

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 27, 2024

8:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair  
Representative Kevin McCabe, Vice Chair  
Representative Tom McKay  
Representative Thomas Baker  
Representative Justin Ruffridge  
Representative Rebecca Himschoot  
Representative Donna Mears

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 234

"An Act relating to police officer training; establishing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission; relating to missing and murdered indigenous persons; relating to the duties of the Department of Public Safety; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 234

SHORT TITLE: MISSING/MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE;REPORT

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) MCCORMICK

01/16/24	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/24
01/16/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24	(H)	CRA, STA
02/20/24	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124
02/20/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
02/27/24	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

CALLAN CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF, Staff  
Representative CJ McCormick

Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented a PowerPoint and sectional analysis for HB 234, on behalf of Representative McCormick, prime sponsor.

KENDRA KLOSTER, Co-Director for Law and policy  
Alaska Native Resource Center  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 234.

CHARLENE AQPIK APOK, PhD, Executive Director and Co-Founder  
Data for Indigenous Justice  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 234.

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner  
Department of Public Safety  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 234.

CATHERINE EDWARDS, 3rd Vice President  
Executive Council  
Tlingit & Haida  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 324.

MARY DAVID, Executive Vice President  
Alaska Regional Coalition Kawerak  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 234.

SHYLENA LIE, Manager  
Maniilaq Family Crisis Center  
Kotzebue, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 234.

DELIAH JOHNSTON, representing self  
Nome, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 234.

ANTONIA COMMACK, representing self  
Wasilla, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 234.

## **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:03:29 AM](#)

**CHAIR MCCORMICK** called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives McKay, Baker, Himschoot, Mears, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representatives Ruffridge and McCabe arrived as the meeting was in progress.

### **HB 234-MISSING/MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE;REPORT**

[8:04:26 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 234, "An Act relating to police officer training; establishing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission; relating to missing and murdered indigenous persons; relating to the duties of the Department of Public Safety; and providing for an effective date."

[8:05:11 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[Chair McCormick passed the gavel to Vice Chair McCabe.]

[8:06:00 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK, prime sponsor, presented HB 234. He pointed out that recently, the high rates of missing and murdered indigenous people (MMIP) have made headlines; however, the phenomenon is known in rural and indigenous communities across the state and country. He emphasized that MMIP affects every corner of the state - rural, urban, and in between - in addition to all of North America. He said the bill would equip the state, law enforcement, families, and Tribes with the tools to protect individuals and put cold cases to rest.

[8:09:54 AM](#)

CALLAN CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF, Staff, Representative CJ McCormick, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative McCormick, prime sponsor, presented a PowerPoint, titled "House Bill 234" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. She began on

slide 2, "HB 234," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Mandatory cultural training under Police Standards Council
- Two MMIP full-time Investigator positions within DPS
- Establishes Missing & Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission in state statute
- Requires DPS submit an annual needs-assessment report to Legislature

[8:11:16 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF continued to slide 3, "MMIP National & State Crisis," explaining that MMIP gained nationwide attention due to the high statistics. She reiterated that the issue is both a rural and urban one.

[8:12:42 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF turned to slide 4, "MMIP Alaska," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- High rates = imperative action
- Jurisdictional challenges
- Indigenous communities
- Lack of law enforcement access
- Historic investigative biases
- Limited road system

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF added that in Alaska, the MMIP crisis is exponentially compounded by the state's remoteness and geography, in addition to the factors listed on the slide.

[8:14:55 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF proceeded to slide 5, "MMIP Reports," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- 2018 Urban Indian Health Institute MMIWG Report
- 2020 UAA Justice Information Center Homicide In Alaska Report
- 2021 Data For Indigenous Justice Baseline Report
- 2023 Alaska DPS MMIP Report

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF reported that Anchorage ranked third highest for MMIP cases by city; Alaska ranked fourth highest by state.

[8:16:55 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF moved to slides 6 and 7, "2018 UIHI Report," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Alaska ranks 4<sup>th</sup> highest MMIP cases by state
- Anchorage ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> highest MMIP cases by city
- Anchorage top five cities - cases not in law enforcement data
- Alaska singled out by geography
- 153 US cases not in law enforcement records

[8:18:02 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF advanced to slide 8, University of Alaska 2020 Homicide in AK Report," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- 55.6 of Alaska's sexual assault victims are AN/AI people
- AN/AI people twice as likely to become victims of homicide
- Alaska Native women reported domestic violence rates are 10 times higher than rest of the United States.
- AN/AI females were killed with a weapon more often than any other victim race-sex group
- AN/AI females make up 10.2% of AK homicide victims, but only 8.1% of total population

[8:19:10 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF continued to slide 9, "2021 DIJ Baseline Report," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- 229 MMIWG cases
- Jurisdictional boundaries
- Data inconsistency, collection and reporting
  - Four-box ethnicity categories [sic]
  - Home-community
  - Cause of death
  - Case status
- Stereotyping and systemic biases
- Recommendations

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF noted that the Data for Indigenous Justice (DIJ) investigates data inconsistencies and continues to refine data sets to make them as robust as possible.

