

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Bill SB 2200. My name is Thea Jorgensen, and I am both an advocate for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and someone who has struggled with my mental health for over a decade. I am here to emphasize the importance of this legislation in safeguarding critical services such as the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and the 211 Information and Referral Helpline.

FirstLink and similar programs play a crucial role in our community by providing immediate assistance to individuals facing crises. These services, delivered through phone calls, texts, and chats, often serve as a lifeline for those in need of support, ensuring they are not alone in their darkest moments. As someone who has been both on the calling end of a suicide prevention hotline and as a volunteer for one, I personally know the value these services provide.

There are a lot of misconceptions regarding those struggling and unless you have truly been there, it is extremely hard to understand how a seemingly simple phone call can save a life. While there are often signs and struggles leading up to the moment of crisis, studies from attempt survivors have shown that nearly half take less than ten minutes from decision to attempt. With all of the rural areas in our state, it is not always possible to get emergency services to people in that time frame, which is another reason the services are so vital.

As a member of the ND Army National Guard, I know that there have been significant strides in reducing the stigma around seeking help. I personally have been extremely impressed with our state's proactive approach in taking the issue seriously. However, as with any at risk population, the stigma does still remain. The ability to dial 988, press 1, is a simple way for them to talk through the struggle in real time.

I know there can be the mentality that because it is a service one may not use, they don't want to pay for it. The matter of fact is, that we truly never know if we will use it, but there is a chance that someone you care about will. I also know that finances are tight for many but the minimal annual fee seems to be reasonable if we know it saves even one life a year. North Dakotans look out for each other.

SB 2200 is vital to ensuring that our 988 services have the necessary funding and support to service people across the state of North Dakota who may be struggling and in crisis. In 2023 alone, FirstLink answered 14,284 calls directly related to suicide, and between 2022 and 2023 they saw a 61% increase in calls to 988 in North Dakota. The work of FirstLink and all of the partners that make 988 possible is critical to saving lives in our communities.

I encourage you to vote in favor of SB 2200 to secure the future of our 988 services.

Sincerely,
Thea Jorgensen