

Testimony of Representative Finley-DeVille

In support of House Bill 1535

Chairman Klemen and members of the House Judiciary Committee, my name is Representative Lisa Finley-DeVille. I represent District 4A, which includes, MHA Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, as a cosponsor I thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of HB 1535, which relates to the feather alert notice system, and the committee on tribal and state relations. As an Indigenous woman, I can say this bill represents a critical step toward addressing a pressing issue that affects the safety and well-being of Indigenous people not only in North Dakota but across the country.

The need for a rapid-response system to assist in locating missing Indigenous people cannot be overstated. Every year, Indigenous communities across the U.S. face alarmingly high rates of missing persons cases, particularly involving women and children. One tragic and recent example is the case of Olivia Lone Bear, a member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, who went missing in October 2017. Olivia, a mother of five, was last seen leaving her home near New Town. Despite extensive search efforts, it took nine months for authorities to find her, and tragically, Olivia's case is just one of many where the response time was not fast enough to bring her home safely.

Her disappearance highlights the ongoing gaps in how missing Indigenous people are treated and the urgent need for a system like the Feather Alert, which could have potentially expedited the search and increased public awareness from the outset. Like so many others, Olivia's case was delayed by jurisdictional confusion, lack of coordination between law enforcement agencies, and limited resources dedicated to finding missing Indigenous people. The creation of a system designed specifically for this purpose would ensure that cases like Olivia's—and others across our state—receive the urgent attention they deserve.

House Bill 1535 directly addresses these challenges by creating a rapid-response system modeled after Amber Alerts, but specifically for Indigenous individuals. The "Feather Alert" would be triggered by law enforcement when a missing person is reported, using the state's emergency alert system to distribute information as quickly as possible. The quicker an alert can go out to the public, the more likely it is that someone may have seen the missing person or may be able to assist in their recovery. Studies have shown that early alerts significantly increase the chances of recovery (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

When we look at any of the cases of the many Missing or Murdered Indigenous People, it's important to remember that Indigenous communities are often dispersed and face specific cultural and linguistic challenges that other communities don't. Ensuring that alerts are delivered in Indigenous languages where necessary ensures greater accessibility and relevance to those who are most affected. Language is a source of strength and unity for these communities, and

U.S. Department of Justice. (2019). *Missing Persons: The Value of Timely Notifications*. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

First Nations Development Institute. (2014). *The Role of Language in Community Health and Wellbeing*.

National Congress of American Indians. (2020). *Addressing the Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. National Congress of American Indians Policy Brief.

including it in the alert system will only enhance its effectiveness (First Nations Development Institute, 2014).

Another key provision of this bill is the establishment of the Indian Affairs Commission as the oversight body for the Feather Alert system. This is essential for ensuring that the system remains responsive and accountable to tribal communities. Coordination between tribal law enforcement, state agencies, and federal partners is vital for swift action, and the Indian Affairs Commission will help facilitate that. As we have seen many times, jurisdictional issues can lead to delays in the search for missing persons. A system that is both tribally led and state-supported can help mitigate those challenges and ensure that every possible resource is brought to bear when someone is missing (National Congress of American Indians, 2020).

The funding provided in this bill—\$250,000 for the Indian Affairs Commission, along with the creation of a full-time position dedicated to this effort—ensures that this system can be effectively implemented and maintained over time. The creation of a sustainable, well-resourced alert system is essential to making sure it works when needed most. Without adequate funding and infrastructure, systems like this risk becoming underused or inefficient.

I ask that you give House Bill 1535 a do pass recommendation. This bill represents a vital step toward addressing the disparities in how missing Indigenous persons are handled in North Dakota. It is a necessary tool to bring greater visibility and urgency to these cases, ensuring that Missing and Murdered Indigenous People, those who have gone missing, will receive the attention and resources they need for a timely recovery. We can do better for our communities, and this bill is a key part of that effort.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

U.S. Department of Justice. (2019). *Missing Persons: The Value of Timely Notifications*. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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