

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

February 5, 2024

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair  
Representative Ben Carpenter  
Representative Sarah Vance  
Representative Thomas Baker  
Representative Maxine Dibert  
Representative Ashley Carrick

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Jamie Allard

**OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT**

Representative Calvin Schrage  
Representative Rebecca Himschoot

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL APPROACH TO MISSING AND  
MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

TAMI TRUETT JERUE, Executive Director  
Alaska Native Women's Resource Center  
Anvik, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled  
"Multi-Jurisdictional Approach to the MMIP Crisis."

JOEL JACKSON, President  
Organized Village of Kake  
Kake, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Commented during the Multi-Jurisdictional  
Approach to Missing and Murdered Indigenous People presentation.

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner  
Department of Public Safety  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the Multi-Jurisdictional Approach to Missing and Murdered Indigenous People presentation.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:31:25 PM](#)

**CHAIR CJ MCCORMICK** called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Representatives Baker and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representatives Dibert, Vance, Carpenter and Carrick arrived as the meeting was in progress.

The committee took an at-ease from 3:31 p.m. to 3:33 p.m.

**PRESENTATION: MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL APPROACH TO MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

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**CHAIR MCCORMICK** announced that the only order of business would be the Multi-Jurisdictional Approach to Missing and Murdered Indigenous People presentation.

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**TAMI TRUETT JERUE**, Executive Director, Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, provided a PowerPoint presentation, titled "Multi-Jurisdictional Approach to the MMIP Crisis" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. Slide 3, titled "About AKNWRC," read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Since 2015, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center has been dedicated to strengthening local, tribal government's responses through community organizing efforts advocating for the safety of women and children in their communities and homes, especially against domestic and sexual abuse and violence. AKNWRC board members are Alaska Native women raised in Alaska Native Villages and have over 141 years of combined experience governments, nonprofit management, domestic violence and sexual assault advocacy, and other social service experience.

## Our Mission

The Alaska Native Women's Resource Center envisions our Tribal women, communities and families free from violence, healing the trauma and utilizing the wisdom of our ancestors to create effective community/Tribal responses to domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, trafficking, sexual assault, and related injustices.

MS. JERUE provided background about the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center.

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MS. JERUE introduced the correlation between gender-based violence and missing and murdered Indigenous people on slide 4, titled "Introduction to MMIP," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Indigenous communities have been experiencing some the highest rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, human/sex trafficking, and MMIWG/MMIP in the country. We know this to be true from even the limited data we have from tribal, state and federal databases.

MS. JERUE discussed data limitations and how data is important to secure funding for victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking.

MS. JERUE moved to slide 5, titled "What is being done to address the MMIP Crisis?" [original punctuation provided]:

In order to end the decades long violence perpetrated on Alaska Native and American Indians, all entities must come together to stop the violence and be coordinated - local, tribal, state, and federal, including all organization and business - there is a trust responsibility to ensure every citizen is protected and cared for.

Today, we are going to address a few of the actions that have been taking place - but understand, this is just the beginning and YOU ALL have a part in ending this violence NOW.

MS. JERUE noted some improvements over the last 10 years; however, statistics concerning the missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) crisis show that there are still significant problems due to colonization and the lack of collaborative relationships with Tribes. She emphasized the desire to work with the state to provide access to services for survivors.

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MS. JERUE discussed the "Not Invisible Act Commission," on slide 6, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The Commission is a multi-agency effort to enhance protections and basic guidelines to engage, coordinate, and consult with tribal governments, survivors, families, and experts who best understand the needs of tribal communities to lead Federal efforts to ensure indigenous people don't continue to go missing by developing strategies to address the crisis by developing:

- Administrative changes to identify, report, and respond effectively to cases of missing persons, murder, and human trafficking of Indians within Indian lands;
- Best practices for Tribal, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to follow in combating violent crime against Indians within Indian lands, including missing persons, murder, and human trafficking; and
- Guidance on how to address any gaps in services for Indian victims of violent crime.

MS. JERUE said that the commission report had proactive requests for change, yet there still has not been a response from the U.S. Department of Justice. She expressed a common thread that was heard throughout the several commission hearings that there were concerns about the lack of response from law enforcement and a lack of support services available for victims.

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MS. JERUE moved to slide 7, titled "Not Invisible Act Commission," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

The NIA Commission held 7 field hearings, 8 full commission meetings, and a combined total of 119 sub committee meetings from 6 sub committees.

A final report was released in November 2023. Some of the highlights include:

- Thanking the survivors, and impacted family and communities of missing and murdered Indigenous persons and human trafficking of indigenous peoples.
- Common Themes from the Field Hearings
- Key Findings
- Recommendations

MS. JERUE described that the Not Invisible Act commission indicated that a special chapter in Alaska would be necessary due to extreme conditions and isolation.

