

Testimony of Abigail Echo-Hawk, MA
Director, Urban Indian Health Institute
Joint hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittees on Oversight & Investigation and Indian & Insular Affairs
Innovative Technologies and Initiatives to Tackle the MMIP Crisis in Indian Country
July 14, 2026

Chairman Gosar, Chairman Hurd, and Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittees on Oversight and Investigations and Indian and Insular Affairs: My name is Abigail Echo-Hawk, and I am an enrolled citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma living in an urban Indian community in Seattle, Washington. I am the Director of the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), the research division of the Seattle Indian Health Board, an Indian Health Services (IHS) designated Tribal Epidemiology Center (TEC), where I oversee our research, data, and evaluation initiatives. Our work provides the data and solutions necessary to identify cost-effective federal investments for the health of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. I am part of numerous efforts to support AI/AN communities in data and research, including co-authoring multiple reports for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

In 2020, President Trump, standing alongside tribal leaders from across Indian Country, signed Savanna's Act and the Not Invisible Act into law. This first-of-its-kind legislation to address MMIP held the hope of survivors, families, and Indian Country for justice, but the implementation during the next administration was severely lacking, resulting in a Government Office of Accountability report detailing the gaps that existed in implementation, federal oversight, and sustained investment from the Department of Justice (DOJ). Actions and resources remain inadequate to address the MMIP crisis, indicating a strong need for federal action in collaboration with tribes. Secretary Bergum has made commendable efforts within the Department of the Interior, including increased support for the MMIP cold case unit, attending meetings with tribal leaders and affected families, and most recently, the announcement of the Indian Country Violent Crimes Taskforce. These necessary efforts should be sustained and mirrored across federal agencies as this crisis cannot be fully addressed in a silo, which echoes the recommendations of the first-ever federal MMIP task force established by President Trump in 2020, Operation Lady Justice.

My organization, UIHI, has refused to stand by as our communities suffer and continues to lead national efforts to secure our treaty right to public safety. Our groundbreaking research studies have called national attention to the barriers in data collection, reporting, and analysis of demographic data that inhibit the nation's ability to address violence against AI/AN people. Our 2018 national report, *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*,¹ was the first-ever to define the crisis in concrete numbers and directly shaped Savanna's Act and Not Invisible Act. We have also advocated at the state-level. Our report *MMIWG: We Demand More Effort*,² prompted a complete overhaul to Washington's MMIP response, including the creation of a dedicated MMIWP alert system, a new cold case investigation unit, and the launching of a MMIP task force within the Office of the Attorney General. We have supported partners across the country to build on this momentum, advising California as they launched a new alert system and designing and facilitating training for law enforcement agencies on data collection and use.

¹ Urban Indian Health Institute, *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls: A Snapshot of Data from 71 Urban Cities in the United States*, November 2018, <https://www.uihi.org/resources/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-girls/>

² Urban Indian Health Institute, *MMIWG: We Demand More: A Corrected Research Study of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls in Washington State*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.uihi.org/resources/mmiwg-we-demand-more/>

Additionally, UIHI directly supports victims and families, serving as the technical assistance provider to the 27 IHS-funded Urban Indian Organizations (UIO) that hold IHS grants through the Sexual Assault, Suicide Prevention, and Domestic Violence Prevention project (SASP/DVP) and providing victim services in the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Despite our tireless work alongside Tribes, UIOs, and community members, Indigenous people are still missing in life, in the media, and in the data. Addressing the MMIP crisis will require coordination across federal agencies and the use of innovative technologies across a broad spectrum. To meet the federal government's trust and treaty responsibility to provide for the public safety of AI/AN communities, **I urge these committee members to partner with us by taking the following steps:**

1. **Direct DOJ to fulfill the mandates of the Not Invisible Act and the Savanna's Act and improve AI/AN data collection in collaboration with tribes.**
2. **Protect federally funded services for survivors of the MMIP crisis via appropriations through the Indian Health Service (IHS), Department of Justice (DOJ), and Health and Human Services (HHS).**
3. **Institute a dedicated MMIWP event code in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)'s Emergency Alert System.**
4. **Facilitate law enforcement response to the MMIP crisis by (1) supporting Tribal Law Enforcement officers, and (2) making permanent the current FBI surges in Indian Country.**
5. **Support survivors' access to Traditional Indian Medicine (TIM) services by 1) including TIM in federal grant programs 2) facilitating CMS reimbursement for services through (a) Section 1115 waivers and (b) extending 100% Federal Medical Assistance Percentage to Urban Indian Organizations**

1. IMPROVE DATA INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO ADDRESS THE MMIP CRISIS

On November 14, 2018, UIHI, in partnership with Senator Murkowski, released a groundbreaking report I co-authored titled *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: A snapshot of data from 71 urban cities in the United States*. It provided the first national data that revealed the horrific crisis on MMIP. Most importantly, it identified the lack of data being collected by law enforcement nationwide. It was instrumental in educating and informing members of Congress on the crisis of violence Native people experience and supported the successful passage of bipartisan legislation— the Not Invisible Act of 2019 and Savanna's Act signed into law by President Trump in 2020, and additionally influenced Executive Order 13898: Establishing the Task Force on Missing and Murdered *American Indians and Alaska Natives*. Our report has also supported states in reporting the high rates of MMIP cases in their jurisdictions, leading to the successful establishment of MMIP task forces across the U.S. It also illuminated the potential of federal databases such as the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) to address the crisis.

Under the current administration, steps have been taken to enhance NamUs's utility by leveraging innovative technologies, including the collection of genetic information to identify remains. As a result, we have seen the identification of cold case murder victims, including a 32-year-old woman from the Yakama Nation who had disappeared in Chicago in 1968. Using NamUs technologies, her remains were reunited with her family in August 2025, bringing closure and healing for her family as they buried her bones in her traditional homelands. This illustrates the power of this database and the opportunities that exist with appropriate investment in technology.

Our hope was to see sweeping data reform, such as the recent NamUs efforts, across the Department of Justice (DOJ) and state and local law enforcement agencies after the passing of the Not Invisible Act and Savanna's Act, which could have assisted in a data-informed response to appropriately address this crisis. However, there has been minimal movement toward addressing the lack of data on the MMIP crisis nationwide, despite the 2021 GAO report titled *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: New Efforts Are Underway, But Opportunities Exist to Improve the Federal Response*, which included data-specific recommendations. This included recommending that DOJ and Department of Interior (DOI) meet their legislative mandates of the Not Invisible Act and Savanna's Act by 1) requiring the Attorney General (AG) to develop a plan for accomplishing ongoing data analyses of data in existing federal databases, 2) developing a strategy to educate the public on entering data into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), 3) developing a plan to conduct specific outreach to tribes, tribal organizations and urban Indian organizations (UIO) regarding their ability to publicly enter data into NamUs. And yet, five years later, aside from NamUs technology improvements, little movement on these recommendations can be seen that directly impacts the ability of policymakers to make data-informed decisions on MMIP.

Our 2018 report identified a basic problem: law enforcement was not entering race and ethnicity data into their databases. Even more concerning was the reason why, too often, there is no box to check to indicate AI/AN. Even more rare was the ability to enter tribal affiliation. By not collecting data, law enforcement was limiting its ability to prevent, intervene, and protect AI/AN people within its jurisdiction. To address this issue, UIHI launched a data-collection toolkit and training for law enforcement on how to collect this data appropriately. We have trained hundreds of officers across the country, often uncompensated, in an effort to improve MMIP data, but we have barely touched the surface. As stated in the 2021 GOA report, DOJ is responsible for this initiative and has continued to not fulfill the minimum mandates of the Savannah's Act and the Not Invisible Act in regard to data. This is not the only issue regarding data; DOJ databases lack consistency in the manner in which data variables are collected and defined, inhibiting the ability to conduct data linkages across systems.

UIHI had partnered with numerous MMIP advocacy organizations to educate the community on public entry into NamUs, and my staff has assisted tribal members in entering missing persons as far back as 2009. This is the only federal database where members of the public can enter data that is then verified by NamUs. This database also allows the collection of DNA and other genetic materials for identifying remains. Yet, we know that many missing AI/AN are not listed in this database; the 2021 GOA report emphasized DOJ developing a strategy to educate the public on entering data into the NamUs, and yet, five years later, little effort has been made in that regard. Data tools like NamUs exist, but AI/AN victims are not being included in the data despite being six years out from the mandate to do so in the Not Invisible Act and Savanna's Act.

This lack of data limits the ability to implement innovative technologies, but despite these limitations, opportunities to utilize AI and machine learning exist and need federal direction and investment. At a minimum, DOJ should catalog what exists across state and federal databases, including FBI NCIC, NamUs, BIA MMU, USAO district reports, tribal police RMS/CAD, 911, EAS alerts like Feather/Turquoise Alerts, social services, shelters, and hospitals. We know the quality of data is problematic, however AI and machine learning opens up the opportunity for investment into efforts such as probabilistic matching when identifying specific cases or incidents, this is a statistical approach used to determine the likelihood that two records represent the same entity, even when the data is incomplete, inconsistent, or contains errors, to

connect reports that refer to the same person or incident across NCIC, NamUs, tribal RMS, and media tips. This approach and other AI innovations can account for spelling variants and incomplete data, but as with any use of AI, it must have human oversight and consistent review.

Recommendations

I urge you to direct DOJ to fully implement the Not Invisible Act and the Savanna's Act, specifically all mandates related to data improvements and interagency collaboration, and provide a yearly report to Indian Country and Congress. At Congress's direction, DOJ should investigate the appropriate use of AI and machine learning to improve AI/AN data and MMIP investigations. DOJ should also issue a standardized data codebook for all federal databases to ensure consistent data collection and reporting in cases involving AI/AN.

It is imperative to ensure that the use of AI is carried out in collaboration with tribes and tribal data experts, to ensure appropriate use that does not violate the sovereign rights of tribes through meaningful tribal consultation and urban confer.

2. PROTECTING FEDERAL FUNDING FOR MMIP SURVIVOR SERVICES

Federal funding plays a key role in sustaining victim services and is a matter of trust and treaty responsibility. Support for all AI/AN victims, regardless of where they reside, is imperative yet rarely supported, and as a result, urban Indian organizations often lack the resources to serve urban-dwelling AI/AN. However, this year, the administration released a grant specifically for urban Indian organizations to address human trafficking in collaboration with tribes. This unique opportunity, supported by the administration, is a strong step forward in fulfilling treaty and trust obligations while providing a blueprint for inclusion of AI/AN survivors residing in urban areas.

This illustrates gaps and opportunities in federal support for MMIP that extend beyond law enforcement and into the services available. This week, UIHI will release a national report in partnership with the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center titled *Sacred Responsibility: Protecting the People*, which documents the devastating impacts of federal funding cuts to victim services for AI/AN people. The report describes the findings of a national survey of 201 service providers, which served more than 25,074 AI/AN survivors in 2025. Of those served, 8.2% were pregnant or postpartum, and 28% were children.

In our survey, 84% of organizations reported that more than half of their operating budgets rely on federal funds, primarily from the Department of Justice (DOJ), Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Indian Health Service (IHS). Since January 2026, 63.8% of responding organizations reported being substantially impacted by federal funding cuts, including delayed grant disbursements and the elimination of longstanding funding opportunities. As a result, many of the organizations surveyed have reduced services that our communities rely on. These reductions include elder services, human trafficking services, stalking victim support, housing, children's services, and legal advocacy. This has resulted in the organizations being forced to turn away 1,156 survivors with unmet needs.

The lack of funding inhibits the ability of programs to implement innovative programs and technologies. For example, survivors often have safety concerns and yet are required to sign in on paper sign-in sheets when attending programs, as sign-ins are often a grant requirement. Too often, the program lacks funds for tablets or computers that would allow for a virtual sign-in with cloud-based security to protect their identities.

Recommendations

I urge you to uphold trust and treaty responsibility by protecting the funding streams that support these services for AI/AN communities. For DOJ, I urge you to support the total amount of funding authorized for Tribal programs in the Violence Against Women Act; I ask that you prevent the subsuming of the Office of Violence Against Women into the Bureau of Justice Programs, to protect this dedicated funding stream, which has funded our critical survivor support services.

For IHS, the National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup has calculated that it would require \$73.01 billion to fully fund IHS and the I/T/U system in FY2027. I ask you to support fully funding the IHS I/T/U system of care. We urge you to also support the \$474.47 million for the Hospitals and Health Clinics: Tribal Epidemiology Center (TEC) line item. Without the work of TECs like UIHI, we would have absolutely no information on the MMIP crisis. HHS grant programs must also be protected, as they are critical to supporting the underfunded IHS system.

Across all agencies, funding established specifically for AI/AN communities should be exempt from the elimination of DEI programs, as AI/AN is not a racial or ethnic group, but rather a political class.

3. INSTITUTING A DEDICATED FCC NATIONAL EVENT CODE FOR MMIWP

Recovering missing AI/AN people is a high priority of our community. I assisted in authoring legislation creating the nation's first Missing Indigenous Person Alert (MIPA) system, referred to as the Red Alert, which was implemented in Washington State in 2022. 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-systems, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced in 2024 its intent to launch an Emergency Alert System (EAS) alert code for Indigenous populations in 2024. In its Notice of Proposed Rule Making for the alert, the FCC specifically noted the need to address violence against AI/AN communities, and the historic underreporting and misclassification of MMIP cases.³

Unfortunately, the alert code ultimately adopted by the FCC, the Missing and Endangered Persons (MEP) Alert, has not met the intent to address violence against AI/AN people. The MEP alert has been co-opted, and serves as an overarching alert covering all people not already covered by AMBER and Silver Alerts. This fails to appropriately address the disproportionate rates at which AI/AN go missing and the unique jurisdictional challenges faced in resolving these cases. The four states that have established Indigenous-specific alert systems have demonstrated that they can be integrated into existing alert infrastructure with minimal fiscal impact, and provide a targeted response to MMIP.

UIHI has pursued every available administrative avenue to institute the alert code, including working with our Congressional partners, writing letters to the FCC, and collaborating with tribes to push the issue forward, yet we have seen no changes. 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, and the chair of the FCC spoke to the National Congress of American Indians on October 29th, 2024, saying that the alert “will save lives in Tribal communities and all

³ Federal Communications Commission, *The Emergency Alert System and Wireless Emergency Alerts; Missing and Endangered Persons Event Code*, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, PS Docket Nos. 15-91 and 15-94, FCC 24-30 (March 15, 2024), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-24-30A1.pdf>

across this country.” Additionally, Indian Country has not been informed regarding the impact, if any, of the MEP on the recovery of AI/AN people.

Recommendations

I request that the FCC conduct a report quantifying how many Indigenous people have been reported through the MEP alert, and identifying the outcomes.

I urge you to support the creation of a dedicated AI/AN event code in the FCC’s Emergency Alert System, with an appropriate name signaling that it is responsive specifically to AI/AN people. The alert system would utilize already-established technical alert systems, thus having minimal fiscal impact with the potential for astronomical impact for AI/AN families and communities to find their loved ones. This may be accomplished by encouraging the FCC to initiate its own Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, or passing legislation that mandates it create this code.

4. FACILITATING LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TO MMIP CASES

Support for the Federal Bureau of Investigation

I applaud the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for launching Operation Not Forgotten, including the 2026 surge support for Tribal Law Enforcement and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)’s Office of Justice Services. As part of the surge, they have deployed agents to temporary assignments in 11 FBI field offices across Indian Country.⁴ At the end of last year, the FBI released outcomes from a 6-month period of the surge, which included 1,260 individuals charged, 1,123 arrests made, and 458 child victims identified and located.⁵ The surge efforts were accompanied by the use of promising new technologies, including ground-penetrating radar, underwater cameras, and sonar searches. Currently, this successful surge is scheduled to sunset in September despite its unparalleled success.

Tribal Law Enforcement Capacity

Data from our report *Sacred Responsibility: Protecting the People* also underscores the urgency of improving Tribal law enforcement capacity for addressing the MMIP crisis. Nearly half of the organizations that responded reported difficulties recruiting Tribal law enforcement officers in their area, and more than 40% reported challenges to retaining them. One of the most commonly cited barriers was the disparity in pay and benefits compared to other law enforcement agencies. In Alaska, the situation is dire. Over 40% of rural Alaska Native villages have no full-time officers, and vast distances mean response times are often delayed. While the VAWA 2022 Special Tribal Criminal Jurisdiction pilot program has brought key improvements, it remains insufficient to address the crisis or address existing jurisdictional issues.

These data highlight the need for policy change, and two key pieces of pending legislation seek to address some of these very factors. The *Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act (HR 3712/S 2452)* would improve recruitment and retention by extending to Tribal law enforcement the same benefits that federal officers already receive. It would also allow qualifying Tribal law enforcement to enforce federal law within Tribal jurisdictions, reducing red tape and jurisdictional issues. The *Bridging Agency Data Gaps and Ensuring Safety (BADGES) for Native*

⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “FBI Surges Personnel to Support Operation Not Forgotten 2026, Expanding Investigative Resources Across Indian Country,” press release, April 2, 2026, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-surges-personnel-to-support-operation-not-forgotten-2026-expanding-investigative-resources-across-indian-country>

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, “Justice Department Surge to Indian Country to Investigate Unresolved Violent Crimes Yields Results,” press release, November 24, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-surge-indian-country-investigate-unresolved-violent-crimes-yields-results>

Communities Act (HR 1010/S 390) would improve responses to MMIP cases by expanding Tribal access to missing persons data systems, increasing training for Tribal law enforcement, and providing dedicated funding for coordinating investigations.

