



TASK FORCE REPORT

MURDERED & MISSING INDIGENOUS RELATIVES TASK FORCE | November 10, 2023

Background

Indigenous relatives in Utah face a disproportionately high risk of violent crime compared to other demographic groups. Despite making up 1.5% of the Utah population, American Indian and Alaska Native relatives account for over 5% of all murder victims in the state.¹ In the 2020 General Session, the Legislature passed [H.B. 116](#), which created the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Task Force. The Task Force was required to:

- conduct appropriate consultations with Tribal governments on the scope and nature of the issues regarding murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls;
- develop model protocols and procedures to apply to new and unsolved cases of murdered or missing Indigenous women and girls, including the best practices for:
 - improving the way law enforcement investigators and prosecutors respond to the high volume of the cases, and to the investigative challenges that might be presented in cases involving female victims;
 - collecting and sharing data among various jurisdictions and law enforcement agencies; and
 - better use of existing criminal databases;
- seek input from multi-disciplinary and multi-jurisdictional persons, including representatives from Tribal law enforcement and federal agencies, about how to review cold cases involving murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls; and
- address the need for greater clarity concerning roles, authorities, and jurisdiction throughout the lifecycle of cases involving murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, by discussing:
 - best practices in cases involving murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, including best practices related to communication with affected families from initiation of an investigation through case resolution or closure; and
 - education and outreach campaigns for communities that are most affected by crime resulting in murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, to identify and reduce the crime.

In the 2023 General Session, the Legislature passed [H.B. 25](#), which changed the name of the task force to the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) Task Force.

As required under [Subsection 36-29-107.5\(9\)](#), this report:

- highlights the activities of the task force; and
- summarizes recommendations for improvements in the criminal justice and social service systems for preventing and addressing crimes involving murdered and missing Indigenous relatives in the state.

¹ Utah Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Health indicator report of homicide*. <https://ibis.health.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/view/Homicide.Race.html>.



Meetings

Since its conception in 2020, the task force has consistently held semi-annual meetings. Many of these meetings included listening sessions, whereby survivors and family members of MMIR victims would share their stories with task force members.

Meetings were frequently held off-site to accommodate individuals who wished to give testimony in-person. These off-site locations included the FourPoints Community Health Center, Bluff Community Center, Urban Indian Center of Salt Lake, and Weber State University.

Contract with Wilder Research

In 2022, the MMIR Task Force contracted Wilder Research (Wilder), a Minnesota-based nonprofit research and evaluation group, to create a report in fulfillment of the requirements in [Utah Code 36-29-107.5](#), including examining the scope and nature of MMIR in the state of Utah and recommending improvements to criminal justice and social service systems. Task force members and staff connected Wilder to resources, interview participants, and opportunities for community participation and feedback.

Wilder's process included a literature review on state and federal best practices, multi-disciplinary key informant interviews, qualitative analysis, and a listening session in Bluff, Utah. The findings were presented at the Tribal Leadership meeting in Blanding, Utah in October 2023. Wilder also attended a multi-state MMIR research conference in New Mexico where they identified common needs and possible opportunities for collaboration.

Report and Recommendations

The [report](#) Wilder produced covers nine major themes. For each theme, the report also includes an overview of current state and federal policies, best and emerging practices, and current issues in Utah. The MMIR Task Force convened on November 14, 2023, to discuss the report and prioritize legislative recommendations.

The report includes the following recommendations:

1. Reporting and Initial Investigations of Missing Person Cases

- Assess Tribes' interests and needs related to the potential development of Tribal Community Response Plans.
- Assess consistency and inclusion of best practices in law enforcement missing person response policies and procedures across jurisdictions.
 - Create unified guidance or model protocols.
 - Revise Utah state law to require preliminary investigation for all missing person cases where location and well-being is undetermined and require immediate entry of all individuals determined to be missing and endangered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC).
- Build or rebuild trust between law enforcement and Tribal communities.
- Increase education and communication with families about the steps to have a missing person posted on the Utah Missing Person Clearinghouse.



2. Communication and Alert Systems

- Ensure AMBER Alert and EMA systems are comprehensive, accessible, and unbiased and determine barriers to their full utilization.
 - Identify and address gaps in infrastructure inhibiting effectiveness.
 - If of Tribal interest, build relationships and establish MOUs regarding alerts.
 - If of Tribal interest, offer training for Tribal and BIA law enforcement officers on the Utah State AMBER Alert system criteria and procedures for activation.
- Consider expanding Endangered Missing Advisory system to include cell phones and/or roadway sign communication networks.

