

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 6, 2024

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Scott Kawasaki, Chair  
Senator Matt Claman, Vice Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Bill Wielechowski  
Senator Kelly Merrick

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 151

"An Act 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

EO 128 SEPARATE MEMBERSHIP OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE ALASKA ENERGY AUTHORITY AND THE ALASKA INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND EXPORT AUTHORITY

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 151

SHORT TITLE: MISSING/MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE;REPORT

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) OLSON

05/13/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/13/23	(S)	STA, FIN
02/06/24	(S)	STA AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

**WITNESS REGISTER**

SENATOR DONNY OLSEN, District T

Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Sponsor for SB 151.

ALMERIA ALCANTRA, Staff  
Senator Donald Olson  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided an overview of the sectional analysis for SB 151.

KENDRA KLOSTER, Co-Director  
Law and Policy  
Alaska Native Women's Resource Center  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Invited testimony for SB 151.

CHARLENE APQIK APOK, Executive Director  
Data for Indigenous Justice  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

MORGAN LIM, Advocate  
Planned Parenthood Alliance Advocates (PPAA)  
Juneau, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

MAKA MONTURE, Member  
Data for Indigenous Justice  
Anchorage, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

KAI MONTURE, Associate Multimedia Producer  
Native Movement  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

KC CASORT, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

ANTONIA COMMACK, representing self  
Wasilla, Alaska  
**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

EMILY KLOC, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

YAARI WALKER, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

JULIE SMYTH, representing self  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

JOEL JACKSON, Tribal Council President  
Organized Village of Kake, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

HEATHER GURKO, Grand President  
Alaska Native Brotherhood  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 151.

JIM COCKRELL, Commissioner  
Department of Public Service (DPS)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Invited testimony for SB 151.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:31:58 PM](#)

**CHAIR SCOTT KAWASAKI** called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Claman, Bjorkman, Merrick, and Chair Kawasaki. Senator Wielechowski arrived thereafter.

#### **SB 151-MISSING/MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE;REPORT**

[3:32:41 PM](#)

**CHAIR KAWASAKI** announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 151 "An Act 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."

[3:33:29 PM](#)

**SENATOR DONNY OLSEN**, District T, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor for SB 151. He stated that the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) has been a long-standing issue in Alaska, but has been neglected for too long. Progress has been made in recent years, but the state has a

significant way to go. He provided the following sponsor statement:

[Original punctuation provided.]

### **SENATE BILL 151**

"An Act establishing the Missing and Murdered  
Indigenous Persons Review Commission"

#### **Sponsor Statement**

For decades, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples (MMIP) has plagued the State of Alaska. This crisis has taken loved ones from families. The absence of these lives affects the health and wellbeing of communities and has negatively impacted generations of Alaskans.

While women and girls are the primary victims of violence and human trafficking, these crimes also impact men, boys, and elders throughout our state. In fact, what many people don't know is Alaska ranks the fourth highest state in the nation for the number of MMIP cases and Anchorage has the third highest number of cases by city according to a study conducted by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) in 2018.

Senate Bill 151 creates a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission which will reside within the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and work cohesively with law enforcement and MMIP investigators. This legislation also directs DPS to employ at least two MMIP investigators. These positions will be permanent within DPS and shall investigate MMIP cases and act as liaisons between law enforcement agencies, communities in the state, and federally recognized tribes.

The Commission will consist of nine members from diverse backgrounds whose sole purpose is to, in coordination with law enforcement, review unresolved MMIP cases from different regions within the state to examine the trends and patterns related to these cases. From their findings, the Commission shall prepare a report providing recommendations to entities throughout the state to increase collaboration and

reduce cases involving Indigenous persons. Along with the Commission's report, this legislation directs DPS to conduct a needs assessment to determine how to increase protective and investigative resources for identifying and reporting MMIP cases within the state criminal justice system.

In the last several years, there has been increased interest and attention on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous persons. Just last year this legislature secured funding for two additional DPS MMIP investigators. These investigators have made significant progress in reviewing unresolved cases, following leads, and making headway in cases that have historically gone unsolved, and we must not lose momentum. The creation of this Commission is necessary for the continued success of those who are working diligently to solve the tremendous amount of unresolved MMIP cases we have in this State.

In closing, I would like to thank the committee for hearing Senate Bill 151 and ask for your support of this legislation to continue this essential work.

