



The ongoing movement to address the problem of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls has a momentum behind it that has perhaps never been seen to date.

What was once a virtually off the radar issue, except among certain groups and advocates, now has an almost daily mention in local and national mainstream media.

In late April, the founders and organizers of the Gathering of Nations powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, dedicated the Miss Indian World pageant (won by Seminole Cheyenne Kippenberger) to the issue as a way to help build awareness around it. A national awareness campaign was also promoted on a billboard near Tingley Coliseum where the powwow took place.

The White House issued a proclamation on May 3rd titled “Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives Awareness Day,” while the U.S. Congress declared May 5th as a “National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls.”



Rep. Deb Haaland

A big part of the increased focus goes beyond the dedications and declarations. It is due to the election of the first two Native American women to Congress in the 2018 midterms – Rep. Sharice Davids of Kansas (Ho-Chunk) and Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico (Pueblo of Laguna).

They join two existing Native Americans in Congress: Rep. Tom Cole, R-OK, (Chickasaw) and Rep. Markwayne Mullin, R-OK, (Cherokee).

Haaland has been at the forefront of a variety of bills to address the problem: that Native women and girls go missing at a rate much higher than the general population. They are often never heard from or found again, and those who are found have many times been murdered.

According to a study commissioned by the Department of Justice, American Indian women in some tribal communities face murder rates that are more than 10 times the national average.

It's a problem that touches not only many Native American reservations across the U.S., but Indigenous populations across the globe.



Rep. Sharice Davids

“Congress has never had a voice like mine – a Native American woman who sees the blind spots that have existed for far too long. That’s why I’ve been working on multiple bills and legislation to address this crisis,” Haaland said on a recent media conference call.

One of the more significant and recent pieces of legislation addressing the issue is the reauthorization of the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Due to the efforts of Haaland and her colleagues, the bill now includes better protections for Native American women.

The updated bill provides victim advocate services to urban Native Americans in state courts and expands information sharing between public safety departments throughout Indian Country.

The information sharing is key, lawmakers say. One statistic shows that of 6,000 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the U.S., only 118 have been entered into the Department of Justice database.

Within VAWA is also the SURVIVE Act (Securing Urgent Resources Vital to Indian Victim Empowerment). It would address the need for tribal victim assistance by creating a tribal grant program within the Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime.



The logo of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA group. (Courtesy image)

Another Native provision within the updated VAWA is one that seeks to ensure children and law enforcement in tribal communities are protected in instances of domestic violence. The Native Youth & Tribal Officer Protection Act reaffirms inherent tribal authority over child abuse and crimes that are committed against police officers and other justice officials who respond to domestic violence calls.

The updated version of VAWA was recently passed by the House of Representatives. Its fate in the Senate is still unknown.

Savanna's Act

In May, a new version of the federal Savanna's Act was introduced in the House - a supplement to the Senate bill introduced in January by Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-AK.

Like certain provisions in VAWA, Savanna's Act seeks to improve coordination among law enforcement offices, increase data collection and information sharing, and gives tribal governments more resources. Haaland said more than 70 Tribal Nations have endorsed the bill so far.

Former North Dakota Senator Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat, named the legislation in honor of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, a member of the Spirit Lake Tribe who vanished in 2017 in Fargo while eight months pregnant. Her body was found eight days later in the Red River.

(In)visible

In addition, Haaland, Davids and others have recently introduced the Not Invisible Act to establish a federal advisory committee on violent crime. The committee would consist of law enforcement, tribal

leaders, federal partners, service providers and survivors or their families. The goal is to make recommendations on best practices for law enforcement.

“This is a crisis that has gone on for far too long,” Haaland said on the conference call. “Part of the problem is that this has been a silent crisis. No one is keeping track. It’s not covered in mainstream media and data is lacking everywhere.”

Other laws and provisions seek to get into very specific areas of concern. One is the Studying the Missing and Murdered Indian Crisis Act. It was recently introduced in order to improve cooperation between tribes and law enforcement by directing the Government Accountability Office to conduct a full review of how federal agencies respond to reports of missing and murdered Native Americans and recommend solutions based on their findings.

States involved, too

Several states have made pledges to study the issue or have passed laws of their own in recent months. Here are a handful.

- Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey signed a bill into law in May that will create a task force to investigate and gather data on missing and murdered Indigenous women.
- Oregon Gov. Kate Brown signed a bill in May that directs the state police to study how to increase and improve criminal justice resources on these cases.
- In late April, Hanna’s Act, a bill that passed in the Montana Legislature and was signed by Gov. Steve Bullock, creates a missing persons specialist within the Montana Department of Justice as well as a state missing persons database.
- Also in Montana, Attorney General Tim Fox and U.S. Attorney Kurt Alme pledged to sponsor a joint training session in June for local, state, tribal and federal police officers and the public on missing persons cases across the state, focusing on Native Americans.
- In May, a missing and murdered Indigenous women awareness day was held in Rapid City, South Dakota.
- New Mexico and Wyoming have assembled task forces to address the issue.
- Washington State is requiring its state patrol officers to establish best practices for investigating missing Native Americans.

“This longstanding epidemic will take time, resources, and dedication to resolve and we will find solutions,” Haaland concluded on her conference call.

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