3. Review and Investigation of Unresolved (“Cold”) Cases

- Expand cold case resources and increase utilization across Utah.
 - Bring all unresolved MMIR cases in front of the Utah cold case review board (or recommended cold case unit).
 - Increase outreach and communication with Tribes and rural communities about resources available.
 - Consider creation of a statewide cold case unit, including sworn law enforcement officers and analysts.
- Increase access to shared investigative resources.
- Encourage consistent implementation of best practices across jurisdictions, including evidence collection and documentation.

4. Death Investigation

- Encourage and support consistent, proactive communication with families throughout death investigation process.
 - Expand the availability of family advocates at Utah Office of the Medical Examiner and law enforcement agencies.
- Build and expand working relationships between Tribal Nations and Utah OME.
- If of Tribal interest, provide training for Tribal staff on preliminary death investigation.
- Provide financial support to:
 - Law enforcement jurisdictions to increase access to investigative technology and training.
 - Tribes, if of Tribal interest, to cover the \$2,500 fee associated with the Utah OME for death investigations.
- Expand funding and resources for the psychological autopsy examiner team.
- Train law enforcement and medicolegal death investigators on cultural issues specific to Tribal Nations in Utah.

5. Jurisdiction Issues and Government-to-Government Collaboration

- Improve communication, relationship-building, and mutual trust.



- Explore Tribes' interest in MOUs, cross-deputizations, state recognition of Tribal law enforcement officers, or other avenues to increase collaboration, access to law enforcement resources, and reducing barriers to Tribal law enforcement effectiveness.
 - Increase collaboration between the Utah Department of Public Safety Tribal liaison and federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies.
- Hold in-person meetings between each Tribe's leadership and the MMIR Task Force to understand how the issue uniquely impacts each Tribe and tailor future plans.
- Increase funding for expansion of law enforcement services among Tribes without local, immediate support.
- Create and implement a Utah-specific Tribal-State Relations Training about Tribes' governments, histories, and cultures to support and improve Tribal consultation process.
- Create a state-level position focused on the MMIR issues to coordinate efforts across state agencies and with the Tribes.

6. Data Issues

- Ensure timely and consistent reporting to NCIC.
- Develop and implement training for law enforcement on gathering accurate and complete information on race, ethnicity, and Tribal affiliation.
- Increase cross-agency notification when a person goes missing.
- Increase data sharing and communication across jurisdictions.
- Create a specialized state analyst position dedicated to collecting, analyzing, and reporting data back to Tribes on issues of Tribal interest.

7. Victim and Family Services

- Increase access to victim service providers, advocates, family liaisons.
- Improve coordination of victim service providers.
- Improve consistency and quality of communication with families.
- Ensure mandated trauma-informed law enforcement trainings are comprehensive and informed by best practices.
- Identify and address barriers to utilization of the Crime Victims' Reparations Program
 - Expand law enforcement exemption to include victims of all categories of domestic violence and sex trafficking.
 - Build awareness among Indigenous community members of how Crime Victims' Reparation funds may be used for a traditional medicine person.
- Increase opportunities for victims to access flexible emergency funds.

8. Prevention

- Provide financial support to Tribes and urban American Indian communities for cultural revitalization community programming.



- Increase allocation of federal and state funding for violence prevention, emergency support, and victims' services that are non-competitive and earmarked for Tribes and urban American Indian communities.
- Support the expansion of community education and public awareness efforts.
- Create and provide comprehensive supports for victims of trafficking, including strengthening and expanding legal protections.
- Increase collaboration to address the intersection of child protection, human trafficking, and the MMIR injustice.
- Improve identification and intervention among those at high risk of continued violence and victimization, including trafficking "hot spots."
- Identify and address gaps in data-sharing regarding protective orders.
- Examine and adjust duration of protection orders set in jail release agreements to address gaps in protection, and develop a domestic violence-specific risk assessment protocol.

9. Media Reporting

- Provide training or education to support self-examination of personal biases.
- Adopt a survivor-centered approach when communication with the media about missing persons and victims.
- Consistently and accurately report victims' race and Tribal affiliation.
- Provide contextual information about the MMIR injustice, its root causes, and government or community initiatives working to address it.
- When reporting on the MMIR injustice, including references to culturally specific supports and resources.

Next Steps

The task force will follow up with Tribes as requested to collect further feedback on which recommendations align with the Tribes' needs and expectations. The task force will also consider legislation that would create a full-time position within the executive branch that would act as a liaison for MMIR issues and assist with the implementation of recommendations.