



ALASKA
NATIVE
HERITAGE
CENTER



DATA
FOR
INDIGENOUS
JUSTICE



January 19, 2024

Representative CJ McCormick
Alaska State Legislature
Alaska State Capitol
Room 416
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Representative McCormick,

We are grateful for your leadership in taking action to protect Alaska Native people through the introduction of House Bill 234 - Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP). This is an important step in addressing Alaska's high rate of MMIP.

The Missing, Murdered, Indigenous Women, Girls, Two Spirit (MMIWG2S) Alaska Working Group, which is an Indigenous-led group with the support of five organizations, fully supports this legislation and encourages the passage of this bill. The MMIWG2S AK Working Group has been working together for six years to address priorities and collective efforts to end the crisis of MMIWG2S/MMIP. We work on all fronts with our communities, Tribes, nonprofits and families, advocating for changes in our state policies, creating healing and wellness spaces, bringing awareness, collecting data and working with agencies to improve data collection, partnering with communities and Tribes on protocols and public safety measures, and much more. We know in order to end the crisis of MMIP, we must work on all fronts and we must work together.

As you know, all across our state, we have been experiencing high rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking and continue to have some of the highest numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across the country. The Urban Indian Health Institute released a national report citing Alaska as fourth in the Nation with the highest MMIP cases and Anchorage with the third highest number of MMIP cases among cities nationwide. This is unacceptable, and the State of Alaska must step forward to do better to protect Alaska Native people and fulfill their constitutional obligation to provide public safety.

The National Crime Information Center reports that in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, despite the US Department of Justice's Federal missing persons database (NamUs) only showing 116 cases. We know that these numbers are incomplete and that Alaska rural communities haven't been fully represented in this research. As of August 2021, NamUs listed Alaska with the most unsolved missing person cases among American Indian and Alaska Native cases, at 292, with Oklahoma second with 79-- these numbers are unacceptable.



ALASKA
NATIVE
HERITAGE
CENTER



DATA
FOR
INDIGENOUS
JUSTICE



House Bill 234 contains important steps in addressing MMIP in Alaska, including improving cooperation between agencies, reviewing and informing ways to set up specific standards for MMIP cases, protocols regarding research and the review of cases to learn and help families close outstanding casework, solidifying the important work and positions of our MMIP investigators, and requiring cultural training for law enforcement.

We have heard from communities and individuals across the state about barriers to communication with law enforcement. We know that law enforcement is not in every community at this time, and that they must travel throughout the state and encounter numerous cultures and people. Our Indigenous cultures also vary across the state from Southeast to North Slope to the Aleutian Islands. It is important that communication is improved and understanding our ways of life so there can be increased communication, respect, and cooperation between communities, Tribes, individuals, and law enforcement. We know that when we take the time to get to know our communities and people it will reduce miscommunication, enhance relationships that will steward working together more fully, build trust, and create a better public safety system for everyone.

In the last couple of years, we have seen the success and need for the MMIP Investigation Unit to be permanent at the Department of Public Safety (DPS). The number of cases, new and old, is staggering. We must codify the MMIP investigator positions in the Department of Public Safety in statute. At this time, we are reliant on current DPS internal policy and operations, which can change based on DPS administration. By having MMIP investigators in statute, we will not have to worry about these important positions being on the chopping block at the change of each administration. Additionally, it provides stability to the investigators and their work. Addressing Alaska's MMIP crisis should not be a political talking point. We need consistency in DPS to ensure the MMIP crisis will continue to be a priority and addressed as so. A number of Indigenous organizations have been working closely with Commissioner Cockrell and other DPS staff to create this new investigation unit, and through this process, DPS has stated the MMIP crisis is larger than originally expected, and even two investigators are not enough to address the number of cases that are still outstanding and the new cases. Currently, DPS employs four MMIP Investigators – the number of investigators started at one, quickly realizing that was not sufficient the Commissioner increased to two positions, and then to four. We recommend a conversation and consideration on whether the number of investigators should be increased to four in the bill to accurately reflect the need and the current positions at DPS.

The MMIP Review Commission set up in this bill is an important step to review the unsolved MMIP cases across the state, examine the trends and patterns of these cases that can lead to better policies and practices to keep our people safe, and help bring closure to families who have been looking for their loved ones, some for many years.



ALASKA
NATIVE
HERITAGE
CENTER



DATA
FOR
INDIGENOUS
JUSTICE



Lastly, the bill directs DPS to conduct a report on investigative resources. This is an important piece that came from the expression and learned gaps in the system from multiple communities where MMIP cases have been treated differently in communities across the state. It is important that each person who has gone missing or has been murdered is treated with the same care and devotion each and every time. Having set procedures and the ability to share and learn with each other, we can make this happen. At this time, many of our communities have been on their own for search efforts of missing tribal citizens, and resources from the state have not been consistent. This in-depth review, developing procedures for information sharing, and government-to-government relationships with our tribes is a necessary step to improve public safety across the state.

In addition to the current language, we respectfully encourage and suggest including language that will create a review of the commission and reports before sunsetting these two programs to ensure that there has been an adequate amount of time to address all the needs, ideas, and solutions.

Again, we are truly grateful for your leadership and for this important bill. We encourage all your colleagues to support HB234 and to pass this session. If you need anything from us we stand ready to assist.

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

Tamra Truett Jerue
Executive Director
Alaska Native Women's Resource Center

Alex Cleghorn
Chief Operating Officer
Alaska Native Justice Center

Emily Edenshaw
President/CEO
Alaska Native Heritage Center

Dr. Charlene Aqpik Apok
Executive Director
Data for Indigenous Justice

Enei Begaye
Executive Director
Native Movement