

**Testimony of Abigail Echo-Hawk, MA
Director, Urban Indian Health Institute
House Committee on Appropriations – Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
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Members of the House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, my name is Abigail Echo-Hawk, and I am an enrolled citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, currently living in an urban Indian community in Seattle, Washington. I am the Executive Vice President of the Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB) and Director of the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), an Indian Health Service (IHS) designated Tribal Epidemiology Center (TEC), where I oversee our policy, research, data, and evaluation initiatives. I have a continuous record of accomplishment as a research and policy professional, specializing in tribal government and urban Indian relations, and sit on multiple boards and advisory committees as the cultural and tribal government expert and research specialist. I have successfully led teams of Native and non-Native public health professionals to develop health and policy interventions with tribal communities across the United States, and have provided cultural expertise on working with rural and urban Native American communities for many local, state, and federal agencies. I have worked tirelessly to address the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP) through the publishing of groundbreaking national reports, such as the first data report *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*¹ in 2018 and most recently *A Step Toward Justice: Community Informed Law Enforcement MMIP Websites*,² and through collaboration with community and government entities which led to the passage of numerous state bills that include creating an alert system for MMIWP in Washington and California and a new cold case investigation unit for MMIWP cold cases in Washington.

Failure of the DOJ to Implement Savanna’s Act and Not Invisible Act

On October 10th, 2020, the Not Invisible Act became law, and required that by February 7th, 2021, members be appointed to a Joint Commission on Reducing Violent Crimes Against Indians, with the Commission to make recommendations by April 10th, 2022. By October 15, 2021, 8 months after the deadline for appointments, no appointments had been made to the Joint Commission. These failures were highlighted in a Government Accountability Office report titled *Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women: New Efforts Are Underway but Opportunities Exist to Improve the Federal Response*.³ After a delay of almost two year, in November 2023, the *Not One More: Findings and Recommendations of the Not Invisible Act Commission*⁴ report was released illustrating

¹ Urban Indian Health Institute. (2018). Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls. Retrieved from: <https://www.uihi.org/resources/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-girls/>

² Urban Indian Health Institute. (2024). A Step Toward Justice: Community Informed Law Enforcement MMIP Websites. Retrieved from: <https://www.uihi.org/resources/a-step-towards-justice-community-informed-law-enforcement-mmip-websites/>

³ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2021). Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women: New Efforts Are Underway but Opportunities Exist to Improve the Federal Response. Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104045>

⁴ Not Invisible Act Commission. (2023). Not One More: Findings and Recommendations of the Not Invisible Act Commission. Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-11/34%20NIAC%20Final%20Report_version%2011.1.23_FINAL.pdf

that federal policies, programs, and services continue to underserve our community and remain complicit in perpetuating the violence against American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people. The Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Interior's (DOI) subsequent response,⁵ released in March 2024, did nothing more than cite existing resources and efforts to address concerns raised in the report while agencies like the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) began to assess resources and opportunities to implement the report's findings. This disparate response illustrates the barriers we face in addressing this crisis, when despite congressional intent, federal agencies tasked under Savanna's Act and Not Invisible Act are unwilling to implement change at the necessary, and legislatively mandated scale. I urge you to champion revolutionary change within the federal government to combat the high rates of violence experienced by AI/AN people and communities. I ask that you hold the DOJ and the DOI accountable for addressing the recommendations of the Not Invisible Act Commission. I also urge you to make greater investments in IHS to expand gender-based violence services and violence prevention programming, investments in clinics to establish Sexual Assault Nurse Examinations (SANE), and investments in primary care and behavioral health resources to support victims in the hand of trusted providers.

In 2018, the Seattle Indian Health Board's research division, the Urban Indian Health Institute released the first ever data report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls at the US Capitol alongside our sponsor, Sen. Lisa Murkowski. This report focused on 71 urban cities across the US and found that our women were going missing and murdered at disproportional rates. But most important was what we did not find. We identified that law enforcement was not entering race and ethnicity data of Indigenous victims, limiting our ability to assess the full impact of this crisis. This report was the first of its kind and was utilized by tribal leaders and urban Indian communities alike to push for accountability and resources to address a crisis of immense magnitude. Legislation, including Savanna's Act and Not Invisible Act, was passed as a direct result of this report as it gave, for the first time, concrete numbers on this crisis. Our report also highlighted that the initial drafts of Savanna's Act would not have benefited Savanna Greywind, who it was named after, as she was killed off tribal lands in an urban setting. Our team worked tirelessly to ensure those living off tribal lands experiencing this crisis, often referred to as urban Indians, were included in this legislation. We were ecstatic to see both bills pass and signed into law by President Trump with urban Indians included. That joy was short lived as the implementation of both pieces of legislation have failed to appropriately include urban Indian populations. We are still dying, our people still missing, and DOJ is failing to address this crisis in urban areas as our families cry in silence.

Four years later, DOJ has still not been held accountable for their lack of response and inaction to address this crisis in urban areas, in addition to their failings for the tribes. While there are hard fought, but minimal mentions of the urban Indian communities in

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of the Interior. (2024). Section 4(c)(2)(C) Response of the Departments of Justice and the Interior to Not One More: Findings and Recommendations of the Not Invisible Act Commission Pursuant to Public Law 116-166. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/tribal/media/1341181/dl?inline>

the Not Invisible Act commission report, we continue to see apathy and non-action to address this crisis that is impacting the approximately 78% of AI/AN living off reservation in urban areas across the US. The law enforcement agencies that serve us in urban areas are suffering as a direct result of lack of training, lack of technical expertise, and lack of data systems to appropriately collect the race and ethnicity of victims. I have spoken to many law enforcement agencies and individuals with many expressing that they want to do better, but don't have the expertise or resources to do so.

