



March 13, 2023

The Honorable Craig Headland
Chairman
Committee on Finance and Taxation
North Dakota House
Committee Room JW327E
State Capitol
Bismarck, ND 58505

The Honorable Jared Hagert
Vice Chairman
Committee on Finance and Taxation
North Dakota House
Committee Room JW327E
State Capitol
Bismarck, ND 58505

RE: North Dakota SB 2149; Relating to the creation of the 988 crisis hotline program and the 988 crisis stabilization fund and the imposition of a 988 access fee

Dear Chair Headland, Vice Chair Hagert, and Members of the House Committee on Finance and Taxation:

Vibrant Emotional Health (“Vibrant”), administrator of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (“988 Lifeline”), as well as Mental Health America and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention appreciates the opportunity to offer our support for SB 2149, which would establish the 988 crisis hotline program and the 988 crisis stabilization fund, with the inclusion of a 988 surcharge to be collected by providers of assessed communications services, of up to thirty cents per month. The 988 surcharge and creation of the fund will provide a critical and sustainable funding stream as North Dakota continues to develop the infrastructure needed to respond to individuals and families who seek help through the 988 Lifeline.

Collectively, our organizations provide a continuum of crisis care to every American needing mental health care services and have worked to develop, implement, and promote the nationwide transition to the 988 Lifeline, codified through the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act. The 988 Lifeline is a life-saving resource for millions of Americans experiencing emotional distress or suicidal crisis, connecting those individuals and their loved ones with trained crisis counselors at local crisis contact centers and other community

resources as needed. In North Dakota, FirstLink is currently the statewide 988 network crisis contact center and provides critical services for those experiencing suicidal ideation or emotional distress, including responses to calls, chats, and texts and linkages to mobile crisis teams. Services are free and available 24 hours a day, seven, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Local crisis contact centers, like FirstLink, need sustainable funding and more resources in order to build capacity to meet the increased volume of individuals seeking emotional support and crisis intervention services through 988 Lifeline. Supporting centers allows them to continue providing these critical, life-saving services to those in need every day. North Dakota has an opportunity through this legislation to invest in reliable and sustainable funding that will allow local crisis contact centers to effectively serve individuals and their loved ones.

Surcharges, allowed for under the Designation Act and like the one proposed in SB 2149, are structured similarly to 911 fees in many states and are critical to ensure local contact centers' ability to respond effectively to those in need. Currently, 911 fees range from \$1.50-\$2.00 per month in North Dakota, varying by locality. Parity between 911 and 988 fees is important as we collectively work to create a culture where mental and physical health are regarded as equally important components of overall health. Public services, like fire services and 988 crisis services, are a shared social responsibility and according to a [recent survey](#) from the National Association on Mental Illness, three-quarters of adults would be willing to pay a monthly fee to support 988.

As the nation's mental health crisis grows, the need for sustainable resources has never been higher. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States¹; the suicide death rate for North Dakota was 18.2 per 100,000 individuals in 2020, which is higher than the national suicide rate and places North Dakota among the states in the top third of suicide rates nationally². SB 2149, if enacted, would align North Dakota with the 25 other states that have enacted 988 legislation, including five states that successfully implemented 988 surcharges. Supporting individuals in crisis through a 988 surcharge can result in overall public savings by reducing costly ambulance rides, emergency room visits, and inappropriate deployment of law enforcement. Allowing individuals to receive crisis interventions in the community through the 988 Lifeline can also positively impact productivity and overall wellness.

This legislation highlights the importance of the 988 Lifeline and the services provided through FirstLink. Our organizations applaud the legislature for considering this important issue. 988 is a turning point in the history of crisis and behavioral health care in the United States, and states are recognizing the important opportunity to invest in this critical infrastructure. We urge you to support SB 2149 and are happy to answer any questions regarding the need for sustainable

¹ Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Preventing Suicide" Fact Sheet, at 1 (2020), https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Suicide-Factsheet_508.pdf.

² CDC, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Suicide Rates by State" (2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-rates-by-state.html>.

funding and transforming the crisis continuum to support those in need. Please contact Caitlin Davidson at cdavidson@vibrant.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

Vibrant Emotional Health
Mental Health America
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention