



Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council

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STATEMENT OF GERALD GRAY, CHAIRMAN OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN TRIBAL LEADERS COUNCIL, IN SUPPORT OF SENATOR JON TESTER PURSUING LEGISLATION FOR A GAO REPORT INTO THE MURDERED AND MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS (MMIWG) EPIDEMIC

Addressing the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) crisis is at the forefront of the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leader’s Council’s priorities. Since June 2018, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council (RMTLC) has worked with the Great Plains Tribal Chairman’s Association (GPTCA) and the Global Indigenous Council (GIC) to actively secure a meaningful legislative response to the MMIWG epidemic, while also implementing a public awareness campaign targeted at the tragedy. At the RMTLC’s last quarterly meeting (1/31/2019), the MMIWG representatives of our tribal alliance advocated for a GAO report to be initiated that focuses upon all aspects of the FBI’s and BIA’s current procedures relative to MMIWG cases, from missing person’s protocols, to the status of cold case files, through to coordination with other federal law enforcement agencies, and an accounting of what data exists – and equally important, what data does not exist - and the reasons why it does not exist. Without quality data to inform public policy one is simply wandering blind like a deer on a Montana highway.

It is imperative that such a GAO report be undertaken, and the RMTLC fully supports Senator Jon Tester in his efforts to realize this vital objective through the introduction of a bill to achieve that aim. For too long, law enforcement agencies have failed MMIWG victims, their families, and Indian Country as a whole, with an uncoordinated and haphazard approach to these crimes. Sadly, the recent Henny Scott and Ashley Loring Heavy Runner tragedies reflect the inadequate law enforcement response to the disappearance, rape and murder of Richynda Roubideaux in 1997. Twenty-two-years later, little has changed. In 2016, Mariah High Hawk did not brutalize herself before supposedly dying of hypothermia under a utility trailer. That is not a plausible investigative conclusion, which has become a common theme in MMIWG cases. I choose not to quote statistics because our women and girls are human beings not statistics. This is mom. Auntie. Sister. Niece. Daughter. Cousin. And sometimes, grandma. We know the names of some of the victims, but study after study shows that MMIWG cases are underreported and have been poorly cataloged by law enforcement - so there are many, many names we do not and may never know.

For Montana tribal leaders, the 2018 Urban Indian Health Institute Report into MMIWG confirmed what we have highlighted for years; that Montana is among the states with the highest incidences of MMIWG cases, and that due to human trafficking, Billings is identified as having the fifth highest rate of MMIWG cases in the study. The weight of evidence and escalating crisis requires solution-based intervention at not only the federal and tribal

level, but also at the state level. To that end, the RMTLC will be appealing to Governor Steve Bullock to take executive action to supplement current state legislative efforts. The RMTLC commends Senator Tester for recognizing the urgency with which we need to collectively act, and for his unwavering commitment to undertake action that will make positive inroads into the MMIWG tragedy, as demonstrated by his support for the reintroduction of Savanna's Act and sponsorship of the SURVIVE Act. In December 2018, our MMIWG representatives, Tom Rodgers and Rain Bear Stands Last, met with several lawmakers to advocate for MMIWG legislation, including Senators Lisa Murkowski, Tom Udall, Cory Booker and Heidi Heitkamp; and in the House, Representatives Raul Grijalva and Deb Haaland from the House Natural Resources Committee.

We are appreciative and optimistic that with last week's introduction of the Justice for Native Survivors of Sexual Violence Act and the Native Youth and Tribal Officer Protection Act, that in combination with Savanna's Act and the SURVIVE Act, we will see some of our priorities implemented within the parameters of that legislation, which include: disentangling the jurisdictional paralysis through interagency coordination between federal, state and tribal law enforcement agencies, that might most effectively be achieved by the establishment of an interagency body in each BIA region; establish standard protocols that reflect the unique circumstances and challenges of MMIWG cases, including "cold case" investigative methodology; establish MMIWG Tribal liaison outlets on reservations that serve three critical functions: a) to provide a confidential environment where tribal and community members can share information on MMIWG cases without having to engage with standard law enforcement agencies. The liaison office would be the conduit to pass information to law enforcement. Tribal members would be empowered to share information in a culturally appropriate setting, and in their own languages; b) be a point of contact and, in a sense, a refuge for victims' families. Victim's families need support and advocacy in the community and with law enforcement; and c) when survivors are found and rescued, it is essential that mental health treatment is available – treatment that is culturally oriented, as well as embodying the latest, most effective mental health practices.

The Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council looks forward to continuing to coordinate with Senator Tester on these MMIWG legislative efforts and on the national MMIWG billboard campaign we initiated with the GPTCA and GIC that began in South Dakota and arrived in Montana this week (www.mmiw-gic.com). One should not use history to imprison you, but when it comes to successful policy outcomes, it should be required to inform you.

Sincerely,



Gerald Gray, Chairman
Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council