

## **Written Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 1199 with Representative Davis' Amendments**

**Presented by: Shanda Poitra, Executive Director, Turtle Mountain IMPACT**  
**To: Government and Veterans Affairs Committee**

**Date: January 23, 2025**

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Shanda Poitra, and I am the Executive Director of Turtle Mountain IMPACT, a grassroots organization dedicated to empowering Indigenous women, youth, and communities through culturally specific violence prevention and cultural revitalization efforts. I am here to testify in support of House Bill No. 1199, and I urge the committee to adopt this legislation alongside the amendments proposed by Representative Davis.

This bill directly addresses the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) in North Dakota by creating a Missing Indigenous People Task Force, establishing a missing persons repository, and providing vital grant funding for tribal-led efforts. For far too long, Indigenous communities have faced systemic neglect and jurisdictional challenges that leave our relatives vulnerable and their cases unresolved. This bill represents a meaningful opportunity to reverse that trend.

### **The MMIP Crisis and the Need for Action**

The statistics surrounding MMIP are heartbreaking. Over 84% of Indigenous women experience violence in their lifetimes, and in some areas, the murder rate for Native women is more than 10 times the national average. Locally, this impact is felt by the women and girls who participate in our programs. Behind these numbers are real people—our mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends—who deserve justice and safety.

In my own experience, I've seen firsthand how violence, trauma, and systemic barriers harm our communities. This reality is why I founded Turtle Mountain IMPACT in 2018, to empower our people through practical safety skills and traditional cultural practices. In a survey of our past program participants, 67% said that fear for their safety is something they think about all the time or fairly often.

Some examples of the ways people have used the skills to keep themselves and their loved ones safer include:

- A woman was working a janitorial shift late at night when her supervisor attempted to sexually assault her. She used the skills she learned from us to stop him.

- Two teen girls were approached by a man who tried to get them into his vehicle, but they were able to escape.
- A domestic violence survivor used her skills to stay calm and focused during a court hearing despite the provocations of her abusive ex-partner.
- A survivor of abduction and domestic violence told us that learning self-defense improved her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.

Every time a member of our community is able to prevent or interrupt violence, it is an achievement for them and a reflection of the need for our work. We have successfully taught self-defense, held community talking circles, and organized search efforts for missing people, but the work is far from done.

### **Culturally Specific Solutions: The Power of HB 1199**

House Bill 1199 incorporates several elements that align with the work we do at Turtle Mountain IMPACT. Its focus on empowering tribal communities and addressing interagency collaboration echoes our own efforts to bring culturally specific solutions to violence prevention. The bill's inclusion of grant funding is particularly impactful, as it will enable tribal nations and grassroots organizations like ours to implement programs tailored to our communities' unique needs.

Representative Davis' amendments further enhance the bill by including tribal representation on the advisory board. At Turtle Mountain IMPACT, we know how transformative these approaches can be. For example, we developed a culturally specific self-defense curriculum for Indigenous women, addressing issues like harassment, hate speech, and intimate partner violence. We've also revitalized traditional coming-of-age ceremonies and launched talking circles to create spaces for healing and empowerment.

This bill and its amendment could help replicate such efforts on a broader scale, creating systemic change that honors our communities' voices and traditions.

### **A Personal Perspective**

My work with Turtle Mountain IMPACT has shown me the resilience of our people and the importance of investing in culturally grounded solutions. One of our proudest achievements is our community's revitalization of a traditional water ceremony as part of a coming-of-age event for young women. It was the first of its kind in decades and combined traditional teachings with modern violence prevention strategies. I believe HB 1199 can support more initiatives like this and build a foundation for safety and healing in our communities.

### **Call to Action**

I urge the committee to pass House Bill 1199 with Representative Davis' amendments.

Together, we can take a vital step toward ending the MMIP crisis and ensuring that our Indigenous relatives are no longer forgotten or ignored.

Thank you for your time and commitment to this important issue and I stand for any questions.

Respectfully,

**Shanda Poitra**

Executive Director, Turtle Mountain IMPACT