

Dear Chairman Klemin and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Jeremy Brown, and I am the Director of Data Quality at FirstLink. I am testifying in support of SB 2145, which provides immunity to employees of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, 211 Information & Referral Helpline, and the 911 system.

988 and 211 are both answered locally in North Dakota by FirstLink. These phone lines are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to provide supportive listening, access to local resources, de-escalation of crisis, and safety planning during instances of suicide, substance use, self-harm, or other potentially life-threatening situations. Without liability protection, the crucial support provided by our team of well-intended, well-trained, compassionate individuals remain vulnerable to legal and financial risks that could limit their ability to offer help to those in need.

At FirstLink, beyond the numerous accreditations our agency holds and over 50 years of experience assisting individuals facing a crisis, our agency has a meaningful relationship with Vibrant Emotional Health, the agency which oversees the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline network. As part of the 988 Lifeline network, FirstLink must adhere to the Vibrant Network Agreement, which provides procedures and protocols for navigating crisis situations of all types, with the goal to de-escalate, safety plan, and resolve by phone. To meet the requirements of this agreement, our staff are supported through a lengthy and rigorous training curriculum including nationally accredited training programs for suicide intervention. This combination of training and guiding procedures enables our staff to provide life-saving support utilizing their skills, judgement, and resources. However, every crisis is unique, and adverse outcomes can still occur.

Providing liability protections would ensure our Call Specialists feel confident in their ability to provide compassionate, professional support without fear of legal repercussions. This would naturally help FirstLink, and 911 dispatch centers across the state, attract and retain qualified, passionate individuals for these roles, strengthening our crisis response and intervention system in North Dakota.

I urge you to support SB 2145 so that those who respond to North Dakotans reaching 988, 211, or 911 in life's most difficult moments are protected by similar safeguards as emergency medical personnel and law enforcement, allowing them to provide life-saving support without unnecessary legal risk.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this legislation. I look forward to any further discussion or questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Brown