

Good Morning Chairman Klemin, Vice Chair Karls, Vice Chair Vetter, and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Mikalen Belgarde, and I am an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. To understand the importance of addressing the current epidemic of Missing Indigenous Peoples in North Dakota, I must share why this topic is deeply personal to me. I wear multiple hats as an Indigenous public health professional, and I have a strong background in education and academics. I am a Ph.D. candidate in Indigenous Health, preparing to embark on my dissertation journey this fall. My research aims to support the Indigenous Peoples of North Dakota by identifying and advocating for culturally responsive prevention strategies to address the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples (MMIP). This issue became personal to me as a sophomore at North Dakota State University, when I first experienced the heartbreaking reality of MMIP. It was all over the news—Savanna Greywind was missing. I remember joining the community search for her and walking from doorstep to doorstep in North Fargo asking if we could search homeowner’s properties and garbage bins for Savannah. I was only 19 years old. Despite the desperate search efforts, she was not found until over a week later. We know that the first 48 hours of a missing person’s case are critical in finding them alive. The ND Feather Alert system, proposed in House Bill 1535, would provide a statewide response to locate Missing Indigenous Peoples within that crucial time frame.

Beyond its life-saving potential, this bill also presents an economic benefit, reducing costs across multiple jurisdictions, including search and rescue efforts, investigations, and law enforcement resources. The data on violence against Indigenous Peoples is alarming:

- ◆ Indigenous Peoples experience violent crime at more than twice the national average.
- ◆ Indigenous women are murdered at 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous women.
- ◆ Murder is the third leading cause of death for Indigenous females under the age of 20.

While North Dakota has existing alert systems—Amber Alert, Blue Alert, and Silver Alert—none are specifically designed to address the unique challenges facing Missing Indigenous Peoples.

House Bill 1535 is an essential step forward. It would:

- Establish the Feather Alert to rapidly notify the public about Missing Indigenous People.
- Strengthen the existing Missing Indigenous Persons database to ensure more accurate and timely reporting.
- Provide a culturally informed and proactive approach to addressing this crisis.

There remains a critical need for research, action, and policy implementation to combat the disproportionate risks faced by Indigenous Peoples in North Dakota. The passage of this bill is not just about policy—it is about saving lives and ensuring that our communities do not continue to suffer in silence. I strongly urge you to support House Bill 1535 and take meaningful action to protect Indigenous lives.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify today.

References:

1. 2020 North Dakota Human Trafficking Report. North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force. (2020). <https://www.ndhttf.org/north-dakota-overview>
2. CAWS. (2020, April 15). Violence against Native Americans. CAWS North Dakota. <https://www.cawsnorthdakota.org/get-thefacts/violence-against-native-americans/> 2.
3. Claiborne, R. (2022, October 18). "Silent crisis" - thousands of missing and murdered Native Americans: Professor Lewerenz is quoted. North Dakota Law. <https://blogs.und.edu/ndlaw/2022/10/silent-crisis-thousands-ofmissing-and-murdered-native-americans-professor-lewerenz-isquoted/>
4. McKinley, C. E., & Knipp, H. (2022). "You Can Get Away with Anything Here... No Justice at All"- Sexual Violence Against U.S. Indigenous Females and Its Consequences. *Gender issues*, 39(3), 291–319. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-021-09291-6>
5. Nicholson, M. (2015, December 5). Colonialism as a determinant of health. Two-Eyed Seeing for Health. <https://2eyedhealth.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/colonialism-as-adeterminant-of-health/>
6. Martin, K. H. (2020). Violent victimization known to law enforcement in the Bakken oil-producing region of Montana and North Dakota, 2006-2012. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/violent-victimization-knownlaw-enforcement-bakken-oil-producing-region>
7. State of North Dakota. (n.d.). North Dakota Public alerts. ND Response. <https://ndresponse.gov/alert>
8. North Dakota Bureau of Criminal Investigation. (2012). North Dakota Bureau of Criminal Investigation Policy and Procedure Missing Persons. North Dakota Attorney General. <https://attorneygeneral.nd.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2022/11/OpenMeetingsManual.pdf>