[3:34:31 PM](#)

ALMERIA ALCANTRA, Staff, Senator Donald Olson, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, provided an overview of the sectional analysis for SB 151. She said SB 151 would enact a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Review Commission under the Department of Public Safety (DPS). At least two individuals would be tasked with investigating MMIP cases and act as liaisons between law enforcement, the community, and federally recognized tribes. The purpose of the commission is to work with MMIP investigators to review unresolved cases across the state, examine case trends and patterns, and make recommendations on how to increase collaboration between state agencies to reduce the number of cases involving Indigenous persons. The commission is also tasked with preparing a report of its findings that shall be submitted to the legislature no later than two years after the effective date. SB 151 directs DPS to conduct a needs assessment to determine how to increase resources for identifying and reporting MMIP cases within the state criminal justice system. The report shall be submitted to the legislature no later than one year after the effective date. The bill is inspired by conversations with Alaskans throughout the state. She expressed that the state must come together to resolve MMIP cases.

[3:37:23 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR KAWASAKI announced invited testimony.

[3:38:34 PM](#)

KENDRA KLOSTER, Co-Director, Law and Policy, Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, Fairbanks, Alaska, invited testimony for SB 151. She said she came into MMIP work with the belief that it is "heart work." As a Tlingit woman who is raising children, she has concerns about the continuance of this issue. MMIP cases have caused suffering in communities for many years. She said in 2018, she reached out to the Executive Director of Data for Indigenous Justice, Charlene Apquik Apok, and together created the MMIWG2S Alaska Working Group for MMIW and two-spirit people. Members from Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, Alaska Native Justice Center, Data for Indigenous Justice, Alaska Native Heritage Center, and Native Movement meet every week to determine ways to address the crisis. Communities come to the organizations to share their stories and entrust them with information. People are here today to speak to gaps they have observed. She said she is thankful this issue is moving forward, but SB 151 is just one of many pieces that will ensure the safety of all Alaskans.

[3:40:55 PM](#)

MS. KLOSTER said the Alaska Native Resource Center receives calls from families looking for help in locating their loved ones because law enforcement has been unresponsive and rural communities do not have the public safety infrastructure needed to ensure everyone is kept safe. As stories are shared, the goal is to identify gaps and an action plan. The Alaska Native Women's Resource Center created a toolkit to help tribes know what to do when someone goes missing. The kit also identified gaps in the response time of law enforcement. On one occasion, it took 16 hours for law enforcement to arrive. People wonder why some communities do not have tribal police. Making Alaska safe and ensuring people are not missing or murdered depends on tribes, communities, and legislators coming together. She stated that this is not a new issue and communities have been suffering for years as a result of colonization. Indigenous people are being targeted in other parts of the country and throughout the world. Indigenous people have high rates of domestic violence and sexual assault. In 2018, the Urban Indian Health Institute released a report that included data for missing Indigenous women. As expected, Alaska has one of the highest rates and is one of five states with the most MMIW cases. She stated that the numbers are vastly underreported.

[3:43:47 PM](#)

MS. KLOSTER said she appreciates the partnership the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center established with Commissioner Cockrell and the Assistant Attorney General's Office to get four MMIP investigators. There are currently four investigators, but SB 151 would only mandate two. At the time SB 151 was first developed, there was only one investigator listed. She wondered if more are necessary given they work in pairs. It is important that MMIP investigators are supported, so they can help bring closure to families and properly investigate cases. She concluded that this is heart work and important to the community.

[3:45:25 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked how her policy efforts and the report work in tandem to create information and how it would be used.

[3:45:47 PM](#)

MS. KLOSTER replied that the report specified under SB 151 would focus on resources and measure the performance of MMIP investigations. She said families are frustrated and believe cases are not being handled in the same manner among different regions. As time goes on, there are opportunities to improve investigations and support investigators with resources, so cases move forward for the Department of Law to prosecute at a higher rate.

[3:47:47 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN inquired about the intent of only having one report.

[3:48:07 PM](#)

MS. KLOSTER replied that the intent is to better understand what is currently happening and identify a needs assessment. There is a working group under DPS, formerly an MMIP council, that acts as a public arm to continue the internal work. Ensuring continued communication between the working group and commissioner is key. The report is to also ensure the commission addresses necessary items within a needed timeframe. She invited the commissioner to offer his thoughts.

