

States weigh bills addressing Native deaths

Legislation in response to increased focus on indigenous women

By MARY HUDETZ
Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Lawmakers in at least seven states have introduced legislation to address the unsolved deaths and disappearances of numerous Native American women and girls.

The legislation calls for state-funded task forces and other actions amid deepening concerns that law enforcement agencies lack the data and resources to understand the scope of the crisis.

On some reservations, federal studies have shown Native American women are killed at more than 10 times the national average.

“This is not about a trend that is popular this year,” said state Rep. Derrick Lente, a Democrat who is co-sponsoring a measure in New Mexico.

“It’s really to bring to light the number of indigenous people who are going missing.”

An Associated Press review of the bills found that mostly Native American lawmakers in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana, Washington, New Mexico and Arizona



Star Tribune/Anthony Souffle, File

In this Jan. 19, 2019, file photo, Rene Ann Goodrich, of Superior with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, leads the procession through the streets of St. Paul during the Women’s March at the Minnesota Capitol in St. Paul, Minn.

have sponsored measures on the issue.

In AP interviews last year, families described feeling dismissed after initially reporting cases of missing female relatives to police. An examination of records found there was no single government database tracking all known cases of missing Native American women.

In Montana, a bill named for Hanna Harris — a 21-year-old

found slain on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in July 2013 — proposes that state authorities hire a specialist responsible for entering cases into databases.

Under Hanna’s Act, the state Department of Justice employee would also serve as a liaison for tribal, federal and state authorities and families after a Native American is reported missing.

“To us we’ve seen study bill after study bill,” said Rep. Rae

Peppers, a Democrat. “Why waste money on a study bill when the issue was right in front of us?”

Peppers, whose district spans the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations, lives in Lane Deer, a small community where Harris’ body was found days after she was first reported missing.

Peppers said she and other lawmakers decided to name the measure for Harris in part because her mother had led an early push for more awareness of the cases.

Other cases in Peppers’ rural district include the death of 14-year-old Henny Scott. Her body was found by a search party two weeks after she went missing in December.

Harris and Scott’s families complained authorities were slow to search for the victims after they were reported missing.

“It’s always been this way. We’ve always had missing women and children,” Peppers said. “The voices are just louder now.”

In New Mexico, Lente said his measure would call for the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department to lead a task force joined by authorities across jurisdictions.

The legislation was welcomed by Meskee Yatsayte, an advocate in New Mexico for families with missing loved ones on the Navajo

Nation. She said she hoped lawmakers and officials would include victims’ families and advocates in their discussions.

“It’s a good step forward,” Yatsayte said. “But it can’t be something where they meet and then nothing is done about it.”

Bills in South Dakota and North Dakota include mandates for law enforcement training programs on conducting investigations.

Rep. Tamara St. John, a South Dakota Republican and member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, said she’s co-sponsoring the measure to put a spotlight on the cases.

Rep. Gina Mosbrucker, a Washington state Republican, introduced a bill signed into law last year that requires the Washington State Patrol to provide an estimate by June of how many Native women are missing in the state. That measure paved the way for similar legislation in other states.

This year she proposed another measure that would require the state patrol to have two liaisons on staff to serve tribes seeking information about cases.

“I truly believe this is an intense emergency and we have to put this on the front burner,” Mosbrucker said Tuesday. “What we learned is we didn’t want to wait.”

Strangers’ suspicions and police reports rankle parents of mixed-race children

By JONATHAN J. COOPER
Associated Press

PHOENIX — Amberkatherine DeCory carried photos of her daughter’s birth certificate in her diaper bag in case she had to prove that the lighter-skinned girl was really hers. Cydnee Rafferty gives her husband a letter explaining that he has permission to travel with their 5-year-old biracial daughter.

Families like theirs were not surprised when they heard that Cindy McCain had reported a woman to police for possible human trafficking because the widow of Sen. John McCain saw her at the airport with a toddler of a different ethnicity. Officers investigated and found no evidence of wrongdoing.

Parents whose children have a different complexion say they regularly face suspicion and the assumption that they must be watching someone else’s kids.

“This is a problem that, to be frank, well-meaning white people get themselves into,” said Rafferty, who is African-American and whose husband is white. “They think, ‘If it doesn’t make sense to me it must not be right.’”

After McCain’s report, Rafferty posted to Twitter a selfie of her with her two children, ages 5 and 5 months.

“I know they don’t look like me, but I assure you, I grew them in my belly,” Rafferty wrote to McCain.

Earlier this month, McCain claimed on Phoenix radio station KTAR that the woman was waiting for a man who bought the child to get off a plane and that her Jan. 30 report



Cydnee Rafferty via AP

This January 2019 photo released by Cydnee Rafferty shows herself and her two children, Devin, 5, and Leo, 5 months old, in New York. Rafferty, who is black and whose husband is white, sends a letter with her husband explaining that he has permission to travel with their 5-year-old biracial daughter.

to police had stopped the trafficking. She urged people to speak up if they see anything odd.