[8:21:08 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF proceeded to slides 10 and 11, which featured a report from Congressional Research Services. The report was provided to congress in 2023. She highlighted the Alaska Department of Public Safety (DPS) report on MMIP on slide 12.

[8:22:36 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF summarized slides 13 through 30, which displayed a list of indigenous people that are currently missing in Alaska. She noted that the circumstance of disappearance is important. She shared a quote on slide 31 from the Association of Village Council Presidents, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

"Every living person in the world experiences hardship or traumatic events. Alaska Native and American Indian people have lived through several traumas including new diseases, attempts to terminate tribes, and the forced assimilation of boarding schools and religion brought by the U.S. Government. The way of life was very different just 100 years ago."

[8:25:03 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF advanced to slide 32, "Alaska MMIP," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Challenges

- Remote indigenous communities
- Historic & modern indigenous biases
- High statistics
- Data & reporting flaws
- Heavy cold & on-going caseloads
- Lack of law enforcement
- Continuing rates

HB234

- Mandatory cultural training under Police Standards Council

- Two MMIP full-time Investigator positions within DPS
- Establishes Missing & Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission into state statute
- Requires DPS submit an annual needs assessment report to Legislature

[8:28:52 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF concluded on slide 33, "HB 234," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The rates of MMIP cases in Alaska illustrate the need for a proactive examination and shift to public safety practices to keep Alaskans safe. Governor Dunleavy and DPS have identified this as a priority. I ask that you support HB234 alongside tribes, communities, families and constituents across Alaska.

[8:29:44 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF shared the sectional analysis for HB 234 [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: Amends AS 18.65.240(a) by adding a mandatory cultural training to the requirement standards as an appointed police officer and stipulates this training be administered by an indigenous coordinator or entity.

Section 2: Amends AS 44.41 by adding Sec. 44.41.023, directing the Department of Public Safety to employ at least two individuals to investigate cases involving missing and murdered indigenous peoples and act as liaisons between law enforcement agencies, communities in the state, and federally recognized tribes.

Section 3: Amends the uncodified law of the State of Alaska by adding the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission

Section 4: Directs the Department of Public Safety to conduct a needs assessment to determine how to increase protective and investigative resources for identifying and reporting cases of missing and murdered indigenous persons within the state criminal

justice system. No later than January 1, 2025, the department must submit a written report to the Senate Secretary and Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives and notify the legislature that the report is ready.

Section 5: Stipulates that police officers with a certificate issued under AS 18.65.240 on or before the effective date of this Act, be granted two years from the effective date of this Act to fulfill the requirements.

Section 6: Sets a sunset date for Section 4 of January 1, 2026

Section 7: Sets a sunset date for Section 3 of January 1, 2027

Section 8: Sets an effective date of January 1, 2025

[8:33:27 AM](#)

VICE CHAIR MCCABE questioned the inconsistent news coverage of MMIP. He suggested that a public reporting component should be included in the bill.

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF deferred the question to Ms. Kloster.

[8:36:10 AM](#)

KENDRA KLOSTER, Co-Director for Law and policy, Alaska Native Resource Center (ANRC), stated that ANRC was contemplating how to continuously update data, get the information out, and ensure better media coverage of MMIP. She referenced HB 235, which would require law enforcement to enter information into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).

[8:39:18 AM](#)

CHARLENE AQPIK APOK, PhD, Executive Director and Co-Founder, Data for Indigenous Justice (DIJ), agreed that working with media was a top strategy to spread the message.

[8:40:21 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK added that unfortunately, the onus to contact news organizations is often placed on victims' families.

VICE CHAIR MCCABE sought further questions from committee members.

[8:41:18 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE, referencing list of missing persons in the PowerPoint, noted the column, titled "Circumstance," in which many of the entries were labeled "environment." He questioned the accuracy of that label. In addition, he cited the quote on slide 31 and asked how things have changed over the past 100 years.

[8:43:15 AM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF shared a personal anecdote about her experience growing up in Anchorage and spoke to the unique challenge of growing up as an indigenous person in Alaska. She said HB 234 is a first start towards reconciling these historic challenges.

