

Dear Chairman Klemin and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of SB 2145, which seeks to establish essential legal protection for employees working within the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, the 211 Information and Referral Helpline, and the 911 system. My name is Ashley Lemke, and I serve as the Director of Workforce and Culture at FirstLink, where I oversee the dedicated professionals responding to these critical services.

Every day, individuals in crisis rely on 988 and 211, which are both managed by FirstLink and available 24/7/365 through call, text, or online chat. These free, confidential services offer immediate assistance to those experiencing mental health emergencies or seeking vital community resources. Last year alone, FirstLink fielded tens of thousands of interactions, underscoring the essential role these helplines play in our crisis response system. However, without proper liability protections, these services remain vulnerable to financial and legal risks that could threaten their effectiveness and accessibility.

Crisis call specialists are required to make split-second, high-pressure decisions while offering critical support. Their work is governed by rigorous national accreditation standards—Inform USA and the American Association of Suicidology (AAS)—as well as the Vibrant Network Agreement, which aligns with best practices set by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Despite their adherence to research-backed methodologies, every crisis presents unique challenges, and adverse outcomes can still occur. The risk of legal action not only jeopardizes FirstLink's financial stability but may also deter individuals from seeking the support they need due to concerns about unintended consequences.

By enacting liability protections, we can strengthen public trust in these vital services and ensure their sustainability. Call specialists will feel secure in their roles, allowing them to provide compassionate, professional assistance without fear of legal repercussions. Additionally, these protections will aid in the recruitment and retention of highly qualified individuals, reinforcing the resilience of our crisis intervention infrastructure.

Similar legal protections already exist for emergency medical personnel and law enforcement officers. It is both fair and necessary to extend these same safeguards to 988 and 211 responders, enabling them to continue their life-saving work without undue legal exposure.

Providing liability coverage for those who offer crisis support is not only a sound policy decision—it is a moral obligation. By supporting SB 2145, we can protect these critical services, safeguard the professionals who staff them, and ensure continued assistance for individuals in their most vulnerable moments.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions or further discussion on this matter.

Sincerely,

Ashley Lemke