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MS. JERUE provided slide 8, titled "Common Themes From Field Hearings," [original punctuation provided]:

Funding: Reliable, consistent base funding for Tribes to battle MMIP and HT is critical.

Accountability: Communities need clarity about the extent and the limit of the authority and responsibility of law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners (ME/Cs), and funeral homes. These entities must be held accountable to quality, committed work, and in the absence of such work, negligence and egregious violations of human rights and dignity must be addressed.

Returning Jurisdiction to Sovereigns: PL-280 and other abdications of criminal jurisdiction to the states have had a disastrous effect on the quality and quantity of LE for Tribal communities. Tribes must regain their equal and rightful status as sovereigns, especially around LE, criminal justice, and public safety.

Alaska requires focused solutions: The 229 tribes in Alaska are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse nations, occupying a vast area of about 365

million acres, much of which is inaccessible by road and lacks basic infrastructure. Prior to the 2022 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) reauthorization, Alaska Native Villages were in a legal no-man's land as to Tribal law enforcement authority. The public safety situation in Alaska is dire and requires tailored solutions that recognize the unique legal framework, exceptionally high victimization rates, and historic exclusion of Alaska Tribal justice systems from federal funding.

MS. JERUE noted that the report can be found online. She expressed the need for accountability for law enforcement because of high victimization rates in Alaska.

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MS. JERUE moved to slide 9, titled "Common Themes From Field Hearings," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Data and coordination: Federal, state, local and Tribal law enforcement agencies (LEAs) must coordinate in reporting, investigations, and sharing data. Jurisdictional boundaries and responsibilities must be clarified and understood.

Communication: Authorities at all levels must improve communications with family members, who are too often left in the dark for days, weeks, or months about the investigation. Tragically, a case may be declared "cold" without a family receiving any information about the investigation.

Victim and family support: Victims and families need support from the beginning to the end. This includes information on how processes work, where to go for help, counseling, and connections to other services.

Law enforcement shortages: There are serious shortages and high turnover of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Tribal LEOs, who choose state or federal departments for better pay, retirement, and perhaps less stress. Up to date, relevant training, wellness support, pay equity, and benefits can remedy this.

MS. JERUE emphasized the need for victim and family support through mental health services. She sought to find solutions regarding shortages, high turnover, and lack of adequate training for law enforcement.

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MS. JERUE moved to slide 9, also titled "Common Themes From Field Hearings," which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Media: There are endless examples of non-Indian victims and missing persons who receive immediate and widespread media coverage. For the AI/AN victim or missing person, this is the job of the family or advocacy groups. Indigenous missing persons must and should receive the attention and focus that others have.

Addressing vulnerabilities: Human traffickers prey on the vulnerable, often people who are young, homeless or in foster care, dealing with addiction, mental illness, or just depression, anxiety, and loneliness. There must be outreach and help to interrupt this pattern.

Trauma and resilience: The impact of the MMIP and HT crisis on AI/AN communities is intergenerational, a terrible legacy handed down in families. But there is also a deep resilience, an ability to survive, carry on, and even heal, especially with the help of cultural and spiritual practices.

MS. JERUE noted the increased likelihood of media coverage for a missing non-Indigenous person versus a missing Indigenous person and the problems associated with this discrepancy. She emphasized the importance of addressing the trauma.

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MS. JERUE concluded that there are many partnerships and collaborations underway to combat the MMIP crisis.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE thanked Ms. Jerue and asked about the statistic on slide 4.

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MR. JERUE clarified that 94 percent of Alaska Native or American Indian women surveyed had been raped or coerced in their lifetime.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE said, "Say it louder for those in the back."

[3:57:02 PM](#)

CHAIR MCCOMICK thanked Ms. Jerue and introduced the next speaker.

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JOEL JACKSON, President, Organized Village of Kake, offered his perspective of the issues of MMIP in his village of Kake, which has fewer than 500 people and recently hired two new village public safety officers (VPSOs). There are sometimes gaps in VPSO service for weeks at a time.

MR. JACKSON recollected a story of two young women who were murdered. He said that one of the murdered women was left in the back of the church for 16 hours while the village waited for law enforcement to arrive. He expressed that the lack of law enforcement presence is unacceptable. This is not an isolated case and other communities have experienced similar problems. He expressed the difficulties faced by the community of Kake in the aftermath of the recent tragedy that occurred. He mentioned that his community felt afraid and unsafe with the lack of law enforcement response. He said that he responds to serious events in the community and has some previous law enforcement experience. He emphasized the need for law enforcement in small communities. He asked, "How many more of our tribal citizens are going to die because of a lack of law enforcement? Enough is enough. I heard all kinds of answers today. Budget issues. Ok, how much is a human life worth? You tell me."

