

Chairman Lee, and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Ashley Ladbury Hrichena, and I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 2149. I currently work as the Operations Director at FirstLink. I have worked at FirstLink for more than 15 years. During this time, I have seen FirstLink's service positively impact the lives of thousands of people.

FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota that answers 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Calls, and the 211 Helpline. In July of 2022, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline was launched and built upon the existing National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number. The launch of this new, easy-to-remember number was just the beginning of the transformation that is planned for the mental health system.

Nationally, 988 is working to create a 24/7 response system for all those in mental health crises with callers being connected to local people that can help connect them to resources and support. FirstLink's Call Specialists can de-escalate and resolve most crisis calls over the phone. This option helps reduce the burden on health care and emergency services related to mental health response. For those that need a higher level of care, we can screen and connect the caller to additional in-person resources such as mobile crisis outreach, crisis stabilization, psychiatric hospitalization, or detox. Especially in rural areas like North Dakota, having an easily accessible number is imperative for people to get help before their mental health crisis becomes life-threatening.

Since 2019, FirstLink has seen a substantial increase in calls. As the 988 Lifeline becomes more well-known it is expected call volume will continue to increase. In addition to the number of calls increasing, the complexity of callers' needs has also increased. This has brought with it an increased need for staff training and support. 988 needs a sustainable base funding source that is protected from budget cuts at a funding rate that can support the life-saving services provided and the staff that provides that service. I urge you to support this bill so FirstLink can be there to support the mental health of all North Dakotans.

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

Ashley Ladbury Hrichena