DOJ is failing these law enforcement communities, and my agency refused to let our people die in silence so we did what DOJ wouldn't. We have created trainings for law enforcement in conducting culturally specific investigations, coordinating with tribal law enforcement, and building robust data systems and reporting. We did this with no federal financial resources. I am the trainer, and I raised the funds via speaking fees to create this which has been successfully implemented by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office in Washington, with additional trainings scheduled with law enforcement agencies such as the San Jose, California, police department later this year. However, accountability is necessary. We tried to implement this in Seattle, received a contract to do so, but the administration of the police department unduly restricted our efforts, and I ended that contact and returned the funds as token efforts are meaningless and harmful.

I continue to question why a small, national, Indigenous not-for-profit organization is doing the work DOJ was mandated to do? I urge you to hold DOJ accountable in addressing this crisis in urban Indian communities and providing local law enforcement the appropriate training and resources to halt it.

National Alert Code for Missing and Endangered Indigenous People

As co-chair of the Washington State MMIWP taskforce, I co-authored legislation creating the nation's first Missing Indigenous Person Alert (MIPA) system, referred to as the Red Alert, in Washington State. The following year, this legislation was utilized by the California state legislature for the creation of the Feather Alert, a missing AI/AN alert system. Following the successful implementation of these state alert systems, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced the launch of an Emergency Management System (EMS) for Indigenous populations in March 2024. Unfortunately, the initial alert code that was ultimately approved by the FCC, the Missing and Endangered Persons (MEP) Alert, did not meet the intent of addressing violence against AI/AN people. The MEP alert has become an overarching alert covering all people not already covered by AMBER and Silver Alerts, demonstrating once again that despite an intent to address this crisis, federal agencies ultimately fall short of what is needed. I sent a letter on March 22, 2024, to the FCC and provided these specific comments previously at a consultation held at the National Congress of American Indians in October of 2023. I strongly believe a specific alert for missing AI/AN is a necessary step to successfully begin to address this crisis as has been illustrated in Washington and California. Including AI/AN in the MEP alert does not appropriately address the

disproportionate rates at which AI/AN go missing, nor the need for a specific alert system. If the naming of the alert system does not reflect a designated code that specifically identifies the AI/AN population, it introduces the potential for misalignment and use for other purposes outside of the AI/AN population for which it is intended for, as has been illustrated by the creation of the MEP alert. We urge you to pass legislation for an AI/AN alert code with an appropriate name building on the success illustrated in Washington and California. The appropriate name must be created for an alert system to be responsive to missing cases involving AI/AN people while being swiftly implemented. This alert system would utilize already established technical alert systems such the successful Amber and Silver Alerts, thus having minimal fiscal impact with the potential for astronomical impact for AI/AN families and communities to find their loved ones. In the last tribal consultation regarding the alert, the FCC left open the possibility that a new, separate, event code could be created for AI/AN people, with the chair of the FCC speaking at National Congress of American Indians on October 29th, 2024 saying that the alert “will save lives in Tribal communities and all across this country.” At this point our people are still missing and we need more than words, we need action. I urge you to work with your congressional partners to take this action and work to pass legislation to establish an AI/AN alert code.

Holding the Military Accountable for Violence Against Indigenous People

Over the last four years, a gap in our understanding of this crisis continues to be illuminated. AI/AN have a long and illustrious relationship with the US military with AI/AN serving at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups. In 2022 we made up 1.1% of those in active-duty military service. And we know they are also impacted by this crisis, we have heard stories of sexual assault, trafficking, domestic violence and murder of active-duty AI/AN. However, available reports are sparse. The Department of Defense must make this data more readily available and issue a report specific to AI/AN service members.

Even more urgent is an understanding of the impact of the US military facilities across the US, many of which are located next to tribal lands across the US and the state of Hawaii. An Alaska Native family from Fairbanks, Alaska, shared the story of their daughter who was murdered in a domestic violence instance on a local military base by her military husband who had a history of domestic abuse. Due to the restrictions on prosecution of these military involved cases, the family had no idea what happened during the trial nor why the man received such a light sentence. Her mother said, “I just wanted to know, and I just wanted them [military] to apologize.”

This story is just one of hundreds I, and other working on MMIWP, have heard and is echoed by the Native Hawaiian community. My organization is the largest funder of MMIWP and Mahu research in Hawaii as they, alongside AI/AN communities, have received no resources to investigate this crisis. I work diligently to find and secure resources, but these resources should not be dependent on one person, and one organization, yet at this point it is. In the first MMIWP/Mahu report in Hawaii, they found

that 38% of those arrested for soliciting sex from a thirteen-year-old online were active-duty military personnel. This is deeply disturbing and illustrates the need for a comprehensive Department of Defense report on the impact of active-duty military on sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, and missing and murdered Indigenous people. I ask you to hold a hearing with the Department of Defense and require them to present the most current data on victimization of AI/AN active-duty military personnel and report the data on active-duty military personnel who are perpetrators of this violence against Indigenous people. We are asking for accountability from the Department of Defense and urge you to work with us.

Addressing the Crisis of MMIWP

Four years after the passing of Savanna's Act and the Not Invisible Act, Indigenous people are still missing in life, in the media, and in the data. Today I ask this subcommittee to stand with us, demand accountability, allocate appropriate resources and ensure that four years from now we see a different outcome.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify on this panel today, and I look forward to answering questions on how to implement these and other changes.