

RE: HB98 Extend the Missing Indigenous Person Task Force and the LINC Grant Program

January 20, 2021

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 Bill 98 and reauthorizing the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Person Task Force and grant program to continue to fight for the safety and well-being of Indigenous people 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 the existing task force's recent findings, we also know that these numbers are grossly under-representative of the actual number of MMIP in Montana. In 2019, Montanans responded to this epidemic by enacting Senate Bill 312 which authorized a state-wide MMIW task force and allocated funding for the Looping In Native Communities (LINC) grant fund.

In one year, the task force was able to bring together representatives from all Tribal nations in Montana, alongside other essential stakeholders, and were able to collaborate with community members to identify the factors contributing to the high number of MMIP in Montana. Pervasive issues such as jurisdictional conflicts, lack of resources, and lack of adequate response protocols were identified, as were areas of strength within communities to build upon. The Blackfeet Community College was also able to use LINC funding to begin developing a database for all MMIW across Montana. Despite these steps toward progress, it is clear there is still so much work to be done to prevent and respond to the MMIW epidemic.

It is impossible to overstate the depths of impact of how MMIW touches the lives of Native people across Montana and across the country. As a community, 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. In January of last year, we collectively mourned the death of Selena Not Afraid, an Indigenous woman who died of hypothermia days after being reported missing. Later that year, in April 2020, DOJ data showed 145 missing persons in Montana, 37 of whom - just over 25% - are Indigenous.

It is essential that the MMIW task force be reauthorized in order to effectively overcome the barriers to justice and safety that were identified by the task force. The MMIW epidemic has dire consequences for the well-being and health of our communities, and the task force must be reauthorized in order to ensure safety and stability for all communities across Montana.

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>