we can support our most vulnerable neighbors in a moment of crisis.

I sincerely thank you for listening and for your ongoing support, and I look forward to your questions.

Jennifer Illich
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Annual Budget Needs	
Payroll expenses	\$ 1,622,984.00
Education and outreach	\$ 93,480.00
Operating expense	\$ 202,902.00
Professional fees	\$ 123,966.00
Total	\$ 2,043,332.00