

House Appropriations Committee  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies  
Statement of Mary Jane Miles  
Nez Perce Tribe  
November 20, 2024

Good morning. I am Mary Jane Miles, and I am an elected representative serving on the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee. I am also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The *Nimípuu* (Nez Perce People) want to thank this Committee and the Administration for their efforts to understand the needs of Indian Country and for the hand of friendship to hear my thoughts on an issue very important to me and many others.

Missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) was first introduced to me as a policy issue during a visit to Vancouver, B.C. I heard how the First Nations were lamenting the murder of women in that town that were not being investigated and the “invisibility” of Native women in the investigation of crimes against them. I then began to understand that there are unsolved murder and missing persons cases involving Native women in the United States and that MMIP is not an isolated problem. Sometimes I feel that Indians are so few that we are easy to forget.

I am an older Native American woman who knows of the turbulence in a relationship as I myself am a domestic violence survivor. During the time I endured that relationship, I wondered why and how our tribal people came to this dark time with fractured relationships and no accountability. I have come to believe that diseases like drug and alcohol abuse play a part in the overall problem, but also that poverty on reservations contribute as well.

My inner being agonizes over the lack of worth given to Native women and the senseless acts that lead to their harm. In the past, people in power have not cared about Native women, but their families and tribes do care. One instance that touches my heart is the loss of a young woman I counselled who was strangled by her partner. I had also counselled the perpetrator and was a friend of his father. I conducted the funerals of both the young woman and the perpetrator’s dad, which happened soon thereafter. This was an awful time of unrest and sadness that tore two communities apart. We don’t want to lose these people as our culture is diminished with even one loss.

Women continue to be the backbone of the tribal community. I like the way we handle life, the way we handle difficult situations. Men need to be part of the solution to this very real problem. As our tribes grow and change alongside the communities around us, some of the traditional roles of many of our men have changed or disappeared. Native men have historically been providers but with the advent of reservation life, this role was taken away from some of them. There is much less freedom to hunt and fish and women have taken on the role of breadwinner.

We need to get to work on combating the root of the problem: drugs, poverty, lack of family support, gaps in law enforcement, and the lack of communication between jurisdictions. We need to work on establishing and funding recovery centers, family support programs, and fully supporting tribal law enforcement and detention centers. The Nez Perce Tribe is working on innovative responses to address the different aspects of this issue.

We will use some grant funding to assist with training for our police force and to assist with investigations. Another proposed program is designed to help persons who are vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking by providing backpacks that contain a personal safety alarm and a flashlight as well as other safety items. We are strengthening our data collection for vulnerable persons by creating a database with information that can be provided to law enforcement if a person goes missing. We are also working to coordinate information sharing with other regional tribes to lessen the time it takes for us to know when a person has gone missing on another reservation.

Because of the intersection of sexual assault with MMIP, we are using a sexual assault program grant to enhance our response and integrate efforts across various departments and programs that support victims of sexual assault. We will serve victims accessing the teen shelter, *'init* (home), Children's Home, Sober Living Home, and other social service programs by providing crisis intervention, advocacy, accompaniment, referrals, and counseling services. This will broaden the scope of services, outside of the Nez Perce Tribe *Úuyit Klmti* (New Beginnings) Program, to include a wider range of survivors, such as victims of sex trafficking who have also experienced sexual assault, adults abused as children, male survivors, child and youth survivors, and adults sexually assaulted by non-intimate partners.

In closing I would like to say that I am happy that there are movements to highlight this issue and hearings like today to help recognize and address the wrongs to the Native women and help prevent them in the future. I am tired of crying on this issue, I do not want to cry anymore, I want to see progress. Thank you.