[3:49:43 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN added that Alaska has the highest rates of sexual abuse and sexual assault in the country and this issue is one part of that problem.

[3:51:10 PM](#)

CHARLENE APQIK APOK, Executive Director, Data for Indigenous Justice, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She introduced herself in Iñupiaq and said she goes by "Apqik." Additionally, she is Co-Director of Native Justice and Healing for Native Movement, which is a statewide organization. She is also Executive and Founding Director for Data for Indigenous Justice. As the voice of many who are not able to be here, she said she comes forth with her past, present, and future ancestors and is the voice for those who cannot attend. She identified herself as a story keeper and added that her heart carries forth the stories of many lost lives in Alaska. In 2018, local community organizers sought to raise awareness of the MMIP issue but could not locate data. Families shared heartbreaking stories in hopes of change and action. When families provided information, she recorded the data and kept an eye on social media. Many times, families will first share information about a missing person on social media due to mistrust of law enforcement. Following the report released by the Urban Indian Health Institute, Data for Indigenous Justice released an Alaska-specific report in 2021, which identified 229 missing and murdered Indigenous women in the state. She expressed her belief that the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women is not a coincidence, and all tribes are impacted.

[3:55:06 PM](#)

MS. APOK said since the continued tracking of data, thousands of cases were identified within just a few years. She stated that this was partially due to outdated database systems, however, MMIP is an ongoing issue. Sufficient support for public safety has not been met. Families often seek advocacy support from Data for Indigenous Justice. She suggested that a public safety system should ensure all Alaskans are safe, entail a timely and trusted response, uphold prosecution, and ensure closure for families. A substantial amount of work has been put into various drafts of SB 151. She expressed her appreciation for the hearing and said it would give hope to families. She said MMIP investigators expressed that they have caseloads beyond their lifetimes, so it is important to establish investigator positions in statute. This is the first step to implementing change in Alaska. Proposals under SB 151 were developed from feedback from families.

[3:57:59 PM](#)

MS. APOK concluded by saying that she is a story keeper like many people in the room and many Alaskans. She stated that tracking the data is a heavy lift, but she is a survivor. She

shared that her mother was murdered at 40-years-old and left behind nine children. The death report incorrectly listed her mother's cause of death as suicide and identified her race as Caucasian. Indigenous women go missing due to cultural misunderstandings and are underreported due to inaccurate data systems. She said her cousin, Samantha Koenig, was the barista who was kidnapped and murdered in Anchorage. Although Anchorage Police Department handled the case well, she expressed her belief that all families deserve to have cases handled in the same manner. She also shared that she has an aunt who went missing when she left the state. Eventually, law enforcement declared her deceased. She stated she testifies today with a lot of heart and experience. Actions taken today would mean a lot to families and would foster partnerships between tribes, tribal sovereignty, state, and federal entities. She conveyed her belief that everyone has the opportunity to be a part of the solution.

[4:00:44 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked what type of data the state needs to accumulate to solve cases.

[4:01:07 PM](#)

MS. APOK responded that race and ethnicity boxes are often left unchecked when reporting missing person data. She stated that improving basic demographic information in the data collection process could make a difference. In the past, there was just one checkbox for all causes of death for missing people. The situation of an abducted person is different from someone who was lost on a hike. DPS developed four checkbox categories based on recommendations. She also recommended mandating NamUs entries, a federal missing persons database, that would ensure protections for all Alaskans. Currently, Alaska is one of a dozen states that does not enter information into a national clearinghouse database, which would be a no-cost request.

[4:03:50 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN asked her to repeat the name of the national database that Alaska does not submit data to.

MS. APOK replied, "NamUs."

[4:04:06 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether the process would require statutory action by the legislature or if DPS could authorize it.

[4:04:16 PM](#)

MS. APOK replied that law enforcement could opt into the service, but she stated her belief that awareness of its benefits are unrealized.

[4:04:48 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI opened public testimony on SB 151.

[4:05:22 PM](#)

MORGAN LIM, Advocate, Planned Parenthood Alliance Advocates (PPAA), Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. He said PPAA supports SB 151, which would bolster investigative resources to identify and report cases of MMIP. Nationwide, the voices of Native and Indigenous people have united to raise awareness of this issue. While violence against Native women occurs at higher rates than other populations in the United States, Alaska has some of highest rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking and MMIP across the country.

