

New call for action on missing, murdered Indigenous people

A federal commission on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples is calling for a Decade of ‘Action and Healing to address the ongoing crisis’.

This should happen “in partnership with tribal communities, tribal governments, and relevant organizations, focusing on improving safety, prevention, justice, support services, and healing for American Indians communities through increased funding, policy reform, action-oriented programs, and training and technical assistance.”

The recommendations were created by the 41-person commission in response to input offered during a nationwide listening tour where they heard testimony from survivors and family members of victims.



There is no nationwide data system for MMIP information, and the actual number of MMIP cases is unknown; however, the Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates there are 4,200 unsolved cases...

Action and Healing

The report’s executive summary reflects the urgency of the crisis and implores the federal government to act ‘without delay’. The report reads, as quoted here:

There is a crisis in tribal communities. A crisis of violence, a crisis of abuse, and a crisis of abject neglect affecting Indian women an men, Indian children, and Indian elders.

The federal government must act now, not tomorrow, not next week, not next month, and not next year. Once and for all, the federal government must end its systematic failure to address this crisis and react, redress, and resolve this. We call on the federal government to declare a Decade of Action and Healing to address the crisis of missing, murdered, and trafficked Indian people.

Grass-roots effort

The report recounts painful stories that the commission heard at each hearing, as well as what Indian Country has known for years: While awareness of the MMIP crisis has grown primarily due to Native-led grassroots efforts. As a result, the federal government, through the Department of Justice and Interior, for example,

launched initiatives to prioritize the issue.

“These heart-rending stories were repeated again and again, and again, in every location the commission visited. And, the gratitude was expressed again and again,” the report notes.

For those who have been impacted by the MMIP, the report contained no surprises, said Lori Jump, of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, chief executive officer of the Strong Hearts Native Helpline, a culturally-appropriate domestic and sexual violence helpline for Native Americans.

“If you go back to other reports that have been done, the issues that we have have all been identified before,” Jump told Native News Online. “So there’s nothing surprising there.”

She went on to say that she hopes the report elicits long overdue response from the federal government.

“It’s past time for the federal government to actually make meaningful progress on some of the recommendations that have come out, not only of this report but reports that have previously been published on the criminal justice system in Indian Country and all of the barriers we face,” Jump said.

The report is thorough in its assessment of the federal government’s actions that have underpinned the crisis, from the forced seizure and destruction of tribal lands to dramatically underfunding Native American communities who are left to rely on grant dollars for basic needs.

Law enforcement, sovereignty and trust obligations featured frequently in the report, which described the crisis as “not-intractable” and pointed to its roots and perpetuation in the U.S. government’s failure to fulfill its trust responsibilities to tribal nations.”

The themes

The themes that emerged from the hearings were noted as follows:

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The need for consistent, reliable funding for tribes to battle the MMIP crisis and human trafficking, with an emphasis on grant reform.

There need to be measures to hold law enforcement accountable to quality and committed work.

Jurisdiction needs to be returned to tribal nations. The report notes that Public Law 280 and other abdications of criminal jurisdiction have degraded the quantity and quality of law enforcement in tribal nations.

Alaska, a state where 229 federally recognized tribes cover 365 million acres—most of which are inaccessible by road—requires focused solutions.

Federal, state, and local governments must coordinate in reporting, investigating, and data sharing.

Authorities at all levels must improve communication with family members of victims, as they are often left in the dark and in many cases, cases are declared “cold” by law enforcement with no notice to the family.

Victims and families need comprehensive support, from knowing where to go for help to counseling services.

The government must invest in tribal law enforcement, including in training, benefits and pay equity.

The media must correct the disproportionate coverage given to non-Native victims and missing persons.

Country are unsure of who has jurisdiction, are unsure of who to call,” Jump said.

“And there is not a lot of information out there. The response tends to be slow-moving, and when we are in crisis, you want things; you want something done now. How do we quickly arm our relatives when facing this situation? I thought the idea of a hotline was a good one.”

Equal access to justice

The murder or disappearance of a loved one is already traumatic, as is the aftermath, when Native families face a justice that tends to exclude them. Culturally appropriate healing and response teams could assist families in navigating the justice system and healing from the trauma wrought by the situation.

“I think that would be very helpful,” Jump said. “We can train people in communities how to do that and assist families. It’s a great idea.”

The report features direct quotes from witness testimony at the hearings, spotlighting the heart-wrenching realities of the MMIP crisis for victims and family members: broken government promises, investigating the deaths and disappearances of loved ones in lieu of law enforcement, programs run on unsustainable grant funding, lack of support for survivors, and pain of being left without answers.

One witness, who gave testimony during a July commission hearing in Billings, Montana, is quoted speaking about losing their mother:

“My mom went missing. We looked for her for two days. They found her in a canal.

“I wonder, ‘How could you have drowned in a canal that was not even that big? How was she found like that, no clothes on except for her top and her shoes were gone? How could her stuff be found so far away from her and her phone smashed and SIM card taken out? Another accidental death?’

“My mom left all of us kids here. Now, we’re all orphaned. My mom is not a statistic, and we deserve answers.”

Jump told Native News Online that she encourages tribal communities to continue helping each other and investing in Native-led grassroots efforts to combat the crisis.

“I think you see that across Indian Country,” Jump said. “When someone goes missing, communities from other tribes gather and help in the search. We need to keep doing that, assisting other tribal communities; I think we do that just innately, as Native people.”

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