

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 1535 with Representative Davis' Amendments

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

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Good morning 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 serve on a Community Advisory Board for a University of North Dakota research initiative designed to interrupt sexual assault in indigenous communities under the direction of Dr. Raeanne Anderson, PhD, and alongside former ND House of Representative Ruth Buffalo, and additionally serve as Board Secretary for the Turtle Mountain Missing and Murdered Indigenous People chapter. I am here to testify in support of House Bill No. 1535, 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 and enacting a Feather Alert Notice System, a system to activate an urgent bulletin using the emergency alert system to air a description of an indigenous individual who has been reported to law enforcement as missing, to aid in the location of that individual, and provide vital funding for tribal, state, and federal 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 by developing a system that actively responds in a timelier manner.

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. The majority of these cases go unsolved because they're simply not being investigated properly. 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 1535

House Bill 1535 incorporates several elements that align with the work we do at Turtle Mountain IMPACT. Its focus on developing an emergency alert system for Indigenous people addresses the necessary action needed to quickly respond to the MMIP epidemic, which in turn will empower tribal communities and address interagency collaboration, echoing 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 1535 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 1535 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