

Opening Statement

Maulian Bryant, Executive Director of the Wabanaki Alliance, Penobscot Nation

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and honorable members of the committee. I sincerely appreciate you holding this hearing and giving space for us to reflect on this crisis and collaborate with you on ways to go forward together. I have served as the Tribal Ambassador for my Tribal Nation and now work on advocacy for all of the Wabanaki Tribes in our homelands now called Maine as the incoming Executive Director for the Wabanaki Alliance. Most importantly, I am a mother to three daughters. Iris who is 2, Layla who is 15, and Carmella who just turned 18. From my little toddler to my newly turned adult I am constantly thinking about their safety and wellbeing. It has driven much of my work and advocacy on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People. One in three Indigenous women, statistically speaking, will be the victim of a violent crime in her lifetime. There are four of us in my immediate family.

This issue has been a crisis for a few different reasons. The societal and cultural component cannot be overlooked. When I was 6 years old I knew I was a Penobscot person. My parents are both Penobscot and took time to teach me the songs, language, stories, and values. When I saw the Walt Disney movie Peter Pan it was the first time I can recall seeing stereotypes about my people played out by mainstream society. This "Indian Encampment" scene is problematic for many reasons but the use of the stereotypes around tribal women stands out. There is Tiger Lily, the Indian Princess, the Chief's daughter. She is no doubt a child yet made to look older and exotic and tempting to Peter Pan. There is the older woman who is brash and mean and called a racial slur by the men in the tribe. Both of these stereotypes have deep implications and have been consequential in our society, even if subconsciously. A lot of our experience as real Indigenous women through the generations has been minimized and at times silenced all together and Americans embraced these false creations of us instead of seeing us as real people. Even the Disney version of Pocahontas, which tells a story meant to portray progress and honor, gets it wrong. Pocahontas was likely 14 when she met the English soldiers. In her tribe the children would have parts of their hair shaved. She was kidnapped and taken to Europe where she died of disease away from her family, culture, and homelands. By presenting her as an adult woman with skimpy clothes and the ability to make consenting decisions we are doing a disservice to not just her legacy but to all Indigenous women who deserve truth about our history. Candy coating it does not make it better. It makes us more invisible.

When an Indigenous woman goes missing there is not the same attention and action as when a caucasian woman is. In the case of Gabby Petito, the young woman who was missing before it came to light she was murdered by her boyfriend a few years ago, we all saw her face and knew her name. That is how it should be and we don't begrudge her family and loved ones for working so hard to make it so. However, we all had a moment of sharp reflection knowing that people from our Tribal Nations are often missing and the victims of ghastly crimes and nobody is looking for us. Nobody outside of our communities knows our names and faces. These stereotypes and false portrayals of our people that I have articulated serve to dehumanize us and freeze us into an image or idea instead of giving space to the full and vast reality of who we

are. Indigenous women for the most part do not resemble what Disney has drawn. We are living and breathing dynamic people who don't fit into this box not created by us. The more you see and hear from us the more visible we are. It has been a powerful thing to watch as people like Deb Halaand and Sharice Davids have risen to places of power in a government that was not built for us. The visibility and presence needs to continue and help shine a light on our people no matter who is in power. We hope and pray it helps us get the same recognition and help when we need it. The false conceptions of our people often lead to some of the attitudes about us and we see lots of victim blaming. If an Indigenous woman was missing from a bar or a boyfriend's home or if she has addiction issues or family issues she is often seen as putting herself in harm's way and there is a dismissive approach at times. It is a fact that lots of negative behaviors and dysfunction are a lasting consequence of the horrors inflicted on our people in the colonization of this country be it the land theft, pandemics, residential school policy, outlawing of our religion, etc. All of that aside, no matter the perceived character of the woman she is worth saving and protecting.

The other reason there is often a lack of justice in these cases are jurisdictional issues between tribal, state, federal, and other law enforcement agencies. There needs to be clear duties and processes delineated before, during, and after these crimes occur. We cannot have these cases slip through the cracks simply because one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. Supporting tribal law enforcement is a key piece, and as we all discussed back at the hearing in May that has been lacking in many tribal communities. At Penobscot Nation we have since partnered with a neighboring municipality to help fill in the gaps in coverage. Supporting the research component to this and data tracking is also a step we can take. Ensuring that Indigenous people report the crimes and feel safe and supported doing so is also something we can all work on. Due to the lack of justice in many of these cases victims can feel like it is not worth the time or effort in an already traumatic time to take these steps. Making the system work better for everyone can help instill credibility and much needed trust.

In Maine an issue related to this work is domestic violence and sexual assault on tribal lands where the victim is a tribal citizen and the perpetrator is not. Before the federal Violence Against Women Act tribes lacked the authority to handle these cases in tribal courts and it added to the brokenness of the system I have explained. When the tribal provisions of this law were authorized the Wabanaki people in Maine could not initially take advantage of it due to the outdated and oppressive 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement and Implementing Acts which effectively blocks us from accessing federal Indian law that the state determines may impact their jurisdiction. It took us many years but we were able to work towards a state statute granting us VAWA jurisdiction and we also worked with our delegation, Representative Pingree included who is always a steadfast advocate for us, to be mentioned in the most recent federal reauthorization. Now tribes with tribal courts in Maine have access to this important law. The Penobscot Nation is actively handling VAWA cases and that is a step in the right direction.

In the time we have here together today I wanted to give a personal take on how my experience as an Indigenous woman and mother who has been steeped in the work of policy and representation for nearly twenty years shapes my views on this crisis. I would encourage

you to read the studies that have been published and I have no doubt my fellow panelists will do our people proud. Funding the key programs for our people in the Interior budget and keeping to the fiduciary responsibility helps our communities in terms of health, stewardship of natural resources, public safety, and keeping our communal and cultural connections strong. All of the appropriations decisions you all make here impacts the MMIW crisis because in order for our people to protect each other and heal from past trauma we need to have resources and means to survive. The apology from President Biden regarding the atrocities committed against our children and families under the United States Boarding School Policy was a genuine and heartfelt one. It can be just empty words or it can have lasting meaning and impact. The choices lay ahead and we hope it is the latter.

Thank you so much for the invitation to come share here and I am happy to be in this work with you and to take any questions.