

Dear Chairman Lee, and members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Jeremy Brown and I am asking for your support of 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 2014, 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.

FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota that answers the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and 211 Helpline. Anyone in our state can dial 988 and reach a local, caring 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. Call Specialists work collaboratively with the individual in need to identify a safety plan and supportive resources. Looking back, these services are exactly what my family was looking for when my sister was struggling.

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 expanding the training and support available to Call Specialists, increasing their capacity to provide such life-saving services to those who dial 988.

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

Jeremy Brown