

Congresswoman Maxine Dexter –Statement for the Record
Joint Indian Affairs and Oversight and Investigations Hearing titled, “Innovative
Technologies and Initiatives to Tackle the MMIP Crisis in Indian Country.”
July 14, 2026, 10:15 a.m.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples crisis represents one of the federal government’s clearest and most tragic failures to uphold its trust responsibility to Tribal Nations. The federal government has a responsibility to investigate and prosecute crimes in Indian Country, but that responsibility has gone unmet, in large part because of the failures to adequately fund and prioritize the safety of tribal communities.

Tribes have been forced to navigate a jurisdictional patchwork that often leaves communities without adequate protection and families without answers. Supreme Court rulings have undermined tribal law enforcement, giving the federal government significant responsibility over investigating and prosecuting crimes in Indian Country. But even if those investigations are completed and referred, the Department of Justice has failed to prosecute offenses committed against Native victims and provide adequate public safety resources and victim services to tribal communities.

These challenges are especially acute in Public Law 280 states like Oregon. In PL-280 states, the federal government’s jurisdiction over major crimes committed in Indian Country is instead placed in the hands of the state government. In practice, this means that tribal communities must rely on state and local agencies that may lack the resources, relationships, or cultural competency necessary to address MMIP cases.

At the same time, this administration has pointed to PL-280 as an excuse to further defund tribal law enforcement and justice systems that are already stretched thin. The Department of the Interior has historically refused to extend funding to tribal justice systems in PL-280 states, which cripples Tribes’ ability to respond to public safety concerns and leaves them with even fewer resources to protect their communities.

The consequences of this underinvestment are real. Native people across my home state of Oregon and the rest of the country continue to disappear, families continue searching for loved ones, and many of the underlying challenges remain unresolved because Congress and the federal government haven’t done enough.

Let me be clear: better data collection and investigative tools are important, but we should be focusing on preventing these cases as much as solving them after they happen, if not more. Forensic technology can’t replace adequately funded law enforcement, culturally competent victim services, and sustained investment in tribal public health and safety systems.

The good news is that we don't have to start from scratch. Tribal leaders, survivors, advocates, and the Not Invisible Act Commission have already provided recommendations and a federal roadmap.

The Commission and other experts have recognized that the MMIP crisis is not solely a criminal justice issue – it is also a public health crisis. Healthcare providers, behavioral health professionals, and victim advocates are often on the frontlines and the first to recognize signs of domestic violence, abuse, or human trafficking risks. Preventing future cases requires coordinated, culturally competent services that support survivors, families, and entire communities.

My fervent hope is that this hearing is not an attempt at celebrating important, but narrow progress on a life or death issue while the solutions to the larger problem collect dust on the table in front of us. Here are the recommendations developed by tribal leaders and those directly affected by this crisis. If my Republican colleagues passed a bill implementing a major recommendation of the Committee every time we had an awareness-praising oversight hearing about law enforcement in Indian Country, we likely could have saved lives by now.

For the sake of the people before us that have come here at great financial and emotional expense to talk to us about missing and murdered indigenous people, for the sake of the victims, and for their families, we need to act. That means investing in tribal justice systems, strengthening victim and family services, improving communication with families during investigations, and ensuring that Tribes have the resources they need to protect their communities from harm. Only then will the federal government fulfill its trust responsibility to protect tribal communities.

I am still ready to sit down with my Republican and Democratic colleagues on this committee to pass some solutions. My relentless optimism makes me hope that this time, this hearing will kick start negotiations.