

December 9, 2021

Alaska State Legislators  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, AK 99811

Re: Need for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, People and Two-Spirit Legislation and other Public Safety Reforms

Dear Senators and Representatives,

There is a crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people (MMIWG2S) in Alaska and across the nation. Indigenous people continue to watch our loved ones go missing or being murdered without recognition or action from our state leaders to stop this senseless violence. We urge the Alaska legislature to recognize the gender-based violence that disproportionately targets American Indian and Alaska Native Women, Girls, People and Two-spirited individuals and to act now with a clear message that such violence will no longer be tolerated. We urge you to pass legislation that addresses our concerns below.

We have seen some actions moving forward with Congress passing Savannah's Act, the Not Invisible Act, an MMIWG Task Force and the creation of the Missing & Murdered Unit by Secretary Deb Haaland to pursue justice for missing or murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives.

We are still waiting on actions by the State of Alaska. We ask for a response from you.

### **Background of the Issue**

The MMIWG2S Alaska Working Group, other organizations and Tribes have called upon legislators and the Governor to take action year after year – yet, no policy has been enacted, no funding has been secured, and public safety, especially in rural Alaska, continues to fall behind basic needs.

In a study by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), Alaska ranks fourth in the nation for the highest number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls with Anchorage listed as having the third highest number of all cities across the US.<sup>1</sup> The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death among

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<sup>1</sup> Urban Indian Health Institute. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, Nov. 14, 2018. <https://www.uihi.org/resources/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-girls/>

American Indian and Alaska Native women and that rates of violence on reservations and rural areas can be up to ten times higher than the national average.<sup>2</sup> According to the Violent Death Reporting System between 2003 and 2008, Alaska Natives and American Indians make up 29.1 % of the Homicide victims in Alaska, with the 20-29 age group seeing the largest number of murders—22.1%. During that time period Alaska Native and American Indian Women represented 38% of the overall deaths, with a firearm being the #1 cause of killing our women—29%. In addition, the perpetrator in the murders of Alaska Natives and American Indian women, were generally not domestic violence or intimate partner related. The majority of the deaths were non-DV related, or 86.1%.<sup>3</sup>

The Violence Policy Center found that in 2017 Alaska ranked first with the highest homicide rate among female victims killed by male offenders -- three times the national average. In this same report, it found that American Indian and Alaska Native females were murdered at a higher rate than white females.<sup>4</sup>

The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database (NamUs) only logged 116 cases. We know that these numbers are vastly undercounted because the Alaska rural communities haven't been represented in this research. As of August 2021, Alaska has the most unresolved missing person's cases among American Indian and Alaska Native cases, at 292, with Oklahoma second with 79-- these numbers are unacceptable.<sup>5</sup>

In our conversations with Public Safety Officials in the state they have recognized and stated that their data systems are outdated, funding and resources for public safety in rural Alaska is not sufficient. It was also stated in a House State Affairs hearing in 2019 that administrative support at the Department of Public Safety is severely underfunded and that cases are not being pursued because of the lack of digital records and cases needing many hours of attention to organize the casework.

Data for Indigenous Justice, an Alaska based non-profit, has continued research in Alaska, gathering information about our missing and murdered women and girls is outlined in a new report – [We Are Calling to You](#) - which was released in February 2021. This report shared

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<sup>2</sup> Echo-Hawk, A. (2018). *Our Bodies, Our Stories: Sexual Violence Among Native Women in Seattle, WA*.

<sup>3</sup> *Alaska Violent Death Reporting System 2003-2008 (August 2011)*, State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, available at <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/injury/Documents/akvdrs/assets/AKVDRS.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Violence Policy Center. *When Men Murder Women - An Analysis of 2017 Homicide Data*. <http://vpc.org/studies/wmmw2019.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

[https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh336/files/media/document/namus-stats-ai\\_an-report-august-2021.pdf](https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh336/files/media/document/namus-stats-ai_an-report-august-2021.pdf)

an additional 229 Indigenous women and girls who have been missing or murdered in Alaska, and who were not a part of the UIHI report.

“There is so much work to be done. We need everyone to be a part of the solution in responding to this call for justice. As an Indigenous led effort, we share our work so our communities can build, co-create, and rise together. We invite allies to support Indigenous people's efforts, in relational solidarity, against colonial systems contributing to this issue. Throughout the work we have ahead, we know the transformational healing that must take place if we are to realize the justice we seek. Let's move together from a place of love, be courageous about speaking our truths, and deliberate in actions for justice,” – Dr. Charlene Aqpik Apok, Executive Director, Data for Indigenous Justice.

These statistics, who are our daughters, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunties, friends, and your constituents, continue to go unanswered and will continue to pass down to generations if we do not put a stop to this now.

### **Your Partnership and Action is Needed Now**

We are here to continue to advocate for the wellness and protection of Alaska Native peoples. We need partners across the state -- Legislators, Governor, law enforcement, non-profit agencies, Tribes, and municipalities -- to come together to be the voice for those who are being silenced through these acts of violence. We need your assistance and leadership to help address the preventable violence happening in our state, to stand up for Alaska Native women and children, and to send a clear message that Alaska can become a safe place for everyone.

We have sent multiple letters to Senate and House Finance Members and Governor Dunleavy requesting funding in the budget to help address the crisis of MMIWG2S – no funding has been added to the budget. We have advocated for hearings, discussion and movement for the MMIWG2S legislation that has been introduced in the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Legislatures. To date there has been absolutely no hearing or movement on this bill.

We have visited legislators offices to share information and ask for assistance, held webinars for the public and sent personal invites to legislators and staff members, held community events, sponsored 5K awareness runs, held vigils, done multiple interviews with radio and news stations to continue to bring awareness and ask for action, held rallies across the state, written letters, hosted multiple presentations, resolutions have been passed by numerous organizations including AFN, Tribes and the Anchorage Assembly. Most of all, we have been

there to hold hands, uplift and support our friends and family who have lost loved ones and for those who continue to look for answers.

**We urge you to take action NOW. Below are specific funding requests to add to the state operating budget in order to investigate and to address the MMIWG2S/MMIP crisis. Continuing this funding in perpetuity as long as it is vital.** We need the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Law to have the resources and the ability to work together to address the crisis because the lack of collaboration, accountability, data collection, reporting and special investigations contributes to the rising numbers of missing and murdered.

### **Action Needed: Legislative**

The state operating budget should include the following:

- Funding to support at least two new investigators in the Department of Public Safety for cases of MMIWG2S/MMIP and to continue this funding as long as it is needed;
- Funding for parallel state positions to the Federal Cold Case Investigation Unit (renamed to 'Unresolved Case') to bring closure to families of the victims;
- Funding of at least \$500,000 to the Criminal Division at the Department of Law designated for prosecution in homicide cases of Indigenous persons;
- Data system upgrades for ABSIN, RMS to improve law enforcement tracking and reporting across systems;
- Grant funding for Tribal Governments for self-determined resources to respond to the MMIWG2S/MMIP crisis in their communities;
- Mandatory cultural training with funding for all state agencies that are to be led by Indigenous Organizations with the goal to end systemic racism and build respectful relationships between the state and Indigenous people of Alaska.

Legislative and Executive Branch Policies should include:

- Require the Department of Public Safety to conduct a study to determine how to increase state criminal justice protective and investigative resources for reporting and identifying missing and murdered Indigenous women and two-spirit people in the state;
- Require training for all public safety officials – troopers, local police, village public safety officers about government relations with Tribes, racial equity and culture;
- Re-establish the fatality review commission to better understand the systematic response gaps for a missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two spirit people;

- Establish a grant program for Tribes that creates annual non-competitive direct funding for response to MMIWG2S/MMIP and public safety issues as determined by the tribes including operating and infrastructure;
- Require interagency cooperation to establish state protocols for missing persons;
- Audits and reporting on law enforcement investigations;
- Review of case management by law enforcement;
- Review of prosecution investigation, charging decisions and access to necessary resources for homicides; and review of judicial outcomes for homicides;
- Direct the Police Standards Council to consult and work with federally recognized Tribes;
- Require the Department of Public Safety to write best practices for how to investigate a missing persons report involving Indigenous women in collaboration with tribes and tribal organizations; and
- Create two liaison positions at Dept. of Public Safety to work on cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and two-spirit people.

Additional legislative reforms concerning public safety are needed:

- An overhaul of the inadequate and outdated 911 system. Alaska’s state 911 system is at least 30 years behind other states and one of three states in the nation without a unified system. There are many flaws in the current system with the most dangerous being the failure of emergency calls made from cell phones that do not track callers location in most of the state, as is done in Anchorage and much of the lower 48. Roughly 80 percent of the 911 calls come from cell phones. Additionally, many villages rely on landline phones and must dial 1-800 numbers to reach troopers, instead of 911. In emergency situations, long 11-digit numbers may be hard to remember, especially for children who are often the first responders in domestic violence situations. Other times individuals have been transferred to different law enforcement posts or only reach an answering machine<sup>6</sup>;
- Enact reforms to support the Village Public Safety Officers, such as Senate Bill 81 currently in the Senate State Affairs Committee;
- Review the Department of Law procedures for prosecution on cases involving murdered Indigenous people. We have heard from multiple families who have lost loved ones or experienced violent assaults, that they have had to wait several months

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<sup>6</sup> Alaska’s 911 System is 30 years outdated and risking lives, state officials say. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/crime-courts/2018/04/10/alaskas-911-system-is-30-years-outdated-and-risking-lives-state-officials-say/>

or even years for a decision from the Department of Law on whether or not prosecution will proceed. Families should not have to wait for years to know if the department intends to take action.

**Conclusion**

It is imperative that we have a collective effort to address the safety of our people. It is not just the responsibility of the state government, but also the Tribes, organizations, and individuals to work together. The information and suggestions presented here come from our organizations, Tribes and communities. We have done the research, had conversations with families, Tribal leaders and Alaskans to present as much information and proposed solutions you as legislators need in order to take action now. We know through hearings and discussions we can continue to come up with innovative ideas and gather additional research that can help address the public safety and provide the wellness needed for all Alaskans.

We are experiencing too many tragedies across our state and continue to see insufficient action by our state and law enforcement to adequately address this crisis. You have the power and ability to make change, to make a difference and to protect the lives of Alaska Native women and girls, and all Alaskans.

We appreciate your consideration and hope that we can work together to solve this crisis. Please do not hesitate to contact us, we stand ready and able to help in any way possible.

Gunalchéesh/Háw’aa/Quyana/Mahsi’ Choo/Baasee’/Maasee’/Dogedinh/Thank you,

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Cc:

Mr. James E. Cockrell, Commissioner of Public Safety

Mr. Treg R. Taylor, Attorney General

Mr. Adam Crum, Commissioner of Health and Social Services

Neil Steininger, OMB Director

Randy Ruaro, Chief of Staff to the Governor

Kim Kovol, Special Assistant to the Governor

Alaska Native Justice Center

Alaska Native Heritage Center