[8:45:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE questioned the labeling of [missing persons] as an environmental cause.

[8:47:31 AM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety (DPS), explained that in Alaska, many incidents, such as plane crashes, boating accidents, and snow machining mishaps, are considered "environmental."

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE asked how accurate the label of "environmental" is in the data set.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said he felt comfortable with all the cases identified as "environmental" by DPS.

[Vice Chair McCabe returned the gavel to Chair McCormick.]

[8:51:28 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCABE asked whether the report could be broken down into additional categories.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said MMIP is an issue that he feels strongly about. He recounted his attempts at consolidating the effort made by DPS and the addition of four MMIP investigative positions.

[8:54:53 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MEARS urged [the state] to work upstream to reduce domestic violence and violence against women, reduce trauma, and reduce ACEs, which would keep the list [of missing persons] from getting longer.

CHAIR MCCORMICK shared that things are often brushed off as "environmental" or happenstance. There's a feeling of being swept under the rug for the sake of expediency, he said. He pointed out that the U.S. contributed to the MMIP issue by deliberate sterilization and displacement. He emphasized that there is more work to do.

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF, in response to Representative Ruffridge's previous question, acknowledged that the data points could be refined and more targeted going forward. She said [the bill] would equip the state of Alaska with a robust set of tools to keep data sets accurate.

[8:58:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT asked about the cultural training for police officers and who creates it.

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF deferred to Commissioner Cockrell.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said essentially, the training would be added to the in-service training provided to troopers.

[9:00:47 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked how many of the missing persons cases on the list had been solved and whether a column could be added to reflect that.

COMMISSIONER MCCORMICK appreciated the suggestion.

[9:02:13 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK invited Commissioner Cockrell to address funding.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL relayed that this year, the department submitted a budget request to fund the four MMIP investigators. He said he was confident that some of the cold cases would be solved, and that the families would be given closure.

[9:06:31 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[9:07:06 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK opened public testimony on HB 234.

[9:07:41 AM](#)

CATHERINE EDWARDS, 3rd Vice President, Executive Council, Tlingit & Haida, testified in support of HB 234. She said it is passed time to put policy and laws in place to protect women and provide law enforcement with the information and resources needed to actively identify and investigate missing persons in Alaska.

[9:09:34 AM](#)

MARY DAVID, Executive Vice President, Alaska Regional Coalition Kawerak, testified in support of HB 234. She said the bill contains important steps to address MMIP in Alaska and emphasized the importance of communication and building relationships to create a better public safety environment. She opined that the creation of a permanent MMIP investigations unit under DPS is important for consistency. HB 234 is an important first step to address this crisis, she concluded.

[9:12:38 AM](#)

SHYLENA LIE, Manager, Maniilaq Family Crisis Center, testified in support of HB 234. She shared her belief that the mandatory cultural training being supervised by an indigenous entity or coordinator is a great addition. She expressed her hope that these changes would start the healing for families that have been waiting for a long time, and possibly strengthen communities' relationship with law enforcement.

[9:14:39 AM](#)

DELIAH JOHNSTON, representing self, testified in support of HB 234. She said that DPS conducting a needs assessment to increase the approach to protecting and investigating MMIP cases within the criminal justice system is long overdue. In a state with 229 Tribes - a state that didn't recognize tribes until 2022 - she opined that prioritizing the raw material extraction from subsistence resources and lands over the safety of Native people is inexcusable. She voiced her opinion that for any Alaskan representative to not take the time to understand the true crisis of the underserved and underrepresented original people of the state is unjustifiable. She added that allowing outsiders to enter villages and communities without an increased protection plan for MMIP is backwards and encouraged violence, homicide, trauma, and sexual assault. She said more needs to be done, adding that the bill needs to come before oil production, mining, etcetera. She urged legislators to have a voice in standing with Alaska's indigenous people to send a clear message that [the crisis] must end now.

[9:17:49 AM](#)

ANTONIA COMMACK, representing self, testified in support of HB 234. She shared her experience on a podcast and conveyed that victims' families are not feeling seen or heard by law enforcement. She emphasized the importance of the mandatory cultural training under the Alaska Police Standards Council to train future officers to be sensitive to the issues faced by Alaska Natives, such as systemic racism. She shared her understanding that the bill only provides for two MMIP investigators and said there should be more. In order for the MMIP issue to move forward, she shared her belief that law enforcement needs to take responsibility for its negligence and be held accountable for adding to the crisis.

[9:22:09 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK said public testimony on HB 234 would remain open and announced that the bill would be held over.

[9:22:46 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:22 a.m.