

Natural Resources Sub Committee on Indigenous People
**"Unmasking the Hidden Crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women:
Exploring Solutions to End the Cycle of Violence."**
Representative Ruth Buffalo Testimony
March 14, 2019

Dosha, Mazda nuxxbaagao, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Ruth Buffalo, I am a citizen of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation of northwest North Dakota and I represent District 27 in south Fargo; I am a newly elected member of the House of Representatives in the North Dakota State legislature. I am a public health professional and educator.

I have introduced four legislative bills in the 66th state legislative assembly that aim to address the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People and Human Trafficking. I have also introduced a study resolution to further examine the issue of missing and murdered indigenous people and human trafficking and a resolution urging congress to pass Savanna's Act. This legislation has passed through the North Dakota House and now awaits action in the North Dakota Senate.

It's important to note that the legislation introduced in North Dakota is non-gender specific, as we wanted to include people of all genders.

One of these bills seeks law enforcement training, and the other, as amended, would create a state repository on missing people including indigenous populations. The other two bills would provide human trafficking prevention and awareness training to hotel establishments and schools.

HB 1311 would provide training for state's attorneys and law enforcement officers and officials regarding missing and murdered indigenous people. The training would be provided by the North Dakota Human Trafficking Commission which is comprised of key stakeholders from tribal, state and federal agencies, organizations and government.

HB 1313 would create a state repository for missing persons including indigenous populations; this bill comes with a fiscal note of \$75,000 to update the software of the Criminal Justice Information System within the Attorney General's office. This bill would address the need for accuracy in data collection of missing and murdered indigenous people. According to the Urban Indian Health Institute's report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls, 71% of American Indians/Alaska Native live in urban and non-reservation areas¹. The issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is a nationwide crisis, worsened by the fact that it

¹ Lucchesi, A., & Echo-Hawk, A. (2018, November 14). *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls* (Rep.). Retrieved <http://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>

is also a nationwide *data* crisis. The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, with only 116 cases logged in the US Department of Justice federal missing persons database.

According to the Sovereign Bodies Institute, as related Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls in South Dakota, North Dakota, & Montana. There are 296 documented MMIWG cases in these three states combined, from 1972 to present. Of these cases, 30 are active missing persons cases, 192 are murders, and 74 have unknown status (reported missing and unable to confirm if found safe or deceased). There are likely many more cases that we have not yet documented. 157 of these cases occurred on reservations, 15 in rural areas, 105 in urban centers, and 19 cases have unknown location types.

I wish I had more data to share with you, but the fact that I don't is part of the reason why I'm here.

As a resident of Fargo, North Dakota, I found myself on the front lines of the search for Savanna Lafontaine-Greywind in August of 2017. Elder women from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa asked me to lead the search the following day. In our culture, when someone asks you to do something, you don't say no, especially if a woman is making the request. I found myself leading the search efforts on August 27th, 2018. This day also happened to be my birthday. Later that same day, kayakers found Savanna's body in the Red River. From that day forward, our eyes were opened to the very real threat before us, and we formed a local taskforce in the Fargo Moorhead area dedicated to preventing such tragedies from ever happening again. There cannot be – there must not be – any more stolen sisters. Not only was our local community affected by the murder of Savanna; the entire nation was shaken. From time to time, I can still hear one of my friends calling Savanna's name during the search as we combed the shoreline of the Red River.

My experiences as a volunteer searcher led me to wanting to seek solutions. I thought of how Savanna was an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe but grew up in Fargo. From the start of the search, I'd wanted federal agencies to become involved. After all, she was a member of a federally recognized tribe. The realities of the situation dictated that we must work with local authorities when incidents occurred outside of the exterior boundaries of an Indian reservation.

I later attended the trials of Savanna Lafontaine-Greywind's murderers. It wasn't until then, I learned of what exactly William Hoehn told the police the day Savanna went missing. He told them, "She always leaves, her parents were just up here last week looking for her."

The police later stated they did not anticipate looking for a body nor a baby, instead they checked all modes of transportation, the bus and train stations. Could Hoehn's comment have swayed the police? Are the stereotypes of our indigenous people perpetuated into implicit bias?

The epidemic of our Missing and Murdered Indigenous People has left many of our communities throughout North Dakota and country on high alert. From the horrendous crime committed in the murder of Savanna Lafontaine-Greywind, a young Indigenous mother who was eight months pregnant, to our indigenous men who go missing.

Recommendations:

North Dakota and many other states who have introduced MMIW legislation have an opportunity to enhance response times and save lives. Our focus is prevention and justice. Through data collection we will show the need for additional resources for law enforcement agencies, etc. Everyone deserves a safe community. I believe through the passage of MMIW legislation and comprehensive laws we are sending a strong message to predators which will further deter tragic outcomes, and move towards keeping our people safer.

The language of MMIW/P needs to be included in the scope of work for the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) and the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). DV/SA/Stalking/Dating Violence/Human Trafficking are currently within the scope of services. Not having MMIW included in their scope of work makes even addressing the issue difficult, even as it is connected with existing work.

It's important to look at the pleadings in criminal cases in prevention of further MMIW cases.

Ensuring all local city, county, state and tribal agencies are working together is a must.

As a public health professional and researcher, I know data tells a story. Without data, there is no clear evidence that a problem even exists. Therefore, it is essential for accurate data reporting and swift action be taken by authorities when people go missing. The dearth of accurate reporting data in the countless cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People, in essence, pours fuel onto an already blazing fire. Hundreds of communities hold stories of truth from generation to generation. Our communities know which relatives have yet to return to their families. We must help them tell those stories, by giving them the tools and resources to do so, and eventually, bring the lost ones home.