

Grace Bulltail

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Innovative Technologies and Initiatives to Tackle the MMIP Crisis in Indian Country

My name is Grace Bulltail. I am an assistant professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I am a citizen of the Crow Nation.

On August 24, 2019, my niece Kaysera Stops Pretty Places was murdered just days after her 18th birthday. I served on the Not Invisible Act Commission (NIAC) as a family member. Like I am doing here today, family members shared their experiences with law enforcement and the justice system at the commission hearings and site visits. For many, those hearings would be the only time that their stories were received and recorded, in a process that we commissioners navigated as best we could despite the rushed and compressed timeline. I took this charge seriously in addressing the barriers family members face in seeking justice. These systemic failures and disproportionate challenges were familiar to myself and fellow commissioners serving as advocates of family members.

Too commonly, we are leading our own investigations and pressuring the justice system to make what little progress that we have in our loved ones' cases. My family spent years begging law enforcement to investigate the homicide of my niece. It is only after our activism and advocacy that we have made any progress. However, that progress has been interrupted by erratic MMIP policy priorities limiting resources available to us.

At the hearing held in Billings, Montana, the Missing and Murdered Unit (MMU) regional agent in charge testified to the NIAC that MMU officers would not be reassigned to other BIA law enforcement duties. That is not the state of affairs now as the primary MMU agent that we knew to be working on Kaysera's case had been assigned to BIA chief of police, then eventually resigned from the MMU, and returned to the BIA role. Now we are not aware that anyone in the MMU is working on Kaysera's case given the lack of response to our inquiries. For ten months now, we have asked the MMU to schedule a half hour phone call with our family to discuss their progress on Kaysera's case. The response we got was that they do not have time to talk to us. Because the current administration has terminated so many BIA employees, there is no one left in the MMU who has time to talk to our family.

We had some semblance of hope that the MMU would have made progress on her case given that the county law enforcement meets us family members with outright hostility and has shown extreme negligence with Kaysera's remains and evidence. We were not made aware until four years after her death that the Big Horn County still had several of Kaysera's facial bones in their custody. As the county coroner cremated her remains against our wishes, these were the only physical remains that we had to place in her grave, which we then had to reopen to bury alongside her ashes.

Given the ongoing atrocities that we face with the presiding county justice system, at the very least we were hopeful that any agency other than Big Horn County would consider her case in an investigatory role. Many more teenage girls have gone missing in the region since Kaysera's

disappearance and several were also found deceased. Our trauma is revisited in seeing their families met with indifference from those charged with investigating their deaths.

It is us family members and advocates demanding measurable action in addressing this ongoing genocide of our Indigenous girls and women. We are not elected officials; we are not invited to or provided a seat at the table in addressing the crisis as is protocol in government-to-government relations with our tribal communities. Our own tribal leaders are often as indifferent as law enforcement unless they are personally affected. As a commissioner, I prioritized recommendations that centered family members to empower those actually doing the work in our communities.

President Trump signed the Not Invisible Act into law during his first term. All of us commissioners worked hard and tirelessly to consider the evidence and testimony and render recommendations that are most likely to address the ongoing Missing and Murdered crisis. There is no reason why the second Trump administration should be abandoning the report issued by the Commission he signed into law.

The federal government should uphold its commitment to addressing the crisis. Reinstate the Not Invisible Act Commission report to the Department of Justice site and implement those recommendations. Provide resources to the law enforcement parties that are overly relying on the MMU and detracting from its critical mission. The erratic state of the MMIP policy implementation delays our hard-fought efforts in realizing justice for our relatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony.

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