

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4705

May 5, 2023

President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

I write to request that you prioritize the delivery of additional federal resources for indigenous communities in the State of Washington to combat the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP) epidemic. According to a report issued by the Washington State Patrol on May 1, 2023, there are currently 142 cases of missing indigenous people with 62 of those cases being juveniles. More federal resources are required and needed to solve active and cold cases and prevent MMIWP cases from occurring in Washington state.

The MMIWP crisis impacts communities throughout the country. However, it is clear indigenous people throughout the State of Washington experience elevated rates of violence. Washington state communities endure some of the highest numbers of missing and murdered cases in the country. According to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls (MMIWG) report issued by the Urban Indian Health Institute in 2018, the State of Washington has the second highest number of MMIWG cases in the country. In addition, Washington is the only state with two major cities, Seattle and Tacoma, in the top ten list of cities with the most MMIWG cases. This data is just a glimpse of the crisis. The Urban Indian Health Institute could not report on all MMIWP cases, and examining this epidemic has suffered from significant under reporting and data misclassification. It is clear the MMIWP crisis in the State of Washington is worse than we can accurately calculate.

The Department of Interior established a Missing and Murdered Unit (MMU) under the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services to work on solving MMIWP cases. The MMU is tasked with investigating unsolved missing and murdered cases throughout Indian Country and, upon request by a Tribe, can provide direct assistance and investigative services. While the unit has been a positive first step, there are only two law enforcement agents located in Washington state dedicated to solving MMIWP cases. This is inadequate federal law enforcement personnel to coordinate with Tribes, local law enforcement, and Washington state on solving the 142 open MMIWP cases. In order to bolster federal law enforcement focused on these cases in the State of Washington, I ask that the Administration work with me to secure additional MMU agents in the state. It is critical that we begin to solve MMIWP cases now.

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Indigenous people disproportionately experience violence throughout their lives. Research from the National Justice Institute found that more than 4 in 5, or over 84 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime. This study also found that indigenous men have high victimization rates, with more than 81 percent, or 1.4 million, American Indian and Alaska Native men having experienced violence in their lifetime. There is an urgent need for additional, culturally appropriate resources dedicated to supporting relatives of victims, families, and children that have or are currently experiencing violence. I would like to work with you to explore solutions to address this resource gap. This includes establishing Indian Child Resources and Family Service Centers, wellness to healing courts, and supporting existing programs that focus on incorporating indigenous culture to heal indigenous people and families that have and are still being impacted by violence and the MMIWP crisis. We need these programs in Washington state and we need to better support the programs that are already working on the ground to help solve MMIWP cases, support MMIWP relatives and provide important resources to vulnerable indigenous people in times of need.

Finally, I believe MMIWP cases can be prevented through improving public safety in Indian Country. I have heard from Tribes located in different locations throughout Washington state, including those located in urban centers and rural areas, that there are not enough Tribal law enforcement officers. In one case, there are two Tribal law enforcement officers to cover more than one million acres of land. I request to work with you and the Bureau of Indian Affairs on pursuing ways to improve Tribal law enforcement recruitment and retention.

It is clear we are only beginning to understand the scale of the MMIWP crisis. We need to listen to indigenous people and communities on how the federal government can best combat this epidemic.

I thank you for your attention to this important issue and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator