

RE: HB35
RE: HB36
House Judiciary Committee
January 12, 2020

The ACLU of Montana would like to extend support and gratitude for your commitment to justice for Murdered and Missing Indigenous People (MMIP) over the past year. We urge you to honor this commitment by enacting House Bills 35 and 36, which will work together to unite communities and people of different backgrounds to bring justice for missing persons across Montana.

Despite making up approximately 6.5 percent of the state population, Indigenous people account for over 25 percent of those entered into the Montana Missing Persons Clearinghouse¹. Due to recent findings, we also know that these numbers are grossly under-representative of the actual number of MMIP in Montana. Jurisdictional conflicts, lack of resources, and lack of adequate response protocols between law enforcement and other community responders continue to play a large role in perpetuating the number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People in Montana. Although this devastating issue disproportionately affects Native people, missing person hot-spots are not confined to reservations or Native populations; this is an issue across all of Montana.

House Bill 36 is essential in responding to these barriers because it allows members of local communities to come together to create solutions and receive training that is most appropriate for their community's specific needs. Community members need resources in order to effectively and efficiently keep their communities safe and healthy, and this bill allows teams to receive the necessary training and develop effective approaches to do so. House Bill 35 builds on these efforts by aiding the DOJ in creating the state-wide analysis of MMIW trends that is necessary in order to more efficiently identify the root problems of this issue and implement effective recommendations for change.

The MMIW epidemic has devastating effects for Native people across Montana and the country who live in fear and frustration of this persisting epidemic. It is impossible to overstate the depths of impact of how MMIW touches our communities, as we have mourned the deaths and disappearances of far too many family and community members with no justice in sight. No family or community has been immune to the pain of this tragic epidemic. The lack of available information and collaboration in missing persons cases affects nearly every county in Montana, and especially affects youth in Montana, who made up 81% of missing individuals in a recent DOJ report.

It is essential that House Bills 35 and 36 be enacted in order to authorize both the state-wide analysis and community-based solutions and trainings that are necessary in order to bring justice and safety to Montana communities. The MMIW epidemic has dire consequences for the well-being and health of our communities, and the Indigenous Persons Review Commission and training grant program are essential in order to effectively eliminate the barriers to justice.

Respectfully,

Sharen Kickingwoman
Indigenous Justice Program Manager, ACLU-MT

¹ Montana Department of Justice. Missing Persons Data Analysis 2017-2019. 2020
<https://media.dojmt.gov/wp-content/uploads/MP-Data-Analysis-Revised-August-2020.pdf>