

March 13, 2023

Dear Financial and Taxation Committee,

My name is Jeremy Brown and I am reaching out to encourage support for Senate Bill 2149. I currently work as the Outreach Director at FirstLink.

The work FirstLink does, and supporting this bill, are very important to me because of my personal experience with suicide. In 2011, I lost a sister to suicide. At that time, my family recognized that my sister was struggling and needed support, however we did not know where to find that support. We lived in rural North Dakota and struggled to access mental health services. We had no idea a phone number existed offering support to those struggling with their mental health or suicide.

Everyone in our state knows to dial 9-1-1 for medical emergencies or fire. 9-1-1 is funded with a telecommunications user fee. Working at FirstLink, I've seen firsthand just how many calls come through 9-8-8, North Dakotans are now starting to recognize 9-8-8 as the number to dial during behavioral health emergencies. 9-8-8 should have a telecommunications fee to establish similar stable funding.

FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota that answers the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Anyone in our state can dial 988 and reach a caring, local FirstLink Call Specialist. During these calls, FirstLink's Call Specialists will offer support and de-escalate most crises without further intervention, preventing additional burden to fire, police, and EMS services. Ten years ago, FirstLink took 1,501 calls directly related to suicide. In 2022, that number went up to 19,000. The complexity and volume of these calls have greatly increased.

Supporting this bill will provide FirstLink with stable funding to continue to provide such a vital service, available to all North Dakotans. Funding would support a wage for FirstLink staff commensurate to the service they provide. This funding would also support needed updates to technology and equipment to ensure FirstLink staff are ready, willing, and able to answer 9-8-8 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important bill.

Jeremy Brown
Outreach Director, FirstLink