Recommendations

I urge you to require that the FBI make its surges permanent, given the promising impact they have had on MMIP cases thus far. Our people deserve more than a temporary fix; our lives depend on it. I also urge you to provide resources for Tribal Law Enforcement by supporting *Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act (HR 3712/S 2452)* and *Bridging Agency Data Gaps and Ensuring Safety (BADGES) for Native Communities Act (HR 1010/S 390)*.

5. SUPPORTING SURVIVOR ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL INDIAN MEDICINE

Public safety must also include access to healing after violence. Violence has a significant impact on the physical and behavioral health of individuals and can result in outcomes including suicidality, substance misuse, mental health issues, and more. Without services to facilitate healing from violence, survivors and their families suffer, and taxpayers absorb the cost. In the last year, the administration has expressed strong support for the implementation of TIM CMS reimbursement, including Secretary Kennedy's publicly stated support for an administrative fix to extend 100% Federal Medical Assistance (FMAP) to UIOs.

For AI/AN survivors, we know what works; the evidence is clear that incorporating TIM within victim services can improve outcomes for AI/AN individuals.^{6,7} Outcomes from the Seattle Indian Health Board's Traditional Indian Medicine (TIM) program demonstrates impact these services can have. Between 2021 and 2024, 172 relatives identified as high-risk for suicide received TIM services; after care, high-risk status decreased by 71%. Of 212 relatives screened for depression severity, those with moderate severity saw a significant 22% reduction.

In our survey, *Sacred Responsibility: Protecting the People*, several of the organizations providing services to AI/AN survivors of violence attested to the importance of TIM. One of the responding organizations reported "our healing circles have become an increasingly important space for survivors to connect with one another and reclaim strength through culture....one participant shared that the healing circle has become 'a place where I can breathe and remember who I am.'" Of the organizations providing these services, 30% reported that funding had been reduced or eliminated since January 2025.

Reimbursement for Traditional Indian Medicine through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has the potential to stabilize access to these crucial services for AI/AN survivors. We are pleased that four states have utilized CMS's template Section 1115 waiver to secure reimbursement for traditional services. However, the fact that UIOs are not eligible for 100% Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) limits the scalability of this work and excludes urban relatives. While CMS includes UIOs as eligible entities in its template, FMAP continues to be a barrier at the state level. Washington state's own draft waiver continues to exclude UIOs, despite the fact that the Seattle Indian Health Board was the first organization in the nation to develop and implement a billing, credentialing, and coding system for these

⁶ G. Nortje, B. Oladeji, O. Gureje, and S. Seedat, "Effectiveness of Traditional Healers in Treating Mental Disorders: A Systematic Review," *Lancet Psychiatry* 3, no. 2 (February 2016): 154–70, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(15\)00515-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(15)00515-5)

⁷ M. Ballowitz, N. Holland, I. O'Rear, A. Payan, and A. Zeymo, *Thematic Analysis of Traditional Healing Programs at Urban Indian Organizations and Meta Analysis of Health Outcomes (Recent Trends in Third-Party Billing at Urban Indian Organizations)* (Washington, DC: National Council of Urban Indian Health, 2023), accessed July 6, 2026, <https://ncuih.org/research/third-party-billing/#tab-id-11>

services.

Recommendations

To secure access to these crucial services for our survivors, I urge you to support CMS in explicitly including UIOs in Section 1115 demonstration opportunities for TIM. I also urge you to support the permanent extension of 100% FMAP to UIOs, so that programs like this can be sustainably reimbursed. While this should include support for the *Urban Indian Health Parity Act*, the Secretary of HHS has expressed interest in securing an administrative fix for this issue, and we ask that you all continue to support this effort.

It is imperative that federal agencies that fund victim support services be inclusive of TIM services and, at a minimum, ensure that it is an allowable cost across grant programs.

Conclusion

The promise of public safety is intended to be universal, but for Native people, it is a promise that has never been met with resources or reality. Tribal Nations have a legal right to public safety resources as a part of the prepaid benefits included in numerous treaties signed with the United States. However, Tribes have never received the adequate resources they are owed and the impact is evident in the MMIP crisis. The violence comes with an astronomical cost as violent crimes accounted for 85% of the \$2.6 trillion in total costs associated with personal and property costs in the United States in 2017. Stopping this violence reduces monetary cost, but most importantly, improves the lives of all Americans, not just Native people. I urge you to consider these recommendations; the lives of my people depend on it.