

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Press Conference and Roundtable

May 5th, 2023

[\[VIDEO\]](#) [\[AUDIO\]](#)

Esther Lucero: My name is Esther Lucero and I'm Diné on my mom's side and Latina and my dad's side and have the privilege of serving as the President and CEO for the Seattle Indian Health Board.

We'd like to welcome you today to Seattle Indian Health Board. I'm standing here amongst powerful champion women, this is what it looks like when people come together. Grassroots movements, right, we have to acknowledge and honor the families that have experienced issues related to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. We have to honor our champions in the grassroots movements, and also our tribal champions, which we have here today. And our legislative champions who responded.

At the Seattle Indian Health Board, we operate the urban Indian Health Institute which is one of 12 tribal epidemiology centers in the nation, and we actually offered the first report that was dedicated to identifying the data gaps within Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women within urban environments.

Seventy six percent of all American Indians and Alaskan Natives live in urban areas and it's very important that we pay attention to those needs. I'm standing here in the shoes of greatness, Abigail Echohawk serves as our Executive Vice President and she was the champion for this work internally.

We recognize that we have a specific role because we know how to speak the language of data, and quite frankly, we know how to translate that so our legislatures, like Senator Maria Cantwell, can understand and mobilize their power to be able to address these needs.

Most importantly, it's about our community. We cannot lose generations of our people any longer. We have to come together and continue to rise and recognize that it's May 5th and we are wearing red. But I want you to wear red every day. I want you to raise your fist every day and recognize that we have our people who are missing and dying every day.

This cannot be just a moment in time. It has to be continuous movement until we're not crying those tears any longer.

Sen. Cantwell: Well thank you Esther, and I want to thank the Seattle Indian Health Board for your great leadership and thank Abigail for her leadership and the pioneering of a very powerful report which, as you just said, put the statistics to a problem that we need to put a stop to.

I'm so glad to be joined by Annette Bryan from the Puyallup Tribe and Anna Bean from the Puyallup Tribe as well. I definitely want to thank both of them for being here today to discuss the missing and murdered indigenous women and people of our state and the United States and what we should be doing about it.

I also want to thank all those who are going to participate later at a roundtable. Not everything that we need to deal with can be shared with you today, but we can share with you those who have witnessed some of this trauma and what they think we need to do to get more resources.

I know today is incredibly difficult for those who have lost loved ones from missing and murdered women or people in our state. I know it is bravery that leads you here today to have this discussion because you don't want the same thing to happen to someone else's family.

We're here to talk because it is a national day of recognition of this crisis and to bring awareness that more resources are needed. Needed nationally and here on the ground.

Indigenous people are being murdered or go missing at alarming rates. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, homicide is the third leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native men and the sixth leading cause of death for Native women.

Women who live on reservations are significantly more likely to be raped in their lifetime. 10 times more likely to be murdered compared to other women, and our urban centers like here in Seattle, are just as dangerous. According to the Urban Indian Health Institute, Seattle has the highest number of missing and murdered indigenous women in the United States and Tacoma is the seventh highest city. So that means that Washington state has two of the highest cities of incidents of these crimes in the United States.

What is more horrifying is that these statistics are just the tip of the iceberg. Recent analysis of data found significant underreporting and misclassification of these crimes. This means the problem could be much worse than we realize.

The Washington State Patrol issued an update just a few days ago, reporting that there are currently 142 cases of missing and indigenous people in our state and 62 are cases of missing children.

We need to fix this problem and we need more resources now. Need to focus on solving cases, preventing indigenous women and people from being murdered and going missing, and we need more help in our indigenous communities.

That is why in addition to pushing the Interior Secretary this past week at a budget hearing for resources, today I'm sending a letter to the President of the United States, President Biden, asking for more federal resources here in the state of Washington, and more resources federally.

We have a couple of federal agents that are part of a national task force, but we need more federal support working with our local law enforcement and working with our local tribes to help solve these cases stand.

With 142 Missing Person cases, we need more help and coordination from federal resources and we need more support for those indigenous families. They need to know what's happening to their loved ones and where these cases.

And that is why we're also asking the administration for resources like family resource centers, so that you can have resources in the state that the families can help, and visit, and dedicate experiences to try to help stop violence experiences, and wellness courts to bring about tribal healing.

This is important to keep in young people off the streets so they aren't vulnerable to these predators that are out there preying on them and importantly, we need to listen to our native communities.

For decades, Native Americans and Native Alaskans have sounded the alarm about this crisis and how it is disproportionate in their communities. We must listen. We need to hear the stories of the relatives of these victims that have survived and we need to learn from their experiences. And that is what we're going to do now.