MR. LIM said despite the growing awareness of MMIP, data on the realities of this violence is scarce and grossly inadequate. Nationally, the National Crime Information Center reported 5,712 missing American, Indian, and Alaska Native women and girls. These numbers are likely dramatic underestimations. The lack of proper data collection, poor record-keeping protocols, underreporting by law enforcement, racial misclassification, and a labyrinth of jurisdictional disputes all contribute to a lack of quality data on MMIP. The severity of these issues demonstrates the importance of SB 151. The bill takes important steps to address MMIP in Alaska, including cooperation between agencies, reviewing and informing ways to set up specific standards for MMIP cases, protocols for guarding research, the review of cases to help families close outstanding casework, and solidifying the important work of MMIP investigators. Indigenous and Native groups must be a part of meaningful consultations to ensure proper data collection and increase coordination. Tribal entities, Indigenous, and Native groups must have the ability to advocate for and access data collection about their members when they go missing or are killed. Improved coordination between all parties when responding, recording, and sharing data is critical to addressing the crisis. He said PPAA appreciates the opportunity to support SB 151, which constitutes a critical step toward addressing Alaska Natives going missing, being murdered, or being subjected to violence and abuse.

[4:08:24 PM](#)

MAKA MONTURE, Member, Data for Indigenous Justice, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She introduced herself

in Tlingit and said she is from Yakutat of the Raven Wat moiety and Copper River Clan, and comes from the Owl House clan. She thanked the committee members, her brothers, sisters, and siblings of the working group. She also acknowledged her grandmother and great grandmother. To ensure her stories stay with members and are relevant for future bills or work done in the state, she expressed her story. She said she is here because she was born from the womb of women who did not go missing and were not murdered. In Tlingit culture, when someone passes to the spirit realm, they are said to have walked into the forest. If the existence of another realm beyond the human body. Certain days are foggy where mist can be seen crawling up the mountain. One year ago in the wintertime, she had a dream she was visited by Apqik. She dreamt that she was standing at the bottom of a mountain and watched mist rise up the mountain. People began to walk out of the forest and approach her, including hungry and thirsty women, children, and boys, who asked her for water. Whenever they tried to fill their hands with water, it would dissipate. She realized it may have been the spirits of MMIP for whom the working group advocates for. She said in Tlingit culture, when people of the forest are hungry a fire is built, the names of the deceased are called, and food is burned as a portal to the spirit world. She implored the committee to work in whatever way possible to help fill these people's hands with water that water so they never go thirsty again.

[4:12:38 PM](#)

KAI MONTURE, Associate Multimedia Producer, Native Movement, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. He introduced himself in Tlingit and said he was born into the Owl House clan through his mother's lineage. He said he is a brother, cousin, uncle, nephew, and a friend to multiple women and girls who have survived sexual and physical assault. It is a pain and shame that weighs heavy on the community. He said the Tlingit people are matrilineal, so all of the clan history, culture and language, and the connection he has to the land that is thousands of years old comes from his mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. It is all invaluable. He expressed shame and grief that Indigenous women suffer and are hurt for evil desires. The warriors of the Tlingit people were called x' èigaa káa, which translates to, "a true or authentic person." He said his culture believes that the people were authentic because they followed the Warrior's code, which has five rules:

1. Never make yourself "heavier" than another person; heavier means "more important" or "more valuable."

2. Always be humble before your people, which is your outer humility.
3. Reach for the hand of the person next to you and uplift them and be of service to the people around you.
4. Always protect your people at all times.
5. If you are wounded and know you are going to die, fight to the last breath without crying out in pain.

He said the Tlingit people haven't had traditional warriors like this in almost five generations due to colonization, the trauma that needs healing, and the difficulty of traditional training. Training for a boy begins at six or seven years old and sometimes takes almost 16 years for them to be fully trained. It is one of his dreams and a task he has undertaken to bring back the warrior to protect and serve Tlingit women, but he acknowledged it may take years and a lot of work. He said even if his dream was realized, it may not be enough to protect the women because of all the harm happening to them.

[4:18:06 PM](#)

MR. MONTURE said protecting women cannot be done alone. The support of the whole community and state is needed. In Tlingit culture, the word "kwáan" is used, which means a region and environment, the people from that region, and all living things are inseparable. He stated his belief that all Alaskans are needed to help address this issue at all levels in the community and in government. It will take many years of work at all different levels to find solutions. He asked the members of the committee and fellow Alaskans to use their power to address this issue. He thanked the committee for allowing his words to be heard.

