

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

My name is Ashley Lemke and I am the Director of Workforce and Culture at FirstLink in Fargo, North Dakota. FirstLink answers the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline for all of North Dakota and 17 counties in Minnesota. I am submitting testimony in support of the bill creating the 988 crisis hotline program, the stabilization fund, and the 988 access fee.

FirstLink is a critical part of the mental health crisis response system. The 988 Lifeline provides immediate, confidential support for individuals in crisis, helping to prevent suicide and connecting people to the appropriate services. As demand for this service continues to rise, it is essential that we have a stable and sustainable funding source to maintain and expand our capacity to meet the needs of our communities.

The 988 access fee proposed in this bill will ensure that FirstLink and other crisis centers can continue providing these vital services. This funding will support necessary staffing, improve service delivery, and allow us to invest in resources to better address mental health crises and reduce the burden on law enforcement and emergency services.

This bill is a critical step toward strengthening our crisis response infrastructure. By establishing the 988 crisis stabilization fund, we can ensure timely interventions and improved outcomes for those in crisis, ultimately saving lives and improving community health.

I strongly support this bill and urge its passage to help sustain and enhance the 988 hotline program. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Ashley Lemke
Director of Workforce and Culture
FirstLink
Fargo, ND