I want them to know that we stand ready to help your tribal communities. That the legislation that Senator Murkowski and I and others got passed was a start to the task force. But it is clear that with the task force getting funded and putting law enforcement resources into our communities that we need to be doing more. The problem is growing and we need to address it.

So now I'd like to turn it over to Annette Bryan - We're going to go back to Esther who is going to introduce you to two people are going to share their individual experiences.

Annette Bryan: Thank you, Senator Cantwell, for your words and your work, trying to get these important things funded. I am Annette Bryan and I am on the Puyallup Tribal Council. I thank you for taking a few minutes to hear just one story.

When I was about 24 years old, I was in the kitchen and I got a phone call that my cousin, Anna Lee Chebetnoy, had been found. She had went missing. She walked to the little corner store on Valley Avenue on the Puyallup Reservation and never came home. She was 14 years old.

She was a beautiful Alaskan Native, Puyallup Native girl. Lived with a single mom, my auntie Carolina Hawks. And she was my auntie's only child, and she was my little sister's best friend. They were the same age, born around the same time.

And during the year that she was missing [it] was very hard for our family. We felt very little support. We had issues with jurisdiction because our tribal police could only work on the reservation. The federal folks at that time were no help.

We didn't even know what county she went to or was in or where she could be. So we felt really lost for a whole year. We did a lot of praying and a lot of crying.

So when we got that phone call it was really really hard. She was found in King County. Her bones were found on a logging road. And again, no help. "She's from the Puyallup Reservation. She is Native American. We can't help you in King County. We can't help you in Pierce County." The federal government can't help us. The tribal police can't help us.

So even though she was found, and it was probably by accident, in fact she was found by accident, nobody was actively looking for her. Her killer has never been found. And I don't even know how hard they're looking, if they're looking at all.

So I personally want to thank the task force, everything that's happening at the local, state, and federal level. All the work that people are doing to help us not only find our missing and murdered, but solve their cases. We opened up some cold case funding, a unit in Washington state and I'm still hopeful that my auntie, before she passes, will get justice for my cousin Anna Lee Chebetnoy.

Anna Bean: Good day, honorable friends and relatives. My name is Way Over There, my English name is Anna Bean and I'm one of seven sitting council members for the Puyallup Tribe of Indians as well as one of the Co-Chairs for the Executive Committee for the Attorney General Bob Ferguson's Task Force for the State of Washington. I also serve as a chair for the Tribe subcommittee as well.

Today, I'm just going to let you know that as I'm standing here with these three wonderful women, I am also standing up here with the relatives that have gone missing and murdered, as well as their relatives. Today is not a celebratory day, it is a day of awareness, honoring, and remembrance.

When we put something on a calendar, somebody thinks it's a national holiday, a to celebrate and today is again, a day of remembrance and honoring and so I thank you for all those who provided space today for this very important discussion that needs to continue again, as Esther said, not just today but everyday and it's really important for that.

I was asked to speak about how I became aware of Missing and Murdered and I'd say, part of the movement I was made aware of in 2017 by one of my fellow task members as well as a Puyallup fellow Tribal member, Carolyn DeFord, her mother went missing when she was very young, a young adult, and yet like Annette Bryan's relative, her case has not gone solved.

They do not get to rest not knowing what had happened with their relatives, and that's a very sad place to be. Any one of us who know this is a mother, a grandmother, and auntie, a sister and to know that somebody could actually stop working and looking it's just mind blowing to me and very hurtful to the families who go with no result.

And I know that we're to have a relationships with the federal, state, and local jurisdictions but we run into jurisdictional issues all the time, as well as funding. A lot of the work that gets done,

I want to say, by the grassroots movements in MMIWP and the families who go they do this work for free and they need our help, they need assistance. It costs gas money, it costs for food, lodging, and they'll show up wherever they're called to. And I just want to thank them all for doing this really heavy, important work. But we all need to be a part of taking the water of this work so it's not as heavy on one person.

It's all of us that needs to be a part of this work and I just want to say I'm thankful to the Puyallup Tribal Council for electing me to be a representative on MMIWP and to Attorney General Bob Ferguson for putting in this task force. We as the Executive Committee have done a lot of work over these last, a little bit over a year, and we just had three bills passed within this line of legislative sessions.

And to touch on Annette Bryan, her relatives' case has gone cold and having that Cold Case Unit being under the Attorney General's Office, I'm hopeful for the work that will be done here so some more families hearts can heal from what has been taken from our communities and I just leave it with that, and I thank you all for being here today.

Thank you to everybody who takes a moment to send up prayers or positivity for the relatives today that are hurting and I raise my hands to everybody for their work and involvement.