[4:20:52 PM](#)

KC CASORT, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She stated that she hopes the committee quickly moves SB 151 and votes yes on the floor. She stated her belief that no one in Alaska is untouched by the issue, and thanked the committee for prioritizing adequate investigative staffing and data reporting.

[4:21:54 PM](#)

ANTONIA COMMACK, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She said she recently became a fellow of Indigenous Justice but has been an advocate of justice for many years following the violent abuse and murders of her two best friends in Fairbanks. Both women, Robin Gray and Kristin Huntington, left behind six children who are now motherless.

After both of their murderers were imprisoned, she took it upon herself to advocate on behalf of many other families across the state. She acknowledged that the list of victim's names is incredibly long and said the stories she has heard are heartbreaking and all too common. It is always the same story, and it needs to stop. She said she has seen some changes since 2017. She opined that it is imperative SB 151 passes and the state ensure Native voices are heard while fighting the MMIP epidemic in Alaska. There is a need for more MMIP investigators to solve these cases, more public safety officers in villages, to establish cultural training for law enforcement so they can understand the crisis happening today, and to provide victims with advocates and better mental health services. Alaskan Natives have asked for basic human rights, but it should not be this difficult upholding justice. She opined that four MMIP investigators is not enough and those four are already overwhelmed. Many MMIP cases are not currently being investigated. She asked members to support DPS by providing as many investigators as needed to bring justice to loved ones.

[4:24:44 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI stated two State Affairs committee members serve on the Public Safety Budget Subcommittee and would discuss the topic of investigators and budget issues.

[4:25:19 PM](#)

EMILY KLOC, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She said it is clear there is an epidemic of MMIW in Alaska. SB 151 is one opportunity to address this ongoing harm. She thanked the MMIWG2F working group and Senator Olson, and urged members to pass the bill.

[4:26:13 PM](#)

YAARI WALKER, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She stated she is originally from Savoonga and identified her paternal and maternal clans. She said listening to testimonies made her think of her She often talks with them about MMIW and human trafficking, and explains that they are targets in the community. She said she does not allow them to travel alone, even to a nearby gas station. In her culture, pregnant women wear their hair in two looped braids to signify they are pregnant. It lets the community know it is their responsibility to make sure she is taken care of and fed. Communities need to protect Alaska Native women and girls. She said she developed safety plans for her family to acknowledge the possibility of being kidnapped or targeted. She asked members to do their part to keep women and girls safe. When

members were voted into office, they were voted in to care for and serve the people. Last month, she lost her niece at the hands of a woman in Palmer, who was charged with manslaughter. Her niece was suffocated to death at the hands of this person.

4:29:55 PM

MS. WALKER opined that the woman who suffocated her niece was aware of what she was doing, but was only charged with manslaughter. She stated it is important that mothers, sisters, and aunts are kept safe in the community. Anyone who works for the legislature or law enforcement should receive training about Alaska Native worldviews, culture, stories, history, traditions, and relationship-building. This would lead to a better relationship and partnership between the Native community, the legislature, and law enforcement.

4:32:09 PM

JULIE SMYTH, representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She said her mother, Mary, is an MMIWG2S statistic. Her mother used to call every few weeks to check on the grandkids. The calls stopped in November of 2019. Her aunt, the matriarch of the family, took the initiative to file a missing persons report. The Anchorage Police Department did everything they possible to avoid helping her family and never bothered to look for her mother's case in the department database. Her aunt was told she was calling the wrong department, that she and her mother could both disappear if they wanted to, and suggested contacting the Alaska Native Corporation to declare her missing. One officer claimed he visited her mother's home and spoke with her, and that she wanted the family to leave her alone. She stated she testified in front of many governments, including the municipality of Anchorage and Fairbanks, but most elected officials failed to care because there was no existing paperwork that was made official. On September 2, 2022, her aunt discovered that her mother was murdered, buried, and had an open case with the Anchorage Police Department since 2018. The Anchorage police officers repeatedly lied and did not have the compassion to look into their own system to advise the family that Mary wasn't missing, but had died under suspicious circumstances. An officer assigned to her mother's case was confused about why an officer would get into trouble for lying about the case. The officer was annoyed that she was aware of her mother's abusive boyfriend. She stated her belief that the case is still open. The family suspects that the boyfriend murdered her based on the abuse they witnessed. She shared her hope that SB 151 passes and matches the language of HB 234, so change can happen.

