



**Senate Industry and Business Committee
SB 2200 Testimony
January 20, 2025
Senator Jeff Barta, Chair**

Good morning, Chairman Barta and Members of the Senate Industry and Business Committee.

I am Carlotta McCleary, Executive Director of Mental Health America of North Dakota and Executive Director of the North Dakota Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health.

Today I speak on behalf of the Mental Health Advocacy Network (MHAN). MHAN advocates for a consumer/family driven mental health system of care that provides an array of service choices that are timely, responsive and effective. Our vision is for every North Dakotan to have access to the right service—whether it be preventative, treatment, or recovery; at the right time—when the service is needed; and at the right place—as near his or her home as possible.

MHAN is testifying in support of SB 2200, which would expand funding opportunities for Firstlink and North Dakota's 988 program. The best practice model for a behavioral health crisis response system is to: have someone to call (988), someone to respond (mobile crisis teams), and a place to go (crisis stabilization units for adults and crisis stabilization units for children). You must have all three legs of this stool for the system to work. Today we are specifically talking about someone to call. 988 was officially designated as the new behavioral health crisis hotline with the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act. 988 is an easy-to-remember number that is operational 24/7 for anyone experiencing suicidal ideation, a mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress.

FirstLink has also provided data regarding their call logs. At around 2013, FirstLink reported that it received 1,501 calls directly related to suicide. In recent years, FirstLink's 988 services handles between 14,000 to 15,000 contacts, with a substantial increase coming in texts and chats. More people are becoming aware of hotlines to seek help, but more people are also finding themselves in crisis. MHAN is also attempting to increase awareness of 988 and bolster North Dakota's ability to respond to crisis situations for more people, including children and families. As North Dakota continues to build its crisis response system, including for children and families, the state will continue to see increased utilization of 988. The crisis response system is a three-legged stool and if one of those legs begins to falter, it risks the stability of the entire stool. FirstLink needs to be able to have enough manpower to respond to calls, texts, and chats to help North Dakotans receive timely services—services that deescalate situations, decrease the use of emergency rooms, and saves lives. That is a service that is worth investing in.

This concludes my testimony, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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