

**Dear Chairman Barta, Vice Chairman Boehm and the Members of the Industry and Business Committee,**

My name is Ashley Ladbury Hrichena, and I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 2200. I am a North Dakota resident and mental health advocate. As you consider SB 2200, I urge you to prioritize continued and increased funding for the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

FirstLink is the only designated center in North Dakota that answers 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Calls.

Nationally, 988 is working to create a 24/7 response system for all those in mental health crises with help-seekers being connected to local people that can help connect them to local resources and support. 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, FirstLink 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.

For the last several years, the number of help-seekers contacting 988 has increased. As the 988 Lifeline becomes more well-known it is expected call volume will continue to increase. This means FirstLink needs continued funding to increase staff capacity to meet the increased demand for services.

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

Ashley Ladbury Hrichena