[4:34:53 PM](#)

JOEL JACKSON, Tribal Council President, Organized Village of Kake, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. He said he has been involved with MMIW for years, and decided to speak up after two young girls were murdered in his village. The case that has stood out to him over the years involved a young girl who was murdered and left in the back entrance of a church. There was no local law enforcement in the village when this happened. Townspeople called him to help since he was a former police officer. He secured the scene and blocked off the area. He formed a group of young men to patrol the village because people were scared. The group included two of his nephews who flew in from Sitka. One is a police officer. Law enforcement contradicted his statement that the young woman laid behind the church for sixteen hours, but he maintained that he lived through the experience. He asked how members would feel if their daughter, granddaughter, or sister were found lying there. This incident hit him hard because he had to sit there the entire time. The other case involved a teenage girl who was killed during a party at her house. There were five adult men at the home. It took over two years to make a case against someone, but law enforcement is uncertain whether the suspect is the correct person. He stated that he speaks for Alaska that every community has the right to law enforcement. People deserve to feel safe in their homes.

[4:43:39 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI joined the meeting.

[4:40:08 PM](#)

MR. JACKSON said there are currently two VPSOs assigned to Kake. They are housed in the Sitka Police Academy and rotate in and out of the village, leaving it without law enforcement one to two weeks per month. He acknowledged that even though there is a police officer shortage on every level, precious loved ones will be lost unless something is done. He expressed to members that if they lived through what he had, they would understand why he speaks passionately about this issue. It falls on leadership in communities when people aren't able to protect their own. He encouraged members to support this in any way possible and stated that it would likely take years to bring enough law enforcement to all Alaskans. He urged the committee to support SB 151 and any other bills that help Native communities. There are non-Natives in the village, but people should look out for each other no matter what skin tone they have or where they are from.

4:43:42 PM

HEATHER GURKO, Grand President, Alaska Native Brotherhood, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 151. She introduced herself in Tlingit and said her uncle informed her that her name represents the "roots of the base of the mountain" of the Tlingit people. She said she was elected in 2019, served a two-year term during the COVID-19 pandemic, got reelected in 2022, and was reelected again in 2023. She said she did not intend to be reelected, but ancestors call people to serve in many ways and that is how she was called. Alongside the Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Alaska Native Sisterhood Council, she helped draft a letter of support for SB 151, HB 234, and HB 235. The resolution was drafted and brought forth to the MMIW Committee to inspire the local community to take action. Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians (ANTI), which serves 57 member tribes. After understanding the importance of the three bills, the committee drafted a resolution and held up all other business that day to ensure it reached the floor the next morning. The resolution was also supported by the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska and Alaskan Native Brotherhood (ANB) and Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS). For the first time, all 57 affiliated tribes of the Northwest Indians are looking at what happens in the legislature. She expressed appreciation for the ability to advocate for Alaska Native people, Native people across the country, and non-Native relatives. She said despite having ties in Alaska, she does not live here because her ancestors and community called her to serve her people. She shared her story and testified in Oregon, but never felt comfortable or safe to share in Alaska. When she was 17 years old, she said she was raped by a non-Native man, but was afraid to come forward and did not feel she would be believed.

4:48:29 PM

MS. GURKO said she took that pain home with her and it left a hole in her soul knowing the perpetrator could do the same to others. When she attended Sheldon Jackson College, a similar situation that involved a non-Native man happened again. She said she chose to keep this information to herself and carried it for over 30 years. At almost 50 years old, she expressed fear of retribution or harm for bringing it to light. The individual who did this to her serves in a high public position. She has three children and does not want them to come to a place where her story and path could bring them harm. While SB 151 is not a solution to everything, it is a step that would prevent predatory behavior, show that people are standing up for each

other, and pave the opportunity to ensure that the investigator positions are established in law. She expressed gratitude for the ability to call herself a Tlingit woman, talk with the community, and speak with current and future generations of leaders. However, she said she carries shame because she does not feel safe enough to come forward because she does not feel that she and her family would be protected. She expressed hope that no other person would have to feel that way. If action is taken, and people continue to work toward protection and healing, future generations will not have to worry about this problem. She stated she is motivated to continue telling her story.

[4:51:53 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked her for having the courage to bring her story forward and step into her current position. He agreed that SB 151 is one step forward and hopes it will be moved quickly.

[4:52:28 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI closed public testimony on SB 151 and announced invited testimony.

[4:53:44 PM](#)

JIM COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public safety (DPS), Anchorage, Alaska, invited testimony for SB 151, acknowledged the work he has done with DPS and Senator Olson. He said he plans to work with the legislature and realized early on that something must be done to address the MMIP issue. DPS staff attended working groups with the federal government, but that was not enough. He originally hired one investigator and was amazed at how overwhelming it became for that one individual. He confessed that he did not immediately recognize the importance of the issue. After the first investigator became overwhelmed and went into retirement, he hired three other investigators. There are currently six cases being investigated in four areas of the state. He stated his belief that he could keep six investigators busy in the state for the amount of information and investigative work needed for cold cases. Some cases lack evidence or police reports, and some are old. One case was picked up outside the jurisdiction in Kotzebue and has been open for a while. He expressed that it is important that the state recognizes the disproportionate amount of resources provided to rural areas and some law enforcement presence in villages would address this issue.

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MR. COCKRELL said there is potential and hope seen with the growth of the VPSO program. Any village that desires a VPSO should receive one. He stated his realization that adequate services have not been provided to rural areas and villages, so many people have suffered from sexual assault, domestic violence, and homicide over the years. There is an open homicide case in the Yukon-Delta area that has received limited resources. He thanked Investigator Lonny Piscoya for his work in the state. The realization from lawmakers is a slow-moving tide, but determined the need to ensure adequate law enforcement to rural areas must receive adequate law enforcements and the state cannot rely on the federal government.

[5:00:30 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN asked for clarification on whether he believes there should be four or six investigators.

[5:00:54 PM](#)

MR. COCKRELL replied that the budget allocates full funding for four positions and outreach for public awareness. He said more would be desired, but four is adequate for the time being. He asked for a station in Southeast Alaska that comprises one tribal liaison and one person with law enforcement experience. It is important communities and families of missing people are taken care of. There is also a need for additional outreach to tribal members and family members. He noted he is reviewing different avenues to provide better services to communities.

[5:02:54 PM](#)

SENATOR CLAMAN asked if the NamUs database could be joined without legislative action and whether he would support it.

[5:03:09 PM](#)

MR. COCKRELL replied that DPS currently enters each missing person's case into NAMUS and is at a 97 percent completion rate. Family members can also enter information into the database. DPS maintains a commitment to doing it. The sixty-day timeline for when a person goes missing to when their information is entered into the database was identified to streamline the administrative process.

[5:04:31 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked for confirmation that 90 percent of all crimes committed in Alaska are related to substance abuse or alcohol and 90 percent of people in the correctional system have a substance abuse problem.

[5:04:50 PM](#)

MR. COCKRELL responded that he was unsure how to reply to the question.

[5:04:58 PM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI wondered if the crimes are related to substance abuse and whether there are other ways to be proactive.

[5:05:31 PM](#)

MR. COCKRELL confirmed that a majority of crimes in the state are committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. While these are one factor, law enforcement cannot treat cases differently than any other investigation. He stated that stigma occurs when there are assumptions of intoxication, so cases may not be fully investigated.

[5:06:55 PM](#)

SENATOR MERRICK asked if the main obstacle to getting resources to Yukon-Delta is the lack of personnel.

[5:07:04 PM](#)

MR. COCKRELL said there is an additional budget request to obtain an aircraft since some places are difficult to access. The odds of the ability to charter an aircraft have diminished since the COVID-19 pandemic. He observed a lack of resources in Yukon-Delta specifically. DPS is looking to modernize its current aircraft and hopes to obtain an aircraft that can navigate all-weather situations and land on runways. The department is determined to respond quickly, but it is not always possible.

[5:09:16 PM](#)

MS. ALCANTRA concluded by thanking everyone who provided testimony. She said this is not an issue that she takes lightly. She added that conversations with individuals have led to amendments that the sponsor would like to consider.

[5:10:45 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI held SB 151 in committee.

[5:11:55 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kawasaki adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 5:11 p.m.