[4:05:12 PM](#)

MR. JACKSON relayed that there were two active shooters in Kake in the last two years, and there were no VPSOs there to respond. Mr. Jackson said he responded to the incidents and luckily no

one was hurt. He said, "I shouldn't have to do this." He previously worked in law enforcement and mentioned 15 suicides in his village in one year which caused him to leave the police force. He said, "I'd had enough, so I moved on."

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MR. JACKSON sought partnerships through state and federal entities to ensure the safety and protection of his community, Native and non-Native. He encouraged the committee to work with tribes to pool resources to create long-term solutions to problems.

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CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked Mr. Jackson for sharing his story.

[4:13:30 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE expressed that Mr. Jackson's story is seared into her memory. She commended him for telling his story which helped to increase the number of VPSOs around the state. She mentioned the nationwide shortage of law enforcement. She asked if there has been any increase in tribal members who want to be involved in the VPSO program.

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MR. JACKSON emphasized the difficulty for a resident of the village to become a VPSO due to a lack of interest in policing one's friends and family. He mentioned that a paramedic from Florida with no law enforcement background was hired to be a VPSO in Kake. He commented on the need for cultural training.

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REPRESENTATIVE BAKER thanked Mr. Jackson. He referred to his work on the Kotzebue Tribal Council. He gave an example of a new VPSO from Oklahoma. He agreed that it is paramount that VPSOs have resources to help them embrace the culture of the place they are protecting.

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REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT thanked Mr. Jackson. She asked for his thoughts on training programs for local youth.

[4:21:16 PM](#)

MR. JACKSON said he was looking at all possibilities to increase recruitment and retention of law enforcement in Alaska. He said, "You gotta want to do it."

[4:22:19 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BAKER commented that when it comes to law enforcement in small communities, it's hard for anyone to want to police their own community. He emphasized the importance of building healthy families and communities so the next generation will want to protect their homes.

CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked Mr. Jackson and introduced the next speaker.

[4:24:29 PM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety (DPS), explained that the state has provided disproportionate resources for communities in rural Alaska. He said, "It's shameful." He mentioned increasing taxes for boroughs to supplement their police forces. He said DPS is focused on MMIP issues. He reported that the federal government funded the first MMIP investigator for the department. He informed the committee that the scope of MMIP issues is too broad for the small number of investigators dedicated to the issue. Currently, there are six cold cases in four regions of the state. Investigators have been active and have received lots of support from community members. He ensured that the department plans to stay focused on MMIP. Four investigators are fully funded in the governor's budget with additional funding for outreach.

[4:30:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK asked about additional tribal sovereignty over cases and how the legislature can support such an effort.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL replied that tribal sovereignty is a complex issue. He mentioned future federal funding for tribal police officers. Certain jurisdictions with tribal courts around the state will be able to tackle low level misdemeanors.

[4:33:12 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CARRICK commented about higher level crime and the challenges for tribes in small communities.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE noted the changes in DPS over the last five years in response to the outcry from communities. She commended the commissioner for his work in implementing changes to provide solutions. She mentioned a new VPSO in Seldovia.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said that hearing the stories of victimization from rural communities changes one's perspective of law enforcement. The department's focus has been on providing more resources to rural areas. There are struggles with housing for VPSOs. He mentioned how rewarding it is to be an Alaska State Trooper. Funding for tribal issues over the last couple years has caused positive momentum and change. He admitted that troopers aren't perfect but are committed to providing professional law enforcement resources that are equal around the state.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL described how crime tends to level off and then decrease once a trooper or VPSO is present in a community and has a relationship with that community. It is difficult to have someone from the village to police the village. Now that the VPSO program is a division within the Office of the Commissioner, there is better communication, parity, and shared resources.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER asked whether it is time to discuss local municipalities providing local policing.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL discussed resources throughout different parts of Alaska. Growth has outpaced funding for troopers in Matanuska-Susitna. It's time to discuss local policing.

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REPRESENTATIVE CARPENTER said that community-oriented policing models are likely to be most effective. If law enforcement has

a presence in the community, intervention can happen before a response is needed. He wondered if a state, borough, or county law enforcement model would have better results.

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COMMISSIONER COCKRELL said the Alaska State Troopers were not designed to police urban areas. If the department were growing to an adequate level, more direct interactions with the public would be possible. The department is currently in a reactionary state because of vacancies and lack of funding. He described a busy day on patrol in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, which involved a backlog of cases due to a lack of administrative support. Uniformed officers should be in the field, not stuck in the office writing reports.

[4:55:04 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT thanked the commissioner.

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REPRESANTATIVE BAKER thanked the commissioner.

CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked the commissioner and said that there are still many families who report incidences and are ignored. He said he looks forward to working to fill in the gaps to keep the public safe.

[4:58:28 PM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 4:58 p.m.