“I came in from a trip I’d been on,” McCain said. “I spotted — it looked odd — it was a woman of a different ethnicity than the child, this little toddler she had. Something didn’t click with me.”

She said she spoke about her suspicions with police “and they went over and questioned her. And, by God, she was trafficking that kid.”

Phoenix Police Sgt. Armando Carbajal confirmed that McCain requested a welfare check on a child at the airport, but said officers found “no evidence of criminal conduct or child endangerment.” McCain has declined

interview requests and has not said if anything besides the difference in ethnicity led her to suspect trafficking.

A spokesman for the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University said McCain was “only thinking about the possible ramifications of a criminal act, not the ethnicity of the possible trafficker.”

After police debunked her claim, McCain reiterated the importance of speaking up when something looks wrong.

“I apologize if anything else I have said on this matter distracts from ‘if you see something, say something,’” she wrote on Twitter.

Rafferty, a 38-year-old New Yorker, was surprised

that McCain, who adopted a daughter from Bangladesh, would make the same something’s-not-right assumption that mixed-race families grapple with constantly. It’s not always summoning the police. Other, more common ways of calling out the differences sting too.

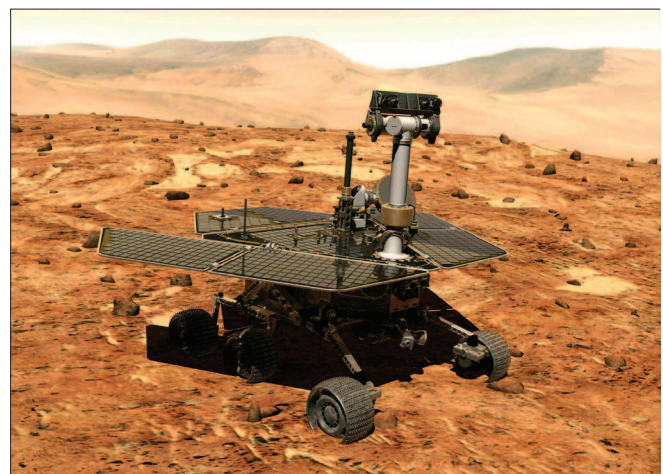
For Rafferty, the questions are frustrating and offensive: “Whose baby is that?” from a woman in the grocery store. “Where’s her beautiful golden skin and curly hair?” from a client at the office, who had a distinct idea of how a biracial child should look.

And if she pushes a stroller on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, everyone assumes she’s the nanny. At the park, neither the mothers nor the caregivers know whether to embrace her in their camp.

DeCory, a 38-year-old police officer outside Minneapolis who has African-American and Native American ancestry, said the anxiety between mom and baby is a constant challenge for mixed-race families that isn’t talked about enough. Until her daughter could speak, DeCory carried her birth certificate and even a photo of her giving birth, just in case she had to prove that her light-haired, blue-eyed child was truly her own. As Mila has gotten older, her hair has darkened. She’s now 11.

DeCory didn’t face the same anxieties with her other two children, who have darker skin closer to her own.

“I would get anxiety going out with her in public,” DeCory said. “I was very reluctant to breastfeed her in public or do anything that would draw attention to me.”



NASA via AP

This illustration made available by NASA shows the rover Opportunity on the surface of Mars.

Mars rover finally bites the dust after 15 years

By MARCIA DUNN
AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA’s Opportunity, the Mars rover that was built to operate for just three months but kept going and going, rolling across the rocky red soil, was pronounced dead Wednesday, 15 years after it landed on the planet.

The six-wheeled vehicle that helped gather critical evidence that ancient Mars might have been hospitable to life was remarkably spry up until eight months ago, when it was finally doomed by a ferocious dust storm.

Flight controllers tried numerous times to make contact, and sent one final series of recovery commands Tuesday night, along with one last wake-up song, Billie Holiday’s “I’ll Be Seeing You,” in a somber exercise that brought tears to team members’ eyes. There was no response from space, only silence.

Thomas Zurbuchen, head of NASA’s science missions, broke the news at what amounted to a funeral at the space agency’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, announcing the demise of “our

beloved Opportunity.” “This is a hard day,” project manager John Callas said. “Even though it’s a machine and we’re saying goodbye, it’s still very hard and very poignant, but we had to do that. We came to that point.”

The two slow-moving, golf cart-size rovers landed on opposite sides of the planet in 2004 for a mission meant to last 90 sols, or Mars days, which are 39 minutes longer than Earth days.

In the end, Opportunity outlived its twin by eight years and set endurance and distance records that could stand for decades. Trundling along until communication ceased last June, Opportunity roamed a record 28 miles and worked longer than any other lander in the history of space exploration.

Opportunity was a robotic geologist, equipped with cameras and instruments at the end of a mechanical arm for analyzing rocks and soil. Its greatest achievement was discovering, along with Spirit, evidence that ancient Mars had water flowing on its surface and might have been capable